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Thomas Platter's Account of an Unknown Play at the Curtain or the Boar's Head

Thomas Platter's account of trips he made to London playhouses in 1599 is an important document for students of the Elizabethan theatre. A Swiss visitor, Platter saw "the tragedy of the first Emperor Julius", usually taken to be Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and another play which has remained unidentified. Unfortunately the translations of Platter's Swiss-German text made by E. K. Chambers and Clare Williams were imperfect, so the superior work of Ernest Schanzer will be used here.¹ Schanzer was right to assert that we cannot be sure that Platter saw Shakespeare's play, only that he saw a play about Caesar either at the Globe, in which case it was Shakespeare's play, or at the Rose, in which case it was not (Egan 1999).

Immediately after describing the play about Julius Caesar, Platter wrote:

On another occasion, also after dinner, I saw a play not far from our inn, in the suburb, at Bishopsgate, as far as I remember. There they presented various nations with whom each time an Englishman fought for a maiden, and overcame them all, except the German, who won the maiden in fights, sits down beside her, and hence got himself and his servant very fuddled so that they both became drunk, and the servant threw his shoe at his master's head, and they both fell asleep. Meanwhile the Englishman went [or, possibly, "climbed"] into the tents, and carries off the German's prize, and so he outwits the German too. At the end they danced, too, very gracefully, in the English and the Irish mode.

Chambers assumed that Platter was referring to the Curtain playhouse since none other was known to be operating in this part of London near the end of 1599 (Chambers 1923, 2:403). The syntax of Platter's identification of the location of the playhouse ("not from far our inn, in the suburb, at Bishopsgate") is ambiguous in both Schanzer's translation and the German original (Binz 1899, 458) and allows either the inn or the playhouse to be "at Bishopsgate". But we know that Platter lodged in Mark Lane, which is not in Bishopsgate (Williams 1937, 152, 224), so the venue, then, must have been "at Bishopsgate". The ward of Bishopsgate extended north along Bishopsgate Street but not as far as the liberty of Holywell, where the Curtain was located.² Recent work by Herbert Berry has indicated that the Boar's Head playhouse, built in the yard of an inn, was active from 1598 and was extensively refurbished in the summer of 1599 (Berry 1986, 29-36), and it is possible that Platter went there rather than to the Curtain. Berry has established the precise location of the Boar's Head playhouse, close to the bars in Whitechapel High Street which marked the limit of city jurisdiction (Berry 1986, 11, 132-38). This was indeed near to Platter's inn, but the bulk of Bishopsgate ward is nearer to the Curtain than to the Boar's Head. Depending on which part of the description we favour--is he more likely to recall which ward or how far away it was?--either playhouse would fit Platter's account.

Describing an animal-baiting arena in Southwark, Platter noted the unusual shape: "circular, with galleries around the top for the spectators" (Williams 1937, 168). We know that Platter saw a play about Julius Caesar at either the Rose or the Globe, both of which were virtually circular, and if he also visited the Curtain we might expect him to note that it too was 'circular'. But Platter did not record the shape of the playhouses. The Boar's Head was rectangular, following the shape of the inn-yard, and perhaps Platter did not generalize because he saw one 'circular' playhouse (the Rose or Globe) and one rectangular playhouse (the Boar's Head). Berry identified 13 plays which might have been performed at the Boar's

Head (Berry 1986, 124-27) but none contains action which fits Platter's description. Since most of the drama of the period is lost, our inability to identify the play from Platter's description is not surprising.³

What of Platter's description of the action of the play he saw: "the Englishman went [or, possibly, "climbed"] into the tents, and carries off the German's prize"? In a discussion of tents in the drama, Alan C. Dessen noted that in all but two cases they might easily be imagined as the fictional location of the scene without the need for actual tent-like structures on the stage (Dessen 1995, 142-44). But in Shakespeare's Richard 3 5.3 the repeated references to the erection of tents and the powerful symbolism of the juxtaposed 'camps' justify the use of stage tents (Shakespeare 1968, R3 TLN 3431-3690; [Shakespeare 1597, sig. L2r-M1r). The 'plot' of 2 Seven Deadly Sins begins with the stage direction "A tent being plast one the stage for Henry the sixt . he in it A sleepe" (Bradley 1992, 98), and there Henry remains while the events of the play unfold as in a dream. In both plays a tent is used in a scene of sleeping, and we should note that a stage booth--a rectilinear wooden box with suspended curtains--could serve indifferently for either a tent or a bed. W. W. Greg conjectured that Henry "is represented as dreaming that he is still encamped on the field of battle" (Greg 1931, 114), which suggests that a stage booth represented both the bed in which Henry slept and the tent of which he dreamt. The provenance of the 'plot' of 2 Seven Deadly Sins is uncertain, but David Bradley (Bradley 1992, 101) added weight to Scott McMillin's suggestion (McMillin 1988, 61) that it might be the Henry 6 play mentioned in Henslowe's records (Foakes & Rickert 1961, 16-20) rather than Richard Tarlton's Seven Deadly Sins mentioned by Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe (Greg 1931, 2:107-113). Although similarity of staging cannot settle the attribution, I offer the observation that Tarlton's company were highly adept at transformations involving stage booths, as McMillin noted concerning their Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay in which Bacon "sets up a sort of early television set, which allows those in the [Friar's] cell to see what is happening in Fressingfield . . . [as it] is acted out on another part of the stage" (McMillin & MacLean 1998, 141).

