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The 'playhouse' at St Paul's: what we know of the theatre in the Almonry

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In April 1633, the royal campaign to effect the clearance of the shops and residential buildings that had accumulated around St Paul's resulted in the demolition of most of the structures in the southern part of the precinct.[2] The venue where the Children of Paul's performed their plays was most certainly destroyed that month. We ignore what the room looked like, as this 'playhouse' was never represented pictorially, and we only have a few contemporary references in legal documents, chronicles, and payment records to help establish its exact location and physical characteristics. The title pages of the printed editions of the plays that were performed there invariably mention the company—as 'the Children of Paul's', never 'Paul's Boys'—but omit the venue, or they refer to it tangentially by stating that they were 'presented at Paules', as in the 1607 quarto of *Bussy D'Amboise*.[3] Scholars have generally assumed that the auditorium, and indeed the stage, were very small. John H. Astington, for example, characterises the space as 'one of the smallest of contemporary playing venues' in the city.[4] Most scholarly appraisals quote a passage from the induction to John Marston's *What You Will*, in which Atticus invites his companions Doricus and Philomuse to watch the ensuing comedy from inside the 'tiring house:

> Lets place our selues within the Curtaines, for good faith the Stage is so very little we shall wrong the generall eye els very much.[5]

Not wanting to wrong the 'generall eye' of the audience by standing in the way and ruining the sightlines is not the only reason for the characters' disappearance: it is a nod to the practical necessity for the three actors in the induction to double other roles in the play. Although the room may not have been enormous, the recurrent assumptions about its tininess can be fruitfully challenged and problematised. Based on Roger Bowers's and Herbert Berry's

investigations of the location and dimensions of the building in which the room must have been located, and partly on the evidence afforded by the surviving playbooks, it is reasonable to suspect that the 'playhouse' at Paul's might have possessed a stage that could have just about rivalled in size, if not in theatrical sophistication, with that of the second Blackfriars. This may have wider implications in terms of gauging the overall operation of the Children of Paul's as a theatre company, particularly in its second iteration between 1599 and 1606, and its relative importance with respect to the Children of the Blackfriars.[6]

The Children of Paul's: the company and their repertory

The theatrical enterprise of the Children of Paul's was devised and managed by the Almoner and Master of Choristers, who had at his charge the care of the ten boys that sang in the choir of the cathedral. It is important to remember, as Roze Hentschell has usefully summarised, that 'the boys were choristers for the cathedral first and only occasionally actors',[7] which, as we will see, is crucial to understand their theatrical activity and their performance venue. Between 1568 and 1589, under the choirmaster Sebastian Westcote, the Children of Paul's performed primarily at court, but rehearsals were open to a paying audience, although Westcote 'did not see the boys as a professional company in its own right'.[8] Their theatre, therefore, was originally just their rehearsal room. By 1590, the primary dramatist of the company, John Lyly, had become involved in the Marprelate controversy and the company ceased operating.[9] Thomas Gyles (Master from 1584 to 1600) revived the theatrical enterprise in 1599, and it was sustained until 1606 by his successor, Edward Pearce (Master between 1599 and 1612). This second iteration of the company, in Hentschell's assessment, was 'a more robust enterprise and played a greater role in the choirboys' lives'.[10]

The boys lodged in the Almonry and were under the Master's care. Berry defined them and their performance venue in the following terms:

> St Paul's was a private playhouse having to do with old St Paul's Cathedral. Its actors were the ten boys who belonged to the choir school and were an important part of the musical establishment of the cathedral. Because, when they became skilful in music, they joined the lessons of the boys in the famous St Paul's grammar school, perhaps the grammar school boys could sometimes assist in the playhouse.[11]

Beyond the contested definition of indoor playing spaces as 'private' playhouses,[12] Berry's paragraph contains a verifiable inaccuracy. An incontestable fact that scholars working on the Children of Paul's repertory have consistently overlooked is that the company's actors could not have been only, or even primarily, 'the ten boys who belonged to the choir school' with perhaps the occasional assistance of the boys from the grammar school. The number of speaking roles in the plays in the repertory of the company varies between 21 and 43, which even, allowing for a generous doubling of roles, implies that the ten choristers would have been unable to perform any of these plays unassisted: extra boys from the school would have been necessary at every single performance, and they would have made up the majority of the ensemble in plays requiring more actors. This would have been the case for Thomas Dekker's *Blurt, Master Constable*, which features up to 36 speaking roles, and for many of Thomas Middleton's contributions: 40-3 in *The Phoenix*, 31 in *Michaelmas Term*, and 37-43 in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. Silent roles could be played by actors doubling speaking roles, but sometimes extra supernumeraries would have been required. Among the pieces in their repertory that require a more modest number of parts, Marston's *Antonio* plays call for 22 spoken roles; a simple doubling chart for *Antonio's Revenge*, for instance, reveals that the play as was printed cannot be performed with fewer than 17 actors doubling the speaking parts and sharing the silent roles of the two waiting women (4.3), the four pages (5.1), and the torchbearer (5.5); even if all ten choristers performed in this play, they would have needed a minimum of another seven actors to complete the cast.

