

Enter Ralph Trapdore

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‘Enter Ralph Trapdore’

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This and cognate stage directions in *The Roaring Girl*, Middleton and Dekker’s city comedy staged at the Fortune playhouse in 1611, beg the question: how might a character so named have entered and exited the stage? The allusion, of course, is to one of the distinctive components of the purpose-built early modern London playhouses, a device that we may trace back to the pageant waggons of the medieval mysteries but which has left a less substantial trail of evidence than we might think.¹ The general assumption scholars make is that, like the flanking doors, discovery space, upper stage, and main stage itself, the trapdoor was a staple architectural feature available to playmakers in London, and thus, it follows, commonly employed in plays.² This view, however, is worth re-examining because it is not at all clear that all playhouses had such a device, under what circumstances it was employed, and how frequently. The pointed naming of this character certainly indicates that the two dramatists expected spectators to understand its significance and connect appellation and function. Ralph Trapdoor’s role in the play is to entrap the ‘roaring girl’, Moll Cutpurse (based on a notorious, contemporary figure, Mary Frith), on the instructions of Sir Alexander Wengrave, who fears that his son and heir is romantically attached to her—a ruse Sebastian Wengrave concocts to pursue his real love interest, Mary Fitz-Allard, of whom his father disapproves. What follows here is an exploration of how the evocative naming Middleton and Dekker employed might hint at how this character was staged; if, as the evidence suggests, the playhouse where the Prince’s Men performed the play had a trap facility, would it *not* have been used for a character so named?³ Thinking through this issue affords an opportunity to explore how the trapdoor may sometimes have been scripted for early modern performance.

It has long been understood that the apparatus of printed plays can tell us only so much about original staging practices (see Dessen 1984 and 1995, and McJannet). It is understandable that we often think of these texts as ‘lacking’ stage directions (or sufficiently detailed sds), and so they do for the scholar who wishes to understand and reconstruct (as far as possible) how plays were put on; presumably early modern readers

could make sense of these texts as they stood but it is worth bearing in mind that to read a play is by no means always to attempt an imagined reconstruction of it in performance as a prerequisite for comprehension. Early modern readers and modern scholars read differently, for different outcomes: marking stage directions, particularly those regarding specific kinds of entrance, would seem not to have been particularly important for playwrights (Stern 8-35) or readers. The evidential problem is particularly acute with respect to the trapdoor, since its use is only specified unambiguously on *three* occasions in the entire corpus of surviving plays (Dessen and Thomson 235). Undoubtedly the trap was employed much more than this statistic indicates, but to make such a claim (as we must) is to move away from hard evidence and enter the realm of speculation. This in part has contributed to the common view that the trapdoor was widely used, since the presumption of its existence thus readily makes sense of stage directions (explicit or implicit, that is, embedded within the dialogue) which designate either places or actions, such as a ‘vault’ or ‘cave’ in the play-world, or where a character or property emerges from ‘beneath’ or ‘below’ the stage (Dessen and Thomson 242, 44, 29, 28-29). One consequence of this is that the existence, characteristics, function and use of the trap have been assumed rather than interrogated, precisely because the assumption underwrites the interpretation of staging possibilities—an unhelpful, circular argument. If we return to first principles, however, and re-examine the surviving evidence afresh, we find that our current understanding of the trapdoor warrants re-evaluation.

Elsewhere I argue that where there is compelling evidence for the use of the trap, as with *Titus Andronicus*, then this correspondingly offers fairly reliable information about the theatre architecture and stage facilities at the playhouses where particular plays are known to have been put on, in this case the Rose (at least in 1594) and Newington Butts playhouses.⁴ Once we suspend our default position that every playhouse typically had a trap, and look instead for strong evidence to support the conjecture that *some* individual playhouses may have done so—in other words, start from a position of scepticism rather than certainty—we are on rather firmer hermeneutical ground. Indeed, re-thinking our understanding of the trap reminds us that our attempts to re-construct original staging practices necessarily brings into play all the constituent elements of the stage, namely the

other options available for entrances and exits. This is important because even in the case of *Hamlet* it is reasonably clear that not all the entrances and exits made by the Ghost could have employed the trap—even though of course this character is associated principally with what Hamlet calls the ‘cellarage’ (1.5.159), a remark which follows the prince’s exit with the Ghost and their joint re-entry, in both cases through flanking doors, in 1.4.⁵ Two observations follow from this. Firstly, the flexible stage conjured location in ways which was sometimes apparently at odds (or at least not in sync) with the tripartite, theologically-symbolic structure inherited from the medieval theatre that so appeals to scholars—the stage ‘suspended’ between heaven above and hell below; in other words, a ‘supernatural’ character could also (instead) enter from a flanking door, as is usually thought to be the case in *Hamlet* when the Ghost enters Gertrude’s chamber in 3.4, for example—especially since, upon its exit, Hamlet exclaims, ‘Look where he goes even now out at the *portal*’ (3.4.138, italics added). Secondly, therefore, symbolic staging does not always correlate with practical staging requirements or preferences or indeed constraints. This will become apparent in the case of *The Roaring Girl*.

