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## **Dressing the History 'Boys ': Harry's Masks, Falstaff's Underpants**

**Carol Chillington Rutter**

By mid-2016 the UK Shakespeare community had experienced, one after the other, a spate of anniversaries and national celebrations that put Shakespeare, iconically, at their center: the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 2014; the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in 2016; the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics; the 2012 Cultural Olympiad; the 2014-16 'Globe to Globe' *Hamlet* tour. This activity, much of it conscripting Shakespeare to 'do' political work in the national self-interest, has prompted me to think about how the UK uses Shakespeare to frame its national self-image and to publish that image to the world. More specifically, I have been interested to observe how the Shakespeare theatre industry in England has aligned itself with this national cultural project by putting on view a particular view of 'England' in recent productions of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays. This, in turn, sent me to revisit the site of original work done by Barbara Hodgdon in the Royal Shakespeare Company Costume Collection, to return to questions she posed in her seminal essay, 'Shopping in the Archives'.<sup>1</sup> I was in search of an iconic costume and led there by other, more recent costumes that I'd seen in performances over the past few years, costumes that required me to ask questions about how current productions of Shakespeare's history plays were remembering history. If costumes are the stuff of production memory and preserve the material remains of stories told, what, I wondered, was the archive telling us about the England that has been on view to England (and the world) of late, particularly in those two plays that Shakespeare used so ambiguously to put England on view to *his* audiences, the two parts of *Henry IV*?

The results of a UK referendum in July 2016 to leave the European Union invested my research with a new political urgency. How, I asked myself, have recent theatrical fashionings of medieval English history anticipated, even contributed or held up a mirror to, the frame of mind that led Britons to support Brexit? In asking how England uses Shakespeare to view England, and what England our major Shakespeare producing house, the RSC, is not just putting on view locally to audiences in the theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon but beaming to global audiences in real-time video links 'Live from Stratford', I was conscious that all European eyes were now fixed — in astonishment, in horror, with baleful bemusement — on a Britain that looked determined to renounce 'Great'-ness for borders (and sovereignty) that would restore 'little England' by pulling her back inside the outlines of a map drawn to John of Gaunt's measure; a map that figures in the *Henry IV* plays. How theatre might be implicated in the making and the exporting of national self-fashioning, imagining, and fantasising was suddenly a very live political issue.

I've spent most of my working life with Shakespeare, writing about performance. I regularly come out of the theatre with a burr under my saddle and a bee in my bonnet. That's how I left Gregory Doran's 2014 productions of the *Henry IVs*, with Jasper Britton as the King, Alex Hassell as Prince Hal, Antony Sher as Falstaff, and with Oliver Ford Davies and Jim Hooper giving show-stopping performances as that geriatric double act, those 'rural fellows' from Gloucestershire, memory-maundering Justice Shallow and his aphasic cousin, Slender. Doran's *Henrys* were beautifully set in something like period costume (the designer: Stephen Brimson Lewis) where 'period' was faux late-Elizabethan.



The low-lifers in the Boar's Head, like the place itself, were rendered in specific detail (down to the turkey carpet on the table and the napkin at serving man Francis's neck). Hassell's Hal wore leather; Falstaff, a filthy dowlas shirt, sagging boots, and a greasy surcoat over breeches held up by a belt that showed the strain of competing with the paunch. He entered the play from under a tangle of sheets in a bed already occupied by the Prince and a pair of doxies who were vigorously servicing him. Reviewing them, I described Doran's *Henrys* as 'richly upholstered costume dramas'.<sup>2</sup> I was registering my admiration for the skill of the designer and of the costume cutters, dyers, seamstresses, and wardrobe mistresses who were playing a simulation game, realising on stage a visual world Shakespeare creates in words, giving us access to the historical time of the narrative and tuning our ears by focusing our eyes. But I was also registering resistance, using 'costume drama' as a term of critique where 'design concept' functions as an act of complacency, safely locating history as 'Ago' in an

England preserved by the heritage industry, an England that votes Tory — if not UKIP (that is, the ultra-right wing United Kingdom Independence Party that campaigned loudly on the 'LEAVE' side of the referendum).