A possibility that has not been considered before is that the boys from the choir and the school may have had the practical assistance, either as performers or, perhaps more likely, as stagehands and backstage personnel, of the adult members of the cathedral choir. As Hentschell summarises, the choir also comprised a number of adult singers, all of them 'churchmen attached to St Paul's': 'the minor canons (often called "petty canons"), ordained clergy chosen for their singing voices; [and] six lay vicars (called the "vicars choral")'. These adult choristers 'were integrated into the boys' lives in significant ways', and possibly became 'their guardians, while the precinct was their neighbourhood'.[13] The occasional presence of adult performers in the plays of the Children of Paul's might be suspected from the schoolroom scene in Act II of *What You Will* (2.2), whose opening stage direction reads as follows:

> *Enter a Schole-maister, draws the curtains behind with,* Battus[,] Nows, Slip, Nathaniell *and* Holifernes Pippo*, schole-boyes, sitting with bookes in their hands.*[14]

The scene would have had particular poignancy if the Schoolmaster was played by their actual master from the grammar school. Alternatively, of course, a playful stage caricature by one of the boys of their daily trawl through Lyly's grammar would have been a humorous addition. Even if the adult choristers did not perform, they were probably involved in other necessary production or backstage tasks.

With or without their adult counterparts, the choristers' presence in the ensemble implied that the plays written for them were rich in music, as they capitalised on the singing talents of the ten boys and their ability to play musical instruments, specifically 'viols and keyboard instruments (virginals and organ)', as Roger Bowers states,[15] but also woodwind instruments such as cornetts and still flutes, as they are required, for example, in *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge*. Most plays seem quite short on the page—around 2,000 lines on average, which might be spoken through in just over two hours at a brisk pace—but the inclusion of instrumental music and a relatively large number of songs, as well as elaborate

dumb shows with musical accompaniment, would have brought the running time of their performances up to the standard playing time estimated for commercial plays in the period, roughly up to three hours.[16] As recorded by W. Reavley Gair and J. P. Collier, William Percy feared that the plays he had written for the company were too long—'The children not to begin before Foure after Prayers, And the gates of Powles shutting at six'—and prescribed that 'some of the songs' should be cut and 'the consort [of music made] shorter'.[17] Percy's statement cannot be true, however, as none of these plays can be performed in under two hours, even without the music,[18] and allowing enough time for the audience to leave the cathedral precinct before the gates were closed.[19] How often the boys performed is still widely debated in scholarship on the topic, as discussed below. Their repertory, in either iteration, was not insubstantial. If we take a look at the plays known to have originated with the Children of Paul's in both iterations, we come to the following list, ordered according to the 'Best Guess' in Martin Wiggins's chronology:[20]

Plays originating with the first Children of Paul's (1568-1590)

1568: *The Marriage of Wit and Science* (anonymous; 'perhaps performed by the boys of St Paul's School' 1567-9; Wiggins #461)

1571: *Iphigenia* (lost; anon.; 1571; Wiggins #498)

1573: *Alcmaeon* (lost; anon.; 1573; Wiggins #549)

1575: 'Play of Vanity' (lost; possibly Sebastian Westcote; 1575)

1576: *Meleager* (lost; possibly performed by the Children of Paul's; 1572-90; Wiggins #593)

1577: *The History of Error* (lost; anon.; 1576-7; Wiggins #603)

Titus and Gisippus (lost; anon.; 1577; Wiggins #609)

1578: *The Marriage of Mind and Measure* (lost; anon.; 1578-9; Wiggins #654)

1579: *Scipio Africanus* (lost; anon.; 1579-80; Wiggins #679)

1580: *Pompey* (lost; anon.; 1580-1; Wiggins #692)

1581: *Cupid and Psyche* (lost; anon.; 1576-82; Wiggins #699)

1584: *Galatea* (John Lyly; presumably performed by the Children of Paul's in 1584-5; Wiggins #754)

1588: *Endymion, the Man in the Moon* (Lyly; 1585-8; Wiggins #794)

The Woman in the Moon (Lyly; 1587-90; Wiggins #819)

1589: *Mother Bombie* (Lyly; 1587-90; Wiggins #826)

Midas (Lyly; 1589-90; Wiggins #835)

The May-Game of Martinism (lost; Thomas Nashe and perhaps others; November 1589; planned for performance at both the Theatre and Paul's)

1590: *Love's Metamorphosis* (Lyly; 1585-90; Wiggins #841)

Plays originating with the second Children of Paul's (1599-1606)

1599: *Antonio and Mellida* (John Marston; 1599-1601; Best Guess: autumn 1599; Wiggins #1218)

1600: *The Wisdom of Doctor Dodypoll* (anon.; 1599-1600; Wiggins #1227)

The Maid's Metamorphosis (anon.; 1600; Wiggins #1231)

Jack Drum's Entertainment (Marston; 1600; Wiggins #1239)

Antonio's Revenge (Marston; 1600-1; Best Guess: winter 1600; Wiggins #1271)

1601: *What You Will* (Marston; 1601; Wiggins #1283)

Change is No Robbery (William Percy; perhaps performed in 1601; Wiggins #1288)

Satiromastix; or, The Untrussing of the Humorous Poet (Thomas Dekker; autumn 1601; Wiggins #1304)

Muhammad and His Heaven (Percy; perhaps performed in 1601; Wiggins #1308)

Blurt, Master Constable (Dekker; 1601-2; Best Guess: winter 1601; Wiggins #1311)

1602: *A Forest Tragedy in Vacunium* (Percy; perhaps performed in 1602; Wiggins #1330)

The Aphrodysial (Percy; perhaps performed in 1602; Wiggins #1357)

1603: *The Old Joiner of Aldgate* (lost; George Chapman; January-February 1603; Wiggins #1385)