The play’s modern editors have ignored the tantalising suggestiveness of Ralph Trapdoor’s name.⁶ The earliest printed text of the play is undivided, but in modern editions (those in which acts and scenes are designated) he features at 1.2, 2.1, 3.1, 3.3 (twice), 4.1, 5.1, and 5.2 (twice).⁷ These entrances and exits (where given) are indicated as follows; I cite Q, keyed to the Revels edition:

Enter Ralph Trapdore (sig. C2r/1.2.185sd); *Exeunt* (sig. C3r/1.2.249sd)

Enter Ralph Trapdore (sig. D4v/2.1.343sd); *Exit Trapdore* (sig. D4r/2.1.384sd)

Enter Trapdore (sig. Fr/3.1.140sd); *Exeunt omnes* (sig. F2r3.1.195sd)

Enter Sir Alexander Wengraue: Sir Dauby Dapper, Sir Adam Appleton, at one dore,
and Trapdore at another doore (sig. G2r/3.3.0sd); *Exit Trapdore* (sig.
 G3v/3.2.50sd)

Enter Mol and Trapdore (sig. Hv/3.3.177sd); *Exeunt* (sig. H2r/3.3.226sd)

Enter Trapdore (sig. H2v/4.1.4sd); *Exeunt* (sig. H2r/4.1.38sd)⁸

Enter Trapdore like a poore Souldier with a patch o’re one eie, and Teare-cat with him,

all tatters (sig. K3v/5.1.64sd); *Exeunt they two manet the rest* (sig. Lr/5.1.252sd)

Enter Trapdore (sig. L3r/5.2.13sd); No sd.⁹

Enter Trapdore (sig. M3v/5.2.228sd); No sd.¹⁰

Two preliminary observations may be made, from which will be deduced a third. Firstly, Trapdoor is a significant character in the play, with no fewer than nine appearances—more than any other, including Moll Cutpurse. Secondly, while he enters alone on seven occasions, he is part of a group exit on five out of the seven times his exit is indicated. Thirdly, therefore, we may surmise that these group exits indicate that it is highly unlikely, in these cases, that the trap was used. This supports the preliminary points made earlier: that the trap is not *always* used when scholars might otherwise suppose it to be used; and that the stage is primarily a site of practical decision-making: thinking of how the trap is employed in this play is to examine the tension that sometimes arises when scholarly, theory-based assumptions come up against rather more practical performance matters.

A city comedy is not the kind of play we would think to associate with the trapdoor, which tends to feature in tragedies such as *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*, and is often assumed to be integral to the plays of Marlowe and Kyd (though there is no firm evidence for this).¹¹ But it is precisely because the character is not a supernatural figure as such—though he is, in the play-world, associated with another kind of underworld, that of contemporary London with its canting language and culture that was the *métier* of Thomas Dekker—that makes this case particularly interesting; and the fact that he appears so frequently offers a useful test case for how we read the trapdoor in performance history more generally.¹² To demonstrate this it is necessary to examine Trapdoor's entrances and exits in detail.

None of the stage directions in Q directly connects Ralph Trapdoor with the device his name calls up, but analysis of the surrounding text and his role in *The Roaring Girl* points to its possible use on two occasions in particular; equally, given that he makes eighteen entrances and exits in total, we would not—or should not—expect his entrance to/exit from the stage to involve the space beneath the stage as a matter of course. Just as

scholars have argued that the central opening was ‘a special entryway’ (Ichikawa 102-17), and therefore used sparingly—the vast majority of entrances and exits in *all* surviving plays being facilitated by the flanking doors—so too the trap’s theatrical value lay in its novelty, in its signalling of difference from the tiring house’s two doors that were the mainstay of on-/offstage traffic. This raises the issue of character/space identification. Scholars may well be right in supposing that in *Hamlet* the Ghost makes his first entrance from beneath the stage: it is this entryway that cements the identification of the character with purgatory; and yet it follows that it is not necessary for the Ghost to enter/exit in that manner thereafter—for the very reason that the association has been forged in that opening appearance. Once the world-beneath-the-stage has been brought into play (and into the play-world) in this manner it is arguably unnecessary to call it up further, and the character can enter ‘normally’, through one of the flanking doors.¹³ In effect, the Ghost’s incursion into the human world is established, and therefore need not be reinforced. If we approach *The Roaring Girl* with a similar logic in mind then we can find some textual support for the proposition that character/space association was suggestive and, once confirmed, both *already* cemented *and* non-binding. Indeed, it is Trapdoor’s introduction into the landscape of London’s streets—from the ‘underworld’ beneath the stage—that argues within the play-world, as well as in practical terms, for the sparing use of the trap.

