

# JONSON GUILTY OF MURDER

## Ancient Law Saves Playwright from the Gallows

### Flogging threat to unlicensed actors

On February 9th the Privy Council issued new laws which replace all earlier legislation relating to acting companies and which increase the penalties to be suffered by unlicensed actors. As far as London is concerned, only two companies - the Admiral's Men and the Chamberlain's Men are to be "licensed and tollerated". Any performer plying his trade who is not a member of either of these two companies shall "be stripped naked from the middle upwardes and shall be openly whipped until his or her bodie be bloodie".

### Boar's Head turned into a Playhouse

The Boar's Head Tavern - the Whitechapel inn used for inn-yard entertainments for more than forty years - has been converted into a full-scale playhouse. It will be occupied by a combination of Oxford's and Worcester's companies.

### James Burbage's Theatre Faces Uncertain Future

The country's first public theatre, built by James Burbage in 1576, is facing an uncertain future. The original 21 year lease was extended for one year only, and now the owner of the land is requiring Burbage's son, Richard, to hand over the premises at the end of this year. As a result of the acrimonious negotiations the Theatre has been closed for much of this year.

Richard Burbage would like to negotiate a new lease, but since this seems unlikely he is apparently looking around for a suitable site to build a new theatre.

### Shakespeare - a name to be noted as his fame increases

Over the past six years the name of William Shakespeare has been appearing more frequently in front of the public. In 1592 he was attacked as "an upstart crow" by the cantankerous Robert Greene, who objected to an actor trying his hand at writing plays. Since then he has written several plays, though they have been published without a writer's credit.

The Shakespeare name has appeared as a writer of poetry and as an actor—significantly in the cast list of the published version of Jonson's "Everyman". There is even an official document in Stratford on Avon, granting a coat-of-arms to the Shakespeare family and entitling William to be styled a "gentleman". Clearly he has earned a reasonable sum of money from his theatrical activities over the past years. To date he has received little credit for his plays, but that will now change, following the publication of Francis Mere's "Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury". In this new anthology William Shakespeare is heavily featured and praised for his playwriting skills.

Gabriel Spencer, actor and leading shareholder in the Henslowe/Alleyn company, has been killed by Ben Jonson, the playwright. Spencer and Jonson shared a prison cell last year when they were jailed for offending the authorities with their play "The Isle of Dogs". It is not known what led to this present quarrel, but both men were involved in a sword fight in Hogsden Fields

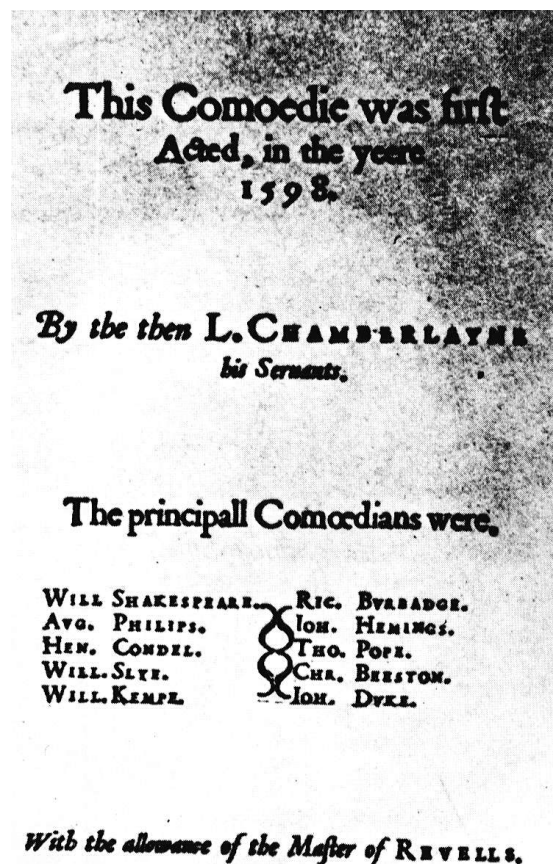
Jonson pleaded "self defence", but was found guilty of wilful murder, and sentenced to death by hanging at Tyburn. However, he has escaped the gallows through an old law originally designed to protect those in Holy Orders. By pleading "benefit of clergy" and proving his ability to read aloud from the Bible, a first-time offender can throw himself on the mercy of the Court.

Jonson's punishment has accordingly been commuted to a token cart-ride to Tyburn where the Public Executioner branded his thumb with the letter "T" for Tyburn. He will also have to serve a short prison sentence.

### Jonson's new play, "Everyman", is performed despite murder scandal

Ben Jonson's new play "Everyman In His Humour" was apparently written for the Henslowe/Alleyn partnership. However, it seems they have rejected it - presumably because the last time they employed him he killed one of their company. Either their rejection is a mark of disapproval for his behaviour, or fear that he might cause them more trouble.

The new play has been accepted by Richard Burbage, and staged with a cast including Burbage himself, William Shakespeare (as Mr Knowall), John Hemmings, Henry Condell, Thomas Pope, Will Sly, Christopher Beeston and Will Kempe.



The title-page of the published script of Jonson's "Everyman", including the name of Shakespeare as one of the performers.