The Fairy Chase (Percy; perhaps performed in 1603; Wiggins #1406)

1604: *The Phoenix* (Thomas Middleton; 1603-4; Best Guess: February 1604; Wiggins #1420)

Bussy D'Amboise (Chapman; 1604; Wiggins #1428)

Michaelmas Term (Middleton; 1604-7; Wiggins #1444)

Westward Ho! (Dekker and John Webster; 1604; Wiggins #1450)

1605: *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (Middleton; 1604-6; Wiggins #1467)

A Mad World, My Masters (Middleton; 1605-6; Wiggins #1479)

Northward Ho! (Dekker and Webster; 1605; Wiggins #1493)

1606: *Abuses* (lost; anon.; 1606; Wiggins #1502)

The Puritan (Middleton; 1606-7; Wiggins #1509)

The Woman-Hater (Francis Beaumont and probably John Fletcher; 1604-7; Wiggins #1522)

Astington states that the Children of Paul's performed for 'a week or two each winter',[21] while Hentschell describes the second iteration of the company offering 'an average of four new performances a year, likely during Michaelmas through Trinity terms'.[22] Given that mounting a production of any new play in an educational environment does take time, mainly due to limited rehearsal slots within a busy schedule of study and other activities (in the case of the choristers at Paul's, their main singing duties), I remain sceptical about Astington's limitation of the boys' theatrical activity to two weeks per year during the company's second existence.

In this period, the introduction of two or three new plays each year seems to have been the average, but in 1601 they may have offered up to five. There are almost certainly lost plays about which we know nothing—*The Old Joiner of Aldgate* and *Abuses* are only known to us by indirect evidence—and we do not know whether, or how often, they revived plays from past seasons alongside their new work, as other more professionalised companies did. The Children of the Blackfriars seemed to have premiered a greater number of plays every year in this period, particularly from 1604-5, which is probably an indication that this company were better organised, and perhaps more professionally ambitious than the Children of Paul's.[23] But, can this be judged from the size of their casts, from what we know of the performers and their managers, from the staging requirements of their repertory, and from the different dimensions and degrees of sophistication of their two performance spaces? What can we know about the relative size and social composition of their audiences? These interrelated questions deserve detailed scrutiny and are lately receiving much-needed scholarly attention.[24] My main concern in this essay, however, is to contextualise the company's activity in the light of what we know of the building in which the Children of Paul's gave their performances, and the particular physical features of the staging area that we can glimpse through the texts of the plays that have survived.

The hall in the Almonry and its playing potential

The precise location of the room within the cathedral precinct that the boys used for their performances cannot be determined with absolute precision or with ultimate certainty. In 1926, Harold Newcomb Hillebrand declared that when trying to locate 'the place in which Paul's boys set up their theatre, we are met everywhere with the most baffling uncertainty'.[25] The poet and dramatist Richard Flecknoe had written in 1664 that the 'Theatre of *Pauls*' was 'behinde the Convocation-house', that is, the eight-sided polygonal Chapter House within the

cloisters that adjoined the cathedral in the south-western sector.[26] Despite the fact that Flecknoe, who was born around 1600, would have been implausibly young to have attended a performance in this venue before it closed for good in 1606, the surviving evidence does not disprove this statement. Hillebrand suggested that the 'playhouse' would have stood in 'the northwest part of the south church-yard'[27] and that its location must have been around or within the Almonry, the Almoner's residence.

In 1982, W. Reavley Gair dismissed this suggestion on the grounds that that building would have only been used as living quarters.[28] He proposed instead that the 'playhouse' was located in the 'shrowdes', an unspecified location within the cloisters, perhaps a structure adjacent to the cloister galleries, whose access the Master controlled. This area included a house that a certain Master Haydon, a petty cannon of the cathedral, had built for himself in the 1570s, which would have been repurposed for performance. He interpreted Flecknoe's statement literally, and proposed that this 'playhouse' was sandwiched between two of the buttresses of the Chapter House and the north-western corner of the cloister. The tiny stage would have been laid out at an angle, using two arches of the lower cloister as the stage doors, and the two arches of the upper cloister immediately above for the window or windows that some of these plays require, while 'the cloister itself served as the tiring-house'. The triangular area at the corner would have been 'squared off by a wood screen, with below a "discovery space" and above an equal-sized space with a curtain'.[29] Gair's elaborate theory, however elegant, can be safely dismissed as impractical and economically unsound, and has been refuted by subsequent scholarship.[30]

At the beginning of this century, and based on earlier suggestions, Roger Bowers and Herbert Berry proposed that the 'playhouse' was not an independent structure dedicated exclusively to the performance of plays, but simply a room within the Almonry itself. As Berry put it, 'Because the master/almoner not only taught and led the boys but housed, fed, clothed,

