

Oliver W. Gerland III

The Introduction of Admission Fees in London: Fencing Prizes, Bearbaiting Arenas, and Speculative Origins

Medieval performers gathered coins during a show from people assembled to see them. By 1570, performers throughout London collected admission fees before a show as a condition of entry. When, how, and by whom were admission fees introduced? Based on the research of David Kathman, I argue that travelling players brought the admission fee system to London in the late 1530s, after which animal baiting entrepreneurs and the fencing brotherhood adopted and refined it. In conclusion, this essay offers a speculative origin for the admission fee system in the practice of shrine keeping.

The most important single fact about the public theatres of Elizabethan and Jacobean London of which we can be certain is their professional character. By ‘professional’ I mean their use by companies of actors who reckoned to earn a living from presenting plays regularly to a public that paid cash to gain admission to see them.

— Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300–1660*¹

For Wickham, admission fees mark a line between professional and non-professional theatres in London. On one side are open marketplaces where troupes of itinerant players collected coins from a crowd during or after their performance. On the other side are permanent structures like the Theatre where gatherers collected coins from people at the door as a condition of entry. Wickham’s characterization of ‘professional’ theatre has proved influential. William Ingram relies upon it when defining the theme of *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London*.² Ingram and Wickham agree that the introduction of admission fees led to fundamental changes in London theatre. When and how did it happen?

Oliver W. Gerland III (gerland@colorado.edu) is an associate professor of theatre and a faculty affiliate of the humanities program at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Performers in medieval England had two main methods for making money. First, some performers were attached by an oath of fealty or contract to an aristocrat, town, or guild, receiving payments in exchange for service provided, (eg, city waits and household or court minstrels).³ Second, performers could collect cash or other rewards from people who assembled to watch them play. E.K. Chambers explains,

During the reigns of the Angevin and Plantagenet kings [1154–1485 CE] the minstrels were ubiquitous. They wandered at their will from castle to castle, and in time from borough to borough, sure of their ready welcome alike in the village tavern, the guild-hall, and the baron's keep. They sang and jested in the market-place, stopping cunningly at a critical moment in the performance, to gather their harvest of small coins from the bystanders ... The greater festivities saw them literally in their hundreds, and rich was their reward in money and in jewels, in costly garments, and in broad acres.⁴

The script of *Mankind*, an anonymous morality play from East Anglia composed ca 1465–70, illustrates this gathering practice. In William Tydeman's reconstruction, it was performed by a troupe of travelling players in an innyard.⁵ Delaying the appearance of the crowd-pleasing devil Titivillus, the actors stepped out of character and collected money from the audience under the direction of the actor playing New Guise:

NEW GUISE We shall gather mony unto
 Ellys ther shall no man hym [Titivillus] se.
 ...
 At the goodeman of this house fyrst we wyll assay.
 Gode blysse yow, master! Ye say as [us] ill, yet ye wyll not sey nay.
 Lett us go by and by and do them pay.
 Ye pay all alyke! (lines 457–8, 467–70)⁶

Despite the demanding tone of the *Mankind* actors, they request gifts of money, 'passing the hat' among spectators like a street busker today. Gathering money from a crowd is an art, and the *Mankind* players had a plan: start with the innkeeper ('the goodeman of this house'). Given the extra custom that the players brought, the innkeeper could be expected to make a generous gift that the players made a model for everyone else ('Ye pay all alyke!'). These two methods of making money from a performance — call them 'by gathering' and 'for service' — were

not mutually exclusive. Minstrels attached to great aristocrats frequently 'hit the road' to collect extra cash through private or public performances.⁷

By 1570, performers in London had a new way to make money: by collecting admission fees. In *A Perambulation of Kent* (published 1576 but composed 1570), William Lambarde reports that none 'suche as goe to Parisgardein [a bearbaiting arena], the Bell Sauage [an inn], or some other suche commonplace, to beholde Bearebayting, Enterludes, or fence playe, can account of any pleasant spectacle, unlesse they first paye one penny at the gate, another at the entrie of the Scaffolde, and the thirde for a quiet standing'.⁸ Note the range of venues and entertainments identified by Lambarde: from interludes to bearbaiting, in outdoor arenas and inns. This 'admission fee' system is different than the medieval 'for service' or 'by gathering' methods. Unlike the former, performers were not paid for carrying out a duty; unlike the latter, they collected money in advance of, rather than during or after, a show.

The shift to admission fees must have occurred between 1470 when *Mankind* was played and 1570 when Lambarde wrote *A Perambulation of Kent*. We can assume why it occurred: performers made more money this way than by 'passing the hat'. Details of the shift to admission fees are scant, however. Scholarship has focused on the periods before or after they were established rather than the moment of their introduction. This essay responds to that gap in research by asking when, how, and by whom were admission fees introduced in London? It unfolds in three parts. The first part defines the admission fee system. People today are so accustomed to paying to enter a place where a show has been promised that we overlook it as an economic practice. An anonymous story published in 1567 clarifies the basic elements of the admission fee system while also providing a sense of the theatre scene in mid-sixteenth-century London. The second part of this essay reviews evidence about admission fees prior to 1567 for public shows of fencing, animal baiting, and theatre, the three forms of entertainment identified by Lambarde. Building on the work of David Kathman, I conclude that admission fees were introduced in London by travelling players beginning in the late 1530s. In the essay's third part, I pose a question intriguing to consider but perhaps impossible to answer: how did the players gain knowledge of the admission fee system? My admittedly speculative answer is intended to raise for further discussion the introduction of admission fees in London.

