Prologue

The weather in London in December 1598 had been frigid, so cold that ten days before New Year’s the Thames was nearly frozen over at London Bridge. It thawed right before Christmas, and hardy playgoers flocked to the outdoor Rose playhouse in Southwark in record numbers. But the weather turned freezing cold again on St. John’s Day, the twenty-seventh, and a great snowstorm blanketed London on December 28.

As the snow fell, a dozen or so armed men gathered in Shoreditch, in London’s northern suburbs. Instead of the clubs usually wielded in London’s street brawls or apprentice riots, they carried deadly weapons—“swords, daggers, bills, axes, and such like.” Other than the Tower of
London, which housed England’s arsenal, about the only places to come by some of the larger weapons were the public theaters, where they were used to give a touch of realism to staged combat. In all likelihood, these weapons were borrowed from the Curtain playhouse, near Finsbury Field, temporary home of the Chamberlain’s Men.

The armed men didn’t have far to go. Their destination was another playhouse in Shoreditch, the nearby Theatre. The Theatre, built in 1576, was London’s oldest and most celebrated playhouse, nursery of the great drama of Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, and Shakespeare. It was here, a few years earlier, that audiences heard “the Ghost who cried so miserably at the Theatre like an oyster-wife, ‘Hamlet, revenge!’” (not Shakespeare’s play, but an earlier, now lost *Hamlet*). As the men approached the hulking building the Theatre itself must have seemed a ghostly presence, vacant now for two years in the aftermath of a fallout between the Chamberlain’s Men and their prickly landlord, Giles Allen. Local residents, seeing the armed troupe approach, may well have been confused about what was happening during this week of holiday revels, for at the head of the group was the leading tragedian in England, the charismatic star of the Chamberlain’s Men, Richard Burbage. But this was no impromptu piece of street theater. Burbage, his older brother Cuthbert, and the rest of the men bearing weapons were there in deadly earnest, about to trespass and take back what they considered rightfully theirs, and, if necessary, come to blows with anyone trying to stop them.

The Chamberlain’s Men were in trouble, and the only way out was to get in a bit deeper. Things had begun to go wrong two years earlier, when James Burbage (Richard and Cuthbert’s father and the man who built the Theatre) decided to build an indoor stage in the wealthy London neighborhood of Blackfriars. The venue would have enabled his son Richard and the other shareholders of the Chamberlain’s Men to act year-round for a more upscale and better-paying clientele, providing more security than they had at the Theatre, where the lease was expiring. James Burbage sank the considerable sum of six hundred pounds into the venture. As the Blackfriars Theatre neared completion, influential neighbors who were worried about the noise and riffraff the theater might attract, succeeded in having playing banned there. James Burbage
died soon after, having also failed to renegotiate an extension on his lease at the Theatre. His sons Richard and Cuthbert had no better luck changing Giles Allen’s mind. With the Burbages’ capital tied up at Blackfriars and the Theatre now in Allen’s hands, the Chamberlain’s Men, lacking a permanent playing space, were in danger of becoming homeless.

By early December, Richard Burbage had quietly approached five of his fellow actor-shareholders in the company—William Shakespeare, John Heminges, Augustine Phillips, Thomas Pope, and Will Kemp—with a plan. The first thing they needed to do was find a new site for a theater, one that was accessible to London’s playgoers but outside the city limits (where playhouses weren’t subject to the authority of the often hostile city fathers). Members of the company, probably Heminges or Condell, who lived in the parish of St. Mary Aldermanbury, had learned that a neighbor, Sir Nicholas Brend, was looking to rent some land in Southwark. The property was a stone’s throw from the Rose Theatre, home of their main rivals, the Admiral’s Men. The Chamberlain’s Men quickly came to terms with Brend, securing an inexpensive thirty-one-year lease that was theirs from Christmas Day. The transaction was rushed, and it wasn’t until late February that the paperwork was completed.

They now had a building site but as yet no theater. In the past, when they had provided a playhouse and covered the lease, the Burbages kept the lion’s share of the profits. No longer able to supply the company with a permanent home, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage made an unprecedented offer: they would secure the building materials for a new playhouse, worth roughly seven hundred pounds, if the five actor-shareholders would each cover ten percent of the remaining construction costs as well as the expenses of running the theater. The material would come from the dismantled Theatre, the pieces of its frame carefully marked and reassembled on Bankside. They’d still have to do it on the cheap: no tiles on the roof, as at the Theatre, just inexpensive (and flammable) thatch. In exchange, and for the first time in the history of the professional theater in London, actor-sharers would be part owners of the playhouse as well as partners in the company, the five men each receiving ten percent of the total profits. The potential yield on their investment would be great,
over a hundred pounds a year. Still, that initial investment—roughly seventy pounds each—was considerable at a time when a freelance dramatist earned just six pounds a play and a day laborer ten pounds a year. The risks were also great. Few had that kind of cash on hand, which meant taking out loans at steep interest rates (the Burbages later complained that it took them years to pay off what they borrowed to cover their share). Plague could once again close the public theaters for an extended period. Fire could destroy the playhouse (as it would in 1613, when the Globe’s thatch caught fire). Or the Privy Council could finally act on one of its periodic threats and close the theaters.