and otherwise cared for them, they should have lived in his house and, if it had a large enough room, might conveniently have performed there.'[31] Both Bowers and Berry grounded their investigations on a fresh appraisal of the documents that have survived in the archives of St Paul's. They analysed the physical dimensions and internal partitions of the considerably large building that occupied a long plot of land between the cathedral's little south door and the western wall of the cloisters, and that ran parallel to Paul's Alley. However, as Hillebrand before them, the exact placing of the 'playhouse' within the Almonry hinges on a single document that has become lost. In 1803, the American topographer James Peller Malcolm reported in his *Londinium Redivivum* that one of the documents he had examined in the cathedral archives stated that 'the house of John [i.e. Thomas] Gyles was partly formed by St. Paul's, and was "lately used for a playhouse"'.[32] When Berry investigated the relevant documents two centuries later, he found that this particular paper, the most important for the purposes of determining the exact location of the 'playhouse', had gone missing. Corroborating independently that the rest of Malcolm's findings held up, he reasonably assumed that 'the chances must be that Malcolm saw and reported a genuine document. The playhouse, therefore, should have been against the south wall of the cathedral.'[33] Analysing the leases of the small shops and sheds that surrounded the cathedral on its south side, he determined that the Almonry that probably included the 'playhouse' 'was on the south wall of the nave between the lesser south door and the west wall of the cloisters'.[34] Examining the lease of a certain William Creeke, doctor of civil law, who was renting a ground-floor shop and two rooms in the attic, Berry concluded that there must have been a middle storey, up one floor from street level. This is where the 'playhouse' would have been. Berry concluded that, by 1596, Thomas Gyles 'was using the playhouse for a singing school and wanted to think about producing plays there again'.[35] I would contend, however, that all along the purpose of the room must have been quite the opposite: any functioning choir would need a singing school, or rehearsal room, rather more

urgently than a playhouse. What Berry seems not to have appreciated sufficiently is that the primary purpose of this venue was clearly not to accommodate the performance of plays but to facilitate singing rehearsals. In fact, this seems to be corroborated by one of the rare mentions of this room in a contemporary printed document. The 1632 edition of Stow's *Annals*, augmented in 1629-31 by Edmund Howes, gives a list of venues categorised as 'Stage[s]' or 'common Play-house[s]' in the city of 'London and the Suburbs':

> Five Innes, or common Osteryes turned to Play-houses, one Cock-pit, **S. Paules singing Schoole**, one in the Black-fryers, and one in the White-fryers, which was built last of all, in the yeare one thousand sixe hundred twenty nine, all the rest not named, were erected only for common Play-houses besides the new built Beare garden, which was built as well for playes, and fencers prizes, as Bull bayting; besides, one in former time at Newington Buts; Before the space of threescore yeares aboue-said. I neither knew heard nor read of any such Theaters, set Stages, or Play-houses, as haue been purposely built within mans memory.[36]

Apart from the inn-yards 'turned to Play-houses', the Cockpit in Drury Lane was indeed repurposed from a cockfighting arena, while the playhouses at the Blackfriars and the Whitefriars were reconverted spaces within former monastic precincts. The implication is that all these venues, plus the singing school at Paul's, had been re-purposed as theatres. It seems rather obvious that the room in the Almonry where the ten choristers rehearsed was occasionally used for theatrical performances, and not the other way around. In fact, as we saw, in their first iteration the performances offered to a paying audience were officially rehearsals for their appearances in court, and were clearly given in their rehearsal room. As Bowers recognised, 'the term by which Howes identified [the playhouse] signified its primary purpose'.[37] This is in stark contrast with the venue used by the other company of children, the troupe in the Blackfriars, who had the use of James Burbage's fully fitted, and probably rather splendid, second Blackfriars, the upper storey of the reconverted Parliament Hall of that former Dominican convent which would become the winter venue of the King's Men from 1608.[38] The differences between the primary purpose of the two buildings, as well as their relative

sizes, may also give us a good insight into the differences in their operation as theatrical enterprises.

Berry calculated that the maximum width of the Almonry, adjoining the cathedral wall between the lesser south entrance and the wall of the cloisters, was '32 feet or so' (9.7 metres), and maybe 29 feet (8.8 metres) inside. He tentatively established that the maximum length of the building, running for most of the cloisters' west wall, was of 94 feet (28.6 metres), with the south end some 15 feet (4.5 metres) wider than the north end where he situated the playhouse.[39] Roger Bowers essentially, and independently, concurred with this assessment, giving the total length of the building at 98 feet (29.9 metres) plus an outer south wing protruding some 11 feet (3.4 metres) further south from the southern cloister wall.[40] The building, according to Bowers, 'was apparently a large and rambling edifice, rather more extensive than necessary to meet the requirements of the choristers and their Master'.[41] He suggested that, in line with 'the grander type of straight-fronted timber-framed domestic residence built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries', the Almonry consisted 'of a central hall (orientated north-south in this case), flanked at right angles at each end by a wing of two storeys with the option of garrets above'.[42] He registers that a number of documents point to the existence of a small garden yard between the eastern wall of the Almonry and the western wall of the cloisters, perhaps not wider than 5 feet (1.5 metres); this strip 'would have reduced the width of the hall to about 23 feet' (7 metres).[43] The argument for this reduction, however, hinges on accepting that the hall, rather than being in the north part of the building as Berry proposes, would have occupied the central position by convention, which is historically convincing but unverifiable. In any case, the total width of the singing school can be estimated between 23 and 29 feet (7 to 8.8 metres).

