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Introduction

The Art of Deception

Interplay between the worlds of entertainment and espionage goes back at least 2,500 years. The fact that one relies on publicity and the other on secrecy, that stars live in the spotlight and spies in the shadows, might seem to rule out successful symbiosis between the two professions. A famous entertainer is generally a successful entertainer, while a famous spy is most often either a failed spy or an ex-spy. Both professions, however, often require similar skills and sometimes attract similar personalities. This book investigates the affinities between these two worlds of smoke and mirrors, and examines the overlapping expertise of some of their leading players.

The adoption of a fictional persona, the learning of scripts and the ability to improvise are central to both professions, and undercover agents often find themselves engaged in what is effectively an exercise in long-form role play. In the early twentieth century, Mansfield Cumming, the first chief of Britain's foreign intelligence service, SIS (also known as MI6), purchased his disguises from the same theatrical costumier as the leading West End theatres. His heads of station abroad included a number of leading theatricals. 'We like your poetical reports immensely', Cumming wrote to one of them. 'Please send us some more.' Role play remains compulsory for today's recruits to SIS and the Security Service MI5, all of whom pretend to have other jobs. During his thirty-three-year career in SIS before becoming its chief in 1999, Richard Dearlove 'used to travel the world extensively in different identities ... well supported with bank accounts, credit cards, everything you needed'.

A number of entertainment industry luminaries – performers, writers, directors and other creative practitioners – have at one time or another tried their hands at espionage. The transitory lifestyle of itinerant entertainers is often not dissimilar to that of many spies, and

this can make them peculiarly well suited to undercover work – a fact which intelligence services have sometimes been able to exploit to good effect. France's most internationally renowned playwright at the end of the Ancien Régime was also its leading spy, whose operations led to Britain's first defeat in the American War of Independence. Some enthusiastic entertainer-spies, however, proved out of their depth. Those executed for German espionage during the First World War ranged from the manager of the Bijou Picture Theatre in Finchley Road, London, to the upmarket international exotic dancer, Mata Hari.

While the roles of both stars and spies have evolved over the centuries, their priorities have changed little. Though the primary responsibility of spies remains to 'steal secrets', they have also been used for a variety of other covert activities. From Elizabethan times onwards, talented entertainers have been involved in a diverse series of influence operations. The most successful – and outrageous – attempt ever made by a British intelligence agency to deceive a US president came not from an intelligence professional but from a professional entertainer recruited for the purpose, who later became head of BBC TV Light Entertainment. Given the colourful dramatis personae involved over the centuries in both espionage and show business, it is unsurprising that the lines between fantasy and reality have sometimes been blurred. It now seems that the foreign intelligence reports sent by Britain's first successful female dramatist in the mid 1660s were probably invented – though they provide remarkable evidence of her creative imagination.

Some of the most successful deceptions in intelligence history have drawn on the skills more commonly found in a film studio's scenery, props and make-up departments. There is a strong argument that an intelligence agency which shows the creative imagination of a successful film studio will have a clear advantage over less imaginative opponents – as in Operation MINCEMEAT during the Second World War when German intelligence was deceived by the British into believing that the corpse of a homeless Welshman carrying fake documents was that of a Royal Marine officer bearing genuine top-secret plans for an Allied invasion. One of the CIA's most successful deceptions, the 'Canadian Caper' in Iran, was based on the creation of a bogus film studio. The leader of the operation, who was also chief of Agency disguise, graphics and (false) authentication, later entitled his memoirs *The Master of Disguise: My Secret Life in the CIA*.¹ Operation TROJAN SHIELD, probably the largest-scale and most wide-ranging

post-Cold War intelligence deception mounted by the 'Five Eyes' (the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), owed its success to a creative imagination reminiscent of the highly successful wartime Double-Cross system. Criminal gangs around the world were duped into using a compromised messaging app which enabled 27 million of their messages to be intercepted.²

The best known assassination by a twentieth-century intelligence agency, the killing of Leon Trotsky by Stalin's NKVD in Mexico City in 1940, was also a triumph of role play and deception. The Spanish assassin, Ramón Mercader, a Soviet 'illegal' agent, posed successively as the Belgian Jacques Mornard and the Canadian Frank Jacson. He gained access to Trotsky by seducing his confidante Sylvia Ageloff, an American Trotskyist. Ageloff said later that until Mercader struck Trotsky a fatal blow on the back of his head with a concealed ice pick, she had never doubted the sincerity of Mercader's love for her.³ Some less homicidal twenty-first-century Russian illegals in the United States have posed so successfully as Americans or Canadians that even their own children had no idea they were either Russian or spies.

Some spies, however, have not found it necessary to play anyone other than themselves. As with the old cliché of the murder weapon displayed on the mantelpiece, undercover operators can sometimes find it most effective to conceal themselves in plain sight. A celebrity performer is uniquely placed to do this, and, like the famous American actor who assassinated Abraham Lincoln in the president's theatre box, enjoys 'access all areas' privileges which any professional spy would envy – rubbing shoulders with politicians and royalty, and sometimes sharing their confidences. While it may well have been possible for England's first playwright-spy, Christopher Marlowe, to work undercover for some years without being identified, despite the popularity of his plays, the development of modern mass media meant that by the time Noël Coward found himself undertaking minor but colourful intelligence-gathering missions in America during the Second World War, he was an instantly recognisable figure and had no option but to 'play' himself. What is interesting in this case is that, in the performance of his duties, he appears to have adopted an exaggerated portrayal of his own persona – almost as if he was consciously playing the character of a spy.

The relationship between stars and spies has never run entirely smoothly. Some entertainers are by nature subversive of established regimes. Ben Jonson raged against the 'vile spies' of early Jacobean



Dame Judi Dench as 'M' in *Skyfall*, with Daniel Craig as Bond.

England, and by the mid nineteenth century, detailed intelligence files were being kept on some of Europe's leading writers and playwrights. The archives of intelligence agencies around the globe contain numerous dossiers on creative practitioners working across the entertainment media of theatre, film, music and broadcasting, mostly as the subjects of state surveillance and (in some countries) censorship.

The entertainment media have always found the ambivalent role of the spy popular with audiences. Their fictionalised portrayals of the world of espionage, a necessarily secretive profession which until very recently has done little to engage with public perceptions of its activities, has led to a glamorisation of its work which often bears little relation to reality. The fictional character of James Bond, who has effectively become a global ambassador for the British secret service (whether it likes it or not) is far better known than any real spy has ever been. The current chief of SIS has publicly suggested that his agency should have a voice in the choice of the next actor to play Bond.⁴

In 1995, for the first time, 'M' in the Bond films was played by a woman, Dame Judi Dench, who continued as chief for a total of seven films. Though assassinated in *Skyfall* (2012), Dench is still probably better known than any of the growing minority of real twenty-first-century female intelligence chiefs.

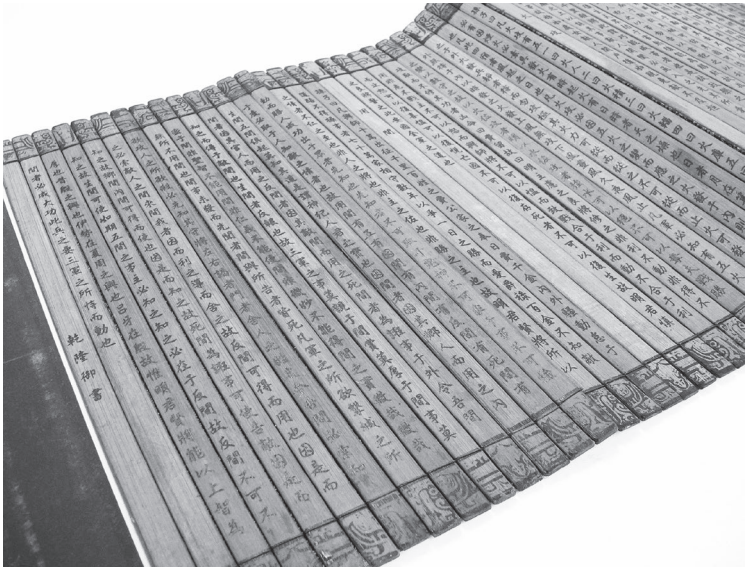
The inspiration for Dench's fictional role as 'M' was the appointment in 1992 of Stella Rimington as both MI5's first female director general and the first woman to head any of the world's major intelligence agencies. Many in Whitehall believed that, unlike her male predecessors, Rimington, a keen amateur actor, 'enjoyed being in the limelight'. The first generation of female recruits to MI5 had taken the lead role after victory in the First World War in an affectionately irreverent in-house revue, *Hush-Hush*, in which women writers and performers outnumbered men. The programme cover showed the director, Vernon Kell, being tied up and taken away for questioning on suspicion of being a German spy.

In recent years a majority of Western, as well as some non-Western, intelligence agencies have devised often entertaining posts on social media both to promote what they consider less fanciful depictions of themselves than those in spy films and to encourage new recruits. Since the CIA enigmatically opened a twitter account in 2014 ('We can neither confirm nor deny that this is our first tweet'),⁵ it has posted items on the entertainment business ranging from the film *Black Panther* to the cult TV series *Game of Thrones*. Like a number of other intelligence agencies, it also sends Valentine's Day greetings each year to its social media followers.⁶

*

The first books to argue the case for the importance of intelligence operations were written not in classical Greece or Rome⁷ but in ancient China and the Indian subcontinent: *The Art of War*, traditionally ascribed to Confucius's contemporary, the Chinese general Sun Tzu (c.544–c.496 BC); and the *Arthashastra*, a manual on statecraft attributed to Kautilya, a senior adviser to the Maurya dynasty which was at the peak of its power in India between about 350 and 283 BC.