What made the risky plan plausible was that Richard and Cuthbert Burbage knew that their father had been savvy enough to put a clause in the original lease stating that while Giles Allen owned the land, Burbage owned the theater he built on it. But since the lease had expired, a strong case could be made that the building was no longer theirs. It was a commonplace, which Shakespeare himself had recently repeated in The Merry Wives of Windsor, that you’re likely to lose your “edifice” when you build “a fair house . . . on another man’s ground” (2.2.207–8). Allen, litigious, well connected, and brother of a former lord mayor, was not a man to be trifled with. But what alternative was there?

The Chamberlain’s Men didn’t have much time. They knew that Allen was away for the Christmas holidays at his country home in Essex. They had also heard that Allen was preparing to dismantle the building and keep its valuable timber for himself. If that happened, they’d be ruined. They certainly had to act before word of their new lease got out. They had performed before Queen Elizabeth at Whitehall Palace on December 26 (the day after their new lease went into effect) and were expected again at court on New Year’s Day. Assuming that the job would probably take more than a day, they were left with a very narrow window. The snow and cold were unfortunate, and would make the work misery for the carpenters handling the frozen timber, but that couldn’t be helped.

When the armed group arrived at the playhouse, they set to work immediately. Even with an early start there wouldn’t be much daylight; the sun had risen that morning after eight and would set before four in the
afternoon. It was four days shy of a full moon, but with the snow coming down there was little prospect of working by moonlight. According to evidence submitted in the heated legal battle that followed, their appearance quickly drew a crowd—friends and tenants of Allen as well as supporters of the Chamberlain’s Men, including Ellen Burbage, James’s feisty widow. And we can be pretty sure that the other shareholders whose livelihoods were at stake—Shakespeare, Phillips, Heminges, Kemp, and Pope—were at the scene as well, among the unnamed “diverse other persons” accompanying the Burbages.

Outmanned, a couple of Giles Allen’s friends, one with power of attorney, tried to stop the trespassers, to no avail. A silk weaver named Henry Johnson demanded that they stop dismantling the playhouse, but was put off by Peter Street, the master builder who had been brought in to supervise the job. Street explained that he was only taking the pegged vertical posts and horizontal groundsills apart in order to put them together again “in another form” on the same site. Johnson, who was privy to the failed negotiations over the lease, probably knew better, but he backed off. By the time they were done, the workers had made a mess of the place, causing forty shillings’ worth of damage.

Of all those gathered at the Theatre that day, none stood to gain or lose as much as Shakespeare. Had the escapade failed, had Allen been forewarned or had he succeeded in his subsequent court battle against the seizure, Shakespeare’s alternatives would have been limited. It’s hard to see how the Chamberlain’s Men could have survived for long as an ensemble without a permanent playhouse—and their arrangement at the aging Curtain was only temporary. The only other available venue was the Swan Theatre, built in 1595 in Paris Garden on the Bankside. But the authorities had prohibited permanent playing there after 1597, following the staging of a scandalous play, *The Isle of Dogs*. Of course, Shakespeare could have continued writing plays as a freelancer, as others did, but the pay was modest. At best, he might have offered some plays as capital and joined his competitors, the Admiral’s Men, as shareholder and chief dramatist, if they would have him on those terms.

But Shakespeare understood that more was at stake in rescuing those old oak posts than his livelihood as a playwright. He was not simply En-
England’s most experienced living dramatist, author of (or collaborator on) roughly eighteen plays, including such favorites as *Richard the Third*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The First Part of Henry the Fourth*; he also wrote for and acted alongside its most talented ensemble of players. The Chamberlain’s Men had been together for five years, having emerged out of the remnants of broken and reconfigured companies, its players drawn from among the best of those who had recently performed with Sussex’s, Derby’s, Pembroke’s, Strange’s, and the Queen’s Men. Shakespeare himself had probably been affiliated with Pembroke’s, or Strange’s, perhaps both. Companies in the early 1590s formed, merged, and dissolved so rapidly, with plays migrating from one group of players to the next, that it is impossible to track Shakespeare’s affiliations at this time with more confidence. There were considerable advantages to a company’s longevity. Since its formation in 1594 it’s likely that the Chamberlain’s Men had already collaborated on close to a hundred plays, almost a fifth of them Shakespeare’s. When Shakespeare sat down to write a play, it was with the capabilities of this accomplished group in mind. *Hamlet* would not have been the same if Shakespeare had not written the title role for Richard Burbage. Comic roles were scripted for Will Kemp’s improvisational clowning. Augustine Phillips and George Bryan had been acting professionally for over a decade; Thomas Pope, who excelled at comic roles, even longer. Henry Condell, Will Sly, John Duke, John Holland, and Christopher Beeston were also veteran performers and helped round out this all-star cast. The degree of trust and of mutual understanding (all the more important in a company that dispensed with a director) was extraordinary. For a dramatist—let alone a fellow player, as Shakespeare was—the breakup of such a group would have been an incalculable loss.

