PLAYGOERS ON THE OUTDOOR STAGES OF EARLY MODERN LONDON

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The presence of playgoers on the indoor or “private” theatre stages is indicated in numerous contemporary anecdotes and generally accepted (although rarely considered in discussions of early modern staging), but the less plentiful evidence of playgoers sitting on the outdoor stages has, I believe, been largely neglected. In particular, there are three main sources of evidence about playgoers sitting on outdoor stages: plays, non-dramatic works, and legal documents. The legal evidence is rarely cited and nowhere have all three kinds been brought together. The aim of this study is to present that evidence, some of it oblique and inferential, but some quite explicit in referring to playgoers on the stages of “public” playhouses.

References to playgoers sitting on the stage are typically found in contemporary texts critical of their disruptive behaviour. The earliest of these occurs in Sir John Davies’s Epigrammes and Elegies, written as early as 1594–5:

3: Rufus the Courtier at the theatre,
Leaving the best and most conspicuous place,
Doth either to the stage himselfe transfer,
Or through the grate doth shew his doubtfull face.
For that the clamorous frie of Innes of court,
Filles vp the private rooms of greater prise:
And such a place where all may have resort,
He in his singularitie doth despise. (sig. A4r)

28: He that dares take Tobaco on the stage,
Dares man a whore at noon-day through the street
Dares daunce in Poules, and in this formall age,
Dares say and doe what euer is vnmeete . . . .(sig. C2r)
Ben Jonson likewise conveys his displeasure in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, a Chamberlain’s Men’s play of 1599 (published 1600), when Carlo Buffone advises Sogliardo that to be “a gentleman of the time” he must “sit on the stage and flout, provided you have a good suit” (sig. C4r). This idea is then picked up when Fastidious Brisk includes among the “strange virtues” of “rich apparel” that it “takes possession of the stage at your new play” (sig. G4v). While one might assume that Davies and Jonson were referring to gallants on stage at an indoor playhouse, in fact neither of the known pre-1600 indoor venues, Paul’s and Blackfriars, was in operation between 1590 and 1599. There were, however, at least five outdoor venues in business during this period: the Theatre, Boar’s Head, Curtain/Globe, Swan, and Rose for which Berry provides more detail. Both sets of comments therefore indicate that gallants watched performances from one or more amphitheatre stages during the 1590s and, furthermore, that the practice did not begin at the Blackfriars where it eventually became most common.

The first explicit indication of stage-sitting at outdoor playhouses is found in Thomas Middleton’s *The Black Book*, with the reference to “Barnaby Burning-glass, arch-tobacco-taker of England, in ordinaries, upon stages both common and private, and lastly, in the lodging of your drab and mistress” (sig. F2r). Middleton’s mention of the practice at both kinds of theatres is expanded with specific details by Thomas Dekker in *The Gull’s Hornbook*. In chapter six, “How a Gallant should behaue himselfe in a Playhouse,” Dekker’s topical references and allusions signal that he means to be taken literally when near the start he establishes both indoor and outdoor theatres as the context for his extended and detailed satire:

> Whether therefore the gatherers of the publique or private Play-house stand to receiue the afternoones rent, let our Gallant (hauing paid it) presently aduance himselfe vp to the Throne of the Stage. I meane not into the Lords roome, (which is now but the Stages Suburbs) No, those boxes by the iniquity of custome, conspiracy of waiting-women and Gentlemen-Ushers, that there sweat together, and the couetousnes of Sharers, are contemptibly thrust into the reare, and much new Sattem is there dambd by being smotherd to death in darknesse. But on the very Rushes where the Commedy is to daunce, yea and vnder the state of Cambises himselfe must our fetherd Estridge, like a peece of Ordnance be planted valiantly (because impudently) beating downe the mewes & hisses of the opposed rascalit. (sig. E2v)

And although some of his references (to boy players and songs, for example) are specifically to indoor theatres, elsewhere it is clear that Dekker has the outdoor venues in mind:
whether you be a foole or a Justice of peace, a Cuckold or a Capten, a Lord Maiors sonne or a dawcocke, a knaue or an vnder Shreife, of what stamp soeuer you be, currant or counterfet, the Stagelike time will bring you to most perfect light, and lay you open: neither are you to be hunted from thence though the Scar-crowes in the yard, hoot at you, hisse at you, spit at you, yea throw durt euen in your teeth: tis most Gentlemanlike patience to endure all this, and to laugh at the silly Animals; but if the Rabble with a full throat, crie away with the foole, you were worse then a mad-man to tarry by it: for the Gentleman and the foole should neuer sit on the Stage together. (sig. E3r)⁶