George F. Reynolds was the first to suggest the dramatic ubiquity of stage booths and his ideas were developed by Warren D. Smith, C. Walter Hodges, A. M. Nagler, and Scott McMillin (Reynolds 1940, 52-87; Smith 1951; Hodges 1968, 54-63; Nagler 1981, 26-65; McMillin 1992). As I have shown elsewhere, the ability of this stage property to represent various kinds of domestic and ceremonial furniture (bed, shop, pulpit, state) was, for Ben Jonson at least, a compelling example of the mutability of theatrical signs (Egan 1998). The coincidence of tents and sleep in Richard 3 and 2 Seven Deadly Sins might well reflect the dramatists' exploitation of the fact that a stage booth representing a tent looked like a bed and one representing a bed looked like a tent.

Unlike most spectators, Thomas Platter would easily have mistaken a bed (the appropriate place for a maiden "prize") for a tent. Platter did not understand English (Williams 1937, 129-32), and he attended the play alone. The account of the play about Julius Caesar specifies that Platter went in company and the dramatic report begins "we saw", but recounting the unnamed play he switches to "I saw". The oddness of his description of the action of the play, which relates a series of stage actions lacking obvious causal connection, indicates that he understood little of what he saw, and he had no-one to explain it to him. So we can at least discount the possibility that Platter simply imagined the tents as fictional locations indicated by dialogue, since he had only the evidence of his eyes upon which to base his report of the play: he saw objects which looked like tents.

It is tempting to relate the use of stage properties to particular venues, but caution is needed. Shakespeare's Richard 3 appears to have been written in the early 1590s (Wells et al. 1987, 115-16), and no date later than June 1594 has been proposed for the 'plot' of 2 Seven Deadly Sins (McMillin 1988, 57). Andrew Gurr noted that "Stays at London playhouses were usually short-lived up to 1594" (Gurr 1996, 22). Portable booths were standard pieces of travelling players' equipment and could be brought to the venue by the company. By 1599 most companies had what Gurr characterized as 'settled practices' with longer residences at London playhouses (Gurr 1996, 78-104), so we might expect greater exploitation of the facilities, including permanent 'enclosures' or 'discovery spaces', available at particular venues. We know almost nothing of the facilities at the Curtain, but if Platter saw his unnamed play at the Boar's Head then the use of booths might have a special significance. The Boar's Head stage was originally set like a

boxing ring in the middle of the yard rather than abutting one wall, so access from the backstage area was awkward (Berry 1986, 108). Discoveries behind the `scenic wall' would have been impossible because there was none, and hence the Boar's Head players had greater need of stage booths than those at other venues. In "July and possibly part of August, 1599" the Boar's Head was redesigned and the stage moved to meet the west wall of the yard (Berry 1986, 34-5). Because of the peculiarities of the yard in which the Boar's Head playhouse was constructed this movement of the stage worsened sightlines for many spectators (Berry 1986, 111). Berry inferred that the stage was moved because the advantages of the traditional `scenic wall'--which permits discoveries without reliance on stage booths--outweighed the disadvantages. Platter arrived in England on 16 September 1599 (Williams 1937, 145), too late to see the Boar's Head before its refurbishment, but the players might have continued with the well-tried stage booths even after alternative facilities became available.

Notes

¹Chambers 1923, 365-66; Williams 1937, 166; Schanzer 1956, 466-67.

²An admirably clear representation of the ward boundaries can be found in the foldaway map which accompanies Stow 1908, which for Bishopsgate draws upon Stow 1603, sig. M3r-M8v. The location of the Curtain near to the dissolved priory of Holywell is omitted from the 1603 edition of Stow's survey, but can be found in the 1598 edition on sig. Z7r.

³Williams believed that Wilhelm Creizenach had identified the unnamed play seen by Platter, but only because she mistook the final item (The White Tragedy) in Creizenach's list of lost plays whose names are known to us for a heading identifying the first item in a list of lost plays whose names are unknown (Williams 1937, 238n; Creizenach 1918, 47). David Wiles thought that the play might have starred Will Kemp because he saw an allusion to it in Jonson's Every Man out of His Humour when Carlo says "I warrant you: would I had one of Kemps shooes to throw after you" (Wiles 1987, 36; Jonson 1600, sig. O1r). Throwing a shoe is not sufficiently unusual a piece of business for this claim to carry much weight.

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