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## Introduction

**Abstract:** *This chapter establishes the central focus of the book: how, in the early years of the seventeenth century, indoor playhouse performances by boy companies came to be called ‘private’, in contrast to outdoor ‘public’ playhouse performances by adults. Theatre historians have long acknowledged this distinction but without subjecting it to sustained scrutiny; as a result they have obscured, or sought to explain away, the complex meanings of these important terms. The Introduction situates the book in relation to the subjects of theatre history, book history and intellectual history. It promises to overturn established thinking by offering fresh perspectives on commercial theatre culture, the printing and marketing of playbooks, and the intellectual concepts of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the English Renaissance.*

**Keywords:** book history; politics; private; public; Renaissance drama; theatre history

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In 1604 Valentine Simmes printed three editions of John Marston's successful indoor theatre tragicomedy, *The Malcontent*, the third of which contained an Induction and other additions written by John Webster. The Induction was designed for performance at the Globe and featured members of the King's Men playing themselves. It begins with a tire-man telling Will Sly 'The gentlemen will be angry if you sit here'. Sly responds, 'Why? We may sit upon the stage at the private house' (A3<sup>v</sup>). The joke depends upon the audience being aware of a difference between supposedly 'public' and 'private' forms of commercial theatre. Indeed, in the early seventeenth century a number of writers alluded to a 'public/private' division. In the 1603 *Hamlet*, Gilderstone, as he is named in that edition, speaks of the 'principal public audience' of adult companies being turned to the 'private plays' of boys; Marston's *Sophonisba*, printed in 1606, contains an author's note that refers to the 'fashion of the private stage', and by the end of the decade Thomas Dekker had incorporated references to 'private' playhouses in four of his pamphlets.<sup>1</sup> In the first decade of the seventeenth century, the notion of 'private' commercial drama – that is, indoor performances by boy companies – had become a feature of theatrical discourse. Indoor commercial boy company drama had existed within London from 1575 until 1590 but there is no evidence of anyone referring to a commercial playhouse performance as 'private' in the sixteenth century, even though it was common to refer to outdoor commercial performance as 'public'. What had changed, and how did commercial theatres come to be called by the apparently paradoxical name of 'private'? This book is the first sustained examination of how these vitally important yet deeply complicated terms were used in relation to the vibrant theatre business of Renaissance London.

The contradiction of calling a playhouse venue 'private' has not entirely escaped the attention of theatre historians. E.K. Chambers noted that the 'public/private' division was 'inessential' and that 'performances in all the houses were public in the ordinary sense', although he also used the terms as chapter headings; other influential scholarly accounts likewise posited the division in chapter titles or subheadings.<sup>2</sup> The terms have remained in use, despite their apparently contradictory nature, in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, although they are perhaps less prominent than they once were, partly because, as Chambers noted, commercial drama, whether at indoor or outdoor venues, might be thought as public. For example, Stephen Orgel differentiates between

‘public’, commercial drama, and ‘court or private theatre’, the latter of which he defines as ‘a playhouse commissioned by and created for a particular person or group, not ... like the Blackfriars’ (*Illusion* 6).<sup>3</sup> The availability of other terms such as ‘indoor’ and ‘outdoor’, or ‘amphitheatre’ and ‘hall’ – the latter two advocated by Andrew Gurr as ‘better indicators of [a theatre’s] character’ – has led to a decline in critical usage (*Playgoing* 14).

Indeed, some critics have rejected the critical value of the terms since they have sometimes been used to imply an extreme divide between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ forms of theatre, or as Alfred Harbage called them, ‘the Theatre of a Nation’ and ‘The Theatre of a Coterie’.<sup>4</sup> This is not always the case: Robert Weimann, writing on the subject of ‘popular’ traditions in Renaissance theatre, acknowledged a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the style of Harbage, even as he criticised the rigidity of Harbage’s approach (246–247). Walter Cohen likewise posited the distinction in his book on ‘public’ theatre, the title of which evokes Harbage’s ‘Theatre of a Nation’ nomenclature (266). However, many other critics such as Martin Butler and Gurr have argued against these sharp distinctions, and have tended to eschew the reliance on public/private division.<sup>5</sup> One might, of course, argue just the opposite – that the amphitheatre and hall playhouses are ‘private’ because they are enclosed and command an entrance fee, in contrast to the marketplace drama of earlier generations – but the point remains the same: sharp distinctions between indoor and outdoor theatres are problematic.