Dekker also advises his gallant to "prouide your selfe a lodging by the water-side: for aboue the conueniencie it brings, to shun Shoulder-clapping, and to ship away your Cockatrice betimes in the morning it addes a kind of state vnto you, to be carried from thence to the staires of your Play-house" (C3r–C4r), and his preceding chapter ends with a reference to some who are going to "the new play . . . let vs take a paire of Oares, and now lustily after them" (C2r). Similarly, Jonson's epigram "On Lieutenant Shift" includes "Or else by water goes, and so to playes; / Calls for his stoole, adornes the stage: god payes" (The Works sig. A4r). G. E. Bentley has observed that "The pair of oars would transport [them] across the Thames, that is to the Bankside, where there were never any private theaters, but in 1609 three public ones" (Seventeenth Century Stage 3); elsewhere he provides evidence that playgoers were more likely to arrive at the Blackfriars by coach (Jacobean and Caroline Stage 6:18, 24, 27). In addition, the practice of "sounding" a trumpet three times to signal the start of a performance is thought to have been restricted to the outdoor playhouses, so another Hornbook passage also probably indicates such a location:

Before the Play begins, fall to cardes, you may win or loose (as 
Fencers doe in a prize) and beate one another by confederacie, yet 
share the money when you meete at supper: notwithstanding, to gul 
the Ragga-muffins that stand a loofe gaping at you, throw the cards 
(hauing first torne foure or fiue of them) round about the Stage, iust 
upon the third sound, as though you had lost: 

(sig. E4r)⁷

When attempting to assess the Hornbook evidence, it might be argued that as satire it cannot be taken seriously or literally; indeed, this view has been advanced to discount Dekker's references to the "public" stage,
although his references to gallants’ behaviour on the indoor stages are accepted (partly of course because a number of contemporary writers make the same criticisms). But satire needs something real to attack or it is not satire; and there is nothing in the Hornbook chapter to signal that the satire of the gallants’ behaviour on the “private” stage is different from the satire of their behaviour on the “public” stage. Additionally, if as seems likely Dekker’s witty attack was prompted by personal experience, it would be more logical for him to refer to the outdoor theatres, where most of his plays had been staged. Indeed, as far as is known almost all his plays before 1608 had been written for the Admiral’s Men and performed at the Rose playhouse, while only a few had appeared at Paul’s and none at the Blackfriars.  

After 1610, when the King’s Men were regularly performing many of the same plays at both the Blackfriars and Globe, the practice of allowing playgoers to sit on the indoor stages could arguably have made it more likely at the outdoor venues. Indeed, Henry Hutton, in another satirical piece of advice, implies that there were stage-sitters at the Globe:

The Globe to morrow acts a pleasant play,  
In hearing it consume the irksome day.  
Goe take a pipe of To[bacca] the crowded stage  
Must needs be graced with you and your page.  
Sweare for a place with each controlling foole,  
And send you[r] hackney servaunt for a stoole  


John Webster’s Induction to The Malcontent has nevertheless been cited as evidence that playgoers did not sit on the Globe stage (sig. A3r). Although the extreme metatheatricality of the whole Induction necessarily undermines any exclusively literal interpretation, if one begins with the premise that playgoers did sometimes sit on the Globe stage, it is possible to understand the Sly-Tireman exchange as an attempt to discourage the practice. Certainly that Sly and those who join him on stage leave before the actual play begins means little, because having brought five of the King’s Men on for the Induction, Webster has to get them off so they can reappear in Marston’s play. Furthermore, after these players had exited, if playgoers did sit on the Globe stage they would have remained and continued to watch the performance from there. So while this might have been an attempt by the King’s Men to stop members of the audience at the Globe from sitting on the stage as gallants did at the Blackfriars, it does not mean they were successful when the play was performed at the outdoor
venue in 1602–03; and once the King’s Men began using both playhouses after 1609–10, it might well have been even more difficult to forbid the practice at one place while allowing it at the other.\(^{12}\)

The likelihood that sitting on the stage was permitted at the Globe is increased by knowledge that it happened at the Red Bull, of all places. A lawsuit that began in 1613 and continued for over ten years provides evidence for this conclusion. Leslie Hotson quotes from this document in *Commonwealth and Restoration Stage*: on 25 October 1623, Thomas Woodford responded to a suit by Aaron Holland regarding an agreement about how the Red Bull profits were to be shared, to the effect that a Phillip Stone and his executors should receive

