2016

Scriveners and notaries: All fools at the Blackfriars

Charles Edelman

*Edith Cowan University, c.edelman@ecu.edu.au*

10.1093/notesj/gjw105

George Chapman’s delightful comedy, *All Fools*, is rare amongst early modern plays in that it was performed both by a company of adult actors, the Admiral’s Men, and by the boy players at Blackfriars.

Philip Henslowe’s *Diary* of the Rose Theatre’s business affairs shows that in 1596 and 1597, Chapman’s first two comedies for the Admiral’s Men, *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria* and *An Humorous Day’s Mirth*, were great commercial successes. However, Henslowe's practice of noting the title of each play with the daily takings, which he began in February of 1592, stopped on 5 November 1597. From then on, he recorded only weekly receipts, so we know in general how well the theatre was doing, but not what plays were performed. We have, however, something just as interesting, Henslowe's record of payments made to the writers. It should be noted that Henslowe himself was not purchasing the plays, but was acting as agent for the Admiral's Men, and most payments were actually loans to the actors who were sharers in the company; they would then pass the money on to the playwright.

Given Chapman's track record, it is hardly surprising that the Admiral's Men continued to employ him. Between 16 May 1598 and 8 January 1599, he received payments totalling £18 for four commissions (all lost). Then, on 22 January 1599, Henslowe loaned Admiral's actor Thomas Downton 'to lend unto Mr Chapman 'in earneste of a Booke called the world Rones A whelles, the sum of £3'. Chapman duly signed the receipt, and his colleague Thomas Dekker witnessed it. Chapman received three more payments totalling £4 between 13 February and 21 June, bringing the total so far for *The World Runs On Wheels* (every entry gives the title), to £7, already more than the normal fee of £6. Chapman was not quite done, however, for on 2 July 1599 Henslowe loaned another £1 10s to Thomas Downton 'to pay Mr Chapman in full payment for 'his Booke called the world Rones a whelles & now all foolles but the folle'. There is no reason to doubt that this is the same play printed in 1605 with the abbreviated title, *All Fools*.

Since Henslowe no longer included play titles in his accounts, we have no written record of a performance by the Admiral’s Men of *All Fools*, but it is inconceivable that they would pay an author more than £8 for a play and not perform it, especially when the same author was already working on another play for them: a receipt amongst Henslowe's papers reads 'Receaved by me George Chapman for a Pastorall ending in a Tragedye in part of payment the Sum of fortye shillings this xvith of July Anno 1599'. This lost pastoral tragedy was to be Chapman's last play for the Admiral's Men; when next we hear of him, he is working with the Chapel Children at Blackfriars.
The title page of the 1605 quarto of *All Fools* reads 'AL FOOLES: A Comody Presented at the Black Fryers, and lately before his Majestie'. Why Henslowe and the Admiral's Men would have sold the play to the Blackfriars is a mystery. Henslowe certainly needed the money; in December of 1599 he signed a lease for the Shoreditch property where he would build the Fortune. This would require an enormous amount of capital, especially since his lease on the land where the Rose stood had another six years to run. Chapman himself might have proposed purchase of the play to the Blackfriars management, possibly offering to make some revisions to improve its appeal to their select audience.

Identifying such revisions has intrigued editors of the play. The Prologue is definitely written for the Blackfriars, as it addresses the fashionable young men who liked to sit on the stage, imploring them not to ‘depart before we end’ (Prol. 31). It also alludes to the ‘Stage War’, fought mostly between Ben Jonson and John Marston, at its height through 1600 and 1601. I have previously argued in this journal that aside from the Prologue and Epilogue, which is written in the same tone, there are no passages in the play that refer unambiguously to external events not current in 1599, when the Admiral’s Men would have performed the play. There is an interesting textual crux, however, that might give us reason to think that one of the play’s funniest scenes was re-written for the boy players.

The secondary plot of *All Fools* concerns Cornelio, a social climbing young man who is obsessed with the idea that his wife Gazetta is cuckolding him. When a group of gallants, purely for their own amusement, convince him that his fears are justified, Cornelio hires a notary to draw up a bill of divorce. Notaries were an integral part of the legal community in early modern Europe, and while precise duties varied from country to country, generally they were not very different from their modern-day counterparts. In England, a notary's usual tasks were to administer oaths and to draw up and certify contracts, deeds, and other legal agreements. The notary who seals the 'single bond' between Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* does not appear on stage, but it is fair to assume that he would bear little resemblance to the absurdly loquacious 'learned notary' (4.1.300) of *All Fools*, who reads out the document he has prepared to all assembled—a document seemingly filled with every arcane legal term in existence, and never using one word when three or four are available:

... That for these, the aforesaid premises, I say, you renounce, disclaim, and discharge Gazetta from being your leeful or your lawful wife, and that you eftsoons divide, disjoin, separate, remove, and finally eloign, sequester, and divorce her, from your bed and your board. That you forbid her all access, repair, egress or regress, to your person or persons, mansion or mansions, dwellings, habitations, remanences, or
abodes, or to any shop, cellar, sollar, easement's chamber, dormer, and so forth, now
in the tenure, custody, occupation, or keeping of the said Cornelio, notwithstanding all
former contracts, covenants, bargains, conditions, agreements, compacts, promises,
vows, affiances, assurances, bonds, bills, indentures, poll deeds, deeds of gift,
defeasances, feoffments, endowments, vouchers, double vouchers, privy entries,
actions, declarations, explications, rejoinders, surrejoinders, rights, interests,
demands, claims, or titles whatsoever . . .

