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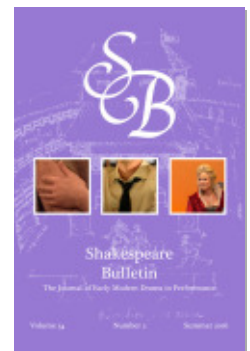
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A Race to the Roof: Cosmetics and Contemporary Histories in the Elizabethan Playhouse, 1592–1596

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Discussing the Elizabethan playhouse often requires referring to a set of assumptions we, as literary and theater critics, share about its architecture. C. Walter Hodges, illustrator of children's books and early modern playhouses, provided the visual template associated most closely with Renaissance theater. This template consisted of ten features attached to the principal architectural unit of the performance space and its tiring house, including the three-sided acting area, the audience area comprising the galleries and yard, a closed-off tiring house, two doors, a permanent upper stage, two stage posts, a curtain, windows, trap doors to Hell under the stage, and the Heavens (Hodges, *Enter* 18–21). Dominant trends in Shakespeare Studies tend to gesture toward the constructed nature of early modern drama in the sense of cultural and ideological influences rather than its materiality. In a 2005 special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, "Theatrical Movements," S. P. Cerasano describes in her headnote that many "aspects of the theatrical scene have also been envisioned as inert; or, at the very least, we often operate under the assumption that the players, companies, and theater financiers settled into similar—and stagnant—patterns of behavior" (iv). Furthermore, "this sense of fixity has so pervaded the narrative of theater history, in fact, that it has produced an almost undifferentiated picture of the Elizabethan public playhouses" (iv). Due to this seemingly undifferentiated picture, frequently overlooked is the fact that playhouse templates were different from one another, developing over time in response to the vicissitudes of the theatrical marketplace *and* these cultural influences.

Hodges predicted some of the ways in which a reconstructed Globe would solidify a template of Renaissance playhouses in both the popular and scholarly imagination. In his chapter “What is Possible,” he articulates the surprising misconceptions scholars had about Elizabethan playhouses prior to the recovery of the Rose foundations in 1989:

But the responsibility is that when the new Globe is at last actually built and complete and at work, after all the effort of academic authority that has gone into it, so far as all the systems of public information and education are concerned, to say nothing of the universal influences of the media, *that will be that*. That will be the Globe. Photographs of it will be in all editions of Shakespeare. Audiences (we hope) and other visitors who go to it will, we hope, enjoy it and go home, and be content to know that that was the great Globe, *be it right or wrong*. (52)

Despite his own mistaken hypotheses about the design of Elizabethan playhouses (mistakes to which he freely confesses), he did not predict how his own drawings would remain incorporated in the explanatory materials posted for audiences attending performances at the Rose archaeological dig site, continuing to reinforce a popular sense of a standard template. As critics, it is easier for us to imagine the playhouse as a static entity or conceptual “green screen” upon which we can project readings primarily mediated by the playtexts. Yet how a space is constructed physically has implications for what that space can reveal culturally. As I will demonstrate, evidence from the staging requirements of the plays of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries alongside recent developments in archaeology strongly suggest that it is unlikely that every playhouse shared this template—that the canvas was and is really so stable.

In order to situate Elizabethan playtexts in the materiality of their historical performance, these spaces must be reconceived as mutable and as evolving as the entertainments they housed. Built in or around 1576, the Theatre, the Rose, and the Curtain all shared the same architect, John Griggs, and the same dimensions: they were fourteen-sided polygons with an external diameter of roughly 72 feet (22 meters). While certainly the playhouses shared a template in terms of their size, it was the architectural features within them that served as the primary metric so that playgoers might distinguish between them. For example, based on evidence from recent excavations in Southwark of playhouses and bearbaiting rings, archaeologist Julian Bowsher is convinced that there was no such thing as “a typical Shakespearian theatre” (“The Rose and Its Stages” 36). While we might go so far as to assume that there was a common early playhouse

type Griggs imagined for the 1576 constructions, those three playhouses soon dramatically diverged from one another with “unspecific alterations at the Theatre, additions of stair turrets at the Curtain and remodeling at the Rose” (Bowsher, “Twenty years on” 457). Such variability reinforces the understanding that the template of features varied greatly from playhouse to playhouse; in short, playhouse development and renovation was intentionally diverse rather than randomly so.

The evolution of the Heavens—comprised of a roof over the stage, attendant pillars, and a pulley system to suspend props, scenery, and actors—indicates that it was not a feature in the initial construction of these first-generation playhouses.¹ This essay first sketches a brief micro-history of the Heavens before speculating upon the possible socio-economic factors that may have influenced its development, including a boom in printed contemporaneous histories, a fad for Mediterranean plays, and the adoption of brownface stage paints by actors at the Rose. In doing so, I argue that the Heavens capitalized upon playgoers expanding shared knowledge of England’s place within a global history and provided a cultural space in which to interrogate England’s changing relationship to its Mediterranean neighbors.

“Cut him out in little stars”: The Marketing of the Heavens

The mid-1590s were marked by plague outbreaks in London. Death counts ranged from 150 to 1100 per week; considering that the playhouses were attended by roughly 15,000 people per week by 1595, they were routinely closed (Keenan 129). While playwrights were turning to publishing to weather the epidemic, playhouse owners used the time to expand. Philip Henslowe’s Rose playhouse underwent significant renovations in 1592 and 1595. The 1591/2² renovations focused on the remodeling of the stage area of the playhouse, including the construction of the first recorded roof over the stage not extrapolated from a speculative reading of a playtext. Henslowe records two payments specifically to painters of the 125 individual renovation payments in 1591/2 (Henslowe 6–7). In 1594/5, however, 9 of the 24 individual payments for renovations were paid specifically to painters, including the “itm pd for carpenters work & mackinge the throne In the heuenes the 4 of June 1595” (Henslowe 9–13). This contrast suggests that while the roof over the stage was built in 1592, it did not include painted details until 1595.³ This chronology implies that the stage roof and the painted sun, moon, and constellations did not, in fact, grow up together.