It has been said, then, that there are difficulties with using ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the writing of theatre history. The words can be misleading and risk encoding unsafe assumptions about the theatres and their audiences. Mark Bayer uses the terms in his recent study of the Fortune and the Red Bull as part of a wider argument about social stratification in the theatres, but while he makes an interesting case there is reason to be suspicious about the popular/elite binary.<sup>6</sup> So, the general decline in usage is not in itself a significant problem: the words suggested by Gurr are more precise and less ideologically loaded and therefore better suited to scholarship. However, this ideological baggage is precisely what makes them worthy of study. The turn towards more neutral descriptors like ‘indoor’ and ‘outdoor’ has inadvertently obscured the complex uses that ‘public’ and ‘private’ served to Renaissance playgoers and playwrights. While some scholars have puzzled over the

emergence of 'private' into theatrical discourse, they have, ultimately, drawn blanks. William A. Armstrong suggested that the term 'may have been designed merely to suggest a degree of exclusiveness and superiority', but some subsequent studies have proven more reserved about coming to conclusions.<sup>7</sup> Irwin Smith noted that '[t]he origin of the term "private house" or "private playhouse" is not fully understood' (130) and in the first edition of *The Shakespearean Stage*, Gurr similarly stated that there 'is no obvious reason' for the indoor theatres of seventeenth-century London to be called private (83). Gurr has come to modify this view more recently as evinced by the changes he has made to subsequent editions of *The Shakespearean Stage*: in the fourth and most recent edition, he stated that the term 'must' have originated for this reason (142). Gurr has offered a discussion of the terms when others have relegated the issue to the footnotes of theatre history.<sup>8</sup> He has elsewhere suggested that 'private' was a construction used by the seventeenth-century boy companies to imply freedom from the Master of the Revels, the licenser of 'public' performances.<sup>9</sup> However, these explanations are in need of re-examination: the idea that 'private' is associated with snobbery looks less attractive when viewed in its wider context, and the suggestion that the term was used to circumvent licensing is also in need of reappraisal.

This book instead suggests that the process by which 'private' entered into the theatrical vocabulary was more complex. There has not been a thorough investigation of the use of 'private' and, its ostensible opposite, 'public' in the language of Renaissance theatre and there needs to be in order to challenge received assumptions. Standard accounts of theatre history, from Chambers to Gurr, have been unable fully to acknowledge the variety and vitality of the terms: indeed, the perceived familiarity of these concepts may well have obscured many of their specific historical connotations.<sup>10</sup> A renewed historical sensitivity to the language of theatre culture is therefore necessary. This book, then, addresses the elaborate web of meanings created from these important but historically contingent terms by examining evidence from a range of interlocutors including dramatists, theatre impresarios, booksellers and legislators. In doing so, it contributes to the study of theatre, book and intellectual history. In its detailed analysis of a range of documentation – for example, anti-theatrical writing, Privy Council correspondence, royal proclamations and, especially, title pages – it is influenced by Tiffany Stern who has shown

that the careful, imaginative study of theatrical documents can help counter dominant assumptions about the way Renaissance theatre was conceived.<sup>11</sup> While recent archaeological and archival discoveries have enabled scholars to learn more about the physical spaces of the Renaissance theatres – in turn leading to fresh insights about the staging of plays – this book argues that interpretation is at least as important as discovery.<sup>12</sup> Many of the sources consulted in this study have been available for decades but have been afforded little attention, or viewed through the lens of suspect critical assumptions. This book reexamines the evidence to offer new ways of thinking about these theatre spaces: it assesses how they were conceived of by the people who built them, worked in them, attended them and wanted them shut down.