The opening sequences do not feature the roaring girl herself: the play begins with a covert meeting between Sebastian Wengrave and Mary Fitz-Allard; the stage is then cleared for the entrance of Sir Alexander Wengrave with his friends, and it is here, following Sebastian’s re-entry, that the conflict at the heart of the play is set out. The clash between father and son results in Sebastian’s exit—‘I am deaf to you all’ (sig. C2v/1.2.173)—followed by that of the friends, who declare their intention to dissuade him from his declared course, the pursuit of Moll to spite the father. This leaves Sir Alexander alone on stage, and a brief soliloquy in which he vents his spleen is followed by an apparently opportune intervention signalled by the direction ‘*Enter Ralph Trapdore*’ (sig. C2r/1.2.184sd), at which point Sir Alexander enquires: ‘Now sirrah what are you, leaue your apes trickes and speake’ (sig. C2r/1.2.185). Editors have glossed these ‘trickes’ as expressions of obsequious deference as Trapdoor seeks to flatter Sir Alexander so as to gain

employment; but it is at least as plausible that the word is a clue to his mode of entry.¹⁴ We can but speculate but ‘apes trickes’ suggests unconventional behaviour, some kind of stage business, and very possibly an entrance from the trap; certainly Sir Alexander is commenting—commentating—on what the audience is seeing. This is a perfect opportunity to establish the connection between a deliberately-chosen appellation, the play’s exploration of London underworld culture, and the role he will assume, undercover but above ground, in Sir Alexander’s scheme. Later in the scene, following his instruction to ‘Play thou the subtle spider, weaue fine nets / To insnare her very life’ (sig. C3r/1.2.230-31), his new master enquires:

Alex [...] How is thy name.

Trap. My name sir is *Ralph Trapdore*, honest Ralph.

Alex. *Trapdore*, be like thy name, a dangerous step

For her to venture on, but vnto me.

Trap. As fast as your sole to your boote or shooe sir.

Alex. Hence then, be little seene here as thou canst.

Ile still be at thine elbow.

Trap. The trapdore set. (sigs. C3r-v/1.2.240-46)¹⁵

It is surely plausible, then, that this first entrance is made via the trap to underscore these levels of association—appellation, role in the play-world, and stage space—to which the play later returns (and where he may also enter via the trap, as we shall see). ‘My name sir is *Ralph Trapdore*’ is a joke that Sir Alexander plays on in the lines quoted; use of the device itself for the character’s first appearance would give the extended conceit further purchase. But whether the first exit, signalled by ‘*Exeunt*’, follows suit, must be regarded as doubtful. Here the stage is cleared so that the long scene featuring three shops (the opening of act two in most modern editions) can begin. Sir Alexander’s ‘Ile still be at thine elbow’ points to a joint exit through the same flanking door, with the discovery space probably serving in the next scene as the site of ‘*The three shops open in a ranke*’ (C3r/2.1.0sd)—through which also enter or appear Mistress Gallipot, Mistress Tiltyard, and Master and Mistress

Openwork—so that the other flanking door can be used for the entrance of the gallants Laxton, Goshawk, and Greenwit. Since Sir Alexander and Trapdoor are now in cahoots it is appropriate that they leave the stage together. Moreover, the latter's insertion into the play-world, *above ground*, is thereby underwritten by his use of a flanking door, a pattern the play will maintain in what follows.

If Ralph Trapdoor makes his first entrance through the trap two things follow: the association between character and symbolic space (with the connotations the 'underworld' beneath the stage has, as a site of difference) is established; and there is correspondingly *less* need for the pattern to be repeated in the subsequent eight entrances and eight exits he makes. Of these sixteen on-/offstage movements, three entrances (if we include the staggered entrance, '*and Trapdore at another doore*') and four exits are joint (with two exits not indicated, one separate, the other implicitly as part of a group), leaving seven single entrances/exits. It is not impossible that Trapdoor might exit through the trap in any of these instances, but, taking each in turn, it will be shown that such possibilities are highly unlikely; and in the schema of the play, it is worth reiterating that repeated use of the device is not only unnecessary but undesirable: overuse would amount to dilution of effect. Alan Dessen exaggerates a little when he remarks that there are 'many departures through trap-doors' in the surviving corpus of plays, since some examples are less unambiguous examples of the device than is often assumed, but what is true of the general picture—dividing the number of possible entrances/exits in a given play via this device by the total number of entrances/exits—is that the trap is used sparingly (Dessen 1995, 203, 264-65). A tentative rule of thumb, then, is that the trap must always be used to effect a striking moment, not become part of an established and therefore expected routine.