As darkness fell on December 28, the old frame of the Theatre, loaded onto wagons, with horses slipping and straining from the burden of hauling the long half-ton, foot-square oak posts, began to make its way south through streets carpeted with snow. The wagons headed through Bishopsgate and southwest to Peter Street’s waterfront warehouse near Bridewell Stairs, where the timber was unloaded and safely stacked and stored. The popular story of the dismantled frame being drawn across or
over the Thames (which was “nigh frozen over”) to the future building site is a fantasy: it would have been too risky sledding the heavy load across thin ice, and the steep tolls on London Bridge for wheelage and poundage would have been prohibitive. And had the timber been left exposed to the elements through the winter months at the marshy site of the Globe, it could have been warped beyond repair (if not subject to a counterraid by Giles Allen’s friends). Not until the foundations were ready would the frame of the Theatre be ferried across the Thames to Southwark, where by late summer, phoenix-like, it would be resurrected as the Globe.

ON THE EVE OF THE DISMANTLING OF THE THEATRE, SHAKESPEARE STOOD at a professional crossroads. It had been five years since he had last found himself in such a situation. At that time he was torn between pursuing a career in the theater and one in which he sought advancement by securing aristocratic patronage through his published poetry. For a while he had done both, but the rewards of patronage (he had fulsomely dedicated two published poems, Venus and Adonis and Lucrece, to the young and charismatic Earl of Southampton) either didn’t materialize or proved unsatisfying. Theater won out, though Shakespeare kept writing sonnets, which he didn’t care to publish but shared with his friends. After joining the Chamberlain’s Men in 1594, Shakespeare hit his stride in the next two years with a great burst of innovative plays: A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Love’s Labor’s Lost, Romeo and Juliet, King John, Richard the Second, The Merchant of Venice, and The First Part of Henry the Fourth.

But by the end of 1596, following one of his most successful efforts, The First Part of Henry the Fourth, this creative surge diminished and his range contracted. Over the next two years he seems to have only written three plays: a second part to Henry the Fourth and two comedies, The Merry Wives of Windsor and the witty Much Ado About Nothing. Will Kemp figured prominently in these plays as Falstaff in the two parts of Henry the Fourth and Merry Wives, and then as the bumbling constable Dogberry in Much Ado. These were popular plays and Kemp a crowd-pleaser. But Shakespeare was aware that he had nearly exhausted the rich veins of romantic comedy and English history. He was restless, un-
satisfied with the profitably formulaic and with styles of writing that came too easily to him, but hadn’t yet figured out what new directions to take. And that depended on more than inspiration or will. Unlike his sonnet writing, his playwriting was constrained by the needs of his fellow players as well as the expectations of audiences both at the public playhouse and at court—demands that often pulled him in opposite directions.

Shakespeare was not alone in experiencing something of a creative hiatus at this time (if three fine plays in two years can be considered a falling-off). This was not the most auspicious moment in the history of the Elizabethan stage. One could point to the relative dearth of exceptional dramatists, the pressure by authorities to curb playgoing, and the periodic closing of the theaters because of plague. During these years England also suffered terrible harvests and renewed threats of invasion from Spain. By 1597, a generation of groundbreaking playwrights—including John Lyly, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, George Peele, and Robert Greene—had passed from the scene, and members of a younger generation (whose ranks included Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, and Thomas Heywood) were only beginning to find their voices. In the course of a few short years Shakespeare had gone from “upstart crow” (Robert Greene’s jealous and belittling label) to grizzled veteran, and was virtually alone in straddling these two generations of playwrights. As an artist who thrived on rivalry and whose work is characterized by an unequaled capacity to absorb the styles and techniques of his fellow writers, Shakespeare seems to have needed competition to push him to the next level, and in 1597 and 1598 there wasn’t enough of it.