It is a safe guess, then, that the Heavens was not a part of the initial design of London's theaters, and that the evolution of this architectural feature was, at the very least, a three-year piecemeal process. With this narrative, the evolution of the Heavens begins to align with previous work on the logic of proto-capitalist theatrical competition in this period. Roslyn Knutson has articulated the accepted industry practice of cross-repertorial duplication, wherein a playing company—seeing the success of one technique in another company's practice—imitated and innovated upon that technique in their own work (*The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company* 50–1). Such acts of cross-repertorial borrowing could be about something material, such as shifting from cloth masks to paint to signal cultural or symbolic distinctions. Or it could be about something in the construction of plays, such as using direct address to convey a character's interiority. As Roslyn Knutson puts it, such imitation and cooperation suggests that “the companies apparently believed that several similar plays of unremarkable quality were potentially more profitable than a singular masterpiece” (*The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company* 50). This is to say, generic novelty did not fundamentally drive sales—or at least not yet.

The most famous painted roof in the record of Elizabethan play-ing is not that of the renovated Rose but that of the Swan, built new in 1594/5. Touring England in 1596, Johannes de Witt sketched the playhouse interior, the earliest visual account of this kind. Despite its murky transmission history of copying and recopying, the drawing has contributed to the general sense of formal fixity we ascribe to all early modern playhouses. Glynne Wickham, in his genealogy of inner stage machinery, observes that our “assumptions about physical conditions and production techniques are closely interrelated” (1). The de Witt sketch is an instructive artifact in that it both articulates the shape of the English playhouse just after a significant change made to these structures (thus giving us a better sense of the Dutchman's reason for recording something new) but also elides the successive steps in that innovation. In a reactionary rather than trendsetting approach, playhouse landlords and companies were turning to material novelty as an additional resource to attract playgoers. As Bowsher notes, “this period was one of competition between the London playhouses, all striving to attract audiences, acting companies, and playwrights through new building designs” (*Shakespeare's London Theatreland* 74). The very press of the audiences against the Rose stage is marked by a foot-and-a-half difference in the floor depth between the majority of the yard and the area immediately in front of that stage (Bowsher, “The Rose and Its Stages” 42). This suggests an allowance for



Fig. 1. Sketch of the Swan playhouse by Johannes de Witt, as copied by Arend van Buchell, c.1596.

more playgoers to pack into the yard, or perhaps a desire by playgoers to see aspects of the stage itself up close. More generally, as playhouses multiplied, the model of anticipating financial success through imitation may have no longer been sustainable in this increasingly diverse marketplace.

These playhouse construction activities, including those of the Swan, had certainly been causing political anxiety at least two years before de Witt's sketch. In a letter to Lord Burghley on 3 November 1594, the Lord Mayor, Sir John Spencer, sets out an extensive argument for "suppressing" the "niew stage or Theater (as they call it) for the exercising of playes vpon the Banckside," in reference to the Swan, by Francis Langley (Rutter 86–7). Spencer implies that the Privy Council knowingly licensed theaters because they could function as a mechanism for social restraint, perceived as they were to have the ability to "divert idle heads & other ill disposed from other woorse practize by this kind of exercise" (Rutter 86). Spencer cites the risks these new playhouses were thought to pose to industry, to public health, and to piety. Crowds might riot (certainly the threat of the plague existed when any large group assembled together) and, as the Puritans later worried, plays might promote blasphemy. The request to Burghley to halt the construction of the Swan suggests that Privy Council policy making was understood to be subject to this kind of lobbying: Spencer implies the ability of Elizabeth I's regime to police the range of meanings and potential radicalism of theatrical content was reaching its limit with yet another playhouse. For the purposes of this essay, the letter suggests a widespread awareness of the growth of the playhouse industry in number and scale, as well as the awareness of possible social implications by those in power.

Spencer's comparison of playhouse building to contagion is an apt one not only in light of the plague outbreaks, but also in that Southwark was, in fact, pockmarked by theaters now: the Rose and Globe were only about 100 yards apart and the Swan about 400 yards westward ("Section D4"). The toe-to-toe competition of the construction of roofs and proximity of the Rose and Swan in 1595/6 forecasts a later contest between the Rose and Globe in 1599/1600, as sketched by Knutson. Rather than offering plays that marked each playhouse as distinct, the Rose and Globe doggedly pursued similarities, staging comedies of similar structure that featured pastoral love plots and humors-based caricatures (Knutson, "Toe to Toe across Maid Lane" 28). Conducting a comparative analysis of the repertoires as Knutson does here provides "insight into the logic of a company's repertory" but does not "explain the ingenuity of its practitioners to identify a subject with theatrical potential and turn it into a stage-worthy

play” (“Toe to Toe across Maid Lane” 32). One way of speculating upon the conditions from which such practitioner ingenuity arose is to contextualize the material stage devices of the Swan and Rose, understanding that their distinct material affordances would have necessarily inflected the repertory that played out under their roofs.