Before looking at further instances where Ralph Trapdoor *could* enter or exit via the trap it may be worth eliminating first the instances where it is most unlikely he does so. Three of his nine entrances, and five (almost certainly six, if we include the final clearing of the stage at the play's end, for which no exit is given in Q) of his nine exits are joint. Such entrances and exits make it highly unlikely, though not impossible, that the trap was employed. The direction '*Enter Sir Alexander Wengraue: Sir Dauy Dapper, Sir Adam Appleton, at one dore, and Trapdore at another doore*' (sig. G2r/3.3.0sd) indicates that he

uses a flanking door (the *sd* implying a staggered entrance so that the characters in the previous scene can exit without risk of collision: presumably the time taken for Wengrave, Dapper, and Appleton to enter allows for Trapdoor to enter slightly later rather than simultaneously, Sir Alexander addressing him four lines in at 3.3.4). There is no need for him to enter through the trap, now that he is operating within the play-world, and this *sd* confirms that: ‘at another doore’ is generally taken to signal the other *flanking* door, rather than a special entry point (Dessen and Thomson 73-74). It is clear too that, in his next (joint) entrance, ‘Enter Mol and Trapdore’ (sig. Hv/3.3.177sd), he does so from the same door as Moll, since they are in mid-conversation:

Mol. Ralph.

Trap. What sayes my braue Captaine, male and female?

Mol. This Holborne is such a wrangling streete. (sig. Hv/3.3.178-80)

And for his third joint entrance, ‘Enter Trapdore like a poore Souldier with a patch o’re one eie, and Teare-cat with him, all tatters’ (sig. K3v/5.1.64sd), while it is *possible* the trap is used here it is surely unlikely: the two characters are disguised, and Trapdoor is yet to be exposed as Sir Alexander’s creature—at which point, as we shall see, there is a case to be made for a less orthodox entry. Here, too, there arises a practical problem, that of getting two actors out of the trap and into the action—and in a way in which the onstage characters, but not the audience, do not notice them. Trapdoor’s opening lines, ‘Shall we set vpon the infantry, these troopes of foot? Zounds yonder comes Mol my whoorish Maister & Mistresse’ (sig. K3v/5.1.65-67), suggest an entrance from the flanking door, through which, across the stage, Trapdoor spies Moll. In all three instances, moreover, the chief objection to the use of the trap is that it would dilute its association with Trapdoor *solus*, and therefore detract from his covert presence ‘above ground’ while he is yet to be exposed.

The same objection may be made with respect to the joint exits, but in addition exits pose two other issues. The first is simply that entering *from* the trap is much more arresting than an exit *into* it. An entrance (from any direction) attracts the audience’s attention (sometimes cued by an onstage response to that entrance), but from the trap this

focusing of the audience through choreography is even more pronounced since the character's identity only gradually emerges; but with an exit there is no such heightening of anticipation, since the character is already on stage. This is a strong argument against the trap's overuse generally, and against its use for exits in particular, though a partial exception is when a supernatural character enters from the trap—or, more properly, 'rises' as part of a special effect and (the text implies) after stage business on the spot (i.e. standing in/on the trap) departs the same way. Secondly, several of Trapdoor's joint exits occur at points where the stage is cleared, as we saw in the opening example with Sir Alexander (sig. C3r/1.2.249sd); similarly '*Exeunt omnes*' (sig. F2r3/1.195sd) and '*Exeunt*' (sig. H2r/3.3.226sd) imply the use of the same flanking door, leaving the other door available for the characters coming on in the next scene to use. In these three cases it is surely clear that Trapdoor goes off together with Sir Alexander, Moll, and Moll again, respectively. Another joint exit (marked in the middle of the scene by modern editors though since the stage is cleared there are grounds for beginning a new scene here) occurs at '*Exeunt*' (sig. H2r/4.1.38sd), which is followed by the entry of Sebastian, and Moll and Mary Fitz-Allard (both of whom are disguised). Trapdoor has been instructed to place conspicuously Sir Alexander's 'Germane watch' and 'my gold chaine too' (sig. H2r/4.1.7, 12) to lure Moll into theft and hence destruction. Since Trapdoor is a member of Sir Alexander's household, and he does not appear in the scene again (which would blow his cover as a servant of two masters), there is no reason why he should not exit through a flanking door, and no good reason to draw attention to the trap at this point. When he exits jointly with Tearcat, '*Exeunt they two manet the rest*' (L1r/5.1.252sd), a joint exit through the trap is clumsy and would only make sense had they so entered together, from below, which it has been argued is unlikely.

So, if it is likely that Ralph Trapdoor uses the trap sparingly, might he use it at any other point where he enters alone? Following his commission from Sir Alexander he encounters Moll in the street (D4v/2.1.343sd): since the stage in this scene represents three shops (presumably across the back of the *frons scenae*, as at sig. C3r/2.1.0sd), the use of the trap here would seem neither logical nor practical, no more than it would for his exit later in the scene (sig. D4r/2.1.384sd). When he next enters, to meet Moll as arranged, her