The scarcity of recently staged plays in London’s bookstalls was further evidence that 1597 and 1598 were relatively lean years. Yet Londoners’ craving for theater had never been greater. In addition to the Chamberlain’s Men at the Curtain and the Admiral’s Men at the Rose, there were a score of itinerant companies touring through the English countryside, some no doubt performing in London while passing through town, either at inns or at the Swan. By 1600, in response to popular demand, entrepreneurs had rushed to build permanent new theaters around the city, including the Globe, the Fortune, and the Boar’s Head Inn, while resident children’s companies began playing at St. Paul’s
and Blackfriars. In 1600, in an England of four million, London and its immediate environs held a population of roughly two hundred thousand. If, on any given day, two plays were staged in playhouses that held as many as two to three thousand spectators each, it’s likely that with theaters even half full, as many as three thousand or so Londoners were attending a play. Over the course of a week—conservatively assuming five days of performances each week—fifteen thousand Londoners paid to see a play. Obviously, some never went at all, or rarely, while others—including young and generally well-to-do law students at the Inns of Court—made up for that, seeing dozens of plays a year. But on the average, it’s likely that over a third of London’s adult population saw a play every month.

Which meant that Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists were writing for the most experienced playgoers in history. Unlike modern theaters, in which actors perform the same play for weeks, months, even years, in Elizabethan playhouses the play changed daily, with resident companies introducing as many as a score of new plays annually and supplementing them with revivals of old favorites. Unsuccessful plays disappeared from the repertory after only a handful of performances. Shakespeare could count on an unusually discriminating audience, one sensitive to subtle transformations of popular genres like romantic comedy and revenge tragedy. But the pressure that he and his fellow playwrights were under to churn out one innovative and entertaining play after another must have proven exhausting.

It’s no surprise then that playwriting at the close of the sixteenth century was a young man’s game. None of the men who wrote plays for a living in 1599 were over forty years old. They had come from London and the countryside, from the Inns of Court, the universities, and various trades. About the only thing these writers had in common was that they were all from the middling classes. There were about fifteen of them at work in 1599, and they knew one another and one another’s writing styles well: George Chapman, Henry Chettle, John Day, Thomas Dekker, Michael Drayton, Richard Hathaway, William Haughton, Thomas Heywood, Ben Jonson, John Marston, Anthony Munday, Henry Porter, Robert Wilson, and of course Shakespeare. Collectively this year
they wrote about sixty plays, of which only a dozen or so survive, a quar-
ter of these Shakespeare’s. Their names—though not Shakespeare’s—can be found in the pages of an extraordinary volume called Henslowe’s Diary, a ledger or account book belonging to Philip Henslowe, owner of the Rose Theatre, in which he recorded his business activities, mostly theatrical, from 1592 to 1609. The Diary is a mine of information. Henslowe’s entries tell us the titles of lost plays, what playwrights were paid, and who collaborated with whom. Other entries list gate receipts, expenditures for costumes and props, and in some instances on which days particular plays were performed.

About half of all plays this year were coauthored, with two, three, or more playwrights writing collaboratively, each handling the parts or scenes at which he excelled. Shakespeare coauthored several plays near the outset and end of his career, but in 1599 he wrote alone. While other playwrights had both their mornings and afternoons free to write and engage in collaborative ventures, Shakespeare’s at this time were spent fulfilling his company obligations—rehearsing and performing alongside his fellow sharers, hired men, and apprenticed boy actors. The only other dramatist in his situation was Thomas Heywood, who was currently under contract to act for the Admiral’s Men (though he wrote for a num-
ber of companies). In a career otherwise rich in collaboration, this year Heywood also wrote alone.

A closer look at Henslowe’s Diary also suggests that some writing teams left the services of the Admiral’s Men for extended stretches and wrote for another company, almost certainly the Chamberlain’s Men. For example, three of the Admiral’s Men’s regulars—Anthony Munday, Robert Wilson, and Richard Hathaway—mysteriously drop from Henslowe’s payroll in August 1598. And they were joined by Michael Drayton in the early winter of 1599. Not until the autumn of 1599 would they all suddenly return to the Admiral’s Men with a play called Sir John Oldcastle—a provocative send-up of Shakespeare’s controversial portrait of the Lollard martyr in his two-part Henry the Fourth. While records don’t survive of who provided most of the twenty or so new plays that Shakespeare’s company staged this year, it’s likely that writers who were off Henslowe’s payroll for extended periods were responsible for such
Chamberlain’s Men’s offerings as Owen Tudor and Henry Richmond and perhaps A Larum for London and Thomas Lord Cromwell as well. By autumn 1599, with the establishment of new playing companies at the Boar’s Head Inn, Paul’s, and Blackfriars, it increasingly became a seller’s market: as opportunities for these freelance dramatists expanded, even more of them were drawn to writing for more than a single company.