Much of the evidence drawn upon in the following chapters derives from printed playbooks and thus the book joins a wider conversation about the print market in early modern England. The marketing of printed playbooks has become a significant sub-field of early modern bibliography. Unsurprisingly, given the cultural centrality afforded to him, Shakespeare is the prime subject of many such studies, as shown by recent work from Lukas Erne, and the contributors to the special edition 'Shakespeare for Sale' edited by Adam G. Hooks.<sup>13</sup> This book, however, takes a holistic view by considering the wider corpus of printed playbook material. In this, it follows the pioneering work of Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser whose electronic resource *DEEP, Database of Early English Playbooks*, has helped make the study of early modern play publication easier.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, however, this book considers 'public' and 'private' to be important terms worthy of extended investigation: Farmer and Lesser suggest that the terms are 'best avoided' and implicitly unworthy of study ('Vile Arts' 107). The process of analysing playbook advertisement involves considering the roles played by stationers, including printers, publishers and booksellers. Consequently, the book enters into dialogue with new work by Marta Straznicky and the contributors to *Shakespeare's Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography* as it likewise investigates the different ways in which bookmakers invested in the marketing of the texts they produced.<sup>15</sup> In addition to title pages, the book also addresses the complex rhetorical forms of playbook prefatory material, thereby participating in the growing interest in Renaissance paratexts.<sup>16</sup> Above all, the book is influenced by Lesser's brilliant work on the political implications of printed playbooks.<sup>17</sup> Lesser locates the

precise context of a play's publication and shows how playbook title pages and prefatory materials participate in wider polemical debates. In a similar vein, paying close attention to the way the terms 'public' and 'private' are used by playbook producers can yield new insights into the politics of theatre culture.

By attending to these political meanings the book also aims to contribute to the study of intellectual history. Recent work on the public/private boundary in Renaissance culture, heavily influenced by Jürgen Habermas, has tended to favour a theoretical approach.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, critics have begun to consider the phenomenon of the Renaissance playhouses in the light of Habermas; Paul Yachnin has argued that plays enabled audiences to think about contested notions of publicity and privacy in new ways.<sup>19</sup> But, while useful, modern theoretical models do not always effectively correspond to historical evidence. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century people did not use terms like 'public sphere' and Conal Condren has warned that contemporary criticism has too often conflated modern and early modern attitudes to the public and private.<sup>20</sup> This book privileges historical evidence over modern theorising in order better to understand the variety of contexts in which the terms were used. The book also makes the case for the importance of theatre to studies of political history. Addressing the way people thought about theatre is one way of addressing how people thought about politics: the claims made about 'public' or 'private' drama are often political. Indeed, historians such as Peter Lake, Thomas Cogswell and Alastair Bellany have provided examples of how political figures like George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, endured fraught interactions with the politicised audiences of the early modern playhouses.<sup>21</sup> This book does not address any single flashpoint, but rather suggests that politics pervaded English theatre culture.

The book offers a broader chronological range than many other studies of Renaissance theatre. Too often the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean period, in which Shakespeare worked, takes precedence in literary and theatre history accounts. Chapters 1 and 2 accord that period due attention, not least because it coincides with the emergence of 'private' as a descriptor for commercial playhouse performance, but Shakespeare is only one of a number of authors under scrutiny. Indeed, some of the most intriguing examples refer to boy company plays, or plays at theatres such as the Cockpit (discussed in Chapter 3), which have received far less attention than the King's

Men's Blackfriars theatre or the Globe. The book also addresses the comparatively understudied early Elizabethan period: the first chapter considers plays such as Richard Edward's *Damon and Pithias* which were performed at non-commercial venues, as well as those played at commercial playhouses, and it focuses attention on the indoor theatres of the 1570s and 1580s. Chapter 3 deals with the Caroline theatre which, despite fine work by Butler, Adam Zucker, Farmer, and others, is too often treated as a barren, post-Shakespearean landscape, rather than a place of vitality and creativity.<sup>22</sup> Standard accounts of Renaissance drama often use 1642 as a terminal date, but this book ends by examining the period between the closing of the theatres and the Restoration, as Renaissance plays continued to be performed at commercial playhouses, albeit illegally.