According to *The Art of War*, governments and commanders 'who are able to use the most intelligent people as agents are certain to achieve great things'. Their achievements, especially in wartime, usually depend on deceiving the enemy. 'All warfare is based on deception', wrote Sun Tzu. 'Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity. When active, inactivity.'⁸ The ability to deceive is a key skill for actors as well as for spies. Entertainers have historically played key roles in some strategic, as well as tactical, deceptions, though, as we are reminded



Bamboo edition of *The Art of War*.

by Leo Rosten, probably the only twentieth-century political scientist who was also a successful screen writer during the golden age of Hollywood: ‘Acting is a form of deception, and actors can mesmerize themselves almost as easily as an audience.’⁹

Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* discussed in enormous detail the recruitment, uses and cover occupations of the huge espionage network which he urged the king to establish under his personal control, both to collect intelligence and to conduct covert operations. Those recommended by the *Arthashastra* for working undercover in enemy courts without arousing suspicion include hunchbacks and dwarfs (both likely to have been engaged as court entertainers) and ‘women skilled in various arts’ (chiefly singers and dancers).¹⁰ Amongst those listed as useful for smuggling out hostages held by the enemy were actors, dancers, singers, musicians, storytellers, acrobats and conjurers.¹¹ Kautilya was also a pioneer in devising what were later called ‘honey-traps’: ‘... acrobats, actors and actresses, dancers and conjurers shall make chiefs [of ruling oligarchies] infatuated with young women of great beauty’¹²; ‘women secret agents may pose as a rich widow, one with a secret income, a singer, a dancer or an expert in abetting love affairs’.¹³

European ‘courtesans’ were also originally to be found – as the word suggests – at court, where their responsibilities, like those of the court jester, would sometimes include both entertainment (usually as singers or dancers) and intelligence gathering. Catherine de’ Medici, queen consort of France (1547–1559) and a notable sponsor of the arts, retained a troupe of dancers (later dubbed ‘the Flying Squadron’ in recognition of their balletic skills) whose members, if legend is to be believed, both seduced and spied upon visitors to the French court.¹⁴ As members of a profession (some would say the oldest) which regularly engages in role play in the course of its work, courtesans unsurprisingly make a number of notable guest appearances in the history of stars and spies. Spies are said to be the second-oldest profession.

While both performers and spies often owed their living to the court, there is only one known example of a monarch who, reputedly, was personally proficient in both spheres. The most celebrated act of espionage in Anglo-Saxon England was the alleged eavesdropping by King Alfred the Great during his wars against the Danish invaders led by Guthrum the Old. In 878, at a low point during the conflict, Alfred left his island refuge of Athelney in the Somerset marshes and entered Guthrum’s camp disguised as a minstrel. According to the great twelfth-century English historian, William of Malmesbury: ‘Taking a harp in his hand, he proceeded to the king’s tent. Singing before the entrance, and at times touching the trembling strings in harmonious cadence, he was readily admitted.’¹⁵ The



King Alfred the Great: probably the first and most successful English royal spy. The only contemporary images of him are on coins like this and the small ‘Alfred Jewel’. All show him as clean-shaven, not, as was later imagined, bearded.

intelligence Alfred obtained while posing as a minstrel is said to have enabled him to win the decisive battle of Ethandun over the Danes.¹⁶ No other monarch in English history has been credited with an espionage operation of comparable importance. His choice of disguise was significant – no one thought twice about letting in a travelling entertainer.

The early troubadours were ‘stars’ in a way that no earlier musicians had been, ‘creating the first “modern” European examples of the individual artist, a genius set apart from the common folk’.¹⁷ They were also, observes David Boyle, ‘stateless wanderers who often provided valuable intelligence to princes’: ‘They would be there by the fire as the local lord and his family and servants discussed their hopes, plans and local events ... All they needed to do was listen ...’¹⁸

The most famous minstrel said to have been involved in espionage during the high Middle Ages was the twelfth-century troubadour¹⁹ Blondel de Nesle, whose music was performed at the coronation in Reims Cathedral in 1179 of the 14-year-old Philip II Augustus, the first French ruler to style himself ‘King of France’. It was probably at the coronation that Blondel first met the heir to the English throne, Richard the Lionheart, who was also a talented musician. According to folklore, when Richard (by now the English king) was captured while returning from the Third Crusade in 1192, it was Blondel who discovered the castle where he was being secretly held captive. Blondel made his way through Germany and Austria, stopping beneath a succession of castle walls, playing his lute and singing verses he and Richard had composed together. There was no response until he reached the castle of Dürnstein, high above the Danube, forty miles west of Vienna. Here, when Blondel had finished the first verse, Richard’s voice from within the castle tower joined in the second. Though this (once widely believed) account of the discovery of the captured King of England is now known to be fictitious,²⁰ it is interestingly reminiscent of the *Arthashastra*’s advocacy 1,500 years before of using singers and musicians to secure the release of hostages.

The most talented musical star to spy for an English monarch was the Bavarian Petrus Alamire, a singer and instrumentalist who performed regularly at royal courts. From 1515 to 1518 Henry VIII and his chief adviser, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, used him to spy on the pretender to the English throne, Richard de la Pole, who had sought refuge in Metz; Alamire signed his reports with the musical

notation, 'La Mi Re'. To show his loyalty to Henry, Alamire presented him with a sumptuously illustrated choirbook which included motets by leading French and Flemish composers. When it was recorded for the first time in 2014 under the title *The Spy's Choirbook: Petrus Alamire and the Court of Henry VIII*,²¹ the CD quickly rose to number two in the classical music charts. Alamire, however, was a double agent who transferred his main allegiance to de la Pole. When the king and Wolsey discovered his treachery, Alamire wisely decided not to return to England.²² In Elizabethan and early Stuart England, musicians and travelling players continued to play occasional roles as spies and confidential couriers.²³

Stars and Spies explores the historic link between espionage and entertainment in a great variety of manifestations. As we consider the history of intelligence operations from a new perspective, by interweaving it with that of the entertainment business, we hope that the multi-faceted and sometimes complex relationship between the two will become apparent. The starting point of our detailed investigation is the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, which saw England emerge as the world leader in both intelligence operations and theatre: a combination which we believe to be no coincidence. Both thrive on the wit and dramatic ability of their practitioners – qualities which arguably typified the best of the Elizabethan age itself. Since Shakespeare's day, the pantheon of stars and spies – whether working in collaboration or in opposition – has been populated by a cast-list of sometimes eccentric personalities, who have contributed to a series of remarkable dramas and deceptions.

I

Golden Age: Theatre and Intelligence in the Reign of Elizabeth I

Elizabeth I's long reign from 1558 to 1603, though glorious in retrospect, was at the time a period of intense insecurity. The Catholic powers of Europe regarded her as both a bastard and a heretic. The loyalty of English Catholics, unreconciled to her Protestant Church settlement, was always in doubt.

The main threats to English security came from invasion plans by the most powerful ruler of the time, Philip II of Spain, and from plots backed by him, with papal blessing, to depose Elizabeth and put Mary, Queen of Scots on the throne to return England to the Catholic faith. Elizabeth faced a serious threat of assassination. Rulers assassinated on the continent included both Henry III and Henry IV of France. The combined menace of foreign invasion and a Catholic fifth column at home led the Elizabethan state to create what was then the world's most sophisticated intelligence system. Sir Francis Walsingham, who from 1573 to 1590 combined the roles of foreign minister ('principal Secretary of State') and intelligence chief, had daily access to the queen. The intelligence he reported to Elizabeth came from domestic surveillance, foreign espionage and – for the first time in English history – from codebreaking. Walsingham told his chief codebreaker, Thomas Phelippes, that he would 'not believe in how good part [the queen] accepteth of your service'.

Unlike many later intelligence chiefs around the world, Walsingham did not hesitate to 'speak truth to power'. The truth was sometimes unwelcome. On one occasion, exasperated by what Walsingham told her, Elizabeth took off one of her slippers and threw it at his head. But the queen also gave Walsingham a portrait of her and the three previous Tudor monarchs as a 'mark of her people's and her own

content' with him.¹ What Walsingham told Elizabeth about the plots to assassinate her made, unsurprisingly, a deep impression. In 1586 she asked that the execution of Sir Anthony Babington and his fellow plotters be made particularly painful. She was told that the existing method of 'protracting' their public execution by hanging, drawing and quartering was as terrible as could be devised.²

As well as being the first English monarch to have daily meetings with her intelligence chief, Elizabeth also had an unprecedented interest in drama. During her reign, far more plays were performed at court than under any of her predecessors. She followed most of them with close attention and became well known for helping confused foreign ambassadors understand what was happening on stage.³

'The Theatre', which opened in Shoreditch in 1576, was the first purpose-built venue in London since Roman rule ended over a millennium earlier. It was one of at least ten commercial theatres, all open-air, which sprung up in various locations in and around the capital between 1574 and 1578. 'Nothing of the kind', writes the theatre historian, Herbert Berry, 'had happened anywhere or would happen again in London for centuries.'⁴ Elizabethan playhouses were the greatest innovation in the entertainment business until twentieth-century cinemas and television.