Defining the Admission Fee System

An anecdote published in 1567 presents a clear view of the admission fee system. It appears in an anonymous work titled *Mery Tales, Wittie Questions, and Quicke Answers* under the heading ‘How a mery man deuised to cal people to a playe’:

A mery man called Qualitees, on a tyme sette up billes upon postes aboute London, that who so euer woulde come to Northumberlande place, should here such an antycke plaie, that both for the matter and handelyng, the lyke was neuer heard before. For all they that shoulde playe therin were gentlmen. Those bylles moved the people (whan the daye came) to come thyther thicke and threfolde. Now he had hyred two men to stande at the gate with a boxe (as the facion is) who toke of every persone that came in, a peny, or an halfe peny at the least. So whan he thought the market was at the best, he came to the gate, and toke from the man the boxe with money, and geuyng theym their duitie, bade them go into the hall, and see the rome kepthe: for hee shoulde gooe and fetch in the plaiers[.] They went in, and he went out, and lockt the gate faste, and toke the key with hym: and gat hym on hys geldyng, whiche stode ready saddilled without Aldershegate at an In, and towarde Barnet he roade a pace. The people taryed from twoo a clocke tyll three, from three to foure, styll askyng and cryng: Whan shall the plaie begyn? How long shall we tarye? Whan the clock stroke foure, all the people murmured and sayed: wherefore tarye we any longer? Here shall be no playe. Where is the knaue, that hath beguyled us hyther? It were almes it thruste a dagger throughe hys chekes, sayeth one. It were well done to cutte off hys eares sayeth an other. Have hym to Newgat sayeth one, nay have hym to Tyburne sayed an other. Shall we loose our money thus saieth he. Shall we bee thus beguiled sayeth this man? Shulde this be suffered saieth that man? And so muttryng and chydyng, they came to the gate to goe oute: but they coude not. For it was faste lockt, and Qualitees had the key away with him. Now begynne they a freshe to fret and fume: nowe they swere and stare; now they stampe and threaten. For the locking in greued them more: than all the losse and mockery before: but all auayle not. For there muste they abide till wayes may be founde to open the gate that they maye goe out. The maidens that woulde have dressed theyr maisters suppers, they wepe and crye, boyes and prentices sorow and lament, they wote not what to say whan thei come home. For al this foule araye, for all this great frai, Qualites is mery ridyng on his waie.⁹

The story of Qualitees portrays a mature admission fee system composed of architecture, advertisement, and collection method. Before the story begins, Qualitees

has selected an enclosed site large enough for a show and spectators, access to which can be controlled. The site is the hall in Northumberland Place, entry to which is through a gate, the key to which he possesses. Qualitees then posts playbills that promise in that place a show ‘the lyke was never heard before’. His promotional efforts are effective and draw spectators ‘thycke and threfolde’. He hires two men who ‘stande at the gate with a boxe (as the facion is)’ collecting from ‘every persone that came in, a peny, or an halfe peny at the least’. In the normal course of events, the people then would be treated to the promised show but Qualitees takes the box with coins from the men, sends them into the hall, locks the gate, and rides away.

The tale of Qualitees outlines the basic form of the admission fee system as it remains today. Its elements can be arranged in the form of a definitional sentence: the admission fee system requires an enclosed place large enough for a show and spectators, access to which can be controlled, in which a show is promised, and entry to which is permitted in exchange for payment collected in advance.

Dating the Admission Fee System

The tale of Qualitees is known as a ‘jest’, a popular literary form that was ‘very pleasant to be readde’ as the book’s subtitle states. The Tudor jest developed out of genres that include the ‘fable, apophthegm, Ciceronian witticism, fabliau, and epigram’ and even ‘the medieval exemplum tradition’.¹⁰ As this example suggests, jests also were inspired by historical events. A 1543 record from the court of London alderman confirms that plays were presented at Northumberland Place. As part of their crackdown on unauthorized performances, the aldermen called one William Blytheman before them on 2 April for a ‘recognizance’, meaning ‘a bond of obligation, made in court, by which a person promises to perform some act or observe some condition’.¹¹ Blytheman acknowledged that he had to pay £40 sterling unless ‘Att eny tyme hereafter [he] do not *permytt* or suffer eny *enterlude* or *comen pleyes* or eny other *vnlaufull game* or *games* to be *vsyd* or *played wⁱthⁱn* hys dwelling house called the Erle of Northumberlondes place ... *wⁱthⁱout* the *especiall lycence* of the lorde mayer of the [C] seyde Cytye’.¹² Moreover, the practice of collecting admission fees in a box is well-attested. It might have been merely fashionable (‘as the facion is’) to do so in 1567 when the story of Qualitees was published but it was standard practice in the purpose-built playhouses a few years later. W.J. Lawrence presents the typical fee-collection method: ‘In the vestibule stood an attendant with a box into whose narrow orifice the playgoer, no matter of what degree, slipped his penny or twopence, giving preliminary admission to

the pit ... all payments, whether at the door or inside the house, were made not to the gatherer himself but to his box'.¹³

The tale of Qualitees suggests that the admission fee system was well-established in London by the 1560s. The story opens with the phrase 'on a tyme' which, like 'once upon a time', places events in a distant past.¹⁴ Moreover, for the hoax to work, people already must have been used to paying to enter a performance site. Qualitees cannot have been the first person to collect 'a peny, or an halfe peny at the least' at the door of a theatre. He might have been the first swindler to do so but he certainly was not the last: 'Versions of Qualitees' trick are a refrain throughout this essay', writes Tiffany Stern in a study of advertising and playbills in early modern London.¹⁵ Readers of the jest are invited to criticize (and laugh at) the spectators' naivety and complaisance. The crowd spends two full hours — the length of an entire play according to the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* — waiting and whining for the show to begin. When they finally stir, they target Qualitees with long distance threats: 'It were almes it thruste a dagger through the hys chekes, sayeth one. It were well done to cutte off hys eares sayeth an other'. Theatre audiences in Tudor England are widely thought to have been active, even unruly, though this audience is not represented in such a way. Apart from going to the gate to discover that they now are immured, the people take no physical or collective action in response to their beguilement. Gathered at the gate, all they do is stamp, threaten, and moan some more, there abiding 'till wayes may be founde to open the gate that they maye goe out'.

