

# **EL 305: Shakespeare and Embodiment**

“Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. . . .

*Shakespeare* is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of *Shakespeare* it is commonly a species.”

-- Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765)



# But what “Shakespeare”?

Shakespearean polysemiosis:

- *Shakespeare*: the historical person  
(biography)
- Shakespeare*: the theatrical professional  
(seen & heard)
- Shakespeare*: the poet, the literary figure  
(books)
- Shakespeare*: the culture industry  
(scholarly books,  
teaching positions)

# Where did Shakespeare's theater come from?

- Civic plays and mystery cycles
- University Drama and the “University Wits”
- Court Entertainment (the masque)
- Travelling players
- Class mobility, London commercial setting
- Occupation of formerly Church lands and privileges
  - *In sum: continuities and discontinuities with medieval drama and social life conspire to create early modern London's theatrical scene*

# The University Wits

## Cambridge:

- Christopher Marlowe, shoemaker's son
- Robert Greene, saddler or innkeeper's son
  - *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, Selimus*, etc.Popular prose.
- Thomas Nashe, parson's son
  - *Dido, Queen of Carthage, The Unfortunate Traveller*

## Oxford:

- John Lyly, church official's son
  - *Euphues; Endymion* and other plays
- George Peele, clerk's son
  - *The Arraignment of Paris; The Battle of Alcazar;*

## While we're on this theme...

- *Thomas Middleton*, bricklayer's son -- Oxford (did not graduate)
- *Ben Jonson*, bricklayer's son -- no university
- *Thomas Kyd*, scrivener's son -- no university
- *John Marston*, lawyer's son -- Oxford
- *Thomas Dekker*, Dutch? -- no university
- *John Webster*, carriage maker's son -- no university
- *Thomas Heywood*, parson's son -- Cambridge?
- *John Fletcher*, cleric's son -- Cambridge



