THE REPERTORY OF THE CHAMBERLAIN’S MEN, 1594-95, WITH OBSERVATIONS ON ITS COMMERCIAL VALUE

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The Chamberlain’s/King’s men put on a repertory of plays every season during the twenty years that Shakespeare was the company’s in-house dramatist. From comparison with entries for the Admiral’s men in Philip Henslowe’s Diary, drama historians have agreed that the Chamberlain’s probably acted an average of twenty-five to thirty plays a year. Approximately forty to fifty percent of the repertory would have been new plays; forty percent or so would have been plays continued from the previous season, and a few—perhaps up to twenty percent—would have been plays revived from earlier years.1 Yet a number of questions remain. Beyond the brief narrative E. K. Chambers has provided in The Elizabethan Stage,2 it is not known precisely when a given play entered the Chamberlain’s active repertory, how long it remained on stage, and whether it was revived. Thus work on the Chamberlain’s company is both speculative and controversial. Scholars do agree, however, that Shakespeare’s company was a successful and lucrative business for its sharers, a business which began in 1594, the year that was also Shakespeare’s first with the company. I propose here, with the aid of some “supposes,” to draw up a list of the plays that Shakespeare’s company may have had on stage during this first year, 1594-95, and, with the list in hand, to point out several commercial principles of the repertory that explain—at least in part—why the Chamberlain’s men were to find the London theater a profitable business.

A repertory list for the Chamberlain’s men begins, appropriately, with Henslowe’s Diary. Philip Henslowe recorded the activities
of Shakespeare's company just once, but he did so at a crucial time: a ten-day run from June 3-13, 1594, in a joint venture with the Lord Admiral's men. Scholars have supposed that the performances were the first of the newly constituted Chamberlain's men. Henslowe cited seven plays as performed during the engagement at Newington Butts, and three—Belin Dun, Cutlack, and The Jew of Malta—he recorded as having continued with the Admiral's after their move to the Rose on June 15. The remaining four plays were not mentioned again by Henslowe; consequently, scholars deduce that they—The Taming of A Shrew, Hamlet, Titus Andronicus, and a biblical drama (now lost) called Hester and Ahasueras—formed the nucleus of the Chamberlain's 1594-95 repertory. Further, scholars agree that when Shakespeare joined the Chamberlain's he brought with him—or the company simultaneously acquired—all of the plays he had written to date. There is, of course, some disagreement on which plays these were, but most grant that the pre-1594 plays include, at the very least, The Comedy of Errors, the three parts of Henry VI, and Richard III. These plays (the Newington Butts ones and the old Shakespearean ones) are the most likely members of the Chamberlain's initial repertory. Although it is possible that not all were actually staged in 1594-95, it is reasonable to suppose that they were. The company was, after all, in the business of acquiring a repertory. Four of the plays had already been prepared, and it would have been a needless and uncharacteristic waste of energy for the company to have retired them promptly. Shakespeare's history plays were established and popular plays; Henry VI had more performances in 1592-93 than any of Strange's other plays, and it averaged to Henslowe the excellent return of 40s. over the seventeen performances. The Comedy of Errors, according to an entry so interpreted in the 1594 Gesta Grayorum, was performed at Gray's Inn during the Christmas season of 1594-95 (see ES, I, 222). Thus it is likely that all plays mentioned above were in production during the Chamberlain's maiden year.

Sometime during 1594-95 Shakespeare wrote new plays for his company—at least two, and perhaps three. The scholarly community is by no means in full accord on which plays the new ones were, but the least controversial candidates as plays completed and ready for the stage before 1596 are Love's Labor's Lost and Romeo