Compare this behaviour with that of the audience duped by Richard Vennar at the Swan playhouse in 1602. Vennar had posted playbills promising a patriotic pageant named *England's Joy*

to be acted only by certain gentlemen and gentlewomen of account, the price at coming in was two shillings or eighteen pence at least and when he had gotten most part of the money into his hands, he wold have shewed them a fayre payre of heeles, but he was not so nimble to get vp on horsebacke, but that he was faine to forsake that course, and betake himself to the water, where he was pursued and taken and brought before the L: Cheife Justice [Sir John Popham], who wold make nothing of yt but a iest and merriment, and bounde him ouer in fiue pound to appeare at the sessions: in the meane time the common people when they saw themselues deluded, reuenged themselues vpon the hangings curtaines chaires stooles walles and whatsoever came in theyre way very outrageously and made a great spoyle: there was great store of goode companie and many noblemen.¹⁶

The parallels between Qualitees and Vennar are close. Like Qualitees, Vennar posted bills promising a play performed by an aristocratic cast; he collected fees from spectators at the door but provided no show; and he left — or tried to leave — on horseback with the money. Remarkable is the response of Chief Justice Sir John Popham who, perhaps alluding to these parallels, downplayed the severity of the fraud by calling it nothing ‘but a iest and merriment’. (Sir John’s remark could be a witty reminder that the story of Qualitees is a jest with ‘a mery man’ in the title.) The owners of the Swan likely felt very different about Vennar’s deeds, surveying the destruction wrought by a mob that had ‘reuenged themselues vpon the hangings curtaines chaires stooles walles and whatsoever came in theyre way very outrageously and made a great spoyle’. Apparently, between the times of Qualitees and Vennar, London spectators learned how to detect admission fee fraud and how to punish theatre owners even unwittingly complicit in it.

Narrating events ‘on a tyme’, the tale of Qualitees is of limited use in addressing when, how, and by whom admission fees were introduced in London. Less fabular, more reliable evidence is needed. Lambarde’s *A Perambulation of Kent* states that the admission fee system was in use at various London entertainment venues by 1570, when people had to pay at least a penny ‘to beholde Bearebayting, Enterludes, or fence play’. Taking this statement as guide, I present evidence concerning admission fees for each of these entertainments, beginning first with fence play.

Fencing matches were popular in Tudor London. Members of the Brotherhood of Masters of the Noble Science of Defense faced off with blunted weapons to proceed through the ranks from scholar to provost to master. Known as prizes, the fraternal matches were open to the public and held in a variety of places in and around the city of London. In a study covering the period 1540–90, O.L. Brownstein traces a shift in the locations used for fencing prizes. Between 1540 and 1558, they were most frequently held in a large open marketplace called Leadenhall. After 1558, Leadenhall was no longer the preferred venue, having been replaced by inns like the Bull and the Bell Savage. When the Theatre and the Curtain began operations, preferences changed again so that, by 1590, public shows of fencing were most frequently held in a playhouse. Brownstein devotes most of his attention to inns and playhouses but his discussion of Leadenhall is more pertinent for this essay’s purposes. It was ‘a publicly owned quadrangular structure of low and narrow halls built around a vast paved court’ in which was held ‘a daily trade-fair’ and, on occasion, the city’s ‘largest assemblies’. ‘The fencers could be sure of finding a crowd at the Leadenhall with money to throw them (a practice that continued for prizes into the playhouses)’, he observes. However,

a minimum fee could not be insured from every spectator so long as there was no way to enclose and control access into that part of the courtyard in which the spectators stood. How closely the abandonment of the Leadenhall followed on the first development of inn-playhouses cannot yet be ascertained, but it is clear that this abandonment was virtually complete after 1558 and that, though the Leadenhall continued to be available to the fencers, the inn-playhouses were preferred.¹⁷

The courtyard at Leadenhall was a great place to gather a crowd but, because access to it could not be controlled, it was architecturally unsuited for the collection of admission fees. Fencers performing there could expect tossed coins and, perhaps, they or members of their brotherhood also gathered coins from spectators between bouts. From 1540 until 1558, Leadenhall was by far the most popular venue for public fencing shows hosting twelve of twenty-one prizes.¹⁸ After 1558, it was used only once for that purpose. Brownstein does not explain why fencers abandoned Leadenhall but consideration of the venues to which they moved is informative: after 1558, fencing prizes were most frequently held in venues like inns and playhouses where admission fees were collected. Based on Brownstein's evidence, it appears that the brotherhood of fencers began turning to the admission fee system near the dawn of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

Evidence for admission fees in animal baiting arenas is both early and substantial. A two-tiered admission fee system was in place at a Bankside bearbaiting arena by 1562. A Venetian merchant named Alessandro Magno visited in that year and recalled,

Across the river [from the city of London] in a certain place they have perhaps two hundred dogs, each separated from the other in certain small boxes made of boards. The dogs are the kind we use in Venice for bull-baiting. They also have, in another pen [*casa*] many bears and in another some wild bulls. In the midst of these is an open circular space surrounded by stands with their awnings for the sun and the rain, where every Sunday in the training of these dogs people find great entertainment. To enter below one pays a penny (which is S.2) and two to go up into the stands. The amusement lasts from the vesper hour until evening, and they put on very fine baitings.¹⁹

As Magno makes clear, the structure's interior was composed of three architecturally distinct areas: 'an open circular space surrounded by stands' where the animal baiting took place; a 'below' area entrance to which was permitted by payment of one penny; and a raised platform covered 'with awnings for the sun and the rain'

accessible to those who paid an additional penny. Two-penny folks were allowed 'to go up into the stands' where they could watch the show from a higher and more comfortable vantage point than those who paid only one penny.