By the mid 1580s, the best actors worked for the queen. In 1583, on behalf of the Privy Council, Walsingham instructed Elizabeth's Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, to found her own acting company, the Queen's Men. Tilney picked the best actors from other companies. Twice the size of any of their rivals, the Queen's Men had a monopoly for the next five years of performances at court, as well as performing in London theatres and on tour.⁵ Their undoubted star – the first in the history of the English theatre – was the comedian Richard Tarlton, who, despite his humble, probably rural, origins, was given the right to describe himself in his will as 'one of the Groomes of the Queenes maiesties chamber'. According to the playwright Thomas Nashe, Tarlton had only to appear on stage to have the audience – Elizabeth included – in fits of laughter. If Walsingham was the queen's favourite spy, Tarlton, until his death in 1588, was her favourite star. According to the seventeenth-century historian and cleric, Thomas Fuller:

When Queen Elizabeth was serious, I dare not say sullen, and out of good humour, he could un-dumpish her at his pleasure. Her highest

favourites would, in some cases, go to Tarlton before they would go to the queen, and he was their usher to prepare their advantageous access unto her. In a word, he told the queen more of her faults than most of her chaplains, and cured her melancholy better than all of her physicians.⁶

Will Kemp, Tarlton's successor as London's most popular clown and 'jesting player', was probably the inspiration for Shakespeare's Yorick, remembered by Hamlet as 'a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy'. For a time Kemp was used as a confidential courier between England and the Low Countries, where he sometimes performed, but he proved unreliable and absent-minded. On one occasion, Sir Philip Sidney complained to Walsingham that letters he had written to his wife Frances (Walsingham's daughter) containing frank criticism of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, had been mistakenly delivered by Kemp to the Countess of Leicester.⁷

Though Walsingham had little personal enthusiasm for drama, he was a strong supporter of the Queen's Men, whose pro-Tudor history plays and other performances were intended to reinforce popular loyalty to Elizabeth and her Church. Some of the Queen's Men were spies as well as stars. Their provincial tours helped Walsingham to monitor regional support for Roman Catholicism. An Act of 1584 commanded all Catholic priests to leave the country within forty days or to swear an oath of loyalty to the queen – failing which they would be guilty of high treason.⁸ Between 1582 and 1595 thirty Catholic priests were hanged, drawn and quartered in the north of England,⁹ most at the Knavesmire gallows near York, a city which was one of the most profitable venues for the Queen's Men.¹⁰ As a result of the destruction of all Walsingham's papers, no records survive of reports by the Queen's Men on signs of sedition in the areas where they performed. But intelligence on York's small but tenacious Catholic minority, which secretly sheltered priests, must have been of particular interest to him.¹¹

Walsingham regarded acting ability as a key skill for his intelligence recruits. Probably his most successful spy abroad was Anthony Standen, an English Catholic loyal to Elizabeth I who posed as 'Pompeo Pellegrini' and provided vital intelligence on Philip II's preparations for an invasion of England by the Spanish Armada. In 1587 intelligence from Standen enabled Elizabeth's favourite privateer, Sir Francis Drake,

to 'sing the King of Spain's beard' and delay the departure of the Armada for England by attacking the Spanish fleet in Cadiz harbour – thus demonstrating, Walsingham boasted to Standen, 'how little we did fear them'.¹²

Some of Walsingham's other spies at home and abroad were Protestants who pretended to be Catholics in order to penetrate Catholic institutions and suspected conspiracies. In February 1579, Anthony Munday, a 19-year-old actor¹³ and later a leading playwright, began a three-month stay in Rome at the Jesuit-controlled Collegium Anglorum (English College), almost certainly as one of Walsingham's spies.¹⁴ Using the alias 'Anthony Hawley', Munday was the first significant English writer to visit Rome since the Reformation. (The next to do so was John Milton sixty years later).¹⁵ To penetrate the English College, Munday had to pretend to be a devout Catholic, serve at mass, go to confession and join in denunciations of Anglican heresy. He later justified what, for a loyal Anglican, was blasphemous behaviour by claiming that he had no option:

my adversaries object against me, that I went to mass, and helped the priest myself to say mass: so that (say they) who is worst, I am as evil as he. I answer, I did indeed, for he that is in Rome, especially in the College among the scholars, must live as he may, not as he will; favour comes by conformity, and death by obstinacy.¹⁶

Munday was so successful in acting the part of a committed Catholic that two English Jesuit novices, Luke Kirby (later canonised) and Henry Orton, lent him money and entrusted to him letters for delivery to their friends and family in England.¹⁷ Though the letters do not survive, they were doubtless passed on to Walsingham and probably revealed their plans to return secretly to England as Catholic missionaries. Kirby was arrested as soon as he landed at Dover in June 1580.¹⁸

On Ash Wednesday 1579, Munday, alongside other novices from the English College, had been present at an audience with Pope Gregory XIII in the Apostolic Palace – a unique moment in the history of post-Reformation English espionage. According to Munday, tears trickled down the Pope's white beard as he told the novices:

As I am your refuge when persecution dealeth straitly with you in your country by reason of the heretical religion there used, so I will be your

bulwark to defend you, your guide to protect you, your father to nourish you, and your friend with my heart blood to do you any profit.

Munday dismissed the Pope's concern for the fate of Jesuit missionaries in England as hypocrisy – 'deceites the devil hath to accomplish his desire'.¹⁹ He also mocked the self-imposed suffering of some of the novices as they prepared for their dangerous missions:

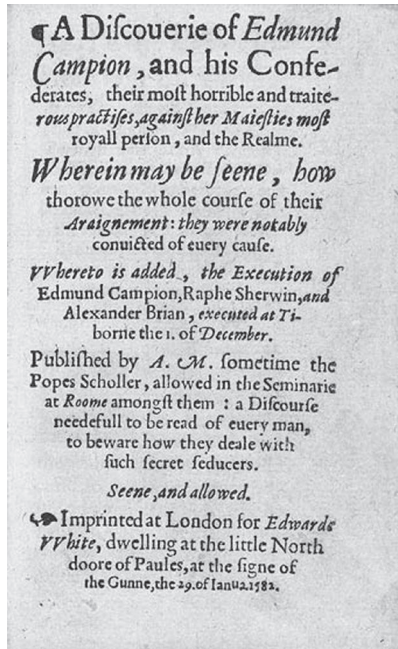
The Jesuits have, some of them, to whip themselves, whips with cords of wire, wherewith they will beat themselves till with too much effuse of blood they be ready to give up the ghost.²⁰

By twenty-first-century standards, some of Walsingham's spies were remarkably young. His use of the 19-year-old Munday as a spy in Rome was paralleled by his recruitment of several Cambridge University students to penetrate the Rheims seminary.

On Munday's return to London, as well as resuming his career as an actor, he helped to track down the members of Jesuit missions to England, and published a series of savage anti-Catholic pamphlets.²¹ Though Munday had never met Edmund Campion (later canonised), a leader of the first mission, he was one of the chief witnesses at Campion's trial in Westminster Hall in November 1581. Part of Munday's tract, *A Discouerie of Edmund Campion, and his Confederates*, which accused them of 'the most horrible and traitorous practises against Her Maiesties most royall person and the realme', was read aloud from the scaffold at Tyburn, when Campion and other Jesuits were executed on 1 December. Munday described himself on the title page as 'sometime the Popes Scholler, allowed in the Seminarie [English College] at Roome'.

Some of the priests executed that day showed extraordinary bravery and religious devotion on the scaffold as they were first hanged, cut down while still alive, castrated, disembowelled and beheaded before their bodies were cut in four. The (admittedly sympathetic) Thomas Alfield, who stood 'very near' the scaffold, reported that Campion 'meekly and sweetly yielded his soul unto his Saviour, protesting that he died a perfect catholic'.²²

From Elizabethan England onwards, playwrights and others in the entertainment business were used for what a modern intelligence agency would call 'influence operations', as well as to collect



intelligence. Munday was one of the first, publicly denigrating all the condemned missionary priests as contemptible cowards:

These are the Martyrs of the Romish Church, not one of them patient, penitent, nor endued with courage unto the extremitie of death: but dismaying, trembling & fearful as the eye witnesses can beare me record.²³

Luke Kirby, against whom Munday had testified at his trial, showed, on the contrary, conspicuous courage on the scaffold, declaring his innocence and claiming that Munday had no evidence against him. The Sheriff then summoned Munday from the crowd of onlookers to respond to Kirby's claims. Even by Munday's account, Kirby seems to have had the better of their exchange, reminding Munday

what freendshippe he had shewed unto me [in Rome], and had done the lyke unto a number of English men, whom he knew well not to be of their Religion, bothe out of his own purse, as also be freending

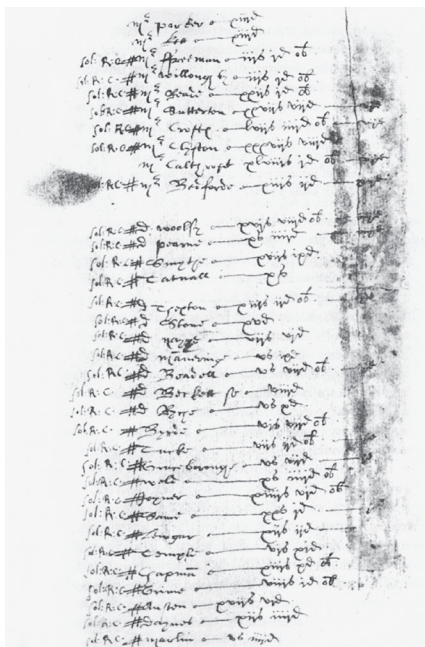
them to some of the Popes Chamber, he made conveyance for them thence, some tyme going fortie miles with them ...²⁴

During the hunt for priests and other hidden papists, Munday worked closely with the most brutal of Walsingham's interrogators, Richard Topcliffe, notorious for his use of a variety of tortures – 'Topcliffian customs', as they were euphemistically termed at court.²⁵ Munday even dedicated a book to Topcliffe. Published in 1588, its title was curiously at odds with Topcliffe's fearsome reputation: *A Banquet of Daintie Conceits. Furnished with Verie Delicate and Choysse Inuentions, to Delight Their Mindes, who Take Pleasure in Musique, and There-withall to Sing Sweete Ditties ...* A promised second volume failed to appear.

