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‘Noe Place to Talk In’: Two More Brawling Playgoers and the 1626 Attempt to Close the Blackfriars Playhouse

Drawing on two previously unnoticed documents, this note identifies two new named early modern playgoers and connects their playgoing to the 1626 petition to close the Blackfriars theatre.

Among the manuscripts collected between 1858 and 1912 by Surrey antiquarian John Eliot Hodgkin were two documents associated with a violent confrontation in February 1626 between Lord Henry Paulet (ca 1602–72) and Thomas Stourton, esquire (d. 1669). The incident is interesting to historians of the early modern stage because it provides evidence of two previously unrecorded playgoers and helps contextualize another, better-known document associated with the Blackfriars playhouse: the 28 February 1626 petition by the residents of the liberty to close the playhouse there.¹ In their complaint, the residents specifically cited the problem of brawls between gentlemen in attendance at the theatre; as the Hodgkin documents reveal, only twelve days prior to that petition — and thus perhaps helping to catalyze it — two gentlemen in the audience at Blackfriars did indeed get into a bloody fight with one another.

Other than the abstract of the manuscripts provided in an Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC) Report of 1896, the only other mention of these documents appears in Charles Botolph’s history of the Stourton family; Botolph merely repeats the HMC report and does not seem to have seen the actual documents themselves.² Hodgkin’s collection was sold at a series of auctions held by Sotheby’s in April and May 1914. The Paulet-Stourton documents were sold on 22 April as lot 139, which also included documents related to an affray between Sir Thomas Savile and Sir Francis Wortly on the steps of Westminster on 31 May 1625 and other ‘documents illustrative of social life at the period’.³ According to the information recorded in Sotheby’s annotated copy of the catalogue — now

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held by the British Library — the lot was bought for two pounds, eighteen pence by London bookseller Frank Marcham (1887–1944). Unfortunately, while much of the Hodgkin collection ended up in the British Library (Add MSS 38846–57), the two documents on the Paulet-Stourton fight have apparently vanished. When Marcham's remaining stock was liquidated by auction in April 1997, neither document was still in the dealer's inventory.⁴ Until such time that the two documents can be found, however, the description provided in the 1896 HMC report does provide some evidence of interest for historians of early modern theatre.⁵

Henry Paulet was the son of William Paulet, fourth marquis of Winchester, and Lucy Cecil, daughter of the first earl of Exeter. His family had a long tradition of Catholicism, though no positive evidence indicates that Paulet himself was Catholic. He graduated from Peterhouse College, Cambridge, in 1618 and travelled around Europe in 1620. In February 1626 he left the family home in Nether Wallop, Hampshire, to come to London as Andover's member of Parliament. Only a few days before his fight with Stourton, Paulet attended Charles I's coronation, at which he was created a knight of the Bath. Stourton was the second son of Edward, tenth baron Stourton, and Frances Tresham (whose brother had been one of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators). After leaving his family home in Wiltshire, he lived for a time in Bonham, Somerset, but was residing in the family's London home on Duke Street, Covent Garden, at the time of the incident, perhaps coming to the city to participate in or simply observe the coronation on 2 February 1626.⁶ Not long after his fight with Paulet, Stourton married the twice-widowed Elizabeth Cornwallis. Like Paulet, Stourton had links to Catholicism, though his were indeed of a personal nature: in 1645, he and Elizabeth were convicted of recusancy, and in 1649 his properties (in Dorset, Kent, and on Paternoster Row in London) were confiscated.⁷ In June 1658, two gentlemen of Clements Inn charged him with being 'a popish priest or Jesuit, one that did frequently exercise and say Mass in and about the county of Middlesex, to the seducing of the good people of the commonwealth'.⁸

The two documents once owned by Hodgkin contain examinations of both men by justice of the peace Dr Roger Bates on 16 February 1626; the purpose of Bates's examination is not clear as no further legal inquiry seems to have been made into the fight. Stourton's account states that on Wednesday, 8 February 1626 he happened to cross paths with Paulet 'at the Playehouse'; Paulet does not — at least, in the HMC summary — mention the playhouse, but he does note that their encounter came about by 'accidentalie meetings' on the eighth. According to Stourton, Paulet told him that the playhouse was 'noe place to talke in' and arranged to meet Stourton the next morning at Medley's ordinary. There,

in an upper room, Paulet accused Stourton of slander by spreading a rumour that he had a mistress who 'was his whore'. When Stourton denied the charge 'upon his salvation' and demanded to 'knowe the author of the false statement', Paulet boxed his ear and the two drew their swords. Paulet was wounded in the arm before tripping and disarming Stourton and declaring, 'I coulde have thy life, but I will not be so bloudie'. Paulet then 'fainted from the wound he had received' and Stourton 'supported him till the surgeon came to him'. The incident evidently did not proceed further, and, as reported by Bates, two doctors confirmed that neither man was seriously injured.⁹ Virginia C.D. Moseley and Rosemary Sgroi suggest that 'the affair was hushed up' and that it may have led to Paulet's failure to take his seat in the second Caroline parliament which had convened on 6 February, though none of the surviving evidence explicitly indicates this.¹⁰

Sir Nathaniel Bacon reported a slightly different version of events in a 10 February 1626 letter to his wife, Lady Jane Bacon. In his letter, Bacon noted that on 9 February Paulet and Stourton 'went secretly in to a chamber' at 'Medlye's ordenary' and fought. Rather inaccurately — though more dramatically — Bacon reported that Paulet had been 'runn through the body [and was] not likely to liue', while Stourton had been 'hurt in iij places [and] apprehended'.¹¹ Bacon made no mention of the fact that the initial encounter between the two had occurred at a playhouse the day before the fight.