By comparison, the second Blackfriars playhouse was 66 feet (20 metres) long and 46 feet (14 metres) wide.[44] This means that the Almonry could have been some 30 to 40 feet (9 to 12 metres) longer, but it was about half as wide as the Blackfriars. The width of the building is

really what determines the maximum available space for a stage, assuming that it is set up across the room at one end and that it takes up its entire width. The Blackfriars' stage was narrower than the total width of the building because stage boxes were fitted within the medieval stone walls of the Parliament Hall. As Sarah Dustagheer has surveyed, 'Estimates of the width of the Blackfriars stage range from twenty-nine [feet, 8.8 metres] to thirty-four feet [10.3 metres]'.[45] Ralph Alan Cohen's estimation is an average of that range, some 30 feet (9 metres) across.[46] If the stage in the Almonry's singing school used the entirety of the building's inner width at its wider point, those 29 feet (8.8 metres), and no galleries surrounded the stage as in the Blackfriars, then we may be looking at a stage of very similar dimensions.[47] We might conclude that the allegedly tiny 'playhouse' at Paul's may actually have had a stage quite similar in size to that of the other children's company in town in their larger, purpose-fitted playhouse. In fact, if we consider that, instead of performing at one end of the room, the Children of Paul's had set the stage against one of the hall's longer side walls, the width could have been even greater.

This would start to explain perhaps the relative sophistication of the staging of some of the plays in the repertory of the company. In particular, their second period featured the four plays that John Marston wrote for them in which he made use of the full potential of the stage. Marston seems to have deployed a reasonably more sophisticated staging than Middleton a few years later in *The Phoenix*, *Michaelmas Term*, or *A Mad World, My Masters*, three plays which, for example, seldom called for the above space or the understage to be used at all. In general, however, all these plays reveal a geography that is familiar from what we understand of most other theatrical spaces of the period: the stage needed to have a number of doors for entrances and exits, a discovery space in the centre, an understage area and a trapdoor, and an above space, or rather a window or windows, that could be curtained or closed.

The physical features of the stage in the singing school

The plays in the known repertory invariably required a minimum number of two doors, although *The Maid's Metamorphosis* calls for three (one may well have been the central opening). The five plays by William Percy that survive in manuscript, and that he intended to be performed at Paul's, call for anything between three and six doors. We have, however, no way of knowing whether they were ever staged there at all, or whether their staging was adapted to the available openings on the *frons scaenae*. The physical features of this *frons* used in the singing school are not otherwise known. Michael Shapiro, followed by Bowers, proposed that a hall screen existed at one end of the room, with appropriate openings and a gallery above which provided backstage facilities in its passage.[48] However, the vast majority of surviving Elizabethan and Jacobean screens in colleges, royal palaces, and private residences almost invariably feature two openings to allow for the traffic of servants, primarily for the purpose of serving food—presumably, like in many modern dining rooms, a way into the hall and a separate way out in order to avoid accidents in the transit of crockery.[49] In other words, a two-door screen would have been unsuitable to perform many of the plays in the Children of Paul's repertory. Shapiro, contesting Gair's theories in 1982, was not convinced, however, that this is sufficient reason to discard the existence of a screen altogether:

> None of the structural features Gair finds required by the Paul's plays of "the early phase" (1599-1602) seem beyond the reach of a banqueting hall theatre. The two doors at the kitchen end of most halls could have been fitted out with hangings, traverses, and a booth-like enclosure to produce the two doors and central discovery space (or third door) needed by the plays.[50]

Trying to visualise how to fit a 'booth-like enclosure' set up in front of the screen between the two doors, on a forward plane, with presumably no backstage access is, in fact, quite difficult: how were the actors supposed to get into the discovery space before being revealed by the opening of the curtains? As we will see, the existence of canvas booths and curtained spaces for performance in this kind of hall is far from unimaginable, but they seem impractical if the

point of the screen is to be used for 'tiring space and as a backdrop to the play. If there was no permanent screen, it would have been necessary to erect instead an ad hoc *frons* that could be assembled and dismantled, and that would comprise at least two doors and a wide central opening with curtains. The curtained discovery space is called for in plays as early as Lyly's *Endymion* (1585-8) and *The Woman in the Moon* (1587-90), and is recurrently required in the plays they performed in the second iteration of the company, so the singing school's *frons* must have had at least three openings throughout its two periods of theatrical activity.

This discovery space could not have been too small. In *A Trick to Catch the Old One,* a bed must fit in the discovery space, as the opening stage direction in 4.5 reveals:

> *Dampit* the Vsurer in his bed, *Audry* spinning by.[51]

At the beginning of Act V of *What You Will*, no fewer than eight characters are discovered at dinner:

> *The Curtaines are drawne by a Page, and* Celia *and* Lauerdure*,* Quadratus *and* Lyzabetta*,* Lampatho *and* Meletza[,] Simplicius *and* Lucea *displayed sitting at Dinner.*[52]

Even taking into consideration the smaller size of the performers, eight boys sitting on eight chairs around a table must take up a considerable space. The stage direction is also revealing of an important distinction: the curtains in this discovery space are invariably referred to in the plural, while the singular is used when referring to the window above:

> ¶ *The Curtain's drawne, and the bodie of Feliche, stabd thick with wounds, appeares hung up.*[53]

Apart from this curtained window, sometimes the stage directions call for a casement instead, as in *Jack Drum's Entertainment*:

> *The Casement opens, and Katherine appeares.*[54]