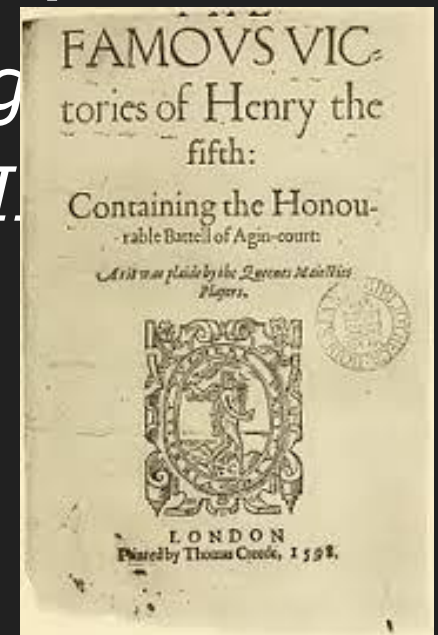


# The Queen's Men

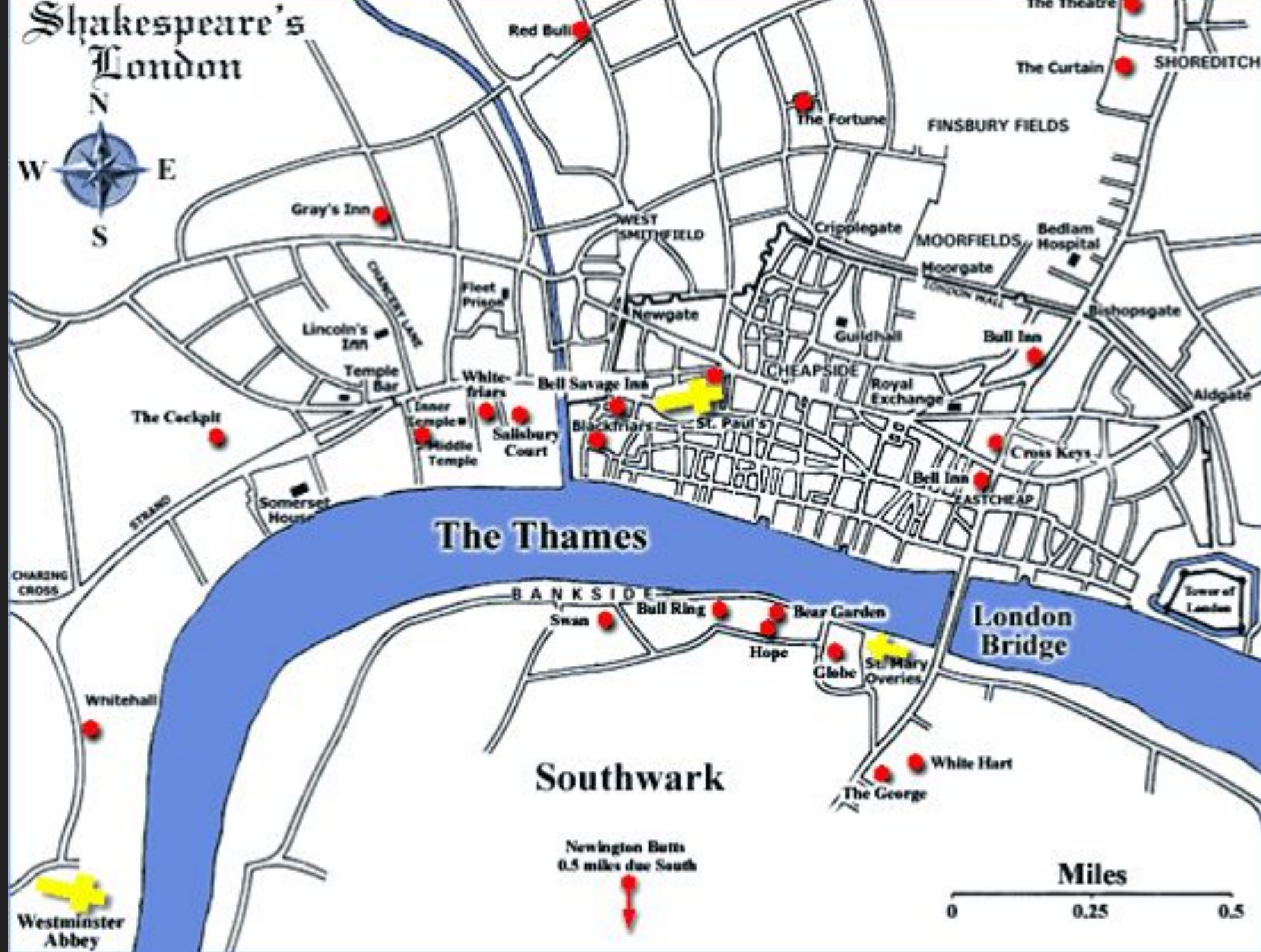


Queen's Men plays performed include:

- *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*
- *The Famous Victories of Henry V*
- *The Troublesome Reign of King*
- *The True Tragedy of Richard II.*