In 1584, Munday found fame as a playwright with *Fedele and Fortunio*, his adaptation of the Italian romantic comedy *Il Fedele*, written eight years earlier by Luigi Pasqualigo. In the play Fedele returns from a journey abroad to find that his friend Fortunio has fallen in love with his lover Victoria. Wrongly believing that Victoria has betrayed him, Fedele turns his attentions to Virginia. Espionage, combined with an element of sorcery, reveals the two women's true feelings, and, after a number of entanglements and misadventures, the play ends happily with Fedele marrying Victoria and Fortunio marrying Virginia. The popularity of the play at court in 1584 did much to ensure its success. The printed version of the play, published in the following year, recorded on the title page that it had been 'presented before the Queenes most excellent Majestie', and included both a 'Prologue before the Queen' and an 'Epilogue at the Court'. Munday's reputation at court was heightened by his hunt for hidden papists. In 1587, as a reward for his good service, Elizabeth granted Munday leases in reversion of eight Crown properties. From 1588 to 1596 Munday signed his publications 'Anthony Munday, Messenger of Her Majesties Chamber'.²⁶

★

In contrast to the light entertainment provided by *Fedele and Fortunio*, the dramatic sensation of the mid 1580s was the first production in 1587 of *Tamburlaine*, a blood-soaked tragedy in blank verse loosely based on the life of the Central Asian tyrant, Timur. *Tamburlaine* established its 23-year-old author, Christopher ('Kit') Marlowe, as the greatest playwright of the era. The play's popular appeal led to a



Marlowe in Corpus Christi's Butter Book for Easter term 1581. 'Marlen', at the bottom of the list, has spent 5s. 4d.

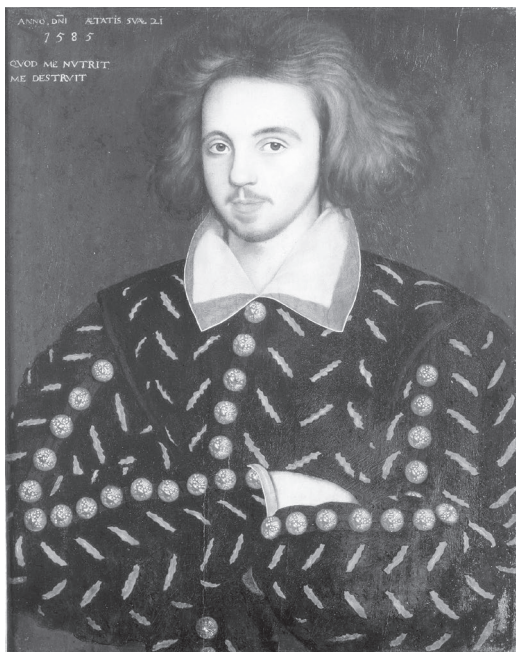
proliferation of Asian tyrants ("Tamerlanes and Tamer-chams", as Ben Jonson called them) in the drama of the next decade.

What makes Marlowe's precocious success as a playwright even more extraordinary is that, like Munday, he was also a spy, probably recruited to Walsingham's secret service in 1585 while studying for his MA at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.²⁷

The Corpus Christi Butter Book, which recorded students' expenditure on food and drink, shows that from 1585, when Marlowe began his intelligence career, his presence at the College became irregular and his expenditure while there considerably higher.²⁸

An anonymous portrait in Corpus painted in 1585,²⁹ widely believed to be of Marlowe, shows a flamboyantly-dressed 21-year-old and carries the Latin inscription *Quod me nutrit me destruit*: 'What nourishes me destroys me'. The inscription arguably proved prophetic. The personal passions which came to consume Marlowe generated enmities which help to explain his murder in 1593 at the age of 29.³⁰

In June 1587, the Privy Council sent a letter to Cambridge University authorities designed to ensure that Marlowe's absences abroad did



not delay the award of his MA: 'in all his actions he had behaved himself orderly and discreetly whereby he had done her Majesty good service, & deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing'. Though the Privy Council did not, of course, refer directly to Marlowe's espionage, it acknowledged rumours that, like other of Walsingham's recruits, he had visited the Catholic seminary in Rheims, successor to the English College in Rome as the main source of missionary priests trained to travel secretly to England. The Privy Council, however, denounced claims by 'those who are ignorant in th'affaires he went about' that Marlowe intended to take up residence in Rheims:

Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley [Marlowe] was determined to have gone beyond the seas to Reames [Rheims] and there to remain, Their L[ordshi]ps thought good to certify that he had no such intent ...³¹

Few clues survive of how Marlowe's experience of espionage influenced his writing. But, when describing how Faustus sold his soul to

the Devil in *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, written in 1588, he must have had in mind how his fellow Cambridge recruit to the Elizabethan secret service, Richard Baines from Christ's College, had blasphemously taken vows as a Catholic priest at the Rheims seminary in 1581, swearing 'on the Bible that I believed in all the articles of the Catholic faith', before trying unsuccessfully to poison his fellow seminarians.³² In the longer version of *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus and Mephistopheles improve on Baines' deception and visit the Pope disguised as cardinals. The Pope is completely deceived and blesses Mephistopheles, who tells Faustus, 'was never devil thus bless'd before.'³³

The most successful spy used by Walsingham against extremist Catholic conspirators in England was Robert Poley, graduate of Clare College, Cambridge, and – initially – a friend of Marlowe. Poley penetrated the entourage of Anthony Babington, leader of probably the most dangerous plot to assassinate the queen, by posing as a committed Catholic supporter of Mary, Queen of Scots. Babington gave him a diamond ring as a token of close friendship. After his arrest Babington suspected that he had been betrayed by Poley but could not quite believe him capable of such treachery. He wrote to Poley: 'Farewell sweet Robyn, if as I take thee, true to me. If not adieu, *omnium bipedum nequissimus* [vilest of all two-footed creatures].' Marlowe was to find the devious Poley, like the obnoxious Baines, an untrustworthy friend.³⁴

Unlike Marlowe, the even more talented but less precocious William Shakespeare was an actor before he became a playwright. Will probably had a good grammar school education in Stratford-upon-Avon until the age of 15 but did not go on to university. Though born only about a month after Marlowe,³⁵ he did not have his first play performed until a few months before Marlowe's murder in 1593.

Shakespeare's first serious contact with the acting profession probably came at the age of 5 in 1569, when two troupes of travelling actors, the Queen's Players and Worcester's Men, the first companies known to have played in Stratford, came successively to his father John's house in Henley Street (now, as 'Shakespeare's Birthplace', a major tourist attraction).³⁶ Will would have seen them parade through Stratford, dressed in colourful liveries, to the rattle of drums and the blare of trumpets. John Shakespeare was then high bailiff (mayor),

and the troupes needed his permission to perform in Stratford at the Guildhall and post bills advertising their performances. John may well have taken his son, free of charge, to see one of their plays. Another young boy named R. (possibly Robert) Willis, whose father took him to a performance by travelling players, later recalled: "This sight tooke such impression in me that when I came towards mans estate, it was as fresh in my memory, as if I had seen it newly acted."³⁷ Will Shakespeare probably had equally vivid memories.

Shakespeare's name appears in no written records between 1585 and 1592. In 1585 he was living in Stratford with his wife and three children. Seven years later he was working as a playwright and an actor in London. Though there is no proof, it has been plausibly suggested that, at some point during the seven 'missing years', Shakespeare began an acting career with the Queen's Men (not to be confused with the earlier Queen's Players).³⁸ He later drew on their repertoire when writing his own history plays, taking plots, characters, and occasionally phrases from, for example, *The True Tragedy of Richard III* and *The Famous Victories of Henry V*.³⁹

Marlowe was an important influence on Shakespeare's early career as a playwright. Shakespeare's first major experience of Marlowe's work was probably watching *Tamburlaine* in London in 1587. 'The fingerprints of *Tamburlaine*', writes Stephen Greenblatt, 'are all over the plays that are among Shakespeare's earliest known ventures as playwright.'⁴⁰ Shakespeare allows himself an occasional in-joke when drawing on Marlowe's work. He improves on one of *Tamburlaine*'s insults:

Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia!
What can ye draw but twenty miles a day?⁴¹

In Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 2*, the swaggering soldier, Ancient Pistol, adds a further ten miles:

Hollow pampered jades of Asia,
Which cannot go but thirty miles a day.⁴²

It is probable that Shakespeare and Marlowe actually collaborated, as Elizabethan playwrights often did.⁴³ On successive days in January 1593, the Rose Theatre on Bankside put on plays which included

