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**Collection Enhancement Report No. 12 for the V&A, Theatre and Performance
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The Theatre

NB: Earlier, the ShaLT Collection Enhancement Reports have used the printed collections at the National Art Library (particularly the unique Dyce Collection) to highlight printed texts in terms of issues such as authorship and genre. However, bearing in mind that the key outreach goal of the AHRC funding for the project was to further public awareness about the actual theatre sites (The Theatre, Blackfriars, and so on) it seems highly appropriate for a series of reports to focus on the actual theatre spaces. Thus, this report highlights The Theatre. Indeed, it is envisaged that the T&P Department at the V&A might be able to host a small exhibition of Dyce material in terms of the actual Shakespearean London Playhouses. With this in mind, this report picks-out printed work at the V&A that links to The Theatre. This topic should prove interesting to visitors to a potential exhibition because often the title page is the only evidence we have for the performance of a play at a certain location.

The Theatre was the first purpose-built early modern playhouse and the original home of the Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men after 1603). Some of the early William Shakespeare plays were performed here up to 1598, possibly including his *Romeo and Juliet*, and this is probably the case with Thomas Kyd's famous *The Spanish Tragedy* and also some of the plays of Christopher Marlowe.

The Theatre opened in 1576, staging plays until its closure in 1598. Located at Shoreditch, the playhouse was built by James Burbage, who called it the 'Theatre' to evoke the idea of a Roman playhouse or 'theatrum'. It became hugely popular with the first London playgoers. The first theatre site was the Red Lion, set up early in the period in 1567 by John

Brayne and the same James Burbage who opened the Theatre nine years later. But it was this Shoreditch playhouse from Burbage (still in some sort of partnership with Brayne) that quickly became the key building for London performances, a venue that staged the first plays of Shakespeare.

The importance of this building cannot be overestimated: it influenced an entire industry to the extent that it is thought likely that there were about fifty million visits to the various playhouses up to 1642 and the closures. The name 'Theatre' was clearly chosen by Burbage to evoke the Roman past and the preacher John Stockwood even referred to 'the Romanish Theatre' in a contemporary sermon. Located just off Curtain Road, Shoreditch and built by Burbage for the sole purpose of putting on plays, he had learnt many lessons from the Red Lion as his new Theatre went on to enjoy tremendous success. As well as the plays of the young Shakespeare, Burbage's Theatre must have staged the works of the influential Marlowe a few years before the arrival of Shakespeare in London from Stratford. In fact, it has recently been located and excavated by an archeological team from the Museum of London. In Elizabethan times, using the name 'Theatre' indicates that Burbage was making sure that the Roman precedence was foregrounded, and this meant that the playhouses might help London to be seen as a new Rome or Troy, as neoclassical elements fused together with the Tudor architecture of the playhouses.

The cost of building The Theatre was originally estimated at about £200, but this turned out to be rather unrealistic for the first 'virtually circular' theatre in London (as Gabriel Egan has pointed out). James Burbage signed the lease on 13 April 1576 (though it was an active lease from 25th March 1576). We know that Burbage had to pay about £14 a year for the site, and that he was required to spend £200 repairing other buildings on the area. Likewise, we know for sure that playing was taking place here by 1 August 1577.

Unfortunately, up to 1594, we cannot be at all certain about the players, playing companies, dramatists, or plays that used The Theatre, though the works of Marlowe and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* seem highly likely as potential plays. Similarly, it is thought probable that The Theatre had a tiled roof, though this is also uncertain, particularly because of a lack of visual evidence from the period.

In terms of occupation, things change in 1594 when the so-called duopoly arrangement meant that the Chamberlain's Men (including the Burbages and Shakespeare) were to perform only at The Theatre, whilst the Henslowe-Alleyn Admiral's Men were to be the only other legally-sanctioned playing company at the Rose. It is because of this fact that we can be sure that The Theatre staged many or even all of the early Shakespeare plays.

From the wealth of legal and cultural documents that survive for The Theatre we know that an early, non-Shakespearean *Hamlet* was staged here. Furthermore, we know that playing finished here by 1598 and that parts of the playhouse were physically removed and used to build the first Globe across the river, also in 1598.

The Theatre and the V&A Collection

The image below (courtesy of the V&A Museum) is taken from the collection's titlepage for the anonymous *Arden of Faversham*, a play which may have been performed at The Theatre in the early 1590s.

THE
LAMENTA-
BLE AND TRUE TRA-
GEDIE OF M. AR-
DEN OF FEVERSHAM
IN KENT.

*Who was most wickedlye murdered, by
the meanes of his disloyall and wanton
wyfe, who for the loue she bare to one
Mosbie, hyred two desperat ruf-
fins Blackwill and Shakbag,
to kill him.*

Wherin is shewed the great mal-
lice and discimulation of a wicked wo-
man, the vnsatiabie desire of filthie lust
and the shamefull end of all
murderers.

Imprinted at London for Edward

White, dwelling at the lyttle North
dore of Paules Church at
the signe of the

Gun, 1592.