A number of plays first performed to the public between 1592–96 highlighted the new technology of pillars, gallery, and the general interpretive space the roof demarcated as a Heavens. Within this revised narrative it seems less coincidental that the two plays by William Shakespeare famous for using the gallery space made possible by a roof have been traced to the period immediately following the second set of renovations in 1595/6. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is littered with moon references, especially in act two: aside from the bower required for Titania to discover the rude mechanicals in scene three and Oberon to overhear Hermia and Lysander in scene two, scene one mentions the moon six times, several of which imply a gesture upwards to the painted moon by the speaker. More important still, these moon references are inherently spatial. Oberon imagines the stage as flooded in light when “ill met by moonlight” (II.i.60) he greets Titania. In relating the origin of the poisoned “western flower” (II.i.166) he also describes Cupid’s movements as contained “between the cold moon and the earth” (II.i.156), the space in which the performance itself would have been constrained by the roof.

Famous for its so-called “balcony” scene, *Romeo and Juliet* also oscillates rhetorically between heaven and earth, night and day.⁴ Scene two of act three is dense with references to the sun deity Phaeton, and mentions “heaven” in spatial terms at least four times. The gestural implications of Juliet’s lines are more direct here than in *Midsummer*. That she inquires “can heaven be so envious?” (3.2.39) implies that the player would be looking upward to the painted roof (relatively close to the boy actor’s position in the gallery), interrogating the heavens directly. Similarly, while *Midsummer* draws most attention to the side of the stage featuring the moon, not only does *Romeo and Juliet* privilege the painted sun ostensibly on the opposite side, but it also draws attention to constellations, where Romeo should be cut “out in little stars” as to “make the face of heaven so fine / That all the world will be in love with night / And pay no worship to the garish sun” (3.2.22–25). In this passage, not only is “heavens” used, but also all the aspects of the cosmos we would assume constituted the roof painting are identified in her speech. Observing Juliet, Romeo traces her movements, realizing that she is thinking aloud to herself: “Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, / Having some business, do entreat

her eyes / To twinkle in their spheres till they return" (2.1.57–59). Both passages imply specific gestures upward to the Heavens as a space for contemplation, where decisions that will alter the arc of these characters' lives are weighed and made. While certainly these lines do not require a painted referent for theatrical effectiveness, the volume of referents to Heavens features, the plays' timing in the historical record, timing that aligns with financial evidence of playhouse renovation, begs a reconsideration of other dramaturgical interpretations—namely, interpretations wherein such moments are underscored by visual placeholders within the playhouse architecture itself.

It is safe to assume that by the mid-1590s there is a rapid expansion of the inner playhouse in both renovated and new construction. Specifically, implicit stage directions from plays on the boards in this period call attention and ask players physically to gesture to the Heavens. The historical evidence (Henslowe's renovation records, the Swan drawing, and the letter to the Privy Council) alongside these playtexts together suggest the architectural feature of the Heavens was perceived as a marketable aspect of playgoing. We also see the beginnings of a shift in habits of marketplace competition: from a glut of similar offerings, to hints at the beginnings of prioritizing theatrical experience by the material novelty proffered. Langley seems to have wanted to provide something unique in addition to his state-of-the-art playhouse by including painted spaces; Henslowe, working in the old model, added a painted Heavens perhaps in a kind of one-upmanship.⁵ Furthermore, playwrights, including Shakespeare, immediately capitalized upon this new theatrical feature. Before the roof renovations, Bowsher contends "actors were largely acting in one, forward, direction" ("Twenty years on" 462). "With the extra space at the side of the second Rose stage acting had to be in three directions," Bowsher found this provided "greater scope for interaction with the audience" ("Twenty years on" 462)—an observation he later reinforced through discussions with actors ("Encounters Between Actors" 66). For Shakespeare at least, the Heavens served rhetorically as a space for contemplation: "The fault," as *Julius Caesar* would have it, was "not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings" beneath this cosmos both materially and metaphorically (1.2.141–42). Such a line could have been written and certainly still has a dramatic effect without a painted Heavens above. However, *with* the painted space of the Heavens, such moments not only call attention to the materiality of the playhouse itself and inflecting the content of Elizabethan playtexts.



Fig. 2. Frontispiece from John Poleman's *All the famous Battels that haue bene fought in our age throughout the world*, 1578.

“Haunted by prior histories”: The Geography of the Heavens

To consider economic factors alone would be to elide the sociopolitical valences to which a feature like the Heavens, as much a cultural product as a playtext is, may have become attached. What cultural factors, then, aside from the competition between playhouses and the Privy Council's stay on performances, could have contributed to the particular course of the Heavens' evolution? First, consider that in the later sixteenth century there was a boom in print histories aimed at popular consumption. This boom was comprised not only of native English histories, but especially of world histories concerning the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and the geopolitics of the Mediterranean. Many stressed the contemporaneity of their contents in their very titles. John Daus' translation of Johannes Sleidanus' *A famous cronicle of oure time* (1560) sketched a series of contacts between Charles V and the Ottoman Turks, diagnosing faults in religion and the commonwealth itself as the reason why the Holy Ro-

man Emperor was unable to stem Ottoman campaigns westward. The frontispiece of John Poleman's *All the famous Battels that haue bene fought in our age throughout the world* (1578) combines a variety of firearms and crossbow bolts as its main decorative motif in order to stress its exigency. For him, sixteenth-century battles with the Ottoman Turks were worth accounting for the military "prowesse" and the "noblesse of stocke" of their adversaries (Poleman 96). The book was apparently popular enough to warrant a second volume to continue the chronology. Aside from these lesser known accountings, most notables of English historiography commented on Mediterraneans' impact on current politics, including John Stubbes in his *The Discouerie of a Gaping Gulf* (1576), John Foxe in his *Actes and Monuments* (1583), and Raphael Holinshed in the third volume of his *Chronicles* (1586). As a group, these texts stress that—at least in print—Mediterraneans were seen to threaten England's political stability. The presence of the Mediterranean outsider reminded the English that England was a very small political force in the geopolitics of western Europe, and that the English themselves were accruing a sense of the cultural specificities that differentiated the non-Christian cultures of the Mediterranean.