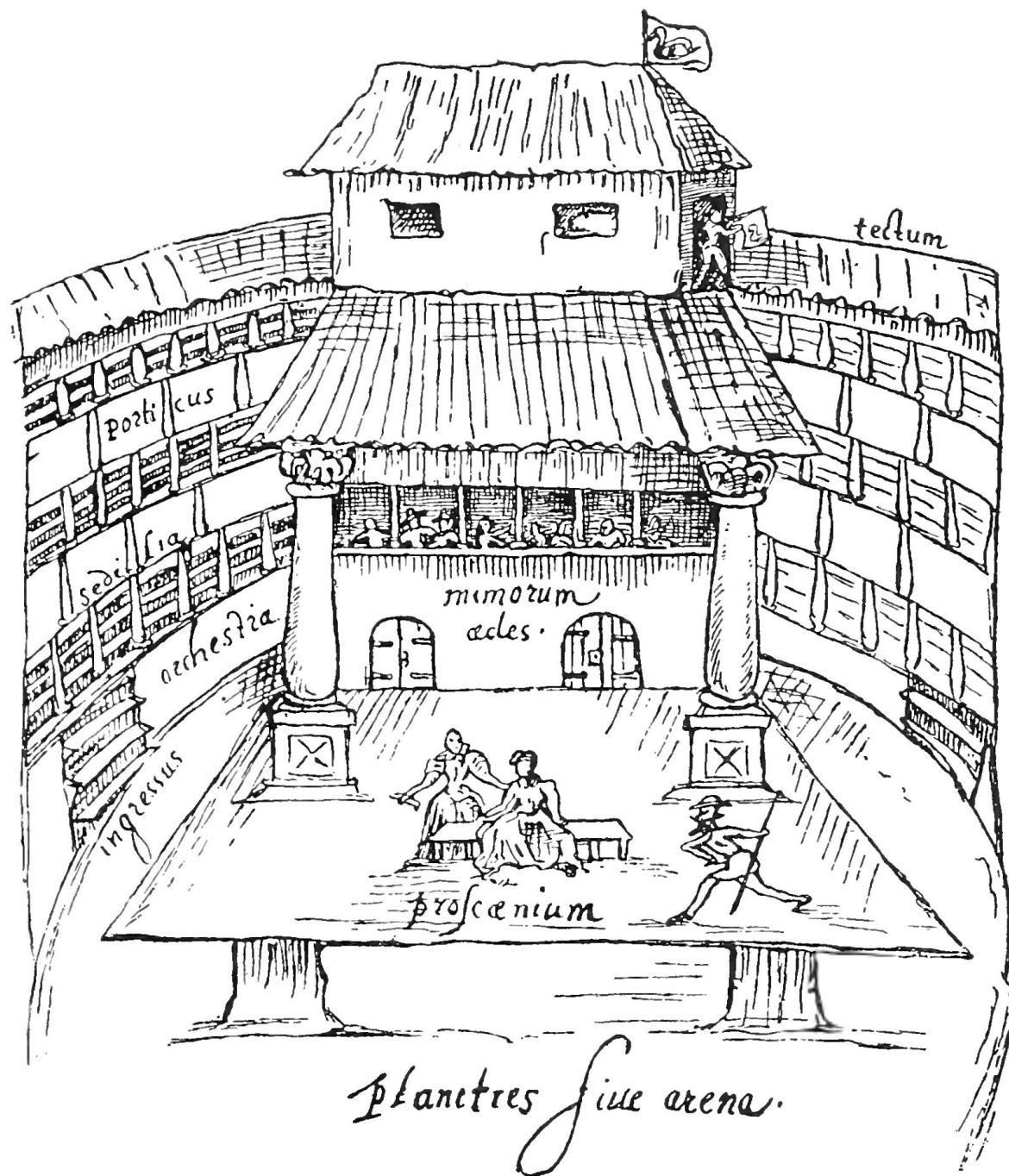


# Shakespeare's London









# Structure of the Commercial Theater

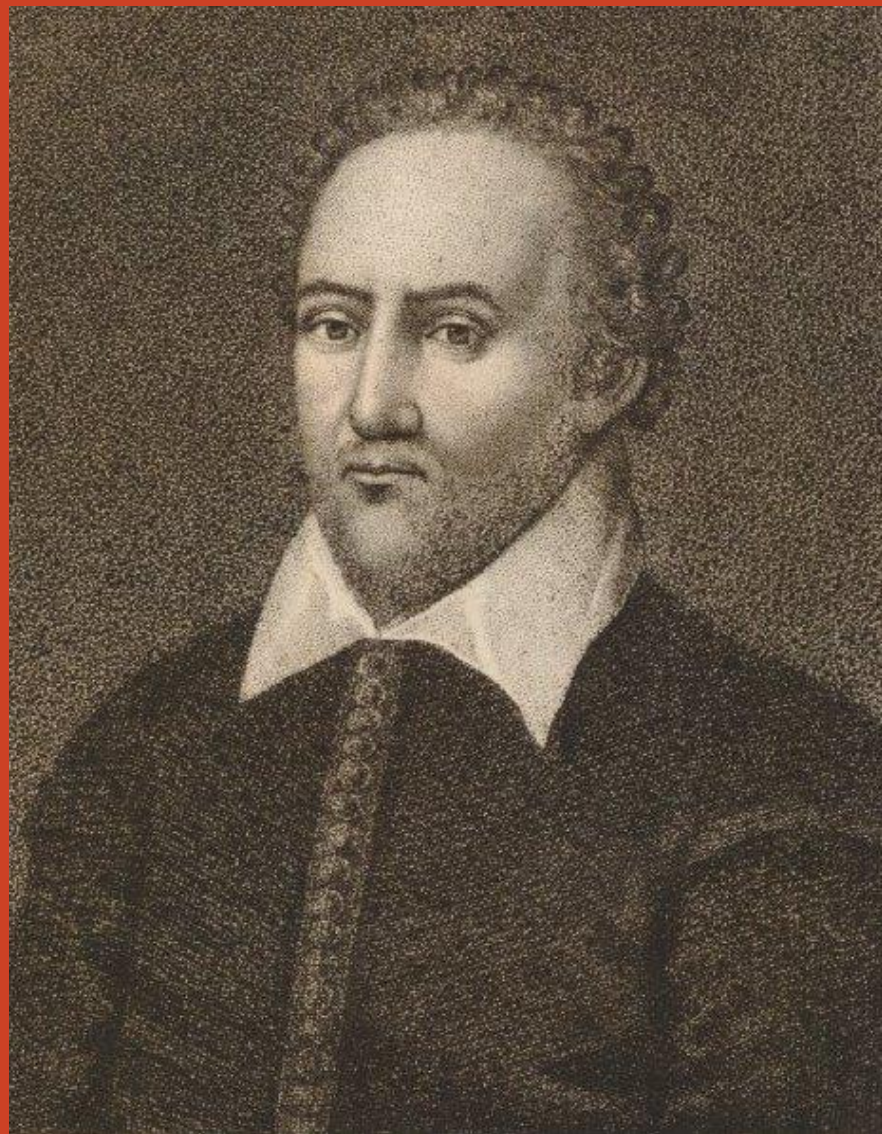
- 1) *Sharers*: Owners/actors/writers. In the Lord Chamberlain's Men, these included Shakespeare and Burbage
- 2) *Hired Men*: Actors with smaller roles
- 3) *Apprentices*: Trainees in the theater. Might eventually become sharers.