Given the intimate working relationships between playwrights (and between playwrights and players), personality clashes were inevitable. It didn’t help matters that many Elizabethan actors were skilled fencers. Just the previous September, Ben Jonson had quarreled with Gabriel Spencer, a rising star (and shareholder) in the Admiral’s Men, and in the ensuing duel near the Curtain killed him. Jonson, who was briefly imprisoned, only escaped hanging by reading his “neck verse”—a legal loophole dating from medieval times whereby the literate were spared the gallows by reading from the Bible in Latin, a task easy enough for the classically trained Jonson. But he did not escape unscathed: Jonson was branded with a “T” for Tyburn, Elizabethan London’s site of execution, on his thumb. The next time he committed a felony he would hang there. Spencer was no stranger to violence, having two years earlier stabbed to death James Feake, who had come at him with a candlestick. His fatal encounter with Jonson took place the very month when Jonson’s first play for the Chamberlain’s Men—Every Man in His Humour—was performed at the Curtain. Ironically, at the time of their quarrel Spencer was probably learning his part in Jonson’s collaborative (and, in retrospect, ironically titled) play for the Admiral’s Men, Hot Anger Soon Cold. And in June 1599, Henry Porter came to blows with fellow playwright John Day in Southwark. Day drew his rapier and killed Porter. The cause of their fight is also unknown; jurors found Day guilty of manslaughter, not murder. Day was subsequently pardoned and resumed writing for the Admiral’s Men, mostly in collaboration with Dekker, Chettle, and Haughton, who either accepted Day’s version of the fight or put professional needs above loyalty to a former writing partner. Ben Jonson, who had also worked with Porter, was less forgiving, and classed Day among the “rogues” and “base fellows.”

London’s civic leaders didn’t share the popular enthusiasm for the
rough-and-tumble world of theater. Their view of things is offered in a petition submitted to the Privy Council in the summer of 1597 requesting that London’s playhouses be closed. What was staged there, they argued, was immoral (“containing nothing but profane fables, lascivious matters, cozening devices, and scurrilous behaviors”) and the audience itself a collection of misfits (“vagrant persons, masterless men, thieves, horse stealers, whose-mongerers, cozeners, coney-catchers, contrivers of treason, and other idle and dangerous persons”). But the city fathers could do little about it, since the playing companies were patronized by influential aristocrats, including members of the Privy Council (after the queen, the most powerful political body in the realm). It must have come as something of a shock to the resident acting companies to learn at this time that the Privy Council decided to act against them, ordering “that not only no plays shall be used within London or about the City or in any public place during this time of summer, but that also those playhouses that are erected and built only for such purposes shall be plucked down.” If the order had been carried out, it might have meant the end of the Elizabethan public theater. The likeliest explanation—and one believed by the players themselves—is that this harsh response was prompted by the scandal created by *The Isle of Dogs*. By early October those imprisoned for their role in that play were released and the playing companies allowed to resume regular playing (except at the Swan). But the episode unnerved the playing companies, reminding them how vulnerable their situation was in London and how easily their expensive theaters could be knocked down (the Privy Council was quite explicit about the demolition order, specifying that those responsible for tearing down the theaters “deface the same as they may not be employed again to such use”). The *Isle of Dogs* affair gives a sharp sense of the heightened sensitivity to how political topics were staged.

For Shakespeare and his fellow Chamberlain’s Men, 1597 to 1598 was not the best of times. In addition to their troubles at the Theatre and Blackfriars, they endured the deaths of James Burbage and of their patron Henry Carey, the lord chamberlain (whose son, George Carey, succeeded him as their patron, and later as lord chamberlain as well). They also lost the services of two leading players, the veteran performer and
sharer George Bryan (acknowledged in the First Folio as one of the “principal actors” in Shakespeare’s plays) and Samuel Cross (whose talents were still affectionately recalled over a decade later). The rough stretch had begun a year earlier, in the summer of 1596, when an outbreak of plague briefly closed the theaters. To earn money, Shakespeare and his fellow actors abandoned London and took to the road, touring through southwest England and playing before provincial audiences, with recorded stops in Faversham, Dover, and Bath. For Shakespeare himself, this period would bring terrible news.

It was either while on the road or immediately upon his return from the tour that took the company to Faversham in August 1596 that word reached Shakespeare of the death of his only son, Hamnet, who was buried in Stratford-upon-Avon on August 11. It could not have been easy for Anne Shakespeare to contact her itinerant husband to convey the news of Hamnet’s illness and death—it would have taken a messenger from Stratford four or five days at least just to find Shakespeare—so it’s unlikely that he learned of his son’s demise in time to return home for his funeral. Unlike Ben Jonson, who left such a touching poem on the death of his young son and namesake Benjamin, Shakespeare left no testimonial for Hamnet. But then, unlike Jonson, Shakespeare lived at a great distance from his family, returning home infrequently. Hamnet and his twin sister, Judith, had been baptized on February 2, 1585, born two years after their elder sister Susanna. By the end of the 1580s, Shakespeare left his wife and three young children behind in Stratford to seek his fortune in London. Shakespeare may have barely known his son, but that is not to say he did not feel his loss deeply. It may even have accounted for his diminished output in the year or so that followed. We just don’t know.