Second, when we look at the calendar of playing derived from Henslowe's *Diary* alongside this race to build a better Heavens, the Lord Hunsdon's Men (made up of the leavings of some of the Lord Strange's Men) was the first troupe to rent out the Swan for its inaugural summer season in 1595. These players were coming from a company with a history of material experimentation: a repertory full of pyrotechnics; the first company recorded to take up a semi-permanent residence in the city at the Rose; and one that habitually deployed celebrity actors, regardless of company affiliation, to premiere new plays. Not only were the Swan and Rose playhouses linked spatially (because of their close proximity in Southwark) and technologically (as the only two playhouses thus far with evidence of a Heavens feature), but also, it would seem, through the players that walked their boards. During the six months of Strange's unrestrained playing at the Rose between 19 February 1591/2 and 1 February 1592/3—just after the first renovations to include the roof—the company staged 134 performances of 27 distinct playtexts. At least 11 (and as many as 15) of the 24 plays in repertory during that season—approximately half of their active properties—featured at least one contemporaneous Mediterranean character. As many as 20 of their 36 total known playtexts feature similar Mediterranean figures and locales. Less concerned with the nearer Catholic Italian city-states, these Mediterranean plays

focused further east, specifically on the non-Christian Ottoman Empire and North African Levant. This is all to say that in tracing the connected lives and nature of competition between the Rose and Swan in the mid-1590s, not only do we see similar technological innovations but also similar types of plays emphasizing the scale and cultural specificity of Mediterranean peoples. The Heavens as an architectural space was at least loosely correlated with an increasing awareness of England's place within global politics.

The third node of influence I would like to posit, the use of brownface stains on actors to reinforce the "Mediterranean-ness" associated with the painted Heavens, is much more speculative and depends upon an accretion of suggestive evidence rather than a lone smoking gun. Seven of the Mediterranean plays at the Rose, roughly a third of the company's active properties, were new offerings in the 1595–96 season, and all of this group were performed by what E. K. Chambers initially labeled an "amalgamation" of Strange's and the Lord Admiral's Men (120). Critics refer to payments made to two companies jointly as "supplemented" playing, because it is often difficult to tell if in fact these payments suggest supertroupe combinations, or the borrowing of a few performers. Likely this tactic varied from company to company as, for example, the Lord Morely's players seemed to have been "popular partners" according to Andrew Gurr (*The Shakespearian Playing Companies* 236). There are frequent records of joint payments throughout the Admiral's career, but in particular with Strange's in 1595–96. If we account for the fact that more than half of Strange's repertory was Mediterranean in some way, including all of their new plays in the season for which they combined frequently with Admiral's, perhaps these "amalgamations" amounted to the addition of Edward Alleyn—kin to Rose-owner Henslowe—and a few of his fellow Admiral's Men to supplement the new Mediterranean productions. If we recall that Alleyn inaugurated the title role of the first successful Mediterranean play, *Tamburlaine*, there is every possibility that Alleyn was brought in to help sell the new material by drawing upon the audiences' association of this actor with his iconic role.⁶ If these new roles featured the use of blackface cosmetics—and this is admittedly a very hypothetical "if"—it could have been on a large scale (which is to say, several members of the cast).

The most successful of these Mediterranean plays in which Alleyn, his colleagues, and the Heavens may have been featured, and that we can place at the Rose immediately after the addition of the roof in the 1592–93 Strange's season, are Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*,

playing thirteen times with average takings of 40s 8d a night, and George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, playing fourteen times with average takings of 32s 6d.⁷ Both plays have large and varied groups of characters from different Mediterranean cultures. The political context in *Malta* necessitates that distinctions between the Turkish soldiers, Spanish envoys, Jewish merchants, Maltese/Italian citizens and a Barbary slave were overtly codified so the competing interests of these cultural factions were clear. *Alcazar*, billed on its frontispiece as "fovght in Barbarie, betweene Sebastian king of Portugall, and Abdelmelc king of Marocco. With the death of Captaine Stukeley" (Edelman 17), foregrounds the death of three kings as a product of widespread geopolitical conflict between the Irish, English, Italian, and Moroccan courts. As Emily Bartels rightly describes it, these plays press their "spectators to look beyond the bounds of race, religion, and nation, to see a Mediterranean 'world' improvised from these unpredictable intersections" (43). These two plays in particular share a broad critique of reciprocal politics wherein a strict application of reason necessitates equal return without regard for possible larger ramifications. Both attach the problem of reciprocity to Ottoman culture financially, politically, and militarily, framing the threat as not to England geographically, but rather to honor as an inherent Protestant English virtue. Under the Heavens, Mediterranean otherness equated primarily to differences of religion and moral compass rather than geographical alterity.

Both casts were large, including 21 parts with named speech prefixes that, with expert doubling, could be played by a troupe of eleven or so. The additional consideration here for the doubling of parts would have been the kind of blackface materials used, a choice that would have been determined by the amount of time the actor was to spend as the character and how many other parts he was responsible for in and out of blackface. In *Malta* as few as 20% and as many as 43% of its roles require some kind of cosmetic cultural signaling, while *Alcazar* requires it in 67% of its roles. The Strange's players at the Rose in the 1595–96 season, having played with Alleyn as Mediterraneans, may have possibly been trained in the use of cosmetics from the borrowed Admiral's players. If Strange's did not adopt the cosmetic strategies from Alleyn and the other Admiral's additions, they may have simply been motivated for reasons of aesthetic distinctions from their competitors in the staging of this large group of Mediterranean plays. Additionally, while many artifacts attesting to everyday London life have been found at the Rose archaeological site, very few of artifacts with specific theatrical associations have been located. Those few items found include, however, a possible make-up brush and part of the frame of a wall mirror alongside fragments of mirrored glass

(Bowsler and Miller 136–37). It would not be a stretch, I think, to say that companies would have had access to the raw materials for cosmetics, and that they were used at the Rose.