response, 'Oh / heere comes my man that would be: 'tis his houre' (Fr/3.1.140-41), is an unlikely one if he entered via the trap: one of the flanking doors is a much more likely entry point. There is similarly no need for the device when he enters to Sir Alexander, in the Wengrave house, to tempt her to steal valuables (H2v/4.1.4sd). And it is surely the case that, the stage long established as the space of the action, he does not do so when he enters to report that 'Your sonne, and that bold masculine ramp / My mistress, are landed now at Tower' (L3v/5.2.13), since he has entered from the offstage 'London' cityscape to report. Established as he is in the play-world 'above ground', his remaining exits—one marked, the others not, one of which is implicitly joint, prior to the delivery of the epilogue—lend little support for the use of the trap. Following his entrance to Sir Alexander (G2r/3.3.0sd) and their surreptitious discussion in which Trapdoor reveals Wengrave *fil's* plan to meet Moll at Sir Alexander's house, he exits (G3v/3.2.50); but again there is no compelling argument to suggest he does so via the trap, since he departs in search of Moll. Following his entrance to report that Moll has 'landed now at Tower' (L3r/5.2.15) he must exit somewhere between his line 'I heard it now reported' (L3r/5.2.16) and his final entrance (M3v/5.2.228sd): editors tend to insert an exit on the delivery of this line, since there is no need for him to hang around on stage; there is also no need for him to exit here via the trap—though, as we shall see, it is not impossible, and may depend in part on how we interpret the mode of his final entrance. Similarly, he could exit via the trap at the end of the play, at which point the stage is cleared for the delivery of the epilogue. But given the harmonious resolution of *The Roaring Girl*, it is perhaps more likely that the trap is not used here, either. If, then, it is conceded that we can conclude with a degree of certainty that in a number of instances Trapdoor would not use the trap—not least when he exits though the same door as another character (as the implicit sds make clear)—then it becomes difficult to imagine when the actors might have thought the use of the trap a sensible idea, other than, as has been argued here, at the outset.

But as Paul Mulholland points out, there remains a further possibility with the character's final entrance towards the end of the play, in the middle of Sir Alexander's apology to Moll, at the line 'Some wrongs I've done thee' (sig. M3v/5.2.229): 'As his name suggests, Trapdoor possibly makes one or more entrances from the stage trapdoor with

comic effect; this may be the case here' (Mulholland 5.2.228n). In what is most probably addressed directly to the audience, Trapdoor says, 'Is the winde there now? / 'Tis time for mee to kneele and confesse first, / For feare it come too late and my braines feelee It' (sig. M3v/5.2.229-31). Clearly, he does kneel, speaking directly to Moll: 'Vpon my pawes, I aske you pardon, mistresse' (M3v/5.2.232). Whether he does so having emerged from the trap (which might visually recall his 'apes trickes' earlier), and in supplication *remains* on his knees, or from one of the flanking doors—unsurprisingly the evidence can only be inconclusive, and both options are possible. But if it was considered desirable for him to use the trapdoor on his first appearance, which leads to the setting of the 'trap' for Moll, then perhaps the confession of error here, as the play resolves itself in the manner of city comedy rather than (as Sir Alexander had originally planned) the 'ensnar[ing of] her very life', then as Mulholland suggests a final entry from the trap might well have been apposite here. But it is to the point that this possibility would make much more sense if, as has been proposed here, Trapdoor's first entrance was also via the trap. And it is worth adding, furthermore, that the trap itself, once evoked, remains visible throughout—as a part of the stage that simultaneously does and does not (as locale shifts between scenes) recall the underworld with which Trapdoor is associated. It is a nice though entirely speculative question to ponder whether Trapdoor or indeed Moll herself (seeing through Ralph Trapdoor's scheme as she does) wittingly or otherwise, physically by stage position or gesturally, alludes to the trap in the stage floor as a site of danger. We cannot know, of course; but we can say that from the audience's perspective the *continuous* presence of the trapdoor, in plain sight as it were, underscores the play's narrative in the play-world that interrogates the intersection between social strata, here built into a kind of 'vertical sociology' (to use Andrew Gurr's phrase) underpinned by playhouse architecture and a straightforwardly visual stage hierarchy (Gurr 1997, 88-89). If Trapdoor 'returns' us to the underworld by emerging from the trap in his final entrance (and/or exiting thereby at the close), then it is worth recalling that *Hamlet* achieves a not dissimilar effect. The graveyard scene cements the association established by the Ghost, and indeed places Hamlet quite literally half in, half out of the underworld to which his father was and now Ophelia is condemned.¹⁶

The foregoing exploration is an attempt to evaluate how the entrances and exits of a character such as Ralph Trapdoor might and might not have been choreographed, according to the nature of the early modern theatre space and performance practices. Undeniably *The Roaring Girl* draws attention to a device that was familiar to playwrights and playgoers: it is possible, but surely unlikely, that Middleton and Dekker and the Prince's Men deliberately alluded to a feature of playmaking that was *not* available at the Fortune, seeing value in matching this character, who functions as a link between the underworld and the superficially more reputable society of early modern London, to the symbolic space under the stage; and while, as has been argued here, it would be a mistake to overstate the likely use of the trap, it is surely even less likely that the device, if available, was gestured towards but not actually used. It is more likely that the play evokes a device that was a feature of the company's repertory practices. But what additional support is there for the hypothesis advanced here, that there was such a device at the Fortune? In fact, the circumstantial evidence for this is strong.