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\text{an eighteenth of all such summe & summes of money and other comodities profits & benefits what soeuer that at [all times within] the said Term of Twentie & five yeares & three quarters of a year should be collected had made gotten or receiued of all & euery or any person or persons whatsoeuer that should or did come into and sit stand or be placed or take place in any the Gallerie or Galleries or [other places or belonginge] to the sayd Play house or vpon the Stage of the said Play house or in or vpon any part or parcel of the said Play house weekly or at th’end of euery week.}
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\((328-29)\)^{13}

Hotson also includes Holland’s answer of 6 November 1623 which begins by repeating most of the bill verbatim, including, “That should be collected or receaived of anie person that should come to take place sitt or stande in the said roomes or galleryes or vpon the stage in the said Playhowse” (338-39). Curiously, the phrase about playgoers on the stage is absent when first the profits are mentioned in both documents, but these initial references are to the men’s earlier informal agreement and Woodford’s initial 1613 suit, whereas in 1623 the reference to sitting on the stage comes in the context of a “new indenture” of 1619, so perhaps sitting on the Red Bull stage had been introduced between the first informal agreement in 1608 and the formal one in 1619. That playgoers sat on the Red Bull stage is also indicated in a 1623 letter written by a John or Richard Gill, a “felt maker’s prentice,” to Richard Baxter, a member of the Revels Company, which performed at that theatre. Gill wrote “So it is that vppon Monday last . . . [I happened] to be uppon your stage intendinge noe hurte to any one, Where I was greeuously wounded in the head as may appear, . . . And therefore in kindnes I desire you to giue mee satisfaccion seeing I was wounded by your own hand [and] weapon” (Bentley, *Jacobean and Caroline*
Stage 1:166–67, 6:220–21). Although nothing in the letter specifies that Gill was injured by Baxter during a performance, it strongly suggests that not only did playgoers sit “upon the stage” at the Red Bull, but that some of them were apprentices.¹⁴

Even taken together these disparate and relatively few references do not prove that allowing playgoers to sit on stage at the outdoor playhouses was a regular practice. Perhaps stage-sitters were permitted at those venues for a popular play or on a holiday, when demand for seats was greatest—playhouses were businesses, after all.¹⁵ Certainly, though, the evidence exists and is sufficient to call into question, even to counter, the common belief that playgoers never sat on the outdoor stages during performances. To put it another way, one can argue that stage-sitting was more typical of the indoor playhouses without needing to insist that it never occurred on the outdoor stages.

Most recent attempts to recreate so-called original practices do not include stage-sitters. Although the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia, provides about five stools on either side of the stage and playgoers are regularly invited to sit on them, as members of a modern audience they typically do their best to be unobtrusive; certainly they do not usually call attention to themselves the way the gallants of Shakespeare’s day seem to have done. Similarly, editors rarely prompt us to see playgoers on stage in our mind’s eye when we imagine an early modern play in performance, especially on an outdoor stage. In the absence of reliable contemporary illustrations, all modern attempts to picture any pre-1660 London stage during a performance are necessarily guesswork. When such illustrations do include stage-sitters, their token and out-of-the-way presence suggests that they are not to be paid much attention now because they were not paid much attention then.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, therefore, we are reluctant to accept the fact that there were indeed playgoers on the stage some, much or all of the time. As a consequence, the ways in which the presence of onstage playgoers might have affected a performance more than four centuries ago are seldom considered. Among the questions worth asking, however, is whether playwrights might have written with the likelihood or possibility of intrusive stage-sitters in mind, and whether they developed methods of deflecting attention from them and onto the characters and action of their plays.
Although to my knowledge nowhere is the extant information about playgoers on the amphitheatre stages collected and presented in detail, some theatre historians have cited some of the evidence that playgoers sat on the stages of the outdoor playhouses and others have implied this to be the case; see Chambers 2:535-36, Southern 30, Hotson Shakespeare’s Wooden O 225-31, 275, Wickham 178-180, Cook 150-55, Hattaway 24, 30-31, Berry 514, Egan 297-309. Perhaps the most influential theatre historian of recent times, Andrew Gurr, has confusingly offered differing interpretations, sometimes acknowledging the evidence that playgoers sat on both indoor and outdoor stages, but more often either qualifying this view or completely dismissing the possibility of stage-sitters at the amphitheatres; see, for example, The Shakespearean Stage 209, 210-11, and Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London 28, 30.