Most scholars believe that Magno visited William Payne's bear baiting arena, known as the Bear Garden.²⁰ In March 1540, Bishop of Winchester Steven Gardiner granted Payne a ninety-nine-year lease on two Bankside estates on which was constructed an animal baiting arena featuring 'certain low scaffolds or standings' that were 'commonly called Mr. Payne's standings'.²¹ These 'standings' were likely the 'stands with their awnings for the sun and the rain' that Magno mentions seeing in 1562. No evidence clarifies when Payne constructed his two-tiered animal baiting arena but evidence shows that either his Bear Garden or the so-called Paris Garden was charging a two-tiered admission fee more than a decade earlier.

In 1550, a puritan poet named Robert Crowley published an epigram that condemned bearbaiting as a foul and foolish financial waste:

What follie is thys
 to kepe wyth daunger,
 A greate mastyfe dogge
 and a foule ouglye beare.
 And to this onely ende
 to se them two fyght,
 Wyth terrible tearynge
 a full ouglye syght.
 And yet me thynke those men
 be mooste foles of all
 Whose store of money
 is but verye smale.
 And yet euerye sondaye
 they wyll surelye spende,
 One penyne or two
 the bearwardes livyng to mende.
 At Paryse Garden each sondaye
 a man shall not fayle,
 To find two or thre hundredes
 for the bearwardes vaile [profit].
 One hal[f]penye a piece
 they use for to giue

When some haue no more
in their purse I beleue.²²

Crowley says a lot about the admission fee system in Bankside animal baiting arenas. First, he establishes its use by 1550: 'And yet euerye sondaye / They wyll surelye spende'. People must surely spend because, under the admission fee system, they are not permitted to enter the place of performance without payment. Second, he states that people have to pay 'One peny or two'. It seems likely that this graduated two-penny scheme is the same as that witnessed by Magno: people spent one penny to enter below and a second to step up into the stands. Crowley's poem indicates an early example of price discrimination with attendees in different areas depending on how much they paid. Perhaps the hall mentioned in the tale of *Qualitees* also had separate areas for spectators which is why they were charged 'a peny, or an halfe peny at the least'.

Crowley's poem also tells us that the two-tiered admission fee scheme was preceded by another, less expensive one. It used to be the case, he says, that people paid only a halfpenny to attend a baiting ('One hal[f]penye a piece / they use for to giue'). This line offers an important clue for dating admission fees. The two-penny admission fee scheme in place at Paris Garden by 1550 replaced an earlier one, in operation by the late 1540s at the latest, under which spectators paid a halfpenny each. Everyone had to pay the same amount because, presumably, they all stood on the ground: there was no architectural distinction to justify a price difference.

Problems with this flat fee system are obvious. Apart from the rich folks who did not like standing too close to poor ones, latecomers could not see much of the action. Someone had the bright idea to build a raised platform surrounding the ring. This architectural innovation solved sightline problems, increased audience capacity, and provided a reason to charge people extra. Latecomers and rich folks could simply spend another penny and step up onto the raised platform where they could both see better and stand apart from the crowd. A downside was the added expense. People used to have to pay only a halfpenny. In 1550, they had to pay double or even quadruple that amount ('One peny or two'), though the added expense brought the possibility of greater comfort. Nor did the experiments in price discrimination stop there. The two-tiered fee system alluded to by Crowley and described by Magno had become tripartite by 1570 when Lambarde composed *A Perambulation of Kent*. Perhaps, after Magno's visit in 1562, another architectural wrinkle was added that justified separating the two-penny spectators from the three-penny ones who could take a place 'for a quiet standing'.

Evidence presented by David Kathman shows that the admission fee system was active in London theatre by the late 1530s. At that time, the city experienced an explosion in 'commercial playing' which Kathman defines as 'professional playing that is more independent and market-oriented than what had come before'.²³ His 'commercial playing' is a heightened version of 'professional' acting as defined by Wickham and Ingram, meaning that it includes the collection of admission fees. Troupes of actors regularly visited London in the early sixteenth century, reckoning to earn a living by providing services to its livery companies. These companies, akin to guilds or trade associations, hired actors to perform plays on special feast days in large indoor rooms or halls that the company owned or had rented for the occasion.²⁴ Individual company members sometimes gave actors payment in the form of coins collected during or after a show but, because they owned or had rented the hall, they did not pay to enter it.²⁵ That said, company halls were architecturally well-suited for the admission fee system, being enclosed sites large enough for a show and spectators, access to which could be controlled. Kathman states, 'What changed in the late 1530s was that, instead of making payments *to* players, companies started receiving payments *from* players for the use of their company halls. Instead of waiting for company feasts which might (or might not) offer a paying job, some players were hiring out company halls in order to perform plays on their own terms for a paying audience'.²⁶

By 'paying audience', Kathman means one that paid admission fees. Analyzing an anti-theatrical proclamation issued by the city of London in 1545, he states, 'The players had been presenting interludes and common plays ... not in the open streets ... but in taverns, halls, and enclosed yards where they could charge admission'.²⁷ In Founders' Hall, Kathman estimates, with 'an admission charge of a halfpenny, an audience of at least 30 to 40 would have been needed to break even'.²⁸ An enclosed performance site did not entail that the players charged an admission fee but the fact that playbills made their first appearance at the same time indicates that this was the case. An admission fee permits one to enter a place where a show is promised. In the early 1540s, that promise took the form of printed bills advertising plays posted throughout London. Kathman cites the earliest record of such an item in England:²⁹ a 1543 order instructing London aldermen to 'cause dylygent *serche* & *watche* to be made in theyr *seuerall* wardes for *suche* *persones* as *commonly* *vse* to sett up *bylles* for *playes* or *interludes* wythin this *Cytye* & to cause the same *bylles* to be pulled downe'.³⁰ Coinciding with these developments was an upsurge in the number of plays presented. A 1545 Proclamation for the Abolishment of Interludes laments 'the manyfold and sundrye Enterludes and *comen* Playes that nowe of late dayes haue been by *dyuers*

and sondrye persons more commonly & besylye set fourth and played then heretofore hath bene accustomed'.³¹