To arrive at the fullest possible picture the place to start is Philip Henslowe's career as a playhouse builder (though he was, it seems, rather more than that, even if there is some dispute among scholars about the extent of his involvement in theatre affairs as such).¹⁷ The Fortune was the second of three playhouse ventures with which he was to be involved, which were but one aspect of his extensive business interests.¹⁸ That this was Henslowe's second playhouse venture, designed to replace the first as the new home of the Admiral's (Nottingham's) Men, may be used in support of the conclusion that it had a trap. While it may be the case that the Rose when first conceived and built in 1587 did not feature such a device, it is all but certain that one was added later, probably in 1591 when (according to rather opaque records of expenditure in the *Diary* in 1592, which the archaeological excavation of the site in 1989 shed some light on) he paid for extensive modifications to be made to the theatre, which included moving the stage itself and, it appears, installing a roof (Rutter xii-xv). By the time Henslowe felt the need to replace his playhouse for his now-established company the actors had therefore already had access to a trap. Judging from the printed texts at least two plays dating from the mid-1590s and known to have been staged at the Rose required a trap, *Look About You* and *John a Kent*

(Gurr 2009, 70, 133).¹⁹ That Henslowe had also developed the Rose's technological capability with the installation of machinery in the heavens in 1595 points to a general recognition on his part (perhaps influenced by his son-in-law Edward Alleyn, given his role as leader of the company established on the Bankside) that facilities for playing had to be improved, particularly if resources elsewhere were perceived to be superior.²⁰ On these grounds alone we might reasonably suppose that the new theatre would include and indeed improve upon the facilities of the old. If Henslowe included a trap at his first playhouse in 1587 or introduced one in 1591 (or later) we would have to conclude that for him, Alleyn, and perhaps the acting company for which the new venue was designed the trap was considered surplus to requirements – if the Fortune did not have one. The evidence, however, does not point in that direction. Although only seven plays (of which *The Roaring Girl* is one) that post-date the Rose plays and are known to have been staged at the Fortune survive, as Andrew Gurr observes, 'since most of the plays written for the Admiral's Men after 1594 were taken on to the Fortune its structure must have been designed to accommodate them in basically similar ways' (Gurr 2009, 144, 142).²¹

Undoubtedly Henslowe drew on his many years of experience on the Bankside when he sought to replace his playhouse; that Alleyn, newly out of retirement, was to take charge of the new venture points to his having significant input too. Crucially, we do know additionally of one clear and significant influence. Thanks to the survival of part of the contract—though not, unfortunately, the 'Plott thereof drawn'—and an explicit requirement laid down for the builder he commissioned, we have a fairly good idea of what Henslowe had in mind for the Fortune. The instruction for Peter Street, who the previous year had been responsible for constructing the Globe out of the timbers of the Theatre, transported south across the river by the Chamberlain's Men, was unambiguous, if opaque for theatre historians. On no fewer than four occasions the document stipulates that Street is to copy what he had previously done on the Bankside with the Globe. Following its detailing of the shape of the new playhouse, its size, its sewerage, number of stories and provision for gentlemen's rooms, the document continues:

Aswell in those roomes as througheoute all the rest of the galleries of the saide howse and with suche like steares Conveyances & divisions withoute & within as are made & Contryved in and to the late erected plaiehowse On the Banck in the saide parishe of Ste Saviors Called the Globe With a Stadge and Tyreinge howse to be made erected & settupp within the saide fframe, with a shadowe or cover over the saide stadge, which Stadge shalbe placed & sett (Rutter 175)²²

Even though the Globe was round—or rather polygonal—while the Fortune would be constructed on a rectangular site, Henslowe envisions his new playhouse as aping the playhouse that (in the view of most scholars) was in the process of supplanting the Rose (which the latter’s demise within the next five years would confirm).²³ One detail is tantalisingly suggestive but ultimately inconclusive: ‘The same Stadge to be paied in belowe with good stronge and sufficient newe oken bourdes’ (Rutter 175): if these ‘oken bourdes’ point to a solid floor under the stage we may hypothesise that a trap was envisaged, the floor below the stage given attention so that traffic between the trap and the tiring house would be facilitated. Where Street is instructed to depart from the Globe this is specified, as with the stage posts which are to be square rather than round (Rutter 176); there is no mention that the ‘Stadge’ should differ in other ways, and in the absence of the ‘Plott’ we have less information than we would like about its precise configuration, but given his evident familiarity with the Chamberlain’s Men’s playhouse we may deduce that Henslowe knew what the stage architecture at the Globe entailed and could hardly have been unaware that the Globe stage had a trap. That the Globe had such a device is not seriously disputed. We need look no further than *Hamlet* of course for evidence for this; it is highly likely, too, that the Theatre—at some point, from the outset in 1576 or subsequently—also had a similar facility, and that the Chamberlain’s Men recognised that their new playhouse should offer the same or better facilities as the old.²⁴