Gair proposed the presence of two windows, but perhaps it was merely one with a casement that could be opened or curtained when needed. This problematises the geography of the room: if it was, as Berry supposed, a middle storey, then we need to assess the height of a room that accommodated a window overlooking the stage. How high above the platform was it placed, considering that it needed to be higher than the discovery space? Was this window an actual window on the room's outer wall that might have been accessed from the outside, and, if so, by what means did the boys climb up to it? In terms of the width of the window, no fewer than two characters need to appear at it simultaneously in, for example, *Mother Bombie*, *Blurt, Master Constable*, or *Bussy D'Amboise*. Either the opening was wide enough to accommodate two actors, or, as Gair assumed, there were actually two contiguous windows. Berry's middle storey model complicates any attempt to answer these questions. The other problem is that, if, as Berry suggests, the stage was on the north part of the Almonry, then its back wall upstage may have been the actual stone wall of the cathedral: if the Almonry was tall enough, were they actually using the cathedral window itself? It is impossible to know and difficult to visualise: any outside window on the wall of the singing school overlooking the stage could not have been part of a *frons scaenae* on the same vertical plane as the doors and the discovery space; but if the 'tiring house and *frons* were ad hoc structures erected in front of that back wall, then plausibly the window might have been on a parallel receding plane some 5 or 6 feet behind (1.5 to 1.8 metres), and yet overlooking the stage. Alternatively, were the window or windows on one side of the building, with the stage propped against the longer side wall of the hall and the audience sitting around the stage? Was the window perhaps accessed from the small garden yard on the east wall? As Shapiro pointed out, in *Antonio's Revenge*, the Prologue addresses the audience pointing at a curious circular geography.[55] He asks '[i]f any spirit breathes within this round',[56] and 'if any heart / Pierc't through with anguish, pant within this ring'.[57] If we take these addresses as indicative of how the audience were sitting, then the

possibility of a stage set up along the hall, and not at one end, seems to simplify the issue.[58] Although inscribing a circular or semi-circular seating area within such a narrow rectangle is a challenge, this possibility would have meant that the stage may have been much wider than if it were restricted by the width of the singing school. It is practically impossible to discern whether this was the case from the surviving evidence, but it is an appealing possibility.

The playhouse also possessed an understage area called for in some of the plays, and perhaps as early as *The Woman in the Moon* (the 'hollow vault' in 3.2). Most memorably, it was used at four different moments in *Antonio's Revenge*. When, in the quarto's 3.2, Antonio is ruminating the murder of Julio, the young son of Piero, the evil Duke of Venice, three voices echo his line 'Lust, state, pride, murder': they are the voices of Andrugio (Antonio's murdered father), the fellow revenger Pandulpho, and Felice (Pandulpho's murdered son); the three cries of 'Murder' are marked with a vertical brace indicating the stage direction '*From aboue and beneath*' (sig. F1^{v}). It is unclear who appears above (at the window) and who is heard from beneath, though maybe the living character, Pandulpho, is the one to speak from above, while the two dead victims may speak from under the stage. It is intriguing that this word is the only speech given to Felice, who appears elsewhere as a lifeless body (presumably a large prop) hung up at the window (in 1.3; see above) and being buried by his father, Antonio, and Alberto (in 4.5), also under the stage, as the stage direction indicates: '*They strike the stage with their daggers, and the graue openeth*' (sig. I1^{r}).[59] As Julio's bleeding body lies in Antonio's arms, the text indicates '*From under the stage a groane*' (sig. F2^{v}), again associating the understage area with death and interment, as Antonio immediately replies to the noise 'Howle not thou pury mould, groan not ye graues'. Finally, in a typically Marstonian comic reversion of a space firmly associated with the grave until this point, the clownish Sir Jeffrey Balurdo emerges '*from under the Stage*' (sig. I2^{v}) in 5.2. Unless we suppose that the stage was on ground level and the trapdoor communicated with the room on the storey below, we have to assume that the stage

platform was raised to make room for the understage area. Even if it may not have been very deep, it would have taken at least a couple of feet (some 60 cm).[60] This has an immediate consequence when trying to visualise the size of the room: if there was a window above and the stage was raised, with a full *frons scaenae* requiring doors and a discovery space in between, then the middle storey of the Almonry would have had a considerable height—or it may not have been a middle storey at all.

The final complication also occurs in *Antonio's Revenge*, when, in 5.5, the masked conspirators—Pandulpho, Alberto, and Antonio—prepare to assassinate Duke Piero:

> ¶ *While the measure is dauncing, Andrugios ghost is placed betwixt the musick houses.*[61]

Shapiro understood that these 'houses' were 'a central upper playing area with a casement flanked by places for musicians' located in an upstage 'minstrel gallery',[62] but this would not work if the room did not have one. Instead I take these 'houses' to be the kind of structures made of canvas that were common in performances in academic institutions and the court. As Richard Dutton has summarised, these canvas 'houses' provided 'tiring room space (where actors changed costumes and kept props), allowing entrances and exits around the sides'.[63] This was an Elizabethan practice by which touring companies could conveniently prepare almost any large room that did not usually accommodate performances for a play; the additional structures could be taken down after the show and conveniently transported to the next location. In fact, the practice clearly survived in later years: 'Academic institutions and the court are places where "houses" such as those [...] remained in use.'[64] Dutton also records that, for the court performance of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* in 1614, the Revels office accounts record a payment for 'canvas for the booths'.[65] The houses in *Antonio's Revenge* are specifically '*musick houses*' which implies that the musicians played within them, or, much less likely, on their top (if they were sturdy and had a flat roof). It is not clear whether these