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and *Harry the Sixth* (presumably *Henry VI, Part I*).⁴⁴ Suggestions that the two worked together in writing the three parts of *Henry VI* in 1591–2 have been reinforced by recent computer analysis of the text. The editors of the latest edition of the *New Oxford Shakespeare* controversially ascribe authorship of the plays jointly to 'William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe'.⁴⁵

During their collaboration, Marlowe may well have talked to Shakespeare about his intelligence career, which entered its most controversial and indiscreet phase in the confused aftermath of Walsingham's death in 1590. In 1592 Nicholas Faunt, formerly one of Walsingham's chief assistants, complained that 'the multitude of servants in this kind [intelligence] ... of late years hath bred much confusion with want of secrecy and dispatch.'⁴⁶ His own recruit Marlowe was one of those responsible. Marlowe's fellow spy and former friend, Richard Baines, accused him of blasphemy, telling the Privy Council, probably correctly, that Marlowe had declared 'that Christ was a bastard and his mother dishonest', and that 'Saint John the Evangelist was bedfellow to Christ [who] used him as the sinners of Sodoma.'⁴⁷

In 1587 the Privy Council had certified that Marlowe 'in all his actions had behaved himself orderly and discreetly whereby he had done her Majesty good service'. By the early 1590s, however, his behaviour was far from 'orderly and discreet'. Marlowe was imprisoned in 1589 after a swordfight in Shoreditch which led to the death of an innkeeper's son, and 'bound over to keep the peace' after another fight in 1592. In the same year he was accused of attacking a tailor in Canterbury. Whether or not he started these fights, Marlowe's hot temper had clearly made him an intelligence liability. While in Flushing (now Vlissingen in Holland), then an English possession, early in 1592, he was arrested for counterfeiting.⁴⁸ Marlowe's indiscretions left their mark on Shakespeare's *Richard III*, probably written in 1592: it is the first play which uses 'intelligence' to mean secret information.⁴⁹ The Lord Chamberlain, Lord Hastings, boasts in the play that, 'Nothing can proceed that toucheth us whereof I shall not have intelligence'. His intelligence, however, turns out to be seriously flawed, and he is executed by the king.

The collaboration between the two greatest Elizabethan playwrights was cut short by Marlowe's violent death on 30 May 1593. Marlowe

was killed after dining in Deptford, near London, with three sinister acquaintances: Robert Poley, Nicholas Skeres, a swindler accused in Star Chamber of 'entrapping young gents', and Ingram Frizer, accused of being in league with Skeres' swindles. According to an inquest held next day by the royal coroner with a local jury, Frizer and Marlowe fell out over the bill. 'Moved with anger', Marlowe allegedly snatched Frizer's dagger from him and struck him on the head, possibly with the blunt end. Frizer grabbed his dagger back and stabbed Marlowe above the right eye, fatally wounding him. The jury found that Frizer had acted in self-defence. Much about Marlowe's death, however, remains mysterious. It is quite possible that Marlowe's violent end was related to the rivalries and disruption within Elizabethan intelligence which followed Walsingham's death, but, unless further evidence is discovered, the truth may never emerge.⁵⁰

Shakespeare later made a veiled but unmistakable reference to Marlowe's death in *As You Like It*, performed in 1599. In a tribute to Marlowe, Shakespeare quoted his words in the play:

Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw [saying] of might:
'Who ever loved who loved not at first sight?'

The 'dead shepherd' was Marlowe. 'Who ever loved who loved not at first sight?' was probably then (as it still is) the best-known line from his narrative poem *Hero and Leander*, first published posthumously in the previous year.⁵¹ Though Shakespeare is known to have collaborated with other dramatists, Marlowe is the only one to whom he paid public tribute.⁵² The maxim chosen by Marlowe for his (probable) portrait in his Cambridge College, *Quod me nutrit, me destruit*, reappears in Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 as 'Consumed with that which it was nourished by'.⁵³

Thanks, initially, to what he had learned from his discussions with Marlowe about Walsingham's secret service, Shakespeare continued to refer intermittently to intelligence operations for the rest of his career.⁵⁴ One of the most famous of his plays, *Hamlet*, first performed at the Globe (of which he was a shareholder) in 1600 or 1601, was also the first in which, at some stage, a majority of the characters spy on the others. The battle of wits between Claudius and Prince Hamlet – two 'mighty opposites' – is dominated by spying.⁵⁵ Agatha Christie called *Hamlet* 'a detective play'. She took the title of her celebrated detective drama, *The Mousetrap*, the longest-running play

in the history of world theatre, from that jokingly given by Hamlet to the play performed at the Danish court by a group of travelling players which, following his own additions to the script, reveals how his father, the king, was murdered by Claudius.⁵⁶ Horatio spies on Claudius to observe his shocked reaction to the re-enactment of the murder. Shakespeare thus makes an ingeniously novel contribution to spy fiction, based on his own first-hand experience of travelling players spreading propaganda and engaging in clandestine activities on behalf of their patrons. When Hamlet discusses the script with the 'first player', he asks him:

You could, for a need,
study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which
I would set down and insert in't, could you not?

'Ay, my lord', replies the actor. Travelling players, the Queen's Men among them, were probably used to such requests.

Hamlet also includes the first memorable use of the word 'spy' in any English play. Claudius tells Gertrude, 'When sorrows come, they come not single spies/But in battalions.' Almost four centuries later, Alan Bennett gave the title *Single Spies* to his play about two of the most successful spies ever to work in Britain for a foreign power. Part One (*An Englishman Abroad*) was devoted to Guy Burgess; Part Two (*A Question of Attribution*) to his friend Anthony Blunt.

Shakespeare showed a better conceptual grasp of intelligence issues than any subsequent British writer until Daniel Defoe, who, like Marlowe, had first-hand experience of espionage. He was the first dramatist to dwell on the frustration of policymakers who receive equivocal or uncertain intelligence reports and on the problems of speaking truth to power (exemplified by Macbeth's order: 'Bring me no more reports!').⁵⁷ King John's exasperated reaction to intelligence failure resonates with that of Richard Nixon over three and a half centuries later. John famously asks, after being surprised by unexpected news of the advance of a large French army: 'O, where hath our intelligence been drunk?'⁵⁸ President Nixon demanded after an intelligence failure in Cambodia, 'What the hell do those clowns do out there at Langley [CIA HQ]?'⁵⁹

Shakespeare also gives some striking examples of SIGINT (intelligence derived from intercepting and, where necessary, decrypting

messages). Like Marlowe, he was probably aware of its use to monitor plots to bring Mary, Queen of Scots to the throne. Elizabeth was full of praise for Thomas Phelippes's success in decrypting Mary's correspondence and awarded him an annual pension of 100 marks (worth about £10,000 today) – an unheard-of sign of royal favour to a codebreaker.⁶⁰

Until Mary's 1586 treason trial, which revealed her correspondence with Babington and led to her execution at Fotheringhay Castle the following year, Mary had been blithely unaware that her correspondence had been intercepted and decrypted by Phelippes.⁶¹ Similarly, in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, believed to be the first play performed at the new Globe Theatre in 1599, 'The king hath note of all that they [his enemies] intend,/By interception which they dream not of.' When Hamlet kills Polonius, Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (the names of two real Danish courtiers)⁶² to escort the prince on a journey to England, providing them with a secret letter to the King of England asking him to arrange for Hamlet's prompt execution. En route, the rightly distrustful Hamlet opens the letter and replaces it with another, purporting to come from Claudius, requesting the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead.⁶³

Where Shakespeare differs most from twenty-first-century notions of intelligence is in the role of the supernatural. Intelligence on the murder of King Hamlet comes from his Ghost. According to tradition, in the first performance of *Hamlet*, the Ghost was played by Shakespeare himself. In *Macbeth* three 'secret, black and midnight hags' respond to his request for future intelligence by summoning apparitions. The third famously assures him that

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

When this improbable event begins his downfall, Macbeth blames 'th' equivocation of the fiend,/That lies like truth'.⁶⁴

★

It is possible that Shakespeare's recipe for the brew in the witches' cauldron in *Macbeth* was influenced by that of the witch Medusa in

Munday's *Fedele and Fortunio*.⁶⁵ For the remainder of Elizabeth's reign, Munday combined success as a playwright with continuing involvement in intelligence operations. The fragmentary record of his operations provides further evidence of his lack of scruples. As one agent reported shortly before Walsingham's death in 1590, Munday

hath been in divers places, where I have passed; whose dealing hath been very rigorous and yet done very small good, but rather much hurt; for in one place, in pretence to search for [Catholic] Agnus Deis and hallowed grains, he carried from a widow 40/-, the which he took out of a chest. A few of these matches will either raise a rebellion or cause your officers to be murdered.

