

CURRENT BOOKS

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Shakespeare & Co.

*THE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY:
1504–1642.*

By Andrew Gurr. Cambridge Univ. Press. 339 pp. \$65

Reviewed by Ron Rosenbaum

Andrew Gurr's study does more than offer a detailed portrait of Shakespeare's theatrical company: It offers a new and somewhat controversial vision of what kind of artist Shakespeare was.

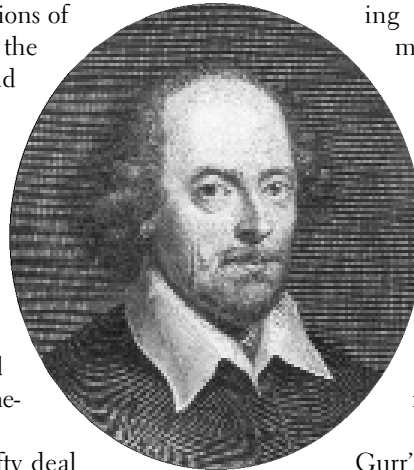
Gurr has become the chief chronicler of the playhouse culture of Shakespeare's age—and a key arbiter of the way Shakespeare is played today. His groundbreaking research on Shakespeare's two playhouses, the open-air Globe and the indoor Blackfriars, has shaped the present-day reproductions of those theaters and the way the plays are staged there and elsewhere. Here he considers not the physical structures or the audiences (topics of his classic 1987 study *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*) but the team: the company who built the audiences, acted the plays, and helped create the phenomenon of Shakespeare.

Gurr explains the crafty deal that gave birth to what he calls "duopoly," the domination of London playgoing by two companies for nearly half a century. In 1594, seeking to keep public performances out of the inns, where they'd been a source of disorder, the Lord Chamberlain gave just two companies licenses to put on

plays; one, the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later, under James I, the King's Men), featured William Shakespeare as actor, writer, and partner. The stability of this arrangement (the company kept going for a quarter-century after his death in 1616) seems to have given Shakespeare the ability to develop his art, and it gave his plays the continuing production that helped entrench them in the canon.

Gurr, emeritus professor at Reading University in England, modestly characterizes *The Shakespeare Company* as a "footnote" to our understanding of Shakespeare's plays. But as a footnote, it offers a new way of looking at the plays. And it's important, as well, for what it tells us about the direction of Shakespeare studies today.

The implicit argument of Gurr's book is that the phenomenon we know as "Shakespeare" was the product not so much of a single man as of a team, and that Shakespeare himself should be looked at less as a lone genius than as a team player, his works really the product of "a collective." At first glance, this may seem yet another variation on the postmodern "death of



the author” theoretical tendency, a death first announced by Roland Barthes and subsequently elaborated by Michel Foucault, who proposed the substitution of an ill-defined “author function.” In the United States, the New Historicists, led by Stephen Greenblatt, saw the plays as less the product of an autonomous author than of “material culture” that imprinted itself on Shakespeare’s consciousness. The plays are notable not so much for literary value (whatever that is) as for the way they reflect or illuminate the power relations of “the hegemony” at that moment in history.

But even Greenblatt has lately discarded the trappings of Theory and returned to a reinvigorated but traditional biographical criticism in his new Shakespeare book, *Will in the World*. And in some ways Gurr’s work, while giving a nod to the notion that an abstract “collectivity” can somehow “author” a work—very important to the Theory devotees who still demand the rejection of “the Romantic fiction of individual genius” and the “autonomous bourgeois self”—can nonetheless be seen as a salutary return to actual history, as opposed to abstract “historicizing.” Gurr’s focus is on the bourgeois selves involved in creating the phenomenon we know as “Shakespeare,” with Shakespeare himself merely one among many responsible.

This is Shakespeare the Company Man, and the company in some ways is coequal with the author. Thus, while Gurr claims he’s only providing a footnote to Shakespeare’s plays, he’s actually giving us a new version of Shakespeare: Shakespeare diminished to, if not a footnote, then a foot soldier. “A company of Elizabethan players had to work as a team, and it is misleading to pick out individual members as the key creative forces,” Gurr admonishes us. He does admit that some merit special note. “One of course was Shakespeare.” Giving Shakespeare special note might not seem lavish praise, but it is an advance over the death of the author entirely.

Another figure singled out—Richard Burbage, chief actor of the company—certainly deserves the attention Gurr gives him as chief impresario and charismatic embodiment of Shakespeare’s characters on stage. A case can be made that Burbage’s theatrical

charisma is as responsible as any factor for making Shakespeare the phenomenon he came to be.

But the emphasis is on “The Team,” as Gurr calls it. And in Gurr’s account, Shakespeare’s most notable contribution to the team was his “reliability” as a writer. “He supplied Burbage with the kind of role that gave best recognition to his skills as a ‘character’ actor, the art of ‘personation’ that became the company’s most lasting credential. Writing plays that competed with [those of Christopher Marlowe’s company, the Lord Admiral’s Men] through Hal’s, Brutus’s, and Hamlet’s self-searching was effective teamwork.”

