

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Kesson, Andy, PI; Lucy Munro, co-PI; and Callan Davies,  
research fellow. Before Shakespeare: The Beginnings of London  
Commercial Theatre, c. 1565–1595

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**Kesson, Andy, PI; Lucy Munro, co-PI; and Callan Davies, research fellow. *Before Shakespeare: The Beginnings of London Commercial Theatre, c. 1565–1595*.**

London: University of Roehampton, 2016. Accessed 24 August 2023.  
 beforeshakespeare.com.

So often, “the Renaissance” is reduced synecdochically to Shakespeare: books are more likely to sell if they feature Shakespeare’s name in the title, “Shakespeare” classes are more likely to fill than “Renaissance Drama” classes are (“What other, non-canonical Renaissance playwrights’ works are worth reading besides Shakespeare?” students may ask), and the cultural capital of Bardolatry in the anglophone world, including general knowledge of the body of work known as “Shakespeare,” still holds tremendous value—for reasons early modern critical race studies (EMCRS) scholars and those whose work embraces the study of gender, sexuality, disability, and intersectional identities invite us to scrutinize, because these works have historically privileged certain groups over others. Such long-standing cultural and socio-political forces encourage the misperception that Renaissance drama—or even early drama in general—began with Shakespeare and can only be understood through a Shakespearean lens.

Enter *Before Shakespeare*. As its name succinctly suggests, this iconoclastic digital resource is dedicated to approaching the early modern theatre on its own terms rather than anachronistically through a since-reified, single-named author (which, I acknowledge, might be an ironic statement coming from someone who has worked for years on the editorial team of *Shakespeare Quarterly*). Focusing on the collaborative nature of theatre and taking an expansive view of performance venues, *Before Shakespeare* itself incorporates a variety of approaches, ranging “from social history to twenty-first century performance,” to explore and investigate the lively early English theatre scene that predates Shakespeare.

Another piece of “received knowledge” that *Before Shakespeare* debunks is that early modern drama began with the establishment of the “first” Theatre in 1576. Instead, *Before Shakespeare* encourages a broader view of the timeline and spaces that comprised early theatre. What emerges is a more expansive notion of “theatre” that encompasses earlier venues, such as the Red Lion; spaces like inns, including the Cross Keys and Bel Savage; smaller indoor locations,

such as St. Paul's and Blackfriars; and even non- or extra-dramatic performance activities, such as jigs and animal entertainments, like those discussed on Before Shakespeare's companion site, Box Office Bears ([boxofficebears.com](http://boxofficebears.com)). The project team contextualizes the English playhouses within European and classical theatrical traditions and discusses works that are, today, less well-known than Shakespeare's but were popular at their time of production.

The fascinating "Timeline" page offers a wonderfully different perspective on Renaissance theatre; early records indicate "that London had a commercially vibrant playing industry with a range of fixed playing places [including a garden playhouse and summer churchyard playhouses] by at least the 1520s." And, while the timeline suggests an earlier date than has been conventionally recognized for the establishment of early theatres in London, the entry for the Red Lion notes that new information will be forthcoming as excavations at this site are ongoing, a testament to the extensive temporality that Before Shakespeare embraces.

The website is home to an embarrassment of riches: in addition to blog entries and embedded video conversations (housed at [abitlit.co](http://abitlit.co)) about sixteenth-century theatrical culture, Before Shakespeare includes short scholarly articles, research-in-progress reports, images and transcriptions of archival documents, and performance reviews. The "Resources" page has several entries intended to spark further research and/or to be used and adapted for classroom use. Especially fun among these is "The Before Shakespeare Guide to [The] Theatre Etiquette," by Callan Davies, which offers a multi-sensory, archival-based account of what an afternoon in an early modern playhouse might have been like—the good (applause), the bad (tobacco smoke in the face), and the ugly (an angry, sword-wielding theatregoer causing a near-death experience). Other blog posts in which the early theatre is brought to life through vivid, multi-sensory (and sometimes startling) details include Anouska Lester's post on comfits as hailstones in several masque productions ("Lost Properties and Where to Find Them: Comfit Hailstones"); a set of two posts by Laurie Johnson ("High and Dry at Newington Butts: The Genesis of the Permanent Playhouse") and Sally-Beth MacLean ("Lawsuits and Leases at Newington Butts Playhouse") on the Newington Butts Playhouse, a space remarkable for its location, the time of its establishment, and the documentary records pertaining to it—many of which are featured on the site; and Andy Kesson's provocative

paper, “Shakespeare as Minor Dramatist,” which provides a recalibration of the importance of Shakespeare to the early modern canon, along with a welcome manifesto on what decentring Shakespeare means for editorial practices and theatre history. Kesson even explores the ethical ramifications of the continued dearth of female-coded roles and roles for contemporary women actors—which he terms a “phalloeccentric mode of literary scholarship”—if Shakespeare is to remain the standard.

Importantly, performance is a featured dimension of the site, and Before Shakespeare has several theatrical partners, including The Dolphin’s Back ([thedolphinsback.com](http://thedolphinsback.com)) and Shakespeare’s Globe ([shakespearesglobe.com](http://shakespearesglobe.com)). One of the many strengths of this immersive site is the expansive ways it interacts with early theatre history, combining rich archival work with contemporary performance, including most recently the world premiere of Emma Frankland’s ([emmafrankland.co.uk](http://emmafrankland.co.uk)) production of John Lyly’s *Galatea*, part of the Brighton Festival in May 2023 (the site hosts a robust series of posts from their 2021 staging). The 2023 production was supported by the Diverse Alarums Project, which centres marginalized communities in contemporary performances of early modern plays, and was also translated into British Sign Language. *Galatea* features two queer, trans lovers at the heart of the story—a plotline so relevant today that it might be surprising to many that this play was penned 500 years ago. Like the site itself, this production looks both forward and backwards temporally to consider and describe in compelling ways what early theatre was like for early audiences and what that might mean for us—as scholars, theatre practitioners, students, and patrons—today.

Before Shakespeare demonstrates logical, clear organization, verbal and visual polish, and ease of navigation across various browsers and devices. The tags are consistent and helpful in locating information, and materials are linked throughout, which is especially useful for connecting directly to sources listed under the comprehensive “Bibliography” tab. Images have clear and detailed captions and acknowledgement of the holding institutions. In short, all information is cited and easy to find, which is a dream for those inspired to embark on further research.

Of course, with the year 2023 marking the 400th anniversary of the publication of “Shakespeare’s First Folio,” it is difficult to imagine that Shakespeare won’t continue to be a major fixture of the (white) phalloeccentric,

Western/English literary canon. And sure, Shakespeare's great, but—as Before Shakespeare reminds us—his was and is not the only show in town.

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