Given Paulet's and Stourton's socioeconomic status and the fact that their encounter occurred in winter, it seems probable that they were at one of London's indoor playhouses.¹² In February 1626, the city's two hall playhouses were the Blackfriars, home of the King's Men, and the Phoenix, home of Queen Henrietta's Men. The King's Men were certainly active in London that February: master of the revels Sir Henry Herbert licensed John Fletcher's *The Noble Gentleman* for Blackfriars on 3 February and the King's Men staged Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News* sometime in the first two weeks of February.¹³ Later in the month, they performed at court on the sixteenth (Lodowick Carlell's *2 Arviragus and Philicia*) and eighteenth (Jonson's *Epicoene*).¹⁴ It is less clear if Queen Henrietta Maria's Men were performing at the Phoenix around the same time: Middlesex authorities required them to stop using the former Cockpit briefly in December 1625 due to concerns about spreading plague near Whitehall. They were certainly active again by May 1626, when they staged James Shirley's *The Wedding* at the Phoenix, but, unlike the King's Men, no evidence exists to indicate that they performed there in the week immediately after the coronation.¹⁵ Herbert did issue a license for Shirley's *Maid's Revenge* on 9 February 1626, the day after Paulet and Stourton's playhouse encounter. (The license does not name the troupe, but

the title page of the 1639 quarto identifies it as having been acted by the Queen's Men at the playhouse in Drury Lane.) We cannot, however, determine if the play was licensed at that point because the company was indeed back at the Phoenix following the December closure or because Christopher Beeston, the troupe's manager, simply anticipated that the troupe would be allowed to play there again soon thereafter.¹⁶ No evidence has been found that either Paulet or Stourton had personal connections with either company or venue.¹⁷ On the balance of available evidence, it seems more likely that the two crossed paths at Blackfriars than the Phoenix, since the former was clearly in use in February while the latter was possibly still closed. The lost documents themselves may confirm this: the 1914 Sotheby's catalogue states that the fight 'began at Blackfriars Playhouse'.¹⁸

Paulet's statement that their business should not be pursued at the playhouse raises some questions of interpretation. On one hand, he might have been implying that a certain code of decorum governed conduct in the space of the playhouse. Equally likely, however, he may have meant that bringing up the scandalous subject of his supposed mistress in a public place would have been even more ruinous to his reputation. Potentially he intended to fight with Stourton from the start and felt that such a spectacle in a playhouse would have been legally risky — he was careful to ensure that their meeting the next morning occurred in secret — but no clear evidence exists that suggests he did intend to fight at all: Botolph, in the history of the Stourton family, refers to the incident as a 'duel', but the HMC account of their testimony clearly indicates that the fight (which John Jeafferson describes as an 'affray' and Moseley and Sgroi as a 'brawl') was rather more spontaneous and less structured than a duel.¹⁹ No evidence has been found of any other confrontations, either verbal or physical.

Judging from Bacon's (admittedly mistaken) letter, the incident was publicly known within a day after it happened. Possibly, then, the affair had some bearing on the decision by several inhabitants of Blackfriars to petition Parliament twenty days later, on 28 February, for the closure of the playhouse in their neighbourhood. Among the reasons cited by the petitioners were the 'Quarrels and Bloodsheds' instigated by gentlemen attending plays.²⁰ If the 'Playhouse' at which the publicly-known quarrel between Paulet and Stourton began was indeed Blackfriars, perhaps the residents of the liberty considered it another, final, demonstration of why the theatre there should be closed. Parliament forwarded the residents' petition to the lord chamberlain, who, on 11 March, pledged to bring the matter to the attention of the king, though nothing ultimately came of the attempt.²¹ The examinations of Paulet and Stourton provide some context for the 1626 petition, but they also complicate somewhat the picture that the petitioners

provided about the nature of playgoers' conduct at Blackfriars: despite what the residents claimed, at least one early modern playgoer believed that the playhouse was indeed 'noe place' for such behaviour. Of course, as the evidence of so many other brawls among members of playhouse audiences' shows, not all playgoers shared Lord Henry's compunctions.²²