But I've always understood the *Henry IV* plays to be historically bi-focal, creating for costume consistency as big a headache for the designer as *King Lear* does, that play juggling scenes set in prehistoric and post-Renaissance Britain. *Henry IV* intercuts 1399 with 1599.<sup>3</sup> The king's play dramatizes history out of Holinshed. But in Hal's play, the play set in Eastcheap, Shakespeare writes about *today*, an Eastcheap of his own time, ostlers grooming horses, poulterers sending turkeys to market, travellers complaining of fleabites, pots being filled, slates being scored. The plays unroll a map that 'we' recognise, the City, Westminster, Coventry, Sutton Coldfield, the Severn, the Trent, Shrewsbury, the Inns of Court, the lanes behind them where the 'bona robas' hang out. The politics discussed are a politics of the moment (which 'we' recognise as a politics of our own moment, these plays dwelling in a perpetual time present): rebellion at home, threat of invasion from abroad, taxation, legitimate government, the draft; topics (under different names) no doubt current in 1399 but discussed in the *Henry IV* plays in ways specific to 1599, most tellingly in that impromptu that refashions interrogation as play: 'Do thou stand for my father' (*Henry IV*, 2.4.366).

Shakespeare's *Henrys*, then, don't consign history to the past. History is *also* about now. The few records of costumes we have surviving from the period — Peacham's drawing of *Titus Andronicus*<sup>4</sup> — or implied as stage directions — Cleopatra's command 'Cut my lace, Charmian'<sup>5</sup> — suggest to us the visual 'now-ness' of early modern performance, productions staged in some version of modern dress, or as mash-ups, Roman sash over Elizabethan armour. Of course, if history is about

NOW (as well as THEN), it's about live issues. That means it's dangerous. And that's my gripe with 'costume drama' Shakespeare. Whether it aims to or not, it instantiates nostalgia. It traps Shakespeare in a single time zone — THEN. It pictorializes history and pictures history as finished. 'Costume drama' Shakespeare gives us conversations long over and done what the plays stage as urgent topical debates.

in my personal memory bank, some collected in the theatre, some accessed in the RSC's performance archive held in Stratford in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, I had to ask, 'Has it always been thus with the *Henry IV*s?' There have been seven productions of the two parts of *Henry IV* in Stratford in the past 48 years, all of them in 'period' dress. Image 2



shows the Boar's Head gang in Terry Hands's five-star production of 1975 where Alan Howard's Hal is, like Alex Hassell's in 2014, a youth in faux-early modern boots and leather, and where Brewster Mason's 'sanguine coward', 'bed-presser', 'horse-back-breaker' Falstaff sartorially begets Antony Sher's 'trunk of humours', 'huge bombard

of sack', 'grey Iniquity', 'father Ruffian' and 'vanity in years' (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.235-6, 437-42). To extend the 'period' comparisons we see in these images, we can go beyond the RSC to the Peter Hall Company with Desmond Barrit as Falstaff



and the Globe with Roger Allam, both productions staged in 2011.



Of course, I knew the answer to my question, 'Has it always been thus'? No.

Over the same weeks in 2014 that Doran's *Henrys* were on stage at the RST, Harriet Walter was playing the King, directed by Phyllida Lloyd, at the Donmar Theatre in London.





The conceit of Lloyd's all-female, bang up-to-date production was that we were observing inmates in a women's prison rehearse Shakespeare's play under the watchful gaze of Her Majesty's enforcers. This was make-shift theatre as rehabilitation, simulating in-yer-face confrontation, staging fake violence as an alternative to actual grievous bodily harm. All the lags had parts. And when they started speaking, their voices made us hear the prison as a microcosm of the nation (what Shakespeare does in *Henry V* when he brings on the four captains, Fluellen, Macmorris, Jamie, and Gower). Hal (Clare Dunne) had an Irish accent. Hotspur and Poins (Jade Anouka, Cynthia Erivo) were a pair of bad-ass 'saaf Lundun' girls who flaunted their black 'gangsta' credentials; Kate Percy (Sharon Rooney) came from one of Glasgow's slums, probably the Gorbals; Falstaff (Ashley McGuire) was a distant East End relative of the Krays, a kind of androgynous bloat of breast sagged into belly, a face hardened by fags, booze, and punch-ups on Bethnal Green. Harriet Walter's 'posh' voice — she'd clearly been sent down for some kind of white collar

offense like credit card fraud — reminded us that 'nobs', too, commit crimes — bankers, TV entertainers, members of Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