Topcliffe, however, retained complete confidence in Munday as 'a man that wants no wytte', and was 'not ... of dull dispocytion towards Gods trewe relidgion. Or to her majesty his Sovereigne, But Rather well disposed, & dewtyfull.'⁶⁶

Munday was also engaged in covert operations against Puritan critics of the leadership of the Church of England. He took a central part in the hunt for the anonymous author of the 'Martin Marprelate' tracts: six pamphlets and a broadsheet printed on a press which from October 1588 to September 1589 was secretly moved across England from one puritan household to another to escape its pursuers. Witty, rumbustious and outrageously irreverent, the tracts are now widely recognised as 'the finest prose satires of their era'. As the author's pseudonym, 'Mar-prelate', suggests, his main targets were prelates: 'It is not possible that naturally there can be any good bishop.' Chief among the 'proud, popish, presumptuous, profane, paultrie, pestilent, and pernicious prelates' of the Church of England ridiculed by the tracts were Archbishop John Whitgift, the 'Canterbury Caiaphas', and Bishop Thomas Cooper of Winchester, whom Marprelate threatened to 'bumfeg' (spank) vigorously: 'hold my cloak there somebody, that I may go roundly to work.'⁶⁷ Munday too was attacked in a Marprelate tract of July 1589: 'Ah, thou Judas! Thou that hast already betrayed the papists, I think meanest to betray us also.'⁶⁸ Though the identity of Martin Marprelate remained unknown,⁶⁹ Munday and other agents successfully tracked down the printing press and most of those involved in the publication of his tracts.⁷⁰

Privately recognising the ineffectiveness of official ripostes to the tracts, Archbishop Whitgift insisted that accomplished writers be found to 'stop Martin & his fellows mouths' by answering them 'after their own vein of writing'.⁷¹ A group of leading playwrights was covertly commissioned to write anonymous tracts mocking critics of the leadership of the Church of England. Though Munday played some part in the influence operation,⁷² the chief role in the attempt to discredit the Marprelate tracts was secretly assigned to the writers and playwrights John Lyly and Thomas Nashe.

John Lyly's *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit: Very Pleasant for All Gentlemen to Read*, published in 1578, had made him for a time the most fashionable author in England. In 1583–4 his first two plays, *Campaspe* and *Sappho and Phao*, were performed at court.⁷³ Thomas Nashe's closeness to Whitgift during the Marprelate controversy is shown by the fact that his only surviving play, *Summers Last Will and Testament* (now best known for its poems), was written while staying in the Archbishop's summer palace at Croydon in 1592. His chief contribution to the campaign against Martin Marprelate was the pamphlet, *An Almond for a Parrat*, written under the alias Cuthbert Curry-Knave and probably published in early 1590. To try to ensure its popularity, he dedicated his anonymous attack on 'the knave Martin' to the most popular comic actor of the time:

To that most comical and conceited cavalier, Monsieur du Kempe, jest-monger and vicegerent general to the ghost of Dick Tarleton, his loving brother Cuthbert Curry-Knave sendeth greeting.

Will Kemp had succeeded Tarlton as London's favourite clown, for whom Shakespeare was to write some of his most famous comic roles. Nashe, however, could not equal the exceptional comic talent either of the 'knave Martin' or of the clown Kemp. *An Almond for a Parrat* was notable more for invective than for wit. It concluded: 'Yours to command as your own for two or three cudgellings at all times. Cuthbert Curry-Knave the younger'.⁷⁴

For those who knew or guessed that Cuthbert Curry-Knave was Thomas Nashe, the notion of him 'cudgelling' Martin Marprelate, who had famously extolled the 'bumfegging' of 'pestilent prelates', was probably the funniest part of *An Almond for a Parrat*. Nashe was well known for his puny physique and for his inability to grow a beard.

In Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, the diminutive, impudent page-boy, Moth – a 'halfpennie purse of wit' – is believed to be a caricature of Nashe. Ironically, perhaps, the later development of Nashe's own comic style owed much to what he had learned from the uproarious satire of the Marprelate tracts.⁷⁵

Anthony Munday's career as a playwright during the final years of the sixteenth century continued more smoothly than those of Lyly or Nashe, whose fortunes went into decline. The 1590s, when Munday received regular payments from the Rose Theatre, were his most productive decade. A number of his plays were performed at court.⁷⁶ In 1598 the cleric and literary critic Francis Meres named Munday in a list of distinguished playwrights (including Shakespeare) as being one of the best writers of comedies. He called Munday 'our best plotter' – probably a reference to his talent for conspiracy as well as in constructing dramatic plots.⁷⁷

In 1601, however, Munday fell foul of official censorship. The long-serving Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, refused to allow the performance of his play, *Sir Thomas More*, fearing that its depiction of London riots against foreigners in 1517 might provoke more civil unrest. Shakespeare was one of several playwrights asked by Tilney in 1603 to revise the text. The 147 lines produced by Shakespeare for the revised version are now the only ones in his handwriting to survive in the manuscript of any play – his own included. Shakespeare added a passionate plea by Sir Thomas More for tolerance of foreign refugees in the capital. 'More', writes the Shakespearian scholar, Jonathan Bate, 'asks the on-stage crowd, and by extension the theatre audience, to imagine what it would be like to be an asylum-seeker undergoing forced repatriation.'⁷⁸

The revised *Sir Thomas More* seems never to have been performed or printed. Though Munday was responsible for a series of successful civic pageants, he gave up writing for the theatre. For the next decade, however, he continued to take an active part in intelligence operations against Catholic recusants, who refused to attend Anglican services. Some recusants accused of treachery by Munday and others were so fearful of execution that they agreed to become informers or spies to prove their loyalty. Among them was the celebrated lutenist and composer, John Dowland, the most famous English musician of his time. When his contacts with English Catholic émigrés were reported to Sir Robert Cecil (who in 1598 would succeed his father, Lord



If a portrait was painted of John Dowland, it was probably this mysterious miniature of 1590 by Isaac Oliver. Though the sitter is not identified, his age is given as 27 – the same as Dowland's. The portrait also resembles that of an unidentified lutenist in an engraving of Christian IV's court.

Burghley, as the queen's chief minister), Dowland sent Cecil a groveling letter of apology, assuring him that he had ceased to be an 'obstinate papist':

Wherefore I have reformed myself to live according to her Majesty's laws, as I was born under her Highness, and that, most humbly, I do crave pardon, protesting if there were any ability in me I would be most ready to make amends.⁷⁹

The 'amends' made by Dowland included providing intelligence on English Catholics allegedly plotting abroad – chief among them some

in Rome who, he claimed, were planning to assassinate the queen. He ended his letter to Cecil by reporting that

the Kinge of Spain is making gret preparation to com for England this next somer [1596], wher if it pleasde yo. honor to advise me by my poore wyff I wolde most willingly lose my lyffe against them.⁸⁰

Dowland's intelligence on Philip II's preparations for an invasion of England proved correct, though the departure of the new Spanish Armada was delayed until 1597. Like the better-known Armada of 1588, it was scattered by storms when it reached the English Channel. Some ships were wrecked, others captured, and the rest returned to Spain.⁸¹

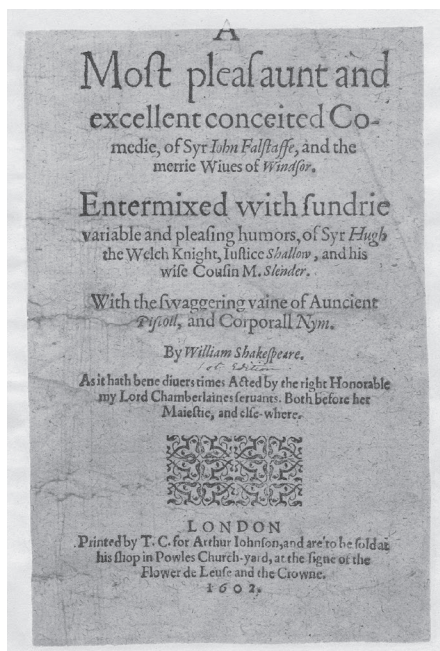
Thereafter, Dowland's most valuable intelligence probably came from Copenhagen. On becoming the leading lutenist of Christian IV of Denmark in 1598, Dowland volunteered to provide intelligence from the Danish court to London.⁸² Ironically, it was while he was in Copenhagen that *Hamlet*, set in the Danish court and with spying as a major theme, was first staged in London. Unlike most court musicians, Dowland was often able, as Christian's personal lutenist, to move around the king's private chambers, sometimes while he was discussing matters of state or confidential court gossip with his councillors. Though few details of Dowland's intelligence survive, the English diplomat Sir Stephen Lesieur wrote to him in 1602:

I shalbe very glad from tyme to tyme to heere from yow of as muche as may concerne her ma.stie or her subjects, yt shall come to yr knoledge ... spare not any reasonable charge to do it for I will see yow repaid.

Though this letter was intercepted by the Danes,⁸³ no action was taken against Dowland.⁸⁴ Christian IV was probably too fond of his music to banish him from court.

★

Elizabeth I's fascination with both stars and spies continued until the end of her reign. Among the plays performed at court, Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is believed to have been a particular favourite of the queen.



The title page of ‘A pleasant conceited comedie called, Loues labors lost’ similarly records that it was ‘presented before her Highnes this last Christmas. Newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespere.’

Less well known than the queen’s love of drama is her strong support for the intelligence service, vividly portrayed in the last portrait of her reign, the ‘Rainbow Portrait’, attributed to the painter Isaac Oliver. The portrait was presented to Elizabeth in 1602, a year before her death, by Sir Robert Cecil, now the queen’s chief minister (though without the formal title). The painting, to which she undoubtedly gave her approval, is full of the symbolism which appealed to Elizabeth as well as to Cecil. In one hand she holds a rainbow with the motto *non sine sole iris* (‘no rainbow without the sun’), reminding the viewer that only the queen can ensure the peace and prosperity of her realm. Embroidered on one arm is the serpent of wisdom with a heart-shaped ruby in its mouth, showing that the queen’s wisdom controls her emotions. With the hand of her other arm, she draws attention to the eyes and ears which cover her cloak, symbolising the members of her supposedly all-seeing and all-hearing intelligence service.



Nowhere in the world is there another portrait of a ruler that pays such tribute to the quality of her spies.