The invitation to become part owner of a new theater on the Bankside came at a critical moment in Shakespeare’s career. And the venture would play a major role in the redirection of his art. The Globe offered Shakespeare a fresh start, the possibility of writing for a new set of playgoers with as yet unhardened expectations, unlike those who had been frequenting the Theatre and Curtain for so many years. Since at least 1596—when James Burbage tried and failed to move the company to
a theater that catered to a more privileged audience—the sharers of the Chamberlain’s Men were divided over what kind of audience they wanted to attract. Some, like the comic star Will Kemp, were deeply invested in the traditions of popular entertainment of the theaters of the northern suburbs. For other sharers, and their ranks included Shakespeare, who was most constrained by these conventions, the move to the Globe reopened the possibility of dispensing with a dependence on improvisational clowning and raucous jigs that playgoers at the Curtain and Theatre had come to love and expect. With a move to the Globe now imminent, suppressed differences over these issues resurfaced.

The Chamberlain’s Men depended upon the thousands of Londoners willing to pay a penny or more, day in, day out, to see them perform. For that reason, every play they staged was written with a popular audience in mind and premiered in the public theaters. But the company’s long-term political security depended on patronage at court. Fortunately for London’s actors and playwrights, the queen and her court enjoyed seeing plays. But Elizabeth didn’t want to pay to keep a retinue of actors for a half-dozen or so command performances a year. She found it easier and much less expensive to reward the players with a gift of ten pounds each time they played at court (though her courtiers patronized the playhouses, Elizabeth herself never set foot in the public theaters). The fiction—which also happened to be the official position of the Privy Council—was that public performances were essentially dress rehearsals whereby the leading companies “might be the better enabled and prepared to show such plays before her Majesty as they shall be required at times meet and accustomed, to which end they have been chiefly licensed and tolerated.”

Shakespeare had had unparalleled success in pleasing both courtly and popular audiences over the past few years—but these admirers weren’t necessarily drawn to the same things in his plays. Ordinary Londoners flocked to *The First Part of Henry the Fourth* for its “humorous conceits.” The play continued to pack the theater: “let but Falstaff come, Hal, Poins, the rest,” wrote Leonard Digges, and “you scarce shall have a room, / All is so pestered.” Courtly audiences, in contrast, were more caught up in the same play’s flirtation with topical political concerns
(which explains why the lord chamberlain asked Shakespeare and his fellow players to perform it when he had to entertain the Flemish ambassador).

Of late, Shakespeare and his fellow players had been invited to play at court far more than all other companies combined, fifteen times in the past three years (and his company also gave private performances for aristocrats, both in London or on tour at their great houses in the country). They were keenly aware of how important the support of the queen, the Privy Council, and the lord chamberlain were—all the more so given the uncertainty about how much longer Elizabeth would reign. They had to prepare against the possibility that only a single company might be protected under a future monarch or singled out for special status as the next “Queen’s” or more likely “King’s” Men.

Just because Shakespeare was able to write plays that appealed to audiences across a wide social spectrum didn’t mean that he wasn’t frustrated by the limits this imposed on what he could write. As his understanding of drama continued to deepen, his desire to experiment—to push the bounds of comedy and tragedy; to wrestle with increasingly complicated social, historical, and political issues; to render how inner states of experience could be conveyed; even to coin new words when English fell short of what his imagination conjured—jarred with the demands of writing plays that had to please all. Those intricate, brilliant sonnets he kept writing provided an outlet, certainly, but that wasn’t enough. Here, too, the move to the Globe, whose identity was as yet unfixed, offered a way forward.

The different responses of citizens and courtiers to his work were part of a larger problem Shakespeare faced having to do with how he was seen as an artist. Though he had written an early Roman tragedy, eight pathbreaking English histories, and some of the best comedies that the English stage had ever seen, it was only in the past year or so that contemporary critics had finally begun to acknowledge his talent, and even more frustrating that when they did so it was invariably his more sexually charged work—the two long poems Venus and Adonis and Lucrece, his love tragedy Romeo and Juliet, and those sonnets that only a privileged few had read or heard—that won their praise. In 1598, for example, the poet Richard Barnfield celebrated Shakespeare’s “honey-flowing vein” in
Lucrece and Venus and Adonis. John Weever likewise calls him “honey-tongued Shakespeare” in a poetic tribute that year, where “fire-hot Venus” and “rose-cheeked Adonis” once again come in for special praise. Weever wanted to compliment the plays but was stumped when it came to their names: “Romeo, Richard; more whose names I know not.” Shakespeare would not have been flattered.