Kathman highlights a transformational moment in the history of English theatre when a vibrant 'commercial playing scene emerged suddenly in the 1540s, a little more than 30 years before the Theatre'.³² In 1576, John Brayne and James Burbage constructed the Theatre in which some of Shakespeare's earliest plays premiered but, Kathman concludes, 'the foundation for all this had been laid in the 1540s when commercial plays exploded onto the London scene, and both players and authorities started negotiating the ultimate paradigm for this new business of commercial playing'.³³

Apart from negotiating with London authorities, players also had to negotiate with property owners under this 'ultimate paradigm'. As we have seen, actors in Tudor London frequently played in company halls that were both enclosed and had controllable access. They could not collect an admission fee in those halls, however, because they did not have a legal right to exclude people from it. To gain that right, they had to acquire it from the property owner through rental agreements. This is why, as Kathman documents, professional actors began renting from or partnering with property owners in London in the late 1530s and early 1540s.³⁴ For Qualitees's trick to work, it was not enough to hold his 'antycke plaie' in a room with four walls, nor was it enough for him to hire two men to take 'a peny, or an halfe peny at the least' from each spectator at the gate. He also had to have a key to the gate which only the owner of Northumberland Place could bestow and did, presumably in exchange for the cost of a rental.

Sourcing the Admission Fee System

Based on the evidence presented, we can sketch an answer to the question of when, how, and by whom admission fees were introduced in London. They were brought to the city by troupes of travelling players in the late 1530s where, proving profitable, they fueled a burst of commercial theatre production in the early 1540s that officials both registered and repudiated by official proclamation. The players' financial success attracted the notice of animal baiting entrepreneurs who leased land in Southwark, beyond the reach of city officials, and built arenas with the admission fee system in mind. A halfpenny was being collected from each spectator at the door of Paris Garden by the late 1540s at least and, by 1550, that scheme had been replaced by another that was more expensive and iterated: for one penny, a person could enter and, for a second, step up into the stands. Meanwhile, back in the city, members of the Brotherhood of Masters of the Noble Science of Defense

were reevaluating Leadenhall as the primary place to hold their fencing prizes. They were sure to gather a crowd there, but its openness made it unsuitable for collecting admission fees. After 1558, the fencers virtually abandoned Leadenhall for places like inns and, later, playhouses, where the admission fee system already was in place. By 1570, when Lambarde wrote *A Perambulation of Kent*, the admission fee system dominated London popular entertainment. People could not see a play, a fencing match, animal baiting, or 'any pleasant spectacle, unlesse they first paye one penny at the gate, another at the entrie of the Scaffolde, and the thirde for a quiet standing'.

Andrew Gurr characterizes admission fees as a mere 'adjustment' of medieval gathering practices. Referencing James Burbage at the Theatre, Gurr writes, 'He could now collect money at the door instead of going through the crowd with a hat when setting up his stages in country market-places. This was no more than an adjustment of long-familiar travelling company practices'.³⁵ In this view, players and audiences experienced the shift to admission fees as a minimal change. Gurr might be correct, but his explanation of the Norwich Affray of 1583 contradicts this assessment. The brawl began when two men pushed past the actor collecting admission fees at the gate of an innyard theatre, spilling coins from his hand. His fellow actors saw the scuffle, leapt from the stage with their swords, and chased the two men back into the street where one of the gate crashers was fatally stabbed. Gurr identifies the Norwich Affray as 'one of the last instances of customer suspicion over plays, the kind of reluctance to pay before the entertainment had been delivered that used to be normal when ... payment was secured by the players going hat in hand round the crowd'.³⁶ At the time, Norwich was England's second-largest city in terms of wealth and population.³⁷ It also was a regular stop on the travelling player circuit.³⁸ If spectators in Norwich were still reluctant to pay admission fees in 1583, more than forty years after they were introduced in London, then the transition from medieval gathering must have been 'more than an adjustment'. It disrupted traditional arrangements among spectators, performers, civic authorities, and property owners. As Wickham, Ingram, and Kathman agree, it laid the economic foundation for commercial theatre as we know it today.

So, where did travelling players gain knowledge of the admission fee system? Were admission fees collected outside London before the late 1530s? The *Records of Early English Drama* (REED) might not hold the answer to this question. John Wasson frames the problem: 'We cannot know how much these early troupes collected from their public performances, as the records normally refer only to the "mayor's play". At Gloucester, as elsewhere, if the troupe met with the approval of

the mayor and the town council, they were then permitted to give two or three additional performances, depending on the importance of their patron.³⁹ The question of admission fees relates to public performances, not to performances like the mayor's play that were presented to invited guests only or paid for with the official funds.

Scholars may never know with documented certainty where actors sourced the admission fee system. Facing a similar problem, Ingram reflected, 'Accordingly, I have allowed myself certain liberties of conjecture and speculation, not only where evidence is lacking but often where it is present, for I think that a coherent narrative is desirable as long as it is neither fraudulently achieved nor misrepresented as truth'.⁴⁰ Keeping Ingram's remark in mind, let us press forward with the inquiry. The admission fee system requires an enclosed place large enough for a show and spectators, access to which can be controlled, in which a show is promised, and entry to which is permitted in exchange for money collected in advance. Where could these elements be found in England prior to the late 1530s?

Lambarde's *A Perambulation of Kent* presents a surprising answer to this question. Thus far in the essay, I have restricted my quotations from this text to its mention of admission fees in London. But Lambarde is not talking about entertainments in London at the point I am now considering. He is describing the fraudulent practices of the monks of Boxley Abbey, a monastery dissolved by Henry VIII in 1538. Specifically, Lambarde is explaining what pilgrims had to do in order to acquire spiritual benefit from seeing the famous Boxley Rood (crucifix) upon which hung a supposedly miraculous figure of Christ that could move its eyes, mouth, and head. As was discovered after the Abbey was ransacked, the Christ figure was a wooden puppet with wires that could be manipulated by a hidden human operator.