Effective teamwork. Gurr’s unwillingness here to say anything more about these characters and plays—the aesthetic value of Shakespeare’s “self-searching” work, beyond its value as competitive fodder for the company—seems to be a deliberate tactic, although it’s not clear whether the refusal stems from a lack of interest in aesthetic questions or from a desire to reintegrate Shakespeare into a notion of material culture that has no room for questions of literary quality beyond material success.

Gurr then goes further in diminishing Shakespeare on the basis of what he must know is a still-controversial hypothesis. He tells us that “Shakespeare seems to have been most notable to the rest of the team as a willing oversupplier of words, never, as Jonson complained, bothering to blot out a line of what he wrote.” The reference is to Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s chief rival after Marlowe died, who responded to claims that Shakespeare just poured forth his verbiage without revising or rewriting—“ne’er blotted a line”—with the riposte, “Would he had blotted a thousand.” There is, in fact, no unanimity among scholars on the question of whether this is an accurate account of Shakespeare’s writing habits, and a vigorous new faction has argued from textual evidence that he may have been a habitual reviser and blotter of lines.

But the key phrase in Gurr’s portrait is “willing oversupplier of words,” which papers over another controversy in Shakespeare studies: Why are so many of Shakespeare’s plays so long? If, as Gurr seems to believe, the playing time of most productions was only two hours, why do the texts of the plays that have come

down to us take three to four hours to perform uncut? Was Shakespeare being recalcitrant? Did he just not get the memo?

First of all, it's not universally accepted that the famous quote from *Romeo and Juliet* about the length of plays—"this two hours' traffic of our stage"—was accurate reportage rather than a tossed-off approximation, especially when it came to plays staged indoors, whose length wasn't dependent on daylight.

Gurr also makes the assumption that Shakespeare, supposedly a team player, wouldn't curb his "habitual overwriting" if that's what the company required. So we get a picture of Shakespeare habitually writing too long, and his manuscripts as "maximal" versions that he turned over to the company so they could pick and choose which scenes they wanted to play.

Nor does Gurr give more than a footnote's mention to the much-discussed recent work of Lukas Erne, the latest advocate of an equally controversial but opposing view that Shakespeare wrote long because he considered himself at least as much a literary artist writing for the page as a dramatic artist writing for the stage. In this view, the long versions were not something he cared little for, but were in fact his ideal vision of his work.

Instead, Gurr advances his most controversial theory: The versions of the plays Shakespeare's audiences saw were closer to the "Bad Quartos," the short, sometimes awkwardly worded versions of some of Shakespeare's plays. Many scholars have long disparaged these as "pirated," "reported," "memorially reconstructed" texts—unauthorized versions. Others have seen the Bad Quartos as Shakespeare's first or early drafts of his plays. Gurr contends that they are more likely the company's own cut versions of Shakespeare's longer drafts.

Gurr first advanced this theory in his Oxford edition of the Quarto version of *Henry V*, which is about half the length of the "official" 1623 Folio version published by Shakespeare's collaborators after his death. Gurr argued that, contrary to received opinion, this version of *Henry V* was "a company version," created, authorized, and cut, if not exactly authored, by the company. In a footnote in *The Shakespeare Company*, Gurr tells us, "I stuck my neck out" to advance this theory, and "have yet to be decapitated."

This has emboldened him to pronounce here that "the extended versions [of Shakespeare's plays] that found their way into print mislead us about what Elizabethans saw on stage. Most of Shakespeare's printed texts [were] reworked for their slimmer stage scripts. . . . Shakespeare's readiness to accept such changes seems to mark him as a safe team-player." Not to disparage the contributions of others on the team, but is that why we remember Shakespeare, because he was "a safe team-player"? If Gurr hasn't been "decapitated," he has been criticized for the implications of his theory, especially when it is seen to feed into an aesthetic preference for the shorter, speedier, streamlined, so-called acting versions of Shakespeare.

In an essay published in the journal *Textual Practice* in 2003 (before Gurr's latest work), Edward Pechter, a highly regarded textual and theoretical scholar, sees this approach to *Henry V* as a symptom of the devaluation of literary value in Shakespeare studies in favor of such practical, commercial-company values as "fast-paced texts" with simple "throughlines." It's a concept of literary value that disdains moments of meditation, soliloquy, digression, "excess," and complication in Shakespeare—categories into which fall many of the passages we most value.

"All across the ranks up to the most influential senior scholars," Pechter charges, "Shakespeareans are investing themselves in a drastically diminished concept of theatrical value. . . . To claim that brevity and straight-ahead simplicity constitute in all cases the essence or totality of theatrical values seems, if not willfully perverse, at best to mistake a particular means for a general end."

Gurr doesn't explicitly say that the "company versions" are better than that habitual overwriter Shakespeare's maximal versions. But the stakes in the argument are high—our vision of what we value most in Shakespeare, why we value it, and the notion of value itself. And so, in addition to being grateful to Gurr for the wealth of historical detail about Shakespeare's company, we are in debt to him for provoking anew this important argument.

>RON ROSENBAUM has written about Shakespearean questions for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*. He is working on a book about Shakespeare scholars and directors.