Putting Shakespeare's words into this setting made these plays about us, about the current state of the nation, and this reanimated the urgency of the head-to-head confrontations they stage. This setting knew all about the rivalries that seethe in the *Henry IVs* (where they explode in civil war, as in contemporary England, on the streets of London rioting in 2011): it knew about territoriality, tribalism, gang warfare, loyalty, promise-breaking, betrayal, the instant combustion of insult and aggro, and it played them to the personal high stakes they demand in Shakespeare's writing. In Doran, Antony Sher's bulked up Falstaff in his fat suit was a lovable rogue — Hassell's Hal clearly adored him. But that string of epithets (most dangerously, 'misleader of youth' [*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.450]) were, in his case, comic flourishes. The larks he got up to with Hal (like that initial 'dirty' turn in the sheets) were boys' own japes. Delinquency couldn't stick to Hassell's teflon-coated Hal. (He kept his early modern boxer shorts on in bed.) The Father of Lies' lies were laughed off as entertainment. In Lloyd, McGuire's Falstaff was also a buffoon — wanting to play Peter Pan as Indian Chief in feathered headdress to a crew of doting boys, except that here, doting was actually addiction. The production's first scenic cut to Falstaff ('Now, Hal, what time of day is it, lad?' [*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.1]) showed McGuire's Falstaff snorting a line of coke — and pushing Charlie onto the un-resisting Prince.

Delinquency, riot, stain, waste: these weren't just metaphors; they were descriptors of bodies in jeopardy. The claim Hassell's Hal made so confidently, 'I know you all, and will awhile uphold / The unyoked humour of your idleness' (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.185-6), trapped Dunne's Hal in a much more dangerous territory. For Dunne's Hal,

delinquency was a drug. Would he kick the habit? *Could* he kick the habit? Falstaff's extended howl on 'I know thee not, old man' [2 *Henry IV*, 5.5.46] in this production as he has dragged off was the incredulous rage of the pusher who never expected to get the elbow.

Most impressively, Phyllida Lloyd's production, making this a play that makes a play that makes a play, multiplying the original meta-theatricality Shakespeare stages in the *Henry IV*s, defamiliarised meta-theatricality. Taking the *Henry IV*s out of period costume, showing us all the materials of performance to be fakes and stand-ins (like the crown that can be seen sitting on the chair next to Walter's King Henry in image 5 looking like it's made out of scrounged cornflake packages with aluminium milk bottle tops stuck on for jewels), Lloyd's production gave us access to one of Shakespeare's big ideas in *Henry IV*, an idea that's absolutely about our own present: that is, the constructedness of authority, the staginess of its symbols of power, the way the person disappears behind layers and layers of manipulated personae. Power always wears a mask — as we saw in Lloyd's production at the battle of Shrewsbury.<sup>7</sup>



*Which* England, then, is put on view in *Henry IV*? Doran gave us comfortable types, huggable buffoons. (We've learned to look at buffoonery in high places differently in the intervening years, not least in England and the US in the 2016 Brexit and presidential election campaigns). Doran's was the 'little England' rendered iconically in John of Gaunt's dying breath, the 'sceptered isle', the 'happy breed of men' living in a 'little world' or 'fortress' protected from 'infection' from 'less happier lands' by the English Channel which serves it as a 'wall' or 'moat' to keep out Johnny foreigner (*Richard II*, 2.1.40-9). By contrast, Lloyd's inmate actors (only slightly disguised with the trappings of 'then') performed scenarios of political disaffection 'now', using Shakespeare's words to give voice to the politically ignored, the excluded, the disenfranchised. They were trash Britain biting back, sticking two fingers up to the self-absorbed political class who populate the Westminster 'bubble'. From different angles, both of these productions predicted Brexit.