The most striking praise for Shakespeare at this time appears in Francis Meres’s Palladis Tamia: Wit’s Treasury, also published in 1598. No contemporary writer comes off more favorably in Meres’s book than Shakespeare, though once again it’s Shakespeare the honey-tongued love poet who commands attention: “the sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare,” Meres writes, “witness his Venus and Adonis, his Lucrece, his sugared Sonnets among his private friends, etc.” Meres predictably includes Shakespeare among “the most passionate among us to bewail and bemoan the perplexities of love.” Shakespeare must have been relieved to see this caricature balanced by attention to his plays, for Meres also writes that as “Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage. For comedy, witness his Gentlemen of Verona, his [Comedy of] Errors, his Love Labor’s Lost, his Love Labor’s Won, his Midsummer’s Night Dream, and his Merchant of Venice. For tragedy, his Richard the Second, Richard the Third, Henry the Fourth, King John, Titus Andronicus, and his Romeo and Juliet.” But only seven of Shakespeare’s plays had been published before 1598, and it wasn’t until that year that his name even appeared on a title page of a play.

The English Ovid—the poet of the “heart-robbing line,” as an anonymous contemporary put it a couple of years later—was a hard reputation to shake. The same anonymous writer even took Shakespeare to task for steering clear of more serious subject matter: “Could but a graver subject him content / Without love’s foolish lazy languishment.” We know too little about the reading and book-buying habits of Elizabethans, but what evidence we have confirms that, especially for younger readers, it was Shakespeare’s amorous writing that held the greatest appeal. When, for example, the twenty-one-year-old Scottish poet William Drummond ar-
rived in London in 1606, he kept a list of the titles of books he read. Drummond passed over Shakespeare’s histories and major tragedies in his first year in London in favor of *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Lucrece*, and *The Passionate Pilgrim*. He may have already read *Venus and Adonis*, for it appears in a separate list of books he owned.

Shakespeare knew that his plays were valued differently at court, where he was recognized as a dramatist alert to the factional world of contemporary politics. Along with *Richard the Second* (whose deposition scene was never printed during Elizabeth’s lifetime), *The First Part of Henry the Fourth* had probably done the most to earn him this reputation and had even provoked an angry response from the new lord chamberlain, William Brooke, Lord Cobham, who briefly succeeded Shakespeare’s company’s patron, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, in that office. Shakespeare had portrayed Cobham’s namesake, an earlier Lord Cobham named Sir John Oldcastle, as a riotous glutton—a portrait sharply at odds with Oldcastle’s reputation as one of England’s great proto-Protestant martyrs. It’s hard from this distance to determine whether the initial slight was intentional on Shakespeare’s part, an attempt to poke fun at a Puritan hero like Oldcastle or a sly dig that aligned Shakespeare with court factions opposed to Cobham and his son. It may simply have been that the prickly new lord chamberlain was chagrined that Shakespeare’s play about Oldcastle was performed at court under his direct supervision, and the offense was taken only at that time. The long and the short of it is that Shakespeare was ordered to change the name, and he did, turning Oldcastle to Falstaff.

The antagonism did not stop there, however, suggesting that the slight wasn’t accidental. If Shakespeare had unknowingly stumbled and insulted the Cobhams the first time around, he probably did so deliberately in his next play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which he interrupted *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth* to write. This time, while careful to call the hero Falstaff and not Oldcastle, Shakespeare gave the name “Brook” to the disguised, jealous, and much mocked husband in the play. The family name of the Lord Cobhams was Brooke, and there could be no mistaking the insult—which the master of the revels, Edmund Tilney, who gave his stamp of approval to the play, must have winked at. And
Shakespeare also included a gently mocking allusion in *Merry Wives* to an actual German duke (named Mompelgard) who had been hovering around the English court waiting to be admitted to England’s Order of the Garter.

By 1598, Shakespeare’s relationship with the court had become increasingly reciprocal. He was not only a regular presence at court but also shaped how England’s leading families in turn gave voice to their political experiences, and his words entered into the court vocabulary as a shorthand for the complicated maneuvering and gossip that defined court life. Tobie Matthew, for example, can write to Dudley Carleton that “Sir Francis Vere is coming towards the Low Countries, and Sir Alexander Ratcliffe and Sir Robert Drury with him. ‘Honor pricks them on, and the world thinks that honor will quickly prick them off again’”—here paraphrasing Falstaff’s unvarnished truth about the dangers of pursuing honor in *The First Part of Henry the Fourth*: “Honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? . . . What is that ‘honor’? Air” (5.1.129–35). The gist of Matthew’s multilayered observation seems to be that while these ambitious men are spurred (pricked) on by honor, the consensus at court is that this pursuit will prove disastrous (to “prick off” means to be marked to die).