# The Players

Naturalistic style:

- “It was the happiness of the actors in those times to have such poets as these to write for them, and [those poets] to have such excellent actors to act their plays as . . . Burbage, [who] so wholly transforming himself into his part, and putting off himself with his clothes, as he never (not so much as in the tiring-house) assumed himself again until the play were done.”
- Audiences “were never so delighted than when he spake, nor more sorry than we he held his peace; yet even then he was an excellent actor still, never falling in his part when he had done speaking, but with his looks and gestures maintaining it still unto the height.”







"...for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, *that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey“

-- Robert Greene, *Greenes Groatsworth of Wit* (1592)

# Controversy

“Woe is me! The playhouses are pestered, when churches are naked; at the one is not possible to get a place, at the other void seats are plenty. It is a woeful sight to see two hundred proud players jet in their silks, where five hundred poor people starve in the streets. But if needs this mischief must be tolerated . . . yet for God’s sake (Sir) let every Stage in London pay a weekly pension to the poor, that *ex hoc malo proveniat aliquod bonum*” (Letter to Francis Walsingham, 25 Jan. 1587)

Commercial theaters “are a special cause of corrupting . . . Youth, containing nothing but unchaste matters . . . being so as that they impress the very qualities and corruptions of manners which they represent . . . Whereby such as frequent them, being of the base and refuse sort of people or such young gentlemen as have small regard of credit or conscience, draw the same into imitation and not to the avoiding of like vices they represent”

- Letter of the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of London to the Privy Council, 28 July 1597)

# Crossdressing

A woman shal not weare the apparel of a man: neither shal a man put on the garments of a woman. For whosoeuer doth so, is an abomination to the Lord thy God.

(Deuteronomy 22:5)

So then, let us mark that here God intended to shew us that every bodies attiring of themselves ought to be such, as there may be a difference betweene men and women. And truly we see what dangers doe ensue when folke go so disguised . . . as for example, in these maskings & mummings, when men put themselves into womens apparel, and women put themselues into mens as ye know: what comes of it? Although no evil ensued thereof, yet the verie thing it self displeaseth god. . . . Ought not this saying to make the haire of our heades stand up, rather than wee would prouoke Gods wrath upon us wilfully? But besides this, we are sure that the suffring hereof is the opening of a gap to all whoredome. At a word, such disguisings are but inticements of baudry, as experience proveth. (Jean Calvin, *The Sermons of M. John Calvin upon the fifth booke of Moses called Deuteronomie*, trans. Arthur Golding [London, 1593], p. 773).

“The proof is evident, the consequent is necessarie, that in Stage Playes for a boy to put on the attire, the gesture, the passions of a woman; or a meane person to take vpon him the title of a Prince with counterfeite porte, and traine, is by outward signes to shewe themselves otherwise then they are, and so with in the compasse of a lye. . . .

We are commanded by God to abide in the same calling wherein we were called, which is our ordinary vocation in a commonweale. So in a commonweale, if private men be suffered to forsake their calling because they desire to walk gentleman like in sattine & velvet, with a buckler at their heeles, proportion is so broken, unitie dissolved, harmony confounded, that the whole body must be dismembred and the prince or the heade cannot but sicken.”

– Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Parts* (1582)