'houses' were two booths on either side of the stage, whether the doors were positioned beside the booths or elsewhere, or whether they might have been part of the same structures—doors on booths. The ghost of Andrugio appears '*betwixt the musick houses*', which seems to imply that he stands on stage level in front of the discovery space, unless the canvas booths were placed elsewhere in the room.[66] In any case, the transitory nature of these 'houses' resonates powerfully with the primary purpose of the room: once the performance was over, the singing room would have needed to be reinstated to its usual function. How much else needed to be taken down at the end of a performance? Were the doors, or even the window, equally movable? What about the stage platform? Perhaps the hall could be fitted with a structure of wood and canvas that could be dismantled and stored elsewhere, as was the case, for example, in two locations in Cambridge. As Alan H. Nelson describes, Queen's College possessed, from 1546 to the late 1630s, a structure 'of strong timber scaffolding, which was normally kept in storage', and which was assembled inside the college hall once a year for 'two or three weeks of rehearsals and perhaps a single performance'.[67] The dining hall of Trinity Hall, Cambridge had a similar structure from its construction in 1608 until 1642.[68] Nelson's pictorial reconstructions reveal raised stage platforms with perhaps enough room for an understage cavity, raked seating for the audience, and even, at Queen's College, an elaborate gallery overlooking the stage, as well as side boxes.[69] Any such elaborate structures may have reduced the width of the playing space considerably, and may have been too large to accommodate in a narrow building as the Almonry at Paul's. Nevertheless, such temporary structures remain a likely possibility.

Conclusion.

As Michael Shapiro recognised, 'it appears that our knowledge about the playhouse at Paul's remains in a provisional state'.[70] Almost four decades later, and in the absence of more

conclusive documentary evidence, we can only speculate when trying to visualise its material characteristics from the plays themselves and the scant tangential references to the room in the available documents. What is clear is that the singing school in the Almonry was a necessary space for the training and rehearsal of the choristers of the cathedral, and may have served other everyday purposes such as doubling as the Almonry's refectory. Its use as a theatrical space for a number of years was secondary, but this does not mean that it lacked theatrical sophistication. If the Children of the Blackfriars in the early years of the seventeenth century were perhaps a more systematically organised theatre ensemble, and their larger playhouse was, in principle, better suited for performance, the 'playhouse' adjoining St Paul's cathedral, with its fluidity of purpose, may have afforded the Children of Paul's every means to rival with their competitors in theatrical accomplishment.

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[2] Roger Bowers, 'The Playhouse of the Choristers of Paul's, c.1575-1608', *Theatre Notebook,* 54 (2000), 70-85 (p. 74).

[3] George Chapman, *Bussy d'Ambois a tragedie* (London: Printed [at Eliot's Court Press] for William Aspley, 1607; STC 4966), sig. A1^{r}.

[4] John A. Astington, 'Why the Theatres Changed', in *Moving Shakespeare Indoors: Performance and Repertoire in the Jacobean Playhouse,* ed. by Andrew Gurr and Farah Karim-Cooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 15-31 (p. 16).

[5] [John Marston], *What you will* (London: Printed by George Eld for Thomas Thorpe, 1607; STC 17487), sig. A3^{r}. For a full consideration of this fascinating Induction, see Will Tosh's essay in this volume.

[6] By 'the Children of the Blackfriars' I mean the Children of the Queen's Revels that originated in the choir of the Chapel Royal, and their various iterations.

[7] Roze Hentschell, *St Paul's Cathedral Precinct in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Spatial Practices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 144.

[8] Hentschell, p. 148.

[9] For a more extensive discussion of the first iteration of the company and its termination in 1590, see Callan Davies's essay in this volume.

[10] Ibid.

[11] *English Professional Theatre, 1530-1660*, ed. by Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry, and William Ingram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 307.

[12] See Eoin Price, *'Public' and 'Private' Playhouses in Renaissance England: The Politics of Publication* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[13] Hentschell, p. 151.

[14] Marston, *What you will*, sig. C4^{r}.

[15] Bowers, p. 71.

[16] For example, the printed quarto of *Antonio and Mellida* (London: Printed [by Richard Bradock] for Matthew Lownes and Thomas Fischer, 1602; STC 17473) includes seven song cues (signalled 'CANTANT') and that of *Antonio's Revenge* (London: Printed [by Richard Bradock] for Thomas Fischer, 1602; STC 17474), six.

[17] Gair quotes from the Percy MSS in the Huntington Library (San Marino, California), MS HM4, fo. 191. See W. Reavley Gair, *The Children of Paul's: The Story of a Theatre Company, 1553-1608* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 53.

[18] The estimates vary but, according to Gregory Doran (personal communication and at various public interviews), Renaissance plays can be performed at a rate of around 900 lines per hour. The plays under consideration here would not have been performable under two hours. For example, at around 1,900 lines, a performance of *Antonio and Mellida* in its present textual form would have exceeded those two hours, even without adding any music. For a full discussion of playing times on the early modern English stage, see Richard Dutton, *Shakespeare: Court Dramatist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chapter 3, pp. 67-96, and particularly p. 77.

[19] We have to consider that the Master of Choristers may have made special arrangements for a gate, probably the southern one, to be opened for patrons to leave the cathedral precinct after a play. For a large reliable map of the precinct, see Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Bookshops in Paul's Cross Churchyard* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1990), fig. 1, pp. 2-3.

[20] All data from Martin Wiggins, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue*, 11 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012—), vols. II-V. The date on the left is Wiggins's 'Best Guess'. I give in brackets the author of the play, the upper and lower limit for its premiere, and the number in Wiggins's *Catalogue*.

[21] Astington, 'Why the Theatres Changed', p. 17.

[22] Hentschell, p. 148.

[23] See Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Appendix B, pp. 170-8.