The book is divided into three chapters and an epilogue. The chapter divisions are determined by events from theatre history, so the opening chapter discusses the period in which commercial theatre began in London and the second chapter examines the emergence of the term 'private' in relation to the second set of indoor boy company performers. The third chapter has a less precise start date, but it takes as its focus the accelerated use of the term 'private' on indoor theatre playbook title pages around the end of the 1620s. The epilogue details the period of theatre closure and finishes at the start of the Restoration, when a new chapter of theatre history was about to begin. These theatrical moments do not coincide with regime changes, but they do occur close to monarchic transitions. So, the first chapter deals with Tudor – and, more specifically, Elizabethan – theatre, the second starts near the end of the Elizabethan regime before addressing the Jacobean period, the third discusses the Caroline period, and the epilogue attends to the civil war and its aftermath.

The first chapter considers the sixteenth-century theatrical usage of 'private' and argues that, despite claims to the contrary, there is no evidence that the term was used to refer to commercial playhouse performance in this period. Next, it addresses the earlier emergence of two important signifiers – 'public' and 'common' – which were used in the sixteenth century to refer to performances; it then refocuses on the use of 'private' as a commercial term in the early years of the seventeenth century. The second chapter assesses those early years in greater detail and debunks the argument that 'private' was primarily used to circumvent censorship. It then pays attention to the continued use of



the terms throughout the Jacobean period, as they seemingly waxed in and out of favour. The third chapter considers the theatrical and political environment of Caroline England, in which indoor theatres were seemingly established as the dominant venue for plays and in which 'private' became used with greater frequency. It also attends to occasions in which the terms are used in an ostensibly contradictory manner and argues that such oddities can yield valuable insights into theatrical culture. The epilogue examines the meaning of the words at the very end of the Caroline era. It then addresses the changes they underwent in the following decades of theatre closure and how they began to fall out of use in the Restoration. As a whole, the book argues that 'private' emerged due to a variety of complex social, political and theatrical forces. In examining these forces it offers new perspectives which overturn established thinking about the commercial theatre, the printing and marketing of playbooks, and the intellectual concepts of 'public' and 'private' in the English Renaissance.

## Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, E3<sup>r</sup>; John Marston, *Sophonisba*, G3<sup>v</sup>; Thomas Dekker, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (London: 1606), D2<sup>r</sup>; *Jests to Make You Merry* (London: 1607), F3<sup>r</sup>; *Lantern and Candlelight* (London: 1608), L1<sup>r</sup>; *The Gull's Hornbook* (London: 1609), E2<sup>v</sup>.
- 2 E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), vol. 4, p. 356. See also, G.E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941–1961), vol. 6.
- 3 For other distinctions between 'public', commercial theatre and 'private' non-commercial drama, see Siobhan Keenan's discussion of 'private and occasional drama' in, *Renaissance Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 74–79. The potentially 'public' nature, even of ostensibly private forms of drama, such as closet plays, has been addressed by Marta Straznicky, in *Privacy, Playreading, and Women's Closet Drama, 1550–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 4 Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), which builds on work in his *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941). For reservations about public/private after Harbage see Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, 'Vile Arts: The Marketing of English Printed Drama, 1512–1660', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 39 (2000), pp. 77–165 (107). For a similar quibble see Steven

- Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 170.
- 5 Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis 1632–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 293–306; Gurr, *Playgoing*, p. 303. In *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576–1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), Ann Jennalie Cook also argued against Harbage, although her work is in turn countered by the critics listed above.
  - 6 Mark Bayer, *Theatre, Community, and Civic Engagement in Jacobean London* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2011). See also, Bayer, 'The Curious Case of the Two Audiences: Thomas Dekker's *Match Me in London*', in *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558–1642*, ed. by Jennifer A. Low and Nova Myhill (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 55–70.
  - 7 William A. Armstrong, 'The Elizabethan Private Theatres: Facts and Problems', *The Society for Theatre Research Pamphlet Series* (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1958).
  - 8 Sometimes literally: Farmer and Lesser (p. 107), Mullaney (p. 170), and Orgel (p. 6) all make points about the meaning of 'private' in theatrical discourse in footnotes or endnotes.
  - 9 Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 56–57, pp. 337–338; and *The Shakespearian Stage*, 4th edition, pp. 66–67.
  - 10 A number of invigorating studies have sought to reconsider ostensibly familiar terms in order to reveal otherwise obscured historical meanings. See, for example, Andy Kesson and Emma Smith, 'Introduction: Towards a Definition of Print Popularity', in *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England*, ed. by Andy Kesson and Emma Smith (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 2–15 and Andy Kesson, 'Was Comedy a Genre in Early Modern England?', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 54 (2014), pp. 213–225. See, also, Tiffany Stern's work on the idea that plays encompass 'two hours traffic': 'Time for Shakespeare: Hourglasses, Sundials, Clocks, and Early Modern Theatre', *Journal of the British Academy*, 3 (2015), pp. 1–33.
  - 11 Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
  - 12 See, for example, Julian Bowsher and Pat Miller, *The Rose and the Globe: Playhouses of Shakespeare's Bankside, Southwark: Excavations 1988–90* (London: Museum of London Archaeology, 2009); Eva Griffith, *A Jacobean Company and its Playhouse: The Queen's Servants at the Red Bull Theatre (c. 1605–1619)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
  - 13 Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; rev. 2013); *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Adam G. Hooks, 'Introduction: Shakespeare for Sale', *Philological Quarterly*, 91 (2012), pp. 139–150.

- 14 For an early, representative example of their work, see Farmer and Lesser, 'Vile Arts'. On DEEP see, Farmer and Lesser, 'Early Modern Digital Scholarship and DEEP: Database of Early English Playbooks', *Literature Compass*, 5 (2008), pp. 1139–1153. See also: DEEP: Database of Early English Playbooks, ed. by Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser <http://deep.sas.upenn.edu> [accessed 18 May 2015].
- 15 Marta Straznicky, ed. *Shakespeare's Stationers: Studies in Cultural Bibliography* (Philadelphia; Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). For a different approach to the study of early modern stationers, see Peter W.M. Blayney, *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501–1557*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 16 See for example, Thomas L. Berger and Sonia Massai, eds, *Paratexts in English Printed Drama to 1642*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 17 Zachary Lesser, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also, Alan B. Farmer, 'John Norton and the Politics of Shakespeare's History Plays in Caroline England', in *Shakespeare's Stationers*, pp. 147–176.
- 18 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge; Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991). For examples of recent work in the Renaissance period, see *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*, ed. by Bronwen Wilson and Paul Yachnin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), Laura Lunger Knoppers, *Politicizing Domesticity from Henrietta Maria to Milton's Eve* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Mary Trull, *Performing Privacy and Gender in Early Modern Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), and *Making Space Public in Early Modern Europe: Performance, Geography, Privacy*, ed. by Angela Vanhaelen and Joseph P. Ward (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- 19 See, for example, Paul Yachnin, 'Hamlet and the Social Thing in Early Modern England', in *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 81–95 and 'Performing Publicity', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 28 (2010), pp. 201–219. For an overview of criticism on privacy and Renaissance theatre see Eoin Price, 'The Politics of Privacy and the Renaissance Public Stage', *Literature Compass*, 12 (2015), pp. 1–11.
- 20 Conal Condren, 'Public, Private and the Idea of the "Public Sphere" in Early-Modern England', *Intellectual History Review*, 19 (2009), pp. 15–28.
- 21 Thomas Cogswell and Peter Lake, 'Buckingham Does the Globe: Henry VIII and the Politics of Popularity in the 1620s', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 60 (2009), pp. 253–278; Alastair Bellany, 'The Murder of John Lambe: Crowd Violence,

- Court Scandal and Popular Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 200 (2008), pp. 37–76.
- 22 Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*; Adam Zucker and Alan B. Farmer, eds, *Localizing Caroline Drama: Politics and Economics of the Early Modern English Stage, 1625–1642* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

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