Elizabeth's intelligence service, however, had declined since the death of Walsingham. In the mid 1590s, the great codebreaker, Thomas Phelippes, spent several years in debtors' prison. The network of 'false' priests – informants who were, or pretended to be, Catholic priests – was less effective than Cecil believed in providing intelligence on Catholic plotters.⁸⁵ Within a few years of succeeding Elizabeth, James I was to come much closer than she had ever been to assassination by Catholic extremists.

‘Our Revels Now Are Ended’: Stars and Spies under the Early Stuarts

The entertainment business, as well as providing recruits and auxiliaries for the intelligence services, has also produced some of their most eloquent critics. Ben Jonson, nine years younger than Shakespeare and second only to him as the most successful Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatist, loathed espionage:

Spies, you are lights in state, but of base stuff,
Who, when you’ve burnt yourselves down to the snuff,
Stink and are thrown away. End fair enough.¹

Jonson’s denunciation of late Elizabethan spies reflected anger at the banning of his satirical play, *The Isle of Dogs*, written in collaboration with Thomas Nashe, which opened, and then quickly closed, at the Swan Theatre in July 1597. An informer ‘of base stuff’ in the audience reported to the fearsome Richard Topcliffe that the play was seditious. Since the scripts were seized and no copy survives, the nature of the sedition remains unclear. The title suggests, however, that Jonson and Nashe had dared to mock the Privy Council, which met on the Isle of Dogs. On 28 July the Privy Council ordered, but failed to enforce, the closure of all London theatres, claiming that ‘great disorders’ had been caused ‘by lewd matters that are handled on the stages, and by resort and confluence of bad people’. On 15 August the Council instructed Topcliffe to ‘peruse soch papers as were fownd in Nash his lodgings’. Nashe fled to Great Yarmouth, but Jonson and two actors appearing in the play were arrested, charged at Greenwich with ‘lewd and mutinous behaviour’, and interrogated by Topcliffe.²



Woodcut mocking Nashe as a jailbird after the banning of *The Isle of Dogs*, though he seems to have escaped arrest. From Richard Lichfield's *The Trimming of Thomas Nashe, Gentleman* (1597).

Though Topcliffe did not torture Jonson, he placed in his cell two 'damn'd Villains' to act as stool pigeons. The villains, almost certainly, were Robert Poley and Henry Parrot. A decade earlier, Poley had won Babington's confidence through deception, obtaining some of the evidence leading to his conviction for treason in 1586, and as we have seen he may well have been implicated in the death of Marlowe in 1593. Parrot was a more recent intelligence recruit, with a background as clerk in the Court of Exchequer.³ By 1606 he was writing short volumes of epigrams and satire. The first, 'The Mous-trap' (again taking its title from *Hamlet*), dismissed Jonson as a dramatist past his prime, whose plays appealed to 'few or none'.⁴

Fortunately for Jonson, he was warned about Poley and Parrot by his jailer and gave nothing away. On 2 October 1597, he and the two actors in *The Isle of Dogs* were released from jail.⁵ In a poem written to invite a friend to dinner after his release, Jonson promised him the evening would not be spoiled by the presence of informers:

And we shall have no Poley or Parrot by,
 Nor shall our cups make any guilty men:
 But, at our parting, we will be as when
 We innocently met. No simple word
 That shall be uttered at our mirthful board
 Shall make us sad next morning, or affright
 The liberty that we'll enjoy tonight.⁶

Jonson called himself a 'huge overgrown play-maker'. He was larger than life in both personality and physique. In middle age, he gave his weight as 'twenty stone within two pound', lamenting that ladies 'cannot embrace my mountain belly'.⁷ Heavy consumption of 'rich Canary wine' was partly to blame for both his girth and some of his quarrels.

Only a year after his release from Winchelsea, Jonson was back in prison at Newgate, convicted of manslaughter after killing an opponent in a duel. As well as forfeiting his 'goods and chattels', he was branded with a T on the left thumb – a reminder that a second conviction for manslaughter might lead to the Tyburn scaffold. While in Newgate, he was received into the Catholic Church, probably by the jailed priest, Father Thomas Wright, a former Jesuit who had studied in Rome and Milan, and seems to have been greatly admired by Jonson for both his bravery and learning.⁸

Jonson did not join the chorus of loyal poets lamenting the death of Elizabeth I in March 1603. He had much higher hopes of her successor, King James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England, and of his queen, Anne of Denmark (sister of Christian IV). Jonson devised a three-day entertainment to welcome Anne and the new heir apparent, 9-year-old Prince Henry (elder brother of the future Charles I), at Althorp House during their progress to London. Jonson was also commissioned to prepare speeches and one of the triumphal arches for James I's arrival in his new capital. Because of an outbreak of plague, however, the new king's triumphant entry had to be postponed until March 1604. An actor personifying the 'Genius of the City' declaimed an obsequious eulogy composed by Jonson:

Never came man more longed for, more desired,
And being come, more revered, loved, admired.⁹

James declared himself the chief patron of English theatre. Great nobles were no longer allowed, as under Elizabeth, to have their own acting companies. In May 1603 the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men.¹⁰ Shakespeare and the other eight members were henceforth part of the royal household; each received four and a half yards of red cloth for the livery they were to wear on state occasions. Probably at least two-thirds of the plays performed at court by the King's Men over the next few years were Shakespeare's.¹¹

Despite Ben Jonson's sycophantic welcome to both King James and Queen Anne, he soon antagonised the new regime. In 1604 he was



Ben Jonson (c.1617) by Abraham van Blyenberch.

accused of promoting ‘popery and treason’ in his tragedy *Sejanus His Fall*,¹² which told the story of the tyrannical rule and overthrow of the favourite of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Sejanus’s tyranny depends on a vast network of what his heroic opponent Sabinus calls ‘vile spies,/That first transfix us with their murdering eyes’. In describing surveillance in imperial Rome, Jonson had in mind the less homicidal surveillance to which he was subjected by ‘vile spies’ in Jacobean London:

Every second guest your tables take,
Is a fee’d spy, t’observe who goes, who comes,
What conference you have, with whom, where, when.¹³

‘Fee’d spies’ continued to report on Jonson’s controversial career as a playwright. In the summer of 1605, *Eastward Ho!*, written jointly by Jonson, John Marston and George Chapman, caused even greater controversy than *Sejanus* because of its mockery of allegedly uncouth Scots who had arrived in London. King James was personally offended. All three playwrights were imprisoned for about a month.¹⁴

Jonson’s militant Catholic friends put him in much greater danger than his early Jacobean plays. On or about 9 October 1605, soon after Jonson’s latest release from prison, surveillance revealed his presence at a supper party in the Strand with many of the leading conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot, then in its final stages of

preparation. Among them was the chief plotter, Robert Catesby, described by two Jesuits who knew him well as 'more than ordinarily well proportioned, some six feet tall, of good carriage and handsome countenance' – an easy surveillance target.¹⁵ Though proof is lacking, during supper Catesby probably mentioned the plot at least in outline. He made the fatal mistake of spreading knowledge of it beyond the original conspirators in order to persuade wealthy Catholics to support and finance the rising in the Midlands which he hoped would follow the assassination of the king and his ministers. One of the wealthy Catholics at the supper party in the Strand was Francis Tresham. Though sworn to secrecy, Tresham sent an anonymous letter to his Catholic brother-in-law, Lord Monteagle, on 26 October warning him not to attend Parliament, where a 'terrible blow' was planned for 5 November. Monteagle took the letter to the secretary of state, Robert Cecil, newly promoted Earl of Salisbury, who showed it to the king.¹⁶

On 4 November 1605, thirty-six barrels containing almost a ton of gunpowder were discovered under a large pile of firewood in a cellar beneath the House of Lords. According to modern calculations, the explosion of the gunpowder during the state opening of Parliament on 5 November would have destroyed much of Westminster as well as killing the king, his ministers and many others. The fact that what would have been the worst terrorist attack in British history came so close to success was the result of what, several centuries later, would be called 'intelligence failure'. None of the 'false priests', government agents who were – or pretended to be – Catholic clergy, had wind of it. Standards of interrogation, as well as of agent penetration, had declined dramatically since the Walsingham era. When arrested on 4 November, the man found in charge of the gunpowder hidden in the cellar gave his name as 'John Johnson'. It was not until 7 November, the third day of questioning, that it occurred to his inexperienced interrogators to look in his pockets. A letter found in one of them instantly revealed that his real name was Guido ('Guy') Fawkes.¹⁷

Immediately after Fawkes' identification, Ben Jonson was served with a Privy Council warrant instructing him to find a Catholic priest – probably Father Thomas Wright who had converted him in Newgate – who was to persuade Fawkes to name his fellow conspirators and reveal details of their conspiracy. The warrant was the most terrifying communication Jonson ever received. Aware that his links with the

plotters had been discovered, he knew that, if found guilty of assisting their treason, he would be hanged, drawn and quartered. Next day, he sent a cringingly obsequious reply to Robert Cecil, whom he privately loathed:¹⁸

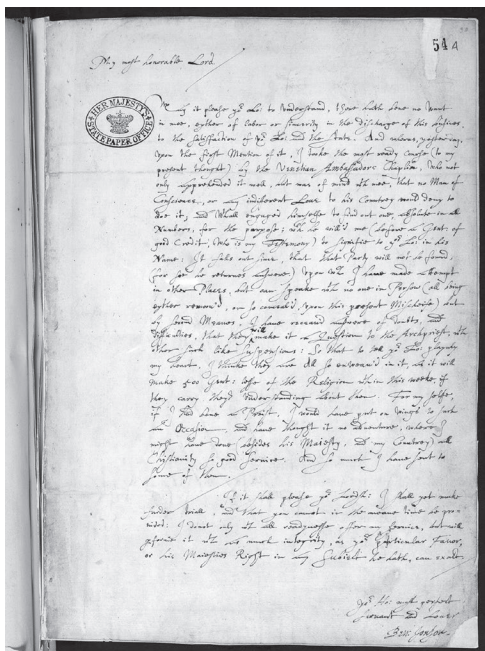
My most honourable Lord.