Seeing King Henry's masks in Lloyd's production, I experienced a rush of *déjà vu*. They triggered a memory. And that's where this article turns (finally) to the costume archive. I've been talking as though productions of the *Henry IVs* staged in period dress give an untroubled view of the past, insulating us from the ways these plays contest contemporary politics and so stripping from them the power to promote our own contestatory politics. That may be true — and if it's true, we'd most likely see such complacency registered at the moment in Shakespeare's play of regime change, when Harry's person, translated into the personage of the king, loses self-hood, loses personal history as he's subsumed into the history of England; when, dressed in the coronation robes that make Harry, after his father, 'Henry', he takes on Justice as his new surrogate father, discarding Riot and Vanity: 'I know thee not, old man'. In Doran's production, this moment was uncontroversial. Harry-becoming-Henry

changed leather breeches for gorgeously woven robes, a tousled mop for hair bound in by a plain gold coronet. The rejection of Falstaff was a personal decision, made face to face. It was consistent with what had gone before; it preserved design continuity, provoked no trouble for interpretation. That same moment in period dress *Henry IV*, Terry Hands's in 1975, staged the rejection to make it mean very differently, a staging that radically disturbed the visual surface of the production.

[Image 7]



As the king's brothers knelt (stage right) and Falstaff and his cronies huddled expectantly (stage left), the newly crowned king entered down stage. He was a Thing of Gold. The stage — solid black for the preceding ten acts of the two parts — had been transformed, shrouded in an eye-blinding white cloth. A few rushes strewn downstage and the naked twisted branches of a tree (behind) reminded us of a natural

world, but only fleetingly. Harry was gone. Masked behind gold that replaced his visage, he no longer faced Falstaff as a person.<sup>7</sup>

In 1975, this costume (designed by Terry Hands's closest design collaborator, Farrah) ruptured design continuity by breathtakingly introducing into the 'period' production radical inconsistency, stylistic incongruity, an image that forced interrogation. Never on stage for longer than three minutes, this costume was an assault on the spectatory retina that left viewers both dazzled and battered. It didn't just say something about power in the play. It suddenly fast-forwarded its way of thinking into the present, to project an image of the facelessness, the remoteness, the machine-like inhumanness of power as the audience experienced it in *their* time. In the final minutes of six hours of playing time, the golden costume made Hands's *Henrys* about the production's audience. In that year, a Labour-led government gave the nation a vote in a referendum asking whether the UK should remain in the European Economic Community. Opposed by the Labour Party itself 2 to 1 and by extreme right wingers who marched through north London protesting integration with Europe and complaining of job losses to economic migrants, the referendum was won by the 'remain' campaign with 67% of the vote. In that year, Maggie Thatcher became leader of the Tory party; the British economy went into double dip recession; the Vietnam war ended, ending, too, eight years of anti-government protests and radical insurrection in the US, particularly on university campuses where students had had enough of the 'old men' they saw as appalling 'misleader[s] of youth', 'grey iniquit[ies]'.

Now preserved in the RSC's Costume Collection, the gold costume is kept in several archive boxes that perforce dismember the gorgeous ceremonial body politic, boots in one box, helmet in another, mask, gloves, cloak in others. Displayed on a

tailor's dummy [\[image 8\]](#) or examined up close in the store, the costume shows itself



an extraordinary work of art, hand-crafted from cloth-of-sequins, each tiny metal disc (of hundreds of thousands) a surface reflecting light in a dazzle of gold. It materialises

costliness. 'Sequin' is itself derived from 'chequin', as early modern English travellers to Venice had corrupted the local currency, the 'ducato di zecca' or 'zecchino'. A costume of 'sequins' is one made literally of money. And it materialises power not just in performance (working the transformation of Harry) but in production. It demonstrates the power of the director. Only someone as self-assured as Terry Hands, already aiming at the RSC's top job (which he'd secure three years later, partly on the triumph of his *Henry IVs*), would stake so much expense on so fleeting an encounter between spectacle and spectator.