The Fortune contract offers considerable evidence of how playhouse builders registered and responded to theatre practices elsewhere. Beginning in early 1592 Henslowe’s *Diary* records the visits of a series of companies, before the newly-constituted Admiral’s Men were installed in May 1594: Strange’s, Sussex’s, and Queen’s and Sussex’s,

all appeared in sequence; and the *Diary* records a joint Admiral's-Chamberlain's collaboration at the Newington Butts playhouse in June 1594. Whatever the nature of Henslowe's involvement in the day-to-day management of the Rose, his accounts book (in this and other respects) suggests at the very least an intimate understanding of playmaking. The companies that visited Henslowe's playhouse in the years 1592-94 (no records for 1587 onwards, if they were ever made, have been found) no doubt brought with them practices and preferences that the Rose could and perhaps also could not accommodate. The 1592 record of expenditure—totalling £108, one quarter of the cost of the Fortune nearly a decade later (Rutter xiii)—points unambiguously to Henslowe recognising that he needed to update his playhouse: given that he made the major alterations several years before the 1594 intervention of the Privy Council, which would provide an official stamp for playmaking, a clear conclusion to arrive at is that Henslowe acted in 1591 (and perhaps in 1595, when the Swan—described a year later by a Swiss visitor, Johannes de Witt, as the finest playhouse in London—opened five hundred yards away) in response to his sense that the Rose had fallen behind the other playing spaces available to acting companies. The alterations made to the Rose may have been a response to circumstances that were vastly improved by the Privy Council's intervention in 1594, or simply a recognition that the Rose, small as it was, even following the 1591 expansion, was reaching the end of its natural life and needed to be replaced; at any rate the move to the Fortune offered Henslowe an opportunity to put into practice a decade and more of experience of theatre that—on the basis of the evidence that has survived—is greater than that for any other contemporary figure. It would be odd indeed if Henslowe decided against the provision of a trap in 1600.

On the surface Middleton and Dekker's choice of name for a character may be considered simply a metatheatrical allusion to a feature of the playhouse with which audiences were familiar; as the text indicates, in the play-world he functions principally on the metaphorical plane: 'The trapdoor's set. / Moll, if you budge, you're gone' (C3r/1.2.246-47). Yet even if no actual device featured in performance—which, as this essay proposes, is unlikely, given the evidence in favour of its availability—*The Roaring Girl* is distinctive in alluding to playhouse architecture, breaking the frame, as it were, and calling

up a feature of the bare stage amidst its fictionalising of contemporary London.²⁵ Too little material relating to the trapdoor has survived to draw firm conclusions, and much more work needs to be done in this area, but one way of thinking about Middleton and Dekker's conceit is to read it as a marker of how the device had by 1611 become so established as to function in new, post-medieval ways. That is to say, that the very presence of the allusion in a city comedy not only fits with these dramatists' likening (and Middleton's in particular) of early modern London to a place of infernal corruption—as evidenced in city comedies such as *A Trick To Catch the Old One* (1605), with its Dampit character associated with hell—but also points to a knowingness about the symbolism of the trapdoor, and how it could be pressed into new service that would, nevertheless, recall its medieval origins. Ralph Trapdoor is a kind of vice figure summoned by a devilish master whose comeuppance the city comedy celebrated, and in this respect Middleton and Dekker may be seen to map a medieval template onto the genre (or vice versa). Such a reading would sit well with an older critical view of Middleton as a (re)writer of the morality tradition, and of Dekker more recently and less problematically as fitting that model too.²⁶ However it was that the Prince's Men choreographed Ralph Trapdoor's entrances and exits, *The Roaring Girl* illustrates how playmakers could not only reuse in this case a medieval model but draw attention to that usage. Whether this was done ironically or in earnest, or in a complex mixture of the two, is impossible to say. But perhaps the issue discussed here—if, and when, the trap was used—is one way of interrogating such questions.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of how the later playhouse recalled Medieval practice, see for example Schreyer.

² Few scholars dispute the view that playhouses featured a central opening, but for a dissenting opinion see Fitzpatrick.

³ No other character in the surviving corpus is so-named; see Berger et al.

⁴ See my '*Titus Andronicus* and Trapdoors at the Rose and Newington Butts'. For the performance record of Shakespeare and Peele's play in 1594 see Foakes. On the comparatively obscure playhouse south of the Bankside, see Johnson.

⁵ See for example Wells; on the influence of Seneca, see Power.

⁶ Mulholland is a partial exception, noting the possibility of an entrance from the trap late in the play; see 5.2.228sd.n, and the discussion later in this essay. Other editors pass over

the issue without comment: see for example Gomme, Cook, McKluskie and Bevington, Bevington, and Kahn.