For a discussion of the evidence that these poems were in circulation before 1596 see C. R. Baskervill (2-3) where he is refuting the use of this evidence by C. W. Wallace, who cited it when arguing that stage-sitting began at the Blackfriars and occurred “in no other theatre in Elizabeth’s reign” (130-47, esp. 130). R. Krueger’s later study of 1962 established the epigrams’ date of composition as 1594-5 (122-3).

According to Gurr, “From 1590 to 1600 no boy companies and no indoor playhouses, except possibly the occasional hall at a City inn, were available in London” (Playgoing 22).

The first Blackfriars playhouse was operative from 1576 until 1584; the second Blackfriars playhouse did not open until 1600 (see Gurr; Shakespearean Stage 33, 119). E. K. Chambers observes that “as [sitting on the stage] certainly originated at the public houses, so it maintained itself there, in spite of the grumbles of the ordinary spectators, with whose view of the action the throng of feathered and restless gallants necessarily interfered” and he cites the Davies epigrams and Jonson’s play to support this statement (Elizabethan Stage 535-36).

Dekker’s address To the Reader indicates that the book was written earlier than 1609: “This Tree of Guls was planted long since, but not taking roote, could neuer beare till now” (sig. A4r).

As Egan notes, “the reference to the yard shows that Dekker is thinking of the public playhouses” (307).

See also, Dekker, Every Man Out, “sono secundo” (B1), “Sound the third time” (C1).

Bentley also makes this point (Seventeenth-Century Stage 3) as does Egan 307.

See J. Leeds Barroll’s discussion of the evidence that the King’s Men acquired Blackfriars in 1608, but that the plague kept theatres closed until 1610-11 (187-92). For a discussion of which plays were or might have been performed at both venues see Gurr, Elizabethan Theatre XIII (47-62).

The first extended consideration of stage-sitting is C. W. Wallace’s chapter, “The custom of sitting on the stage originating at Blackfriars” (130-147) in which he tries to counter any evidence that might disprove his case. He concedes that this passage might seem to refer to the Globe, “But as it is merely a hypothetical case, in a satire at that, I doubt its value” (136-37).

The Induction begins with an exchange between a Tireman and Will Sly, who is acting the part of a playgoer sitting on the stage when the Tireman says “SIR, the Gentleman will be angry if you sit heare” and Sly replies, “Why? We may sit upon the stage at the private house: / thou dost not take me for a country gentleman, doest? / Doest think I feare hissing? Ie holde my life thou / took’st me for one of the plaiers”. Gurr says this shows that “the Globe did not usually allow stools on its stage” (Rebuilding 68); Irwin Smith is even more certain in his unsupported assertion that “Marston’s Malcontent
declares stage sitting to be the settled privilege of gallants at the Blackfriars, and expressly denies it for the Globe” (221).

12 It is worth noting how the Sly-Tireman exchange has been annotated by three modern editors of the play. M. L. Wine says that Sly is “alluding to the taunts of the groundlings in the public theater who objected to the gallants who sat on the stage and blocked the action. Dekker, in The Guls Horne-booke . . . advises his gull to sit upon the stage even ‘though the Scar-crowes in the yard hoot at you, hisse at you, spat at you, yea, throw durt even in your teeth’” (1.1.4n); Bernard Harris similarly offers that, “The habit which gallants had of sitting on the stage, whether at the private or public theatres, is best described in Dekker’s Gull’s Horn-book” (1.1.2n); G. K. Hunter interprets Sly’s question only as implying “that sitting on the stage was more acceptable in the ‘private’ theatre than in the public one” (1.1.2n).

13 George Fulmer Reynolds also cites this passage, assumes that Dekker is referring to outdoor theatres, including the Red Bull, and says that “spectators were customary” on its stage (8–9, 64, 141). Reynolds did not pursue the matter and in the intervening years no one seems either to have countered his conclusions or considered the implications they have for not only the Red Bull but the outdoor playhouses more generally.

14 Inexplicably, on at least one occasion when Gurr refers to this incident he says that the apprentice was “standing by the stage platform” (“Playing in Amphitheatres” 58).

15 I am grateful to John Astington for this suggestion. Egan observes, “Presumably the ‘couteousness of Sharers’” mentioned by Dekker “refers to the management’s toleration of the practice because of the extra revenue generated” (298).

16 On at least one occasion Richard Southern drew a Swan-type outdoor stage with several playgoers seated on either side of it (Plate IV, B). C. Walter Hodges, whose drawings have helped us to imagine how various Shakespearean scenes might originally have looked, sometimes also put a few playgoers on an outdoor stage; see Enter the Whole Army (19–20) and his illustrations in Shakespeare’s The Two Gentlemen of Verona (16).

Works Cited