It's perhaps because Alan Howard wore this costume for less than three minutes per performance — he appeared for the curtain call in something like a bathrobe — that it contains (to my eyes and nose) none of the actorly residue Barbara Hodgdon longs to encounter in the RSC's costume archive, where she writes of 'the thrill of touching a costume's fabric, feeling its weight and drape in one's hand': 'some of these clothes whisper, some sing or shout'; 'seeing them is like talking softly with someone'.<sup>8</sup> My encounter with the golden costume was of a completely different order. In the archive, it feels as remote as the act of alienation it performed on stage. There's no wear in the gloves, no sweat on the mask, no pressure marks of feet being shoved into boots during a quick change. No sign of Big Al's presence. No conversation, even whispered.

Question: what, then, does the costume archive remember? It doesn't remember. But it anchors the memories we bring to it. (The young curator opened archive boxes for me, unwrapped tissue. I lifted out gloves, the facemask; I talked about Alan Howard, remembering that magnificent actor of Shakespeare's English kings from Henry VI to Richard III, who'd died only a few months earlier. 'I had no idea', she said. Can objects, can texts, talk if we don't do the talking?)



Still, if Harry's mask didn't speak to me, the work it performed upon spectators in 1975 got me thinking about the 'original' work that Shakespeare required 'stuff' to perform upon *his* spectators of the *Henry IV* plays — objects, properties, costumes, the materials of performance that, for instance, were inventoried in lists (creating something like an early modern production archive) by Philip Henslowe for the Admiral's Men in 1599.<sup>9</sup> How might those English spectators have looked at an England Shakespeare staged as one mapped by rebels, a map put in view not just carved up and turned to new sovereignty, but squabbled over, its very rivers 'turned' (*1 Henry IV*, 3.1.132)? What might they have made of an England troped in a crown that we see figured in a shabby cushion worn threadbare by the weight of many men's buttocks (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4.369) and later, in a golden manifestation, a 'polished perturbation', made of torturing metal that 'scald'st' the brows it encircles like 'armour worn in heat of day', a sort of elemental corrosive, not 'Preserving life in med'cine potable' but a chemical cannibal that 'Hath eat' the 'bearer up' (*2 Henry IV*, 4.3.154, 161-2, 292, 294)? Was the England he was gesturing at with these 'properties' the England of 1399 — or 1599?

I've claimed that Shakespeare wrote his *own* — his own time, people, London — into the *Henry IVs*, that he encouraged spectators to see themselves in the plays. But what if, like modern audiences watching 'heritage' Shakespeare today and failing to connect, Shakespeare's own audiences missed that recognition? Is it fanciful to suggest that he might have hit upon Falstaff, that spectacular embodiment or reification of so much conflicted history in these plays, to feature in a subsequent performance that would serve as the troublesome mechanism to align history 'ago' with 'now' and make Elizabethans see themselves? Shakespeare invents an afterlife for Falstaff. Post rejection, Falstaff is sent, we remember, into banishment, owing

poor Justice Shallow £1,000, though it's anyone's guess how Falstaff managed to shed £1,000 between Gloucestershire and Westminster, when they didn't even pause to change horses or shirts. By the time we see Falstaff again, he's escaped from a boyhood serving John of Gaunt (d. 1399) as a page and from rogue service as an adult at Shrewsbury (fought in 1403), and he's miraculously emerged into a chancer's 'third age'. He's on the loose and on the make in Elizabethan Windsor, aiming to settle old debts in new times. In his disgracefully laddish feudal past he ambushed the medieval king's exchequer and fabricated fabulous stories of derring-do and martial combat. In his Elizabethan present, he turns his attention to women, to fabulous flatteries, and to *marital* combat, aiming to prise open the groaning coffers of the well-heeled Windsor gentry by seducing their wives. Collapsing history into his capacious body, Falstaff makes *The Merry Wives of Windsor* all about 'us'. Could any Elizabethan misrecognise 'us'?