⁷ The 1611 quarto text is not divided. I give the act/scene divisions in Mulholland's edition to help facilitate navigation; some modern editions divide the play into scenes only. All subsequent references are to the 1611 quarto, preserving spelling and layout, but I give both Q signatures and Mulholland's line numbering.

⁸ The stage is cleared at this point, but like other modern editors Mulholland does not indicate a new scene, presumably on the grounds that the location has not changed; Sir Alexander is given a new entry (4.1.105sd in Mulholland's edition) so he is included in the 'Exeunt' here: the stage is cleared, thereby.

⁹ Trapdoor must exit in order to re-enter; Mulholland's edition has Trapdoor exit soon afterwards, at 5.2.16.

¹⁰ In Mulholland's edition Trapdoor is (implicitly) part of the group exit with which the play ends (followed by the epilogue).

¹¹ See Wickham; for a critique of the widespread view that *The Jew of Malta* employed the trap, see my 'Barabas's Fall'.

¹² Dekker contributed three texts to what was a well-established subgenre of writing on popular culture: *The Seven Deadly Sins of London*, *The Bellman of London*, and *Lanthorn and Candlelight*.

¹³ Perhaps tellingly Barnardo remarks of the Ghost's first exit, 'See, it stalks away' (1.1.53): 'stalks' suggests movement towards a flanking door, rather than down into the trap.

¹⁴ Kahn, for example, glosses 'ape's tricks' as 'possibly refer[ring] to Trapdoor's attempts at courteous gestures' (2.190n).

¹⁵ Mulholland, 1.2.242-44n, notes a similar play on words in *Patient Grissil* (now regarded as a collaboration between Dekker, Chettle, and Houghton, and staged at the Fortune).

¹⁶ See Gurr and Ichikawa, 153: 'the trap as a grave reminds Hamlet of his own previous encounters with the trap, when the ghost of his dead father appeared through it. ... To the symbol-conscious Elizabethan audience ... jumping into the trap also confirmed Hamlet's readiness to enter hell like Laertes in pursuit of his revenge'.

¹⁷ See for example Beckerman.

¹⁸ See Cerasano.

¹⁹ Gurr believes *John a Kent* to be the same play as *The Wise Men of West Chester*, for which Henslowe records thirty-two appearances between 1594 and 1597; 58-59, 211-12, 212n.

²⁰ For the relevant entries in the Diary, see Rutter, 90-91; as she points out, 90, 'The throne must have been so regular a fixture in plays this Company performed that Henslowe saw good reason to invest in one that was permanently installed and was equipped with machinery to raise and lower it from the heavens'. A similar conclusion may be drawn with regard to the installation of a trap, both at the Rose and then at the Fortune.

²¹ The Fortune plays Gurr identifies are *Hoffman*, *I Honest Whore*, *When You See Me You Know Me*, *The Whore of Babylon*, *The Roaring Girl*, *No Wit/No Help Like a Woman's*, and *The Duchess of Suffolk*. None of these specify the need for a trap.

²² Rutter provides a commentary, 174-77. The document is dated 8 January 1600.

²³ The notion that the Chamberlain's Men and the Admiral's Men were rivals, artistically and economically, has long underpinned scholars' understanding of company and playhouse relations. It is widely assumed that Henslowe's decision to build a new playhouse for Alleyn's troupe was a direct consequence of the arrival in 1599 of the other company set up by the Privy Council in 1594: the new Globe, in this scenario, challenged the Rose's audience base and thus its financial position; see for example Rutter, 168: 'The possibility that the Company could not afford to pay Henslowe any of its [half share of the] gallery money for four months [in 1599] might indicate that they were facing a crisis. This was the First full season that the Rose tenants were competing with their rivals at the newly erected Globe. Financially, that competition may have spelled ruin'. However, it has been contended that Henslowe's decision to build a new playhouse was *not* a reaction to having a new neighbour on the Bankside but may date to as far back as 1597; see Landro, and Cerasano (1998).

²⁴ If *Titus Andronicus*, which seems to have come into the possession of the Chamberlain's Men in 1594, was staged at the Theatre then presumably a trap was available there. It has also been argued that the stage business with Hamlet leaping into the trap (recorded in Q1 but not Q2 or F) refers to the lost 'Hamlet' (which, like *Titus Andronicus*, was staged by the company at Newington Butts in June 1594); see Meagher, especially 146-49.

²⁵ As editors point out, it does so too in Sir Alexander's comparison of the sea of faces of the audience to his galleries (B3r/1.2.14-32), and of course most strikingly in the appearance of Moll Cutpurse in one performance (which the epilogue teasingly suggests will be repeated); for a discussion of this episode see my 'Mary Frith at the Fortune'.

²⁶ The critical paradigm of early modern dramatists as moralists has a long tradition; see for example Ornstein; like Middleton, Dekker may be regarded as writing in a protestant tradition: see for example Gasper.

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