Notes

- 1 Parliamentary Archives, HC/CL/JO/1/16; see *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 1, 1547–1629* (London, 1802), 826.
- 2 John Cordy Jeaffreson, ed., *The Manuscripts of J. Eliot Hodgkin, Esq., F.S.A., of Richmond, Surrey* (London, 1897), 283–4. Charles Botolph, *The History of the Noble House of Stourton, of Stourton, in the County of Wilts*, 2 vols (London, 1899), 1.454. The two documents are not included in Hodgkin's own published account of his collection, *Rariora: Being Notes of Some of the Printed Books, Manuscripts, Historical Documents, Medals, Engravings Pottery, Etc., Etc., Collected (1858–1900) by John Eliot Hodgkin, F.S.A.*, 3 vols (London, 1902).
- 3 *The J.E. Hodgkin Collections: Catalogue of the Autograph Letters and Historical Documents ... which Will be Sold by Auction by Messrs Sotheby, Wilkinson, & Hodge* (London, 1914), 25. On the Savile-Wortly documents, see Jeaffreson, *The Manuscripts of J. Eliot Hodgkin*, 285–8.
- 4 The documents do not appear in the *Catalogue of Manuscripts and Printed Books Largely from the Stock of Frank Marcham, c. 1880–1944* (London, 1997), thus indicating that Marcham had sold them at some point before 1997, possibly not long after he had obtained them in 1914. I am grateful to Scott Ellwood of the Grolier Club Library for assistance checking the Marcham auction catalogue.
- 5 The two documents do not appear to be in the Hodgkin papers held by the British Library or in any of the library's other manuscript holdings. They are also apparently not in the National Archives, the London Metropolitan Archives, the Surrey History Centre, the Folger Shakespeare Library, or the Huntington Library (where several of Marcham's collections of manuscripts now reside). I am indebted to Julian Pooley of the Surrey History Centre and Jeff Kattenhorn of the British Library for their assistance in trying to track down the missing documents.
- 6 Botolph, *The History of the Noble House of Stourton*, 1.454.
- 7 Mary Anne Everett Green, ed., *Calendar of the Proceedings of the Committee for Compounding, &c., 1643–1660, Preserved in the State Paper Department of Her Majesty's Public Record Office. Cases, 1647–June 1650* (London, 1891), 2058–9.

- 8 Quoted in Botolph, *The History of the Noble House of Stourton*, 1.455.
- 9 Jeaffreson, *The Manuscripts of J. Eliot Hodgkin*, 283–4.
- 10 Virginia C.D. Moseley and Rosemary Sgroi, ‘Paulet (Powlett), Lord Henry (c. 1602–1672), of Nether Wallop, Hants.’, in *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1604–1629*, ed. Andrew Thrusch and John P. Ferris (Cambridge, 2010), <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604–1629/member/paulet-lord-henry-1602-1672>.
- 11 Richard Griffin, ed., *The Private Correspondence of Jane Lady Cornwallis: 1613–1644* (London, 1842), 141–2.
- 12 Gentlemen and aristocrats also, of course, attended plays at the outdoor amphitheatres, though given the time of year it seems more likely that Stourton and Paulet were at one of the indoor venues. On the playgoing habits of individuals from the upper socioeconomic ranks, see Ann Jennalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare’s London, 1576–1642* (Princeton, 1981), esp. 97–167; on their tendency to attend the indoor playhouses, see, for example, Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 2004), 69–94.
- 13 G.E. Bentley, ed., *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols (Oxford, 1941–68), 3.387 and 4.629–30.
- 14 Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford, 1996), 390, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198129776.001.0001>.
- 15 Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*, 420.
- 16 Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 1.222–3. On the problem with necessarily assigning *Maid’s Revenge* to Queen Henrietta Maria’s Men in February 1626, however, see Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 1.218n3.
- 17 Stourton’s grandfather, John, ninth baron Stourton (1553–88), had been patron of a troupe of players who performed at Exeter in 1584–5 (John Wasson, ed., *Records of Early English Drama (REED): Devon* [Toronto, 1986], 517). Paulet’s father, William, fourth marquis of Winchester, was acting as lord steward in the summer of 1587 and thus may have been the patron of the Lord Steward’s Players for the troupe’s only documented appearance, also at Exeter, but in 1587–8 (John Tucker Murray, ed., *English Dramatic Companies, 1558–1642*, 2 vols [London, 1910], 2.95–6).
- 18 *The J.E. Hodgkin Collections: Catalogue*, 25.
- 19 Botolph, *The History of the Noble House of Stourton*, 454; Jeaffreson, *The Manuscripts of J. Eliot Hodgkin*, 283; Moseley and Sgroi, ‘Paulet (Powlett), Lord Henry (c. 1602–1672), of Nether Wallop, Hants’.
- 20 Parliamentary Archives, HC/CL/JO/1/16; see *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 1, 1547–1629*, 826.
- 21 *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 1, 1547–1629*, 834.

- 22 On the misbehaviour of aristocratic and gentle audience members, including at the Blackfriars, see, for example, Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 33–6 and Richard Rowland, '(Gentle)men Behaving Badly: Aggression, Anxiety, and Repertory in the Playhouses of Early Modern London', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 25 (2012), 17–41.