According to Leanne Groeneveld, a visit to Boxley Abbey was a little like a visit to a carnival midway. The puppet Christ on a cross was the chief attraction but there also was the statue of Saint Rumwald that one had to lift to prove sexual purity. Groeneveld points to Lambarde's description of

this image of Rumwald as 'so small, hollow, and light, that a childe of seuen might easily lift it'. However, [Lambarde] qualifies and explains immediately, by means of a 'pyn of wood, stricken through it into a poste (which a false knaue standing behind, could put in, and pull out at his pleasure)', the image could be immobilized. Lambarde notes that at times this trick 'moued more laughter, then deuotion, to beholde

a great lubber to lift at that in vayne, whiche a young boy or wenche had easily taken up before him'.⁴¹

Lambarde delights in mocking these monkish deceits. He addresses the reader,

But marke here (I beseeche you) their [the monks'] prettie policie in picking playne folkes purses. It was in vaine (as they persuaded) to presume to the Roode without shrifte, yea, and money lost there also, if you offer before you were in cleane life. And therefore, the matter was so handled, that without trebble oblation, (that is to say) first to the Confessour, then to Sainct Rumwald, and lastly to the Gracious Roode, the poore Pilgrimes coulde not assure them selues of any good gayned by all their labour: no more then suche as goe to Parisgardein, the Bell Sauage, or some other suche commonplace, to beholde Bearebayting, Enterludes, or fence playe, can account of any pleasant spectacle, unlesse they first paye one penny at the gate, another at the entrie of the Scaffolde, and the thirde for a quiet standing.⁴²

The sternly anti-clerical Lambarde saw Boxley Abbey as a site of spiritual corruption, hence his comparison of it to popular entertainments in London. Groeneweld's research underscores the monastery's similarities to a puppet theatre with wooden figures of saint and savior manipulated by hidden operators. But the passage from Lambarde points beyond its theatricality to its theology. Just as one had to pay in advance to experience 'any pleasant spectacle' at popular London performance venues, so one had to pay in advance to gain 'any good' at Boxley Abbey. Moreover, advance payments at the abbey were structured like those at the venues, in a three-step sequence: pay the confessor to access Saint Rumwald, pay at Saint Rumwald to access the Rood, and pay at the Rood to access its spiritual benefit.

The Boxley Rood was one of many shrines in medieval England. As Ben Nilson explains, shrines were especially hallowed locations inside a church that could be accessed only with the assistance of a shrine keeper or feretrar.⁴³ The feretrar and his assistants functioned as spiritual tour guides, taking small groups of pilgrims around the church, leading them behind the altar, unlocking gates or grills as they went. Once admitted, pilgrims were told miraculous narratives and shown amazing objects made of gold, silver, or jewels, and containing a relic. Before departing, pilgrims were expected to make an offering such as jewels, rich cloth, or wax. The most common offering was a penny left on the altar or deposited into a strong box called a pyx.⁴⁴ Anne McCants writes, 'All shrines were equipped with a box for the deposit of pilgrim oblations, most often paid in the form of a

penny (or half penny or some other specific coin). While wealthy pilgrims might in fact make a show of a larger gift to a shrine they had visited, the bulk of the gifts were expected to be a single coin'.⁴⁵ Strange but true: clerics supervising shrines in medieval England collected pennies in boxes just like gatherers at Elizabethan playhouses.

This conjunction can be explained by considering shrine offerings as payments collected through a spiritually pressurized version of the 'by gathering' method used by medieval performers. As exemplified by *Mankind*, they halted the action at a suspenseful moment, approached the innkeeper who could be counted on to make a substantial gift, then demanded that everyone else follow his lead: 'Ye pay all alyke!'. The peer pressure exerted by an innkeeper and crowd was nothing compared to that of a shrine keeper and fellow pilgrims. Erasmus makes this point in *Peregrinatio religionis ergo* ('A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake'), a colloquy based on his 1512 visit to the Shrine of Our Lady in Walsingham that features the characters of Ogygius and Menedemus.⁴⁶

MENEDEMUS So where does she [Our Lady] live?

OGYGIUS In that church, which I said is unfinished, is a small chapel built on a wooden platform. Pilgrims are admitted through a narrow door on each side. There's very little light: only what comes from tapers, which have a most pleasing scent ... and if you peered inside, Menedemus, you would say it was the abode of the saints, so dazzling it is with jewels, gold, and silver ... in the interior chapel, which I said is the inner sanctum of the Holy Virgin, a canon stands by the altar.

MENEDEMUS What for?

OGYGIUS To receive and keep the offering.

MENEDEMUS Do people contribute whether they want to or not?

OGYGIUS Not at all: but a certain pious embarrassment impels some to give when a person's standing by; they wouldn't give if no one were present to watch them. Or they give somewhat more liberally than they would otherwise.

MENEDEMUS That's human nature. I'm no stranger to it.⁴⁷

We see here key elements of the admission fee system. Prior to arrival, Ogygius has heard advertisements of the famous shrine at Walsingham and the miracles that occur there. Upon arrival, he is led to an enclosed place (the 'small chapel' with a 'narrow door on each side') that is large enough for a show and spectators. The show uses controlled lighting ('tapers') and 'pleasing scents' to enhance

experience of 'the abode of the saints, so dazzling it is with jewels, gold, and silver'. While Ogygius does not have to pay to enter the shrine, he feels a strong obligation to do so before leaving it. The presence of other pilgrims and the canon at the altar produces a 'pious embarrassment' that compels visitors 'to give somewhat more liberally than they otherwise would'. As Menedemus observes, it is only 'human nature' to do so.