My point here is not about how or why cultural difference was encoded in early modern performance. Certainly that work has and is being done by a number of literary and cultural critics. Kim Hall observes in English discourses of blackness an “anticosmetic strain” which spoke “both to the search for a pure whiteness and to the larger movement against ‘foreign’ and material wealth” that linked “cosmetics and foreign difference” (87). In her study of early modern blackface technologies, Virginia Vaughan suggest that “in plays of the 1590s new blackfaced figures might push stereotypes a bit further than their homiletic forebears,” thus contradicting and complicating “audience expectations” of the moral/symbolic resonances of blackface “in new ways” (4). This is reinforced by Andrea Stevens’ observation in her study on the materiality of painted bodies that, “if ever a convention groaned under the weight of its competing meanings, was multiply haunted by prior histories of use, surely blackface is it” (92). Vaughan concludes that “whatever ingredients were used, the application of black pigment must have been messy, and on occasion the paint must have rubbed off from one actor to another” (13). This conclusion speaks to another assumption about a lack of sophistication in stage technologies of the past as well as the ways in which combining analysis of the evolution of playing spaces alongside playtexts expands potential readings. In a detailed analysis of makeup tests from period recipe books, Richard Blunt demonstrates that “while medieval scarves, masks, and soot applications were generally a true black, Renaissance makeup is a more realistic brown” (223). The nut-based recipes he tested function more like stains rather than paint, solving an important staging problem: “actors would not have to worry about smearing or smudging” (Blunt 224). These period recipes were not only “less susceptible to rubbing off while remaining water-soluble,” but provided a range “of shades of brown possible” (Blunt 224). All of these critics would agree that actors had a range of methods to create the illusion of otherness. While we cannot know precisely what they used, factors including period recipes, the growing investment in paint in the playhouse, and the interest in contemporaneous Mediterranean plots allows me to speculate that Elizabethan drama engaged with an expanding shared knowledge of the cultural and political diversity of the Mediterranean.

Cultural and theater historians have pursued a number of avenues following the specific materials that went into constructing the performance space. The odds that the nut-based recipes were used by actors at the Rose

and Swan increase when we consider the cluster marketing structure of Southwark: neighboring industries capitalized upon neighbors, including the use of wattle-and-daub infill for the floor of playhouses, streets, and bowling alleys that included soot and nut shells from a nearby soap yard not 200 yards from the Rose on Maid Lane (Orrell 11). The other main recipe type was egg tempera-based, which could be mixed with pigment to make paint; while easier to create, these makeups did have the potential to flake or crack, however “any sweating done by the actor actually help[ed] to keep the mixture’s elasticity” (Blunt 226). One could imagine that parts like that of the Barbary slave Ithamore in *Malta* and Abdelmelec, the rightful King of Morocco in *Alcazar*, were parts that required the breathable cosmetic nut stains so that it would remain for the duration of the performance, while easily doubled parts like the Turkish Bashaw captains in *Malta* and the Moroccan ambassadors in *Alcazar* might have used the more water-soluble options like cork soot to complete quick changes. Thus, part of the increasing complexity to which theater critics refer is not only the significations by blackfaced or brownfaced characters, but also in the evolving and increasingly specific ways in which cultural and religious distinction was signified.⁸

Additionally, in both *Malta* and *Alcazar*, paint may not only have been used to mark the Heavens referent and sociocultural distinctions on actors’ bodies, but also to set those bodies ablaze. In *Alcazar*, the Heavens are again a referential space onto which characters attempt to debate, dictate, and map their fates like that of the later *Romeo and Juliet*. The Moroccan ambassadors reach the court of King Sebastian of Portugal asking for “kingly favor at our hands,” which is to say troops and resources, in order to “reobtain” the “royal seat” for Abdelmelec and “place his fortunes at their former height” (2.4.9–11). Again, we get spatial references to height, providing the actor with an opportunity to gesture with his hands upwards to the Heavens—a hand that he then sets alight with “a blazing brand of fire” (2.4.23). The ambassador ostensibly allows the flame to “fasten on [his] flesh” in order to “perform to thee [Sebastian] and to thine heirs” the promise of his “great lord and sovereign,” the challenged King of Morocco (2.4.31, 35). Lawrence Manley, in a survey of the Strange’s Men performances at the Rose Theatre in 1592/3, observes an unusually large number of plays involving pyrotechnics, possibly including the staging of human immolations like this one, largely used to represent acts of cruelty and judicial punishment that had an edge of topical relevance to English history and politics. That a playgoer, rather than see *Alcazar* “at the Rose on 20 February 1592 might have instead attended the execution

of Robert Pormorte in the west end of Paul's churchyard" (123), strongly suggests the urgency of grappling with issues of Londoners' place on both the global stage and the threat of violence inherent in that global engagement. It would seem this engagement was made possible in part by the pyrotechnic skills of Strange's Men together in the newly renovated Rose playhouse.