(IV.i.311-327)

No legal officer like this had appeared in English comedy before, but an Italian visitor
to London would have recognised the Notare of the Commedia dell'Arte. This popular
form of theatre was never as influential in England as in France, but Italian companies
often toured abroad during the 1590s, and English writers offer scattered allusions to the
Commedia, along with some appearances of their stock characters in their plays, such as
the 'old Pantaloon' Gremio in The Taming of the Shrew.7

The Notare was not nearly as important as Pantalone, but surviving scenarios show
that he appeared frequently. The Correr collection at the Museum of Venice has two
scenarios with a notary, but with no description of what he does.8 The Casamarciano
collection of Neapolitan scenarios is more forthcoming, and while details are
maddeningly few, we do get some idea of the lazzi associated with his character. In
Rosalba the Shrew, he draws up a marriage contract, and Rosalba beats him up for his
trouble; Pulcinella Duped has a notary named Piombino ('leaden one') who has a 'usual
scene with the usual lazzi, and after the usual prank the notary departs'. The Basilisk of
Barnagasso, which exists in two versions, has some information about these lazzi: in
one, a 'talkative notary' (notare chiacciarone) fights with an 'ailing notary' (notare
infermo) for the job of drawing up a deed of gift, the winner then reading the deed
aloud. The second version is similar to what we see in All Fools: the notary, once again
given the name Piombino, enters, and 'with his usual lazzi he does not let Pulcinella say
a word, and with the usual jokes, and their scene, the second act ends'.9

Unlike an equally ridiculous surgeon named Francis Pock who soon appears, our
notary is given no name in the text. Others address him simply as 'Notary'; stage
directions and speech prefixes show 'Notary', or are abbreviated to 'Not.' or Nota'.
In itself, this is far from remarkable, but the play's list of characters at the front of
quarto has no Notary; the character's name is 'Kyte, a Scrivener', while neither 'Kyte'
or 'scrivener' appears anywhere in the play.

In early modern usage, a 'scrivener' is simply a scribe or copyist, but the word was
also synonymous with notary (OED n.), while a 'kite' (in modern spelling) is a bird of
prey of the falcon family, and figuratively 'a person who preys upon others, a rapacious
person, a sharper’ (OED n.). So while it is perfectly in order for a scrivener to prepare a bill of divorce, one struggles to think of any reason why the list of characters would have ‘Kyte, a Scrivener’ unless those words appeared in an earlier version of the play. The list of characters may come at the beginning of the text, but it can only be composed after the play is written.

It would also be very unusual for Chapman not to include wordplay on a character’s name, as he does with Pock the surgeon, and with a remarkably precocious young page named Curio who delivers a long and learned speech after being introduced as ‘a young Mercurio’ (III.i.179), i.e. Mercury, the god of eloquence. Furthermore, nothing is the least bit ‘kitish’ about Chapman’s Notary; he is neither rapacious nor a sharper, and any fee he might demand is never mentioned.

Why, then, the transformation from Kyte the Scrivener to Notary? The answer might have something to do with the management of the Blackfriars. The first theatre at the Blackfriars monastery opened in 1577, and the Chapel Children performed there until 1584, when disputes over the lease brought about its demise. In 1596 Richard Burbage, always in search of an indoor venue to expand his operations, bought most of the upper frater [refectory] block, and all the Duchy chamber building, for £600. After having spent nearly as much on renovations, Burbage found that influential citizens of the area, who may have tolerated a boy company with its one or two performances per week, did not want a commercial adult company in their neighbourhood. Desperate to get some return for his investment in order to finance construction of the Globe, he leased out the premises on 2 September 1600 to Henry Evans, a Welsh scrivener with a variety of entrepreneurial interests. Evans then engaged Nathaniel Giles, Master of the Chapel at Windsor, to assemble a new company of boy players, and by the end of the year, the Children of the Chapel, or the 'little eyases', as Hamlet calls them, were back in business.

Being the main financial backer and manager of the Blackfriars, Henry Evans had an interesting way of recruiting boys for his company—basically, he kidnapped them. On 13 December 1600 he recruited thirteen-year-old Thomas Clifton, who was on his way to school. Thomas’s father furiously demanded, and got, the boy’s release, but a year later, unappeased, he complained to the Queen and had Evans and his associates brought before the Star Chamber. The text of the decision has not survived, but the record of a later case states that Evans ‘in or about the three-and-fortieth year of the late Queen Elizabeth, was censured by the Court of Star Chamber for his unorderly carriage and behaviour in taking up gentlemen’s children against their wills, and to employ them for players’. Soon afterward Evans removed himself from direct involvement with the management of the Chapel Children.
As noted above, The ‘Stage War’ alluded to in the Prologue of All Fools was at its fiercest in 1601, and it was in 1601 and 1602 that our scrivener Henry Evans was in deep trouble. Under the circumstances, Chapman and the Blackfriars management may have thought it prudent to turn Kyte the Scrivener into a commedia Notary, who may be loquacious in the extreme, but shows no sign of being a ‘rapacious person’ or a ‘sharper’.

Charles Edelman

Edith Cowan University

1 R. A. Foakes, ed., Henslowe’s Diary, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2002), 34-7, 47-8, 54-60.
3 Foakes, 266.
12 Smith, 182-3, 484-6, 545; Gurr, Shakespearian Playing Companies, 348-9.