May it please yo[u] Lo[rdship] to understand, there hath been no want in me, either of labour or sincerity in the discharge of this business, to the satisfaction of yo[u] Lo[rdship] and the state. [...]

All Jonson's efforts to contact the priest, either directly or via intermediaries, had so far come to nothing.

If it shall please yo[u] Lordsh[ip] I shall yet make further trial [...]

I do not only w[i]th all readiness offer my service, but will p[er]form it w[i]th as much integrity, as yo[u] particular Favour, or his Majesty Right in any subject he hath, can exalt.



Yo[u]’ Ho[nour’s] most perfect
 servant and Lover
 Ben Jonson

On 8 November, the day Jonson wrote to Cecil, Catesby and three other conspirators were killed in Staffordshire by a posse led by the Sheriff of Worcestershire. But all attempts to discover Father Thomas Wright failed. Guy Fawkes and the other surviving conspirators were tortured in the Tower, tried in Westminster Hall, and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn.

In public, Ben Jonson continued to condemn the plotters (some of whom he probably privately admired) and to proclaim his own unconditional loyalty to James I by methods which included publishing a sycophantic poetic eulogy of Lord Monteagle, ‘saver of my country’:

Lo what my country should have done (have raised
 An obelisk, or column to thy name,
 Or, if she would but modestly have praised
 Thy fact, in brass or marble writ the same)
 I, that am glad of thy great chance, here do!
 And proud, my works shall out-last common deeds,
 Durst think it great, and worthy wonder too,
 But thine, for which I do’t, so much exceeds!
 My country’s parents I have many known;
 But, saver of my country, THEE alone.¹⁹

While eulogising the ‘savers of my country’ from the Gunpowder Plot, however, Jonson continued to ridicule the espionage mania of the official ‘fee’d spies’ who kept him and other Catholics under surveillance. Jonson was the inventor of the spy farce. *Volpone*, the most successful of all his plays, first performed at the Globe in March 1606, contains a comic sub-plot in which Sir Politic Would-be (‘Sir Pol’) expounds a number of paranoid espionage fantasies. The French, he claims had been using baboons as spies, one of whom had told him that they were preparing further secret missions. On being told of the death of ‘Stone the Fool’, who was habitually drunk, Sir Pol claims that Stone had actually run a sophisticated spy ring, receiving weekly intelligence reports hidden in cabbages, which he passed on concealed in other fruit and vegetables. Sir Pol had also personally

witnessed Stone receive intelligence in 'a trencher of meat' from a 'statesman' in disguise

And instantly, before the meal was done,
Convey an answer in a toothpick.

Because Jonson remained a Catholic, he continued to be intermittently accused of disloyalty to the Church of England. In the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, the playwright-spy, Anthony Munday, was 'zealous in tracking down recusants'. Among those on whom he compiled reports was Hugh Holland,²⁰ a lifelong Catholic friend of Jonson, who had written a poem in praise of his unpopular play *Sejanus*.²¹ Though Jonson loathed Munday, he dared not publicly attack him for pursuing papist recusants. Instead, he ridiculed Munday's plays, portraying him as the hack-writer Antonio Balladino in *The Case is Altered*, first published in 1609. Balladino boasts in Act I: 'I do use as much stale stuff, though I say it myself, as any man does in that kind, I am sure.' When reminded that he had been nominated as 'the best plotter' in the English theatre (a reference to Francis Meres' published praise of Munday), Balladino replies: 'I might as well have been put in for a dumb shew too.'²² Munday, by this time, had given up writing plays in order to concentrate on pageants and masques.²³ Jonson continued work on both.

The most lavish theatrical productions in early Stuart England, especially during the Christmas season, were not stage plays but elaborate court masques, closed to the public, which were far more extravagant than Elizabeth I's relatively modest entertainments. Actors and singers performed a written text, accompanied by consorts of lutes, viols and wind instruments. Jonson wrote twenty-one Christmas masques for the Jacobean court, far more than any other writer, usually in creative but often acrimonious collaboration with Inigo Jones, who designed sumptuous costumes and scenery. Masques brought performers and royalty closer together than plays staged at court because royals were among the actors. Though King James stopped dancing after leaving Scotland, Queen Anne had a starring role in six masques between 1604 and 1611, four of them written by Jonson.²⁴ In the first of Jonson's masques, the *Masque of Blacknesse* in 1605, commissioned by the queen, she and her ladies appeared as Africans, dancing with blacked-up faces.²⁵ At a time when all female roles in

theatres had to be played by boys, Anne of Denmark thus became – though not in public – Britain's first prominent actress. Prince Charles, second in line to the throne until the death of his elder brother Henry, also took part in numerous masques and royal entertainments. Even as a toddler, Charles amused courtiers by acting and dancing in elaborate costume with his mother. His early enjoyment of masques and disguise helps to explain why he later became the first heir to the throne to go in disguise on a secret mission abroad.²⁶

At the height of Jonson's success as a writer of court masques, he faced a personal religious crisis. In May 1610 Henri IV of France was assassinated by a Catholic fanatic, François Ravailiac. Though Ravailiac acted alone, there were persistent rumours that he was part of a wider Catholic conspiracy. On 2 June James I forbade Catholics access to court. All Catholics were required to renounce allegiance to the pope and pledge allegiance to James. The recusant Jonson gave in to pressure to return to the Church of England. He told a friend that, 'in token of true Reconciliation' at his first Anglican communion and in a typically flamboyant gesture, he drained the whole communion cup.²⁷

Jonson's proximity to court had made it impossible to conceal his Catholicism. In some remote Catholic strongholds in the North of England, however, where there was no organised surveillance of recusants, actors and playwrights continued to use drama to denounce the Church of England. One such stronghold was Netherdale (now Nidderdale) in north Yorkshire, where almost all the Gunpowder plotters had relatives. William Stubbes, the 'godly' (Anglican) minister of Pateley Bridge, called Netherdale 'one of the most obscure p[ar]tes' of Yorkshire. Separated from the rest of the country by high moors and 'great wastes', it was a 'fitt place for secrett' activities; 'a great number' of the people were 'evillye affected to the true religion established' and 'increasinge daylie in their irreligious courses'.

Among the opponents of 'the true religion established' was a group of Yorkshire players led by the recusant shoemakers, Robert and Christopher Simpson. Though few details survive about the Simpson players, they are known to have performed Shakespeare's *Pericles* a year after the publication of the 1609 quarto edition, which they may have purchased from a York bookseller. But their repertoire also included Catholic plays which condemned the Church of England as heretical. Among them was a version of the play *St Christopher*, which

included a religious debate in which a Catholic priest defeats a Protestant minister, who is then carried off to hell 'wth thundering & lightning' and 'flasheings of fire'. Other special effects, probably involving fireworks, included the arrival on stage of Lucifer with 'flaunt of fyre'.²⁸

St Christopher was included in a well-received performance by the Simpson players at Christmas 1609 in Gouthwaite Hall, the mansion of the recusant Sir John Yorke at the head of Netherdale, who welcomed the audience with seasonal hospitality.²⁹ One 'godly' preacher, Mr Mawson, shocked by news of the performance, claimed that a churchwarden whom he sent to summon parishioners to prayer at church was told 'that it woulde hinder the ale wife.' When Mawson went to Gouthwaite Hall to complain in person about the behaviour of Yorke's tenants, the household servants took him to an alehouse and tried to get him drunk. On another occasion, Mawson entered his ill-attended church to find a dummy in the pulpit dressed as a Protestant preacher.³⁰

Probably the most prominent of the Simpsons' Yorkshire patrons, Sir Richard Cholmley, had begun acting while at Cambridge University. Despite his 'naturally choleric' temperament, he 'acted the part of a woman in a comedy at Trinity College, in Cambridge ... with great applause, and was esteemed beautiful'. In 1609, Cholmley was summoned before the Star Chamber of privy councillors and judges, which sat in the royal palace of Westminster, accused of 'bearing inward love and affection to such as are obstinate popish recusants and having many obstinate popish recusants that depend on him', as well as licensing a company of actors whose plays contained 'much popery and abuse of the law and justice'. The charges were dropped for lack of evidence.³¹

Theatrical subversion continued in north Yorkshire. In 1616 five 'armigers' (men entitled to heraldic arms), three 'gentlemen' and two yeomen were fined for hosting performances by the recusant Simpson players.³² Cholmley, the Simpsons' chief early supporter, was briefly MP for Scarborough in 1621 and Sheriff of Yorkshire in 1624–5;³³ Sir John Yorke, though, despite being fined and possibly imprisoned for recusancy offences in 1611, continued his support for popish drama. In 1628 the travelling player, Christopher Malloy (of whom little is known), was prosecuted in Star Chamber for playing the devil in a play at Gouthwaite Hall, during which he carried an actor playing the