While literary and theater critics have carved out the scope of ways in which cultural difference was signified, my aim is to anchor those generalist observations within a specific season, a specific playhouse and a specific moment in its evolution. In doing so, we can see how the evolution in stage architecture, technology, and dramatic content were interrelated. Consider *Alcazar's* prologue to act five. The scene immediately precedes the infamous battle wherein three kings will die, includes the heirless monarch of Portugal, England's great ally. With his death arose a succession crisis in Portugal, eventually resolved with its acquisition by Spain, England's great enemy; reference to the Heavens in both plays magnify anxiety about Spain and the Portuguese crisis, and a realization of how those affairs could easily come to swallow England. The prologue calls for "*Lightning and thunder*" (5.prol.6.1) in explicit stage directions and implicitly with "Now throw the heavens forth their lightning flames, / And thunder over Afric's fatal fields" (5.prol.6-7). Considering the trend for pyrotechnics at the theater by Strange's, some kind of firework like those called for a few lines later (5.prol.17.1) may have been used to "throw" down the lightning from the gallery platform or from the pulley mechanism within the roof itself.¹⁰ Both the stage directions, "*Enter Fame like an Angel*" (5.prol.9.1), and implicit directions, "At last descendeth Fame" (V.prol.9), strongly imply that with the sound effects an actor would have been suspended from the roof area in order for Fame to "descend" downward "from her stately bower" (5.prol.11). Fame's actions in this dumb show are designed to emphasize, like the play itself, the destruction of these three kings in a faraway place to the "eye of all the world" (5.prol.14). Not only that, but the direction for "*Here the blazing star*" (5.prol.15.1), perhaps a kind of firework or descending piece of scenery, sends the point home that events seemingly unconnected to everyday English life could have widespread and immediate consequences. Regardless of geographical distance all the men on "the earth and princes of the same" over which the "streaming comets blaze" are equally under threat (5.prol.15-6).

In *Alcazar*, the cosmic destructive forces of fire and lightning are materialized and showcased by combining flame-retardant cosmetics with

fireworks and the pulley system of the Heavens. In *Malta*, the spectacular final scene literalizes the pulley system, hyper-exposing and showcasing the new technology of the Heavens feature at the Rose. Barabas, the Machiavellian prototype for Shakespeare's Shylock, is directed to begin the final scene "*with a hammer above, very busy*" (5.5.1.1). The character is directed to be actually working with his carpenters to construct a death trap for the would-be conquering Turks (having first struck a monetarily-motivated bargain with the Governor of Malta in a show of anti-Semitism unsettlingly fashionable in early modern English drama). From the upper gallery, possibly, Barabas asks, "How stand the cords? How hang these hinges, fast? / Are all the cranes and pulleys sure?" (5.5.1-2). With their confirmation, Barabas rewards the carpenters for their "art" (4) with unfettered access to his wine cellars, all poisoned unbeknownst to them. It is at this point that Barabas has reached the zenith of his power, reveling as he does in a direct address to audiences:

Why, is not this
 A kingly kind of trade, to purchase towns
 By treachery, and sell 'em by deceit?
 Now tell me, worldlings, underneath the sun
 If greater falsehood ever has been done. (5.5.46-50)

He names his audiences "worldlings," not "groundlings" as made famous by *Hamlet*, nor Englishmen and women as in *Alcazar* with its marauding yet heroic Captain Stukeley. As "worldlings," the Orientalized world of the play is meant to refract back England's bad political behavior and its consequences to them as English. Here, Barabas makes his audiences global citizens, overtly situating them as players in this global contest for Malta. Like the blazing star and comets in *Alcazar*, in *Malta*, English audiences are pressed to acknowledge their shared position alongside Mediterraneans as all "underneath the sun" and h/Heavens.

As the play suggests, since we are all under the same sun, so are we all equally subject to the vicissitudes of Fortune's Wheel. Barabas's trap is used against him through a brief compact between the Governor of Malta and the Turkish force: "*A charge [sounded], the cable cut, a cauldron discovered / [into which BARABAS has fallen]*" (5.5.63.1-2). It is unclear whether audiences are meant to see the cutting of the pulley system, or if this were merely a signal for personnel to open a trap door beneath Barabas so that he would fall from "his gallery" "there above" (5.5.52-53) into an ostensibly boiling cauldron on the stage beneath him. The dialogue suggests that Barabas flails and begs for help from the "Christians"

(64) while both the Maltese citizens and the Ottoman leadership watch Barabas “breathe forth thy latest”—and last—“fate” (77). Yet it is not the last of Barabas’ influence, as the Governor takes not one but two pages out of his Machiavellian playbook. First, the Governor takes the Turkish prince Calymath hostage, confessing that while they were together busy capturing Barabas, he had the house where the Ottoman janissaries were quartered “fired, / Blown up, and all thy soldiers massacred” (105–56); the Governor calls the trick “a Jew’s courtesy” (107). Second, he plans to use the leverage of taking the famous warrior Calymath prisoner in order to stave off “all the world” from attacking them (118). To the Maltese soldiers the Governor imparts the final words of the play: “let due praise be given / Neither to fate nor fortune, but to heaven” (122–23). Not the unpredictable vicissitudes of fate or fortune, but the self-fashioning opportunities provided by the Heavens are what the Governor valorizes in an echo of Barabas.