It’s not the only such example committed to writing to survive (and who knows how many similar allusions in conversation went unrecorded). At the end of February 1598, the Earl of Essex wrote to Secretary of State Cecil in France: “I pray you commend me also to Alexander Ratcliff and tell him for news his sister is married to Sir John Falstaff.” This time, the allusion to Shakespeare’s character is part of an in-joke about Lord Cobham (now nicknamed Falstaff for his family’s opposition to Shakespeare’s use of the name Oldcastle) playing the marital field, pursuing Ratcliff’s beautiful sister Margaret. Rumor also had it that Cobham was also in pursuit of the merchant Sir John Spenser’s rich daughter. Essex was at court on February 26, 1598—a day or so, perhaps, before he wrote this letter—where he might have seen the Chamberlain’s Men perform *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in which a sexually rapacious Falstaff gets his comeuppance. Essex loathed Cobham and alluding to Shakespeare’s character was a way of tweaking him (by linking him with
Falstaff's multiple wooing in the play) while not alienating Cobham's powerful brother-in-law, Cecil. A year later, the Earl of Southampton's wife could write to her husband about the latest gossip about Cobham's sexual escapades in similarly veiled Shakespearean terms: "All the news I can send you that I think will make you merry is that I read in a letter from London that Sir John Falstaff is by his Mrs. Dame Pintpot made father of a goodly miller's thumb, a boy that is all head and very little body."

No other Elizabethan playwright's words or characters served as a similar kind of code for courtiers at this time because no other writer spoke to their preoccupations so directly as Shakespeare. It's no surprise that the few references at this time to popular plays performed in aristocrats' homes are limited to Shakespeare's work, typically his histories. But there was no getting around the danger of alienating one powerful faction while pleasing another. Shakespeare walked a careful line, but as the Isle of Dogs episode made clear, the punishment for overstepping the bounds of the acceptable was severe. Trying to satisfy those at court introduced a different set of risks and constraints.

Shakespeare's way out of the dilemma of writing plays as pleasing at court as they were at the public theater was counterintuitive. Rather than searching for the lowest common denominator, he decided instead to write increasingly complicated plays that dispensed with easy pleasures and made both sets of playgoers work harder than they had ever worked before. It's not something that he could have imagined doing five years earlier (when he lacked the authority, and London audiences the sophistication, to manage this). And this challenge to the status quo is probably not something that would have gone down well at the Curtain in 1599. But Shakespeare had a clear sense of what veteran playgoers were capable of and saw past their cries for old favorites and the stereotypes that branded them as shallow "groundlings." He committed himself not only to writing great plays for the Globe but also to nurturing an audience comfortable with their increased complexity. Even before the Theatre was dismantled he must have been excitedly thinking ahead, realizing how crucial his first few plays at the Globe would be. It was a gamble, and there was the possibility that he might overreach and lose both popular and courtly audiences.
Until recently, Shakespeare had been living in north London in rented quarters in St. Helen’s Bishopsgate. It was a popular area for actors, just a short walk to Shoreditch and the Theatre and Curtain. It was also a comfortable and upscale neighborhood, home to musicians and merchants. But by the time construction on the Globe had begun, Shakespeare moved to the Liberty of the Clink in Southwark, a rougher, raunchier neighborhood outside the city limits, but very close to where the new theater would stand. The rented quarters on the Bankside—he had always rented in London, restlessly moving around, to the frustration of tax collectors—could only have added to a sense of a fresh start, his new surroundings contributing in unpredictable ways to the great surge of creative energies that followed.

As all this was going on, Shakespeare was trying to finish Henry the Fifth, which he had been thinking about for several years—as far back as 1596, when he decided to stretch the plot of his main dramatic source, the anonymous Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth, to cover the two parts of Henry the Fourth as well as Henry the Fifth. And events, professional and political, kept overtaking the play. The scars of revision that Henry the Fifth bears—inconsistencies, locales that are specified then altered, characters that are introduced then mysteriously disappear, repetitions that seem to be ghostly remnants of earlier drafts—testify to the extent to which Shakespeare’s conception of the play kept changing. It seems to have taken him a lot longer than usual to complete, and it’s unlikely that it was ready to be performed before late March 1599. Shakespeare knew by then that it would be the last play he would write for the loyal playgoers of the northern suburbs as well as one of the first that would enter the repertory of the Globe. As Shakespeare’s melancholy epilogue to Henry the Fifth acknowledges—with its backward glance at a decade’s worth of history plays with which he had entertained Shoreditch audiences—Henry the Fifth marked the end of one stage of his career and the uncharted beginning of another.