In Desmond Barrit's performance at the RSC in 2014 — Barrit having played Falstaff in Peter Hall's *Henry IVs* in 2011 and in Michael Attenborough's at the RSC in 2000 — Falstaff in *Merry Wives* showed us the new face of power. The politics were local. The economy was domestic. The rhetoric was persuasive, and the costume was a kind of mask (like Harry's golden one) that revealed even as it concealed. We saw the contemplative predator, cranking up the charm for one more sting, sitting on the edge of his iron-frame bed in the charmless garret he rented at the Garter, holding up to his girth what he'd dug out of his suitcase. [\[Image 9\]](#) Falstaff considered his



underpants — a pair of seducer-ware boxer shorts that he clearly hadn't worn since the days when he was an 'eagle's talon in the waist' (*I Henry IV*, 2.4.321). Here he needed a mirror to see over his mountainous corpulence to check the fit. How macro the belly; how micro the 'yard'. Yet how dangerous the intent. This personal costume archive disturbed Falstaff's image of who he was — observed by a theatre full of spectators.

Dressing the history 'boys', Phillip Breen, the director of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with Max Jones (his designer), like Phyllida Lloyd of the *Henry IVs* and her designer Deborah Andrews, used costume as Hands and Farrah did, precisely to that end: to disturb England's image of itself. It would be gratifying to report that the RSC's Costume Collection recognises the equivalent political work the dressing did in these productions. It doesn't. The golden costume is archived. Harry's mask is carefully preserved. But Falstaff's underpants? They aren't there. More troublingly for my purposes in this essay, the collection preserves row upon row of 'heritage history' costumes, costumes that say that England is about her gorgeous, vanished past; that

her history is about well-padded, elaborately decorated Westminster elites. Gazing on all those remains of the history 'boys' across the years spilling out at me from untied muslin costume bags (like the guts of so many English subjects, hanged and drawn on traitors' scaffolds), I mused upon the kind of betrayal we perform upon these plays — and upon England — by settling for nostalgia, for looking backward. Post Brexit, England has entered a period of profound, and profoundly conflicted, self-scrutiny that has to look forward. If they're produced as plays about the present as much as about the past, about Eastcheap as much as Westminster, about Gloucestershire, Wales, and Northumberland as much as London, Shakespeare's *Henry IVs* can offer a powerful lens for conducting that scrutiny. Figured in Harry's masks and Falstaffs underpants, they give us England the golden — and the grubby.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Shakespeare, Memory and Performance*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 135-67. Hodgdon's seminal work has reached its culmination in a monograph, *Shakespeare, Performance and the Archive* (London, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Carol Chillington Rutter, 'Shakespeare Performances in England 2014', in *Shakespeare Survey 68* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 368-407; p. 376.

<sup>3</sup> See James C. Bulman's 'Introduction' to the Arden Third Series *King Henry IV Part 2*. Bulman writes of 'events dramatized in the political plot' sitting side by side 'anachronistically' with a view of 'English society in the 1590s'. 'Drawing on oral traditions and popular nostalgia as a counterweight to the authority of chronicle narratives', *Part 2* 'creates a world rich in the quotidian life of Elizabethan subcultures and populated by characters more authentically realized than many of those drawn from chronicles...who collectively paint a picture of contemporary English society more inclusive than one finds in any other Shakespeare history play' (London, 2016),

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p. 3. My quotations of the two plays come from this and from the David Scott Kastan, ed., *King Henry IV Part 1* (London, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Manuscript held in the library of the Marquess of Bath at Longleat; image reproduced in R.A. Foakes, *Illustrations of the English Stage 1580-1642* (Stanford, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.3.71. Quotations from plays other than *Henry IV* are from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells et al. (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> See Bulman's *King Henry IV Part 2* for more on this production where the King and the Prince were 'played by white actors' while 'the rebels' were 'black' or 'Asian': 'Rebellion thus wears a dark face', and just as 'The prisoners and the actors who play them ... represent the different races, ethnic histories and types of poverty and oppression to be found in the UK today' so (Bulman quotes the *Observer* reviewer, Susannah Clapp) 'the state is embodied on stage' (p. 503).

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Terry Hands for talking me through the final scene of this production (May 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Hodgdon, 'Shopping in the Archives', p. 140.

<sup>9</sup> These inventories, now lost, are printed as Appendix 2 in R.A. Foakes and R.T. Rickert, *Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 316- 325.