Erasmus was a reform-minded Catholic but his account of his pilgrimages was seized on by Protestants eager to break with Rome. A reformation swept through England in the 1530s, culminating in the dissolution of the monasteries which began in 1536. This development was, according to historian G.W. Bernard, 'one of the most revolutionary events in English history' that 'could not but have a dramatic and dramatically visible effect' on English society.⁴⁸ Henry VIII's commissioners first investigated the monasteries then seized their land and treasures. Shrines were ransacked and demolished, their precious relics crushed to dust and their gold, silver, and jewels packed up for the king's treasury in London: 'The worth of the plunder was calculated by its weight, and this, as entered upon the roll of the treasurer, may be stated as follows: Pure gold, 14,531 3/4 ounces; silver gilt, 129,520 ounces; parcel gilt, 73,774 3/4; and silver, 67,600 1/4'.⁴⁹ Some 12,000 people (out of a total population of 500,000) were economically and physically displaced.⁵⁰ Shrine keepers were absolutely out of a job. The commissioners carried a set of injunctions, including 'that they [the monasteries] shall not shew any reliques or feigned miracles for increase of lucre, but that they exhort pilgrims and strangers to give that to the poor, that they thought to offer to their images and reliques'.⁵¹

Could the dissolution of the monasteries beginning in 1536 somehow be connected to the introduction of admission fees in London in the late 1530s? Shrines long had been seen by Protestant reformers as theatres. In their view, the fabulous reliquaries were gilded sepulchers and the narratives reported by feretrars merely 'feigned miracles for increase of lucre'. That shrine keepers knew how to make money from a show is obvious from the riches listed in Henry VIII's treasury rolls. Put a dazzling object in an enclosed site large enough for spectators, promote it, control access to it, and compel payments to experience it. Erasmus details the methods of compulsion. One was the spiritualized peer pressure exerted by a canon standing at the altar of a shrine. Later in the dialogue, Ogygius relates another. He and a friend are brought to an altar on which stands a crystal vessel supposed to contain powdered breast milk of the virgin mother. Ogygius offers up a prayer, after which

OGYGIUS The sacred milk appeared to leap up, and the Eucharistic elements

gleamed somewhat more brightly. Meanwhile, the custodian approached us, quite silent, but holding out a board like those used in Germany by toll collectors on bridges.

MENEDEMUS Yes, I've often cursed those greedy boards when travelling through Germany.

OGYGIUS We gave him some coins which he offered to the Virgin.⁵²

This method of gathering directly relates to the admission fee system. Toll collectors in Germany controlled access to certain bridges. Before permitting a traveller to enter, they demanded payment. Apparently, their customary approach was to present a wooden tablet on which coins were to be placed. After payment, the traveller was admitted to the bridge and could continue their journey. Presenting a toll collector's board, the shrine keeper tells Ogygius: 'pay up, if you want to proceed'.⁵³ Fifty years later, Lambarde would elaborate this idea by explicitly comparing offerings at Boxley Abbey to admission fees.

People of the Tudor period, even religious opposites like Erasmus and Lambarde, saw close similarities between shrine offerings and admission fees. Both were small cash payments made at an enclosed site large enough for a show and spectators, access to which can be controlled, in which a show is promised, and entry to which is permitted by a gatekeeper. This homology does not prove that admission fees developed out of shrine offerings, of course, but it invites speculation about how that could have happened. Admission fees appeared in London at the same time that the monasteries were dissolved. Did newly unemployed shrine keepers share their mystery with touring players who, adapting it for their purposes, created the admission fee system? The idea is less far-fetched than it sounds. Historian Francis Young asserts, 'Following the dissolution, ex-monks and ex-friars were assimilated into broader English society as parish clergy, schoolmasters and craftsmen' but others found ways to act on more specialized knowledge acquired in the monasteries.⁵⁴ For example, Young examines 'the impact of the dissolution of the monasteries on the diffusion of magical knowledge into non-clerical contexts'.⁵⁵ Perhaps, similarly, knowledge of shrine keeping found its way into non-clerical contexts, carried by ex-feretrars and their assistants. Ex-priests undoubtedly turned players during this period: three of them were executed in Salisbury in 1541.⁵⁶ John Bale, author of *Kyng Johan* (1538), was a former carmelite friar who renounced his vows, married, and was recruited by Thomas Cromwell not only to write anti-clerical plays but also 'to lead a company of players willing to perform them'.⁵⁷ Are admission fees another example of crossover from church to theatre? It suffices to have raised the question. Whatever the explanation, it was a

surprisingly short step from the canon at the altar of a shrine in the time of Erasmus to the gatherer at the door of the Theatre in the time of Elizabeth.

Notes

- 1 Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300–1600*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1963), 2.1.158.
- 2 William Ingram, *The Business of Playing: The Beginnings of the Adult Professional Theater in Elizabethan London* (Ithaca, 1992), 13, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501736766>.
- 3 E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1903), 1.48–55.
- 4 *Ibid*, 44.
- 5 William Tydemann, *English Medieval Theatre 1400–1500* (Boston, 1983), 33.
- 6 *Mankind*, ed. John C. Coldewey, *Early English Drama: An Anthology* (New York, 1993), 121, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315056685>.
- 7 Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 52–3.
- 8 William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent: Conteyning the Description, Hystorie, and Customes of that Shyre*, 2nd edn (London, 1576; STC: 15175.5), *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*, 187–8. On the title page, Lambarde states that the book was ‘collected and written (for the most part) in the year. 1570’.
- 9 *Mery Tales, Wittie Questions, and Quicke Answeres*, 2nd edn (London, 1567; STC: 23665.5), *EEBO*, no 133.
- 10 Anne Lake Prescott, ‘Humanism in the Tudor Jestbook’, *Moreana* 14.95–6 (1987), 5, <https://doi.org/10.3366/more.1987.24.3-4.3>.
- 11 Bryan A. Garner, ed., *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 7th edn (St Paul, MN, 1999), s.v. ‘recognizance’.
- 12 Anne Lancashire and David J. Parkinson, eds, *REED: Civic London to 1558*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 2015), 2.664.
- 13 W.J. Lawrence, ‘Early Systems of Admission’, *The Elizabethan Playhouse and Other Studies*, Second Series (Stratford-Upon-Avon, 1913), 97.
- 14 *Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online*, s.v. ‘on a time’.
- 15 Tiffany Stern, ‘“On each Wall and Corner Poast”: Playbills, Title-Pages, and Advertising in Early Modern London’, *English Literary Renaissance* 36 (2006), 60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.2006.00072.x>.
- 16 Herbert Berry, ‘Richard Vennar, England’s Joy’, *English Literary Renaissance* 31.2 (2001), 240–1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.2001.tb01189.x>.
- 17 O.L. Brownstein, ‘A Record of London Inn-Playhouses from c. 1565–1590’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22.1 (1971), 19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2868759>.
- 18 *Ibid*, 18.