In these earlier Mediterranean plays we can see the ideological and dramatic function of the Heavens as an inner stage space to which the later Shakespearean uses only partially allude. The Heavens serve as an architectural incarnation of what Diana Taylor refers to as a *scenario*: a formulaic paradigm or framing device that provides a recognizable concept through which audiences could access new content. For example, the cosmic ordering of the *theatrum mundi* and Fortune’s Wheel (where man is the universe writ small as the universe is writ large, and his fortunes wax and wane like the rotation of the heavenly bodies) are cordoned in by the upper stage and pillars as a mutable space upon which to project the competing discourses of fate and fortune as inflected by a multicultural Mediterranean. The Heavens as a stage technology thus materializes a cultural scenario: an Elizabethan might perceive the power of non-Christian empires as threatening and link that to older rhetorics about the rise and fall of empires embedded in narratives of Troy, Rome, and Fortune’s Wheel. The accretion of evidence here suggests it was possible that specific architectural features helped to stage such a scenario. Edward Said acknowledges a similar transference when he locates the origins of the figures of speech linked with the Orient in the Renaissance. For Said as for Taylor, to orientalize is a reproducible, performative act:

the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the large whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe . . . In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a

prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world. (63)

The connection between the development of this stage technology and a fashion for plays about the Ottoman Empire and North Africa is not simply a convenient concurrence, but one in a series of cultural rehearsals of the Heavens scenario that used theatrical experience as a medium for transferring broader forms of cultural production into popular discourse. That we can link these phenomena to specific playhouses and precise historical periods reconceives theatrical reception as both evolving and culturally contingent.

**“Modern matter full of blood and ruth”:
The Evolution of the Heavens**

Within the larger trajectory of early modern theater history, the evolution of the Heavens as a stage technology came at a particularly compelling moment. The playing companies had been significantly rearranged in 1594, sometimes referred to as the “duopoly.”¹¹ This threshold moment for the companies often obfuscates what plays were on the boards during this transition in the interest of before-and-after analyses. Elided is the combination of this series of cultural nodes associated with the Heavens’ development, a development that correlated with the growing “collective social consciousness” of the “pervasive, repetitive, and accelerated presence” of black peoples in England (Habib 116). It now seems much less a coincidence that, as Imitiaz Habib has uncovered, “the documented residences of black people [were] in the very same neighborhoods in which English theatrical figures were present, and [were] during the peak years of the English popular theatre” (Habib 270). According to the Presenter in *Alcazar*, the Heavens as an architectural feature facilitated the “modern matter” of contemporaneous history on a global scale, but the place of the playhouses underscored the impact of that global history at home.

No doubt there are more potential nodes of influence that may have inflected the particular path of development for the Heavens. Here, I have tried to identify three that seemed at the least temporally simultaneous. The print fascination with the Iberian Union, the Ottoman Turk, and the very immediate threats they posed to English stability produced a kindred phenomenon on the public stages, one that may have called for a physical space to echo the scale of these geopolitical conflicts. The sense of these stakes would have been reified all the more with the development of nuanced stage paints that capitalized on nearby resources, addressed

a larger cultural preoccupation, and solved basic staging problems like smudging to which even the great Laurence Olivier was susceptible as Othello, accidentally and notoriously transferring makeup to Maggie Smith as Desdemona throughout the 1965 film. That we can link these phenomena to specific playhouses and precise historical periods allows us to plot a point on the chart of developing stage practices and their reception. In doing so, we can speak to the changing identity politics within these plays in terms situated both materially and ideologically.

Tracing the development of playhouse features in such a way is a particularly sticky process, not least because the playhouse foundations continue to be discovered; archaeological surveys of the Theatre, Curtain, and Rose playhouses are currently underway. The roughly three-decade window of open-air playhouse innovation in the late sixteenth century aligns with a rapid rise in printing of not just histories, but plays, chapbooks, treatises, ballads, and a number of other genres. Such a small time frame and dramatic shift makes us painfully aware of the kinds of archival evidence available—like the diaries of Pepys and Henslowe (the latter of whose the Rose records are of the first set of entries)—and the evidence of reception we will never have for 1580s and 1590s England. This is in fact the period in which the most rapid innovation happens, but the usual hunting grounds for theater historians—prompt books, consistent decades-worth of payment receipts, player biographies, newspaper reviews, and private accounts of theatrical experience—are simply not extant. For example, Holger Schott Syme argues that this difficulty and resistance to inhabiting an interdisciplinary space as critics has produced a reductivist tenor:

I do not doubt, in principle, that plays that are canonical now were also highly regarded and even popular in the period. The danger lies in assuming that everything that was valued and broadly influential has survived and that the literary development of early modern drama was largely a print phenomenon, with trajectories of influence dominated by published plays. My point is not that audiences and playwrights did not share our enthusiasm for particular texts (they may well have); it is that we almost certainly only have access to a sliver of what was considered valuable, admirable, or worthy of imitation. (524)

His argument implicitly poses the question: do we have too little evidence to make responsible claims about the theater of the 1590s and its consumers? In response to the changes in archive construction, the new and growing archaeological archive, and access to new digital infrastructures,

I would argue that, with a black-hole methodology that looks at all the aspects on the horizon of the performance event, we can sketch a reliable narrative of the Renaissance theatrical marketplace. Rather than attempting to recover the historical audiences of Elizabethan England, projects like tracing the history of the Heavens theorize the playgoers to which these companies saw themselves catering.

In this essay I have attempted to trace this kind of micro-history and place it alongside possible factors mediating its development. I have suggested a larger phenomenon in the Elizabethan theater: that novelty, not a part of this proto-capitalist marketplace, was beginning to take hold as a category playgoers may have used to select which playhouse to patronize. I have also theorized several potential points of cultural investment around England's changing relationship to the Mediterranean and increasing culturally-specific knowledge of these cultures. The historical alignment of these phenomena, and the overlap of thematic interests with material affordances, reifies the fact that developments in the theatrical marketplace and the ideological content of the plays were mutually constitutive. Risking the interventionist ethos of my argument, it is not shocking to say that aspects of theatrical experience and cultural production are mutually constitutive. Because of the difficulty in balancing historical and theatrical evidence against the realities of the Elizabethan archive, research that materially speaks to the recursive nature of theater and culture is sparingly practiced. The stochastic evolution of the Heavens provides an example of how we might articulate that relationship, checking our assumptions about blank canvases, and of how the perceived limits of an archive shape our practice.