[24] See, for example, *Moving Shakespeare Indoors*, ed. by Andrew Gurr and Farah Karim-Cooper; Sarah Dustagheer, *Shakespeare's Two Playhouses: Repertory and Theatre Space at the Globe and the Blackfriars, 1599-1613* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), and Hentschell.

[25] Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, *The Child Actors: A Chapter in Elizabethan Stage History* (Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois, 1926), p. 112.

[26] Richard Flecknoe, 'A Short Discourse of the English Stage', in *Love's Kingdom* (London: Printed by R. Wood for the author, 1664), sig. G5^{r}.

[27] Hillebrand, p. 113, p. 113

[28] Gair, p. 46.

[29] Ibid., p. 66.

[30] For example, it would have been challenging to fit the 16 bodies required on stage in the final scenes of *Antonio's Revenge* in a tiny area of 170 square feet (15.8 square metres). Gair's theory does not explain why, in such a busy cathedral precinct in which every square inch was exploited for profit, the supposed 'playhouse' was left to stand apparently unused for almost a decade between the two iterations of the company. It also contradicts all known contemporary visual representations of the cloisters, which show that specific area clear of buildings, and I suspect Master Haydon was probably lodging in the undercroft of the Chapter House, or in an ad hoc structure within the cloister galleries themselves.

[31] Herbert Berry, 'Where Was the Playhouse in which the Boy Choristers of St Paul's Cathedral Performed Plays?', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England,* 13 (2001), 101-16 (p. 105).

[32] James Peller Malcolm, *Londinium redivivum; or, An antient History and Modern Description of London* (London: Printed by J. Nichols, 1803), vol. III, p. 73.

[33] Berry, p. 108.

[34] Ibid., p. 111.

[35] Ibid., p. 112.

[36] John Stow and Edmund Howes, *Annales, or, a generall chronicle of England* (London: Richard Meighen, 1632; STC 23340), sig. 4I^{v} (my emphasis).

[37] Bowers, p. 71.

[38] See Dustagheer, chapter 1.

[39] Berry, p. 113.

[40] Bowers, p. 78.

[41] Ibid., p. 73.

[42] Ibid., p. 79.

[43] Ibid., p. 80. See as well a re-drawn diagram of Bowers's pictorial reconstruction in Hentschell, p. 154.

[44] Richard Dutton, *Shakespeare's Theatres: A History* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), p. 293.

[45] Dustagheer, p. 19.

[46] Ralph Alan Cohen, 'The Most Convenient Place: The Second Blackfriars Theater and its Appeal', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre,* ed. by Richard Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 213.

[47] As Dustagheer records, estimations of the depth of the stage 'range from eighteen [feet, 5.5 metres] to twenty-three feet [7 metres]' (p. 19), but the width of the stage is what determines its manoeuvrability for performance. The depth of a stage in a hall when performing on one end can always be augmented by reducing the seating.

[48] Michael Shapiro, 'The Children of Paul's and their Playhouse', *Theatre Notebook* 36 (1982), 3-13 (p. 6).

[49] We do not know either if the singing hall also doubled as the refectory in which the Master and the choristers took their meals, though this is perhaps likely.

[50] Shapiro, p. 6.

[51] Thomas Middleton, *A trick to catch the old-one* (London: Printed by George Eld, 1608; STC 17896), sig. G3^{r}.

[52] Marston, *What you will*, sig. G3^{r}.

[53] John Marston, *Antonios reuenge*, sig. B4[r].

[54] John Marston, *Iacke Drums entertainment: or The comedie of Pasquill and Katherine* (London: Printed [by Thomas Creede] for Richard Olive, 1601; STC 7243), sig. C2[v].

[55] Shapiro, p. 5.

[56] Marston, *Antonios reuenge*, sig. A2[r].

[57] Ibid., sig. A2[v].

[58] The size of the audience is difficult to assess, and ranges enormously from Bowers's estimation of 'no more than a few dozen' (p. 81), which sounds economically ruinous in terms of generating income, to Andrew Gurr's 'two hundred bodies or less'; Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 338. David Carnegie, based on his practical work directing plays in a hall of similar dimensions, suggests 'up to two hundred spectators, or perhaps a few more'; David Carnegie, 'Theatrical introduction' to *Westward Ho*, in *The Works of John Webster*, gen. ed. by David Gunby, David Carnegie, and MacDonald P. Jackson, vol. IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[59] Felice is a main character in *Antonio and Mellida*; in the sequel, however, it is his father Pandulpho Felice who takes his place in the main cast, perhaps suggesting that the same boy played both characters. Felice's voice from under the stage would have been supplied by another actor. However, an audience cannot possibly identify it as the voice of Felice, and the speech prefix is rather a literary indication for readers of the quarto.

[60] A two-feet gap would have given the boys just about enough space to crawl under the stage and emerge at the trapdoor. A higher raising of the platform would have given them more space for that manoeuvre and may have improved the sightlines in the room.

[61] Marston, *Antonios reuenge*, sig. K1[v].

[62] Shapiro, p. 6.

[63] Dutton, *Shakespeare's Theatres*, p. 21.

[64] Ibid., p. 133.

[65] Ibid., p. 134. See also John H. Astington, *English Court Theatre, 1558-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 249.

[66] Alternatively, he might appear above at the window, but then the stage direction would not specify that he is to be 'placed' between these two music houses.

[67] Alan H. Nelson, 'The Universities: Early Staging in Cambridge', in *A New History of Early English Drama,* ed. by John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 59.

[68] Ibid., p. 61.

[69] Ibid., p. 59

[70] Shapiro, p. 11.