- 19 Giles E. Dawson, 'London's Bull-Baiting and Bear-Baiting Arena in 1562', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.1 (1964), 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867963>.
- 20 Anthony Mackinder, et al., *The Hope Playhouse, Animal Baiting and Later Industrial Activity at Bear Gardens on Bankside* (London, 2013), 11.
- 21 C.L. Kingsford, 'Paris Garden and the Bear-baiting', *Archaeologia* 70 (1920), 176, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261340900011073>. I thank my former doctoral student and research assistant Hadley Kamminga-Peck for bringing this essay to my attention.
- 22 Robert Crowley, *One and Thyrtye Epigrammes Wherein are Brieflye Touched so Manye Abuses, that Maye and Ought to be Put Away*, 2nd edn (London, 1550; STC: 6088.3), EEBO, np. Crowley does not number pages but arranges his epigrams in alphabetical order. 'Of Bearebaytinge' is under the letter 'B'.
- 23 David Kathman, 'The Rise of Commercial Playing in 1540s London', *Early Theatre* 12.1 (2009), 15, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.12.1.801>.
- 24 Lancashire and Parkinson, *REED: Civic London to 1558*, 1.xliv.
- 25 Ibid, 1.clxx, n 181.
- 26 Kathman, 'The Rise of Commercial Playing', 18.
- 27 Ibid, 29.
- 28 Ibid, 19.
- 29 Ibid, 21.
- 30 Lancashire and Parkinson, *REED: Civic London to 1558*, 2.664.
- 31 Ibid, 682.
- 32 Kathman, 'The Rise of Commercial Playing', 15.
- 33 Ibid, 30.
- 34 Ibid, 21–8.
- 35 Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage: 1576–1642* (Cambridge, 2009), 141–2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511819520>.
- 36 Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Playing Companies* (Oxford, 1996), 203, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198129776.001.0001>.
- 37 David Galloway, ed., *REED: Norwich 1540–1642* (Toronto, 1984), xvii.
- 38 Kara Northway, "'[H]urt in that service": The Norwich Affray and Early Modern Reactions to Injuries during Dramatic Performances', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26 (2008), 38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0039>.
- 39 John Wasson, 'Professional Actors in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 1 (1984), 4.
- 40 William Ingram, *The Business of Playing* (Ithaca, New York, 1992), 18.
- 41 Leanne Groeneveld, 'A Theatrical Miracle: The Boxley Rood of Grace as Puppet', *Early Theatre* 10.2 (2007), 27, <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.10.2.752>.

- 42 Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*, 187–8.
- 43 Ben Nilson, ‘The Medieval Experience at the Shrine’, in *Pilgrimage Explored*, ed. J. Stopford (Woodbridge, 1999), 95.
- 44 Ibid, 109.
- 45 Ann McCants, ‘Donations and the Economics of Shrines’, in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, eds Larissa J. Taylor and Leigh Ann Craig (Boston, 2010), 166, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004181298_emp_sim_00360.
- 46 Desiderius Erasmus, ‘A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake’, in *Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 40, Colloquies*, trans. and ed. Craig R. Thompson, 86 vols (Toronto, 1997), 40.619, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442659964>.
- 47 Ibid, 629–30.
- 48 G.W. Bernard, ‘The Dissolution of the Monasteries’, *History* 96.324 (2011), 390, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229x.2011.00526.x>.
- 49 Francis Aidan Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, Revised Popular Edition (London, 1899), 413.
- 50 Bernard, ‘The Dissolution of the Monasteries’, 390.
- 51 David Wilkins, ed., *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, ab MCCCCL ad Annum MDXLV*, 4 vols (London, 1737), 3.791.
- 52 Erasmus, ‘A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake’, 633.
- 53 Erasmus’s critique of gathering methods at Walsingham inspired one of the Articles of Inquiry for that monastery. Commissioners were instructed to determine ‘whether the keepers of [relics] did not bring about tables to men for their offering, as though they would exact money of them or make them ashamed except they did offer’. ‘Tables’ refers to the wooden tablet presented by the custodian at the shrine of the virgin mother’s milk. Ogygius says it was the canon standing at the altar of the holy virgin’s inner sanctum who made people feel ‘ashamed except they did offer’. This Article of Inquiry can be found in Erasmus, *Pilgrimages to Saint Mary of Walsingham and Saint Thomas of Canterbury*, trans. John Gough Nichols (London, 1875), 210, article 6. See also Erasmus, ‘A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake’, 657, n 62.
- 54 Francis Young, ‘The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Democratization of Magic in Post-Reformation England’, *Religions* 10.4 (2019), 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10040241>.
- 55 Ibid, 1.
- 56 Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry, and William Ingram, eds, *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660* (Cambridge, 2000), 22–3.
- 57 Ibid, 21.