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Notes

¹The first non-dramatic reference to this feature is by Thomas Nashe in his preface to Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), describing the book as a paper theater of poetic seriousness "with an artificial heav'n to overshadow the faire frame" rather than one of mere pleasure. In Thomas Heywood's later *Apol-*

ogy for Actors (1612), we get a more thoroughgoing description of “the covering of the stage, which wee call the heavens (where upon any occasion their gods descended), were geometrically supported by a giant-like Atlas, whom the poets for his astrology feign to bear heaven on his shoulders; in which an artificial sunne and moon, of extra-ordinary aspect and brightnesse, had their diurnal and nocturnall motions; so had the stars their true and celestial course” (34–5). For the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse reconstructed Shakespeare’s Globe rationale for the inclusion of a painted Heavens, see Tiffany Stern, “‘This Wide and Universal Theatre’” (specifically 15–19, for dramatic references to a painted Heavens).

²Up until 1752, the new year began in England on Lady Day, 25 March. I am employing the slash here to indicate the calendar year of the record against the calendar year as we would have it after the change, while dashes will indicate ranges.

³The level of sophistication of its pulley system remains ambiguous based on the Henslowe, archaeological, and playtext evidence. No evidence of the particulars of the Rose superstructure were found in its archaeological survey, and plays in the season immediately following the 1591/2 renovations detailed later in this article suggest that at the very least a rudimentary pulley system was available, although it may not yet have been retrofitted with Henslowe’s “throne.” This sub-feature of the Heavens may, too, have evolved gradually, but evidence speaking to the particulars of that process are not extant.

⁴The staging history of *Romeo and Juliet* and the late addition of the word “balcone” into vernacular English makes the imagery we associate with this scene complex. While a part of the upper stage or a gallery may have been used, it likely looked nothing like the Italianate balcony popularly used in film and stage productions. See Lois Leveen’s “*Romeo and Juliet* Has No Balcony” (*TheAtlantic.com*, 28 Oct. 2014). That there is some variation in the vertical distance between Romeo and Juliet in this and later scenes seems clear from dialogue shared by the Nurse and Juliet about ropes for Romeo’s escape from their wedding night: “JULIET: What hast thou there? the cords / That Romeo bid thee fetch? / NURSE: Ay, ay, the cords” (III.ii.33–5) and the stage direction “*Enter NURSE, [wringing her hands,] with the ladder of / cords in her lap*” (3.2.30.1–2).

⁵Interviewing Bowsher in 2013, Todd Borlik asked about what we can safely speculate about the superstructure over the Rose and of what the Heavens might have been capable. Bowsher responded: “I think there was an awful lot going on in terms of competition with what we now call special effects,” including building “a roof which was large and sturdy enough to require to solid pillars” to support “all these *dei ex machina*” Heavens technology (2); “You go see the latest movie that’s got the latest digital doo-da, and its going to provide a great deal of audience excitement. I think the equivalent is happening at these playhouses. In fact, we know from legal documents that Burbage seems to have been doing something to the Theatre at the same time” (2).

⁶In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), Marvin Carlson explores this phenomenon

of an actor's body echoing past performances in Japanese Noh and contemporary western theatre.

⁷Both these plays are on the high end; Henslowe's average takings for a performance ranged between 14 and 30s. It is unclear if what he records represents the gross takings for each performance or just Henslowe's share. English currency was divided into three units: *libra* or pounds (£), which was equal to twenty *solidus* or shillings (*s*), which was equal to twelve *denarius* or pennies (*d*). Playhouse admission cost 1*d*. For comparison, an August 1588 "statute regulating London victuals prices" lists "seuen egges the best in the Market" to cost 2*d* while "a fetherbed for one man one night and so depart," ostensibly from an inn, to cost 1*d* (Rutter 232).

⁸I refer to Vaughan and Stevens specifically here because their work productively synthesizes the complex, ongoing conversation about peoples of color, cosmetics, an expanding notion of capital on English Renaissance stages; see Emily C. Bartels, Kim F. Hall, Farah Karim-Cooper, Nabil Matar, Daniel Vitkus, Francesca Royster, and Tanya Pollard.

⁹The irony of "heirs" is pointed here: being slain at the forthcoming battle, not only does Sebastian have no heirs, but his death results in Spain's take-over of Portugal after a series of fake heirs attempt to take the throne.

¹⁰In her article on the early modern stage direction for "*thunder and lightning*," Leslie Thomson argues that these particular theatrical effects signaled the "intervention in human affairs by the demonic or divine" (14). This is true for *Alcazar*: not only does fame follow this effect, but also a prop or firework to represent a blazing star. In his edition of the play, Charles Edelman does not speculate on either of these cosmological stage directions, but rather points to a passage from *Titus Andronicus* likening the Roman emperor's court and its members' willingness to gossip to "the house of Fame" (117).

¹¹Andrew Gurr establishes his theory that after 1594 the theater marketplace consisted of only two state-sanctioned troupes, the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men, in *Shakespeare's Opposites: The Admiral's Company 1594–1625* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For critiques of this theory, see Roslyn Knutson's "What's So Special About 1594?" and Holger Schott Syme's "The Meaning of Success: Stories of 1594 and Its Aftermath," both in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2010).

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