

Searching the New Labyrinth: the Echoes of Mercutio's Banter in Paul's Cross Churchyard

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This is not a research paper exactly but a paper on doing research, a paper about writing a paper, a meta-paper, and, perhaps, a cure for insomnia. Fortunately it is short. Presented here is a quick view of a larger project in progress, supplemented by an example of how EEBO-TCP has empowered this project and how it is being used in conjunction with other more traditional methods of research.

When standing outside the current-day Globe theatre in London looking north over the Thames on a clear night, one is struck by the immediate presence of St Paul's Cathedral. The proximity of Christopher Wren's domed structure with the Globe theatre is noteworthy, but the two locales share little else in common in terms of how they actually function in our times. This view of St Paul's does encourage one to wonder, though, about the massive but quite different cathedral that occupied the same space during the early modern period (the one shown here) and about the old cathedral's possible relationship with Shakespeare and the nearby public theatres. The general thesis here is that the new form of stage drama played in new public amphitheatres, before and during Shakespeare's time, in fact grew out of the echoing print culture of the St Paul's precinct. In the image presented here one can see the flags of two theatres south of the Thames and in close proximity with the old cathedral.

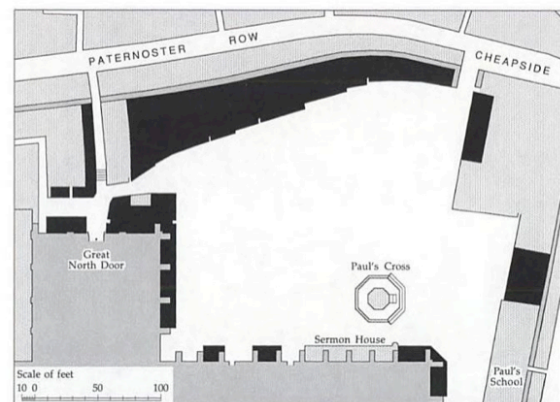


St Paul' with nearby theatres flying their flags, from a 17th-century Dutch painting, London Museum of Art.

The cathedral was of course ransacked during the reigns of Henry and Edward, partially

restored during Mary's reign, but the trend was already set to lease out to private concerns what had formerly been church property. Much of this property was leased to book sellers. Three areas in particular become important in the history of print and drama just before and during the Elizabethan period. First, in 1557, the London Company of Stationers was granted a charter and moved their offices to Peter College, on the west side, making the cathedral precinct central to the publishing industry. Next, the area on the northeast side of the precinct, Paul's Cross Churchyard, became the center of the book selling trade in London. Finally, in this area was the Paul's Cross preaching pulpit. The pulpit had been a mainstay for centuries, but when it became the site of Reformation preaching to large crowds, its function would change dramatically. During the Elizabethan period, the preaching from the pulpit was transformed. Now more people could read and had access to books and pamphlets. The Bible and other religious works circulating in the churchyard were referenced in the same locale from the Paul's Cross pulpit. In this arena, thoughts were echoed around and among congregants who had read or had heard about the often unnerving religious issues being discussed.

The sermons literally echoed from the outer walls of the cathedral and from the outer walls of the shops that flanked the pulpit. They also echoed and re-echoed in the print offered within the churchyard. Therefore, on the northeast side of the cathedral, the churchyard itself became an enclosure that amplified sermons, proclamations, and news in a much more dramatic way during the Elizabethan period because the religious print that preceded and followed a preaching event echoed in the minds of those many who came to hear sermons and to browse and read. By 1572, the churchyard was thoroughly flanked by bookshops, as Peter M. W. Blayney shows in black here.¹ This area was part of a standard walk from Ludgate Hill on the west side, through Paul's



16.3. Paul's Cross Churchyard in 1572 (stationers' shops in black).

1. 'John Day and the Bookshop That Never Was,' in *Material London, c. 1600* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 200), 327, Diagram 16.3.



From the Virtual Paul's Cross Project (online)

Walk, the nave of the cathedral, and into the book selling frontage. We fortunately have a fine and recent reconstruction of Paul's Cross Churchyard from the Virtual Paul's Cross Project.² In the image here, we can see two important features. First, the bookshops in brown, as Blayney pointed out years ago, are not small, but three storey buildings that make the Churchyard and its pulpit an accidental amphitheatre. The choir and north transept of the cathedral with the surrounding

bookshops made this area an amplifying space, whether there was a sermon on or not. Second the volume of bookshops in this area made it the centre of the London book selling industry.

This discussion is certainly not the first to note that this area resembles the early modern public amphitheatre, although such stages as The Theatre, north of the cathedral and, later, the Rose and the Globe, were more compressed, and therefore had better acoustics. Perhaps more than their architectural features, these venues were similar in that they also began to echo recent and popular print from the churchyard. Before the public amphitheatres were built, though, there were the sermons at Paul's Cross. Even what we see as the often tendentious rants of sermons and religious works in print were popular because they echoed dramatic changes in a long-established, then recklessly reconstructed cosmos. Heaven and earth, as Hamlet reminds his audience, were in transition. So, print works would have echoed from the pulpit and from the reception of many new works in surrounding bookshops and in the churchyard.

A form of print surfaced in the early Elizabethan period, a form not devoted to the devotional or to the self help categories that were the main. This was a new category of pleasure reading that was decried by the righteous well before public theatre plays were condemned by the same lot. Early on, Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet*, thinly disguised as a moral treatise,

2. *The Virtual Paul's Cross Project*. Web. <http://virtualpaulscrossproject.blogspot.jp/search?updated-max=2012-08-21T11:44:00-07:00&max-results=7>

was supplemented by such works as Arthur Golding's translations of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and William Painter's bold *Palace of Pleasure*. Such works would have been on display in or near the St Paul's precinct and probably in the bookshops of Paul's Cross Churchyard.

These printed works supplied fodder for plays well before Marlowe and Shakespeare came on the scene. This point in fact reminds us of the now famous 1582 comment by the dramatic curmudgeon, Stephen Gosson, that popular print material at that time was being "ransackt" for London playhouses. The first title Gosson mentions in his review is Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, indeed a high impact mainstay in the Elizabethan popular consciousness that eventually provided fodder for Shakespearean plots and themes.³ However, well before Shakespeare began using Painter, such plays as "Mutius Scaevola" (1577), *Apus and Virginia* (1575), *Tancred and Gismunda* (1568), the "A Masque of the Amazons" (1579), and "Timoclia of Thebes" (1574), all dating from the early period of the public amphitheatres, echoed the translated stories or "histories" in Painter's volume (extant texts in italics).⁴ Although many such pre-Shakespearean plays are lost (or perhaps never gained the dubious status of being lost), the evidence for playwrights adapting popular and novel stories from recently printed works distributed in the St Paul's precinct is overwhelming. If we flash forward from the earliest amphitheatres roughly 15 or 20 years to the 1590's, we will find that Shakespeare and his contemporaries followed the template of dramatizing well-known stories in print, specifically from Paul's Cross Churchyard. And a successful playwright was highly attentive to the echoes of popular print reception throughout the St Paul's precinct.

Here lies the challenge of collaborating digital research methodology with information we have from hard-copy publications that have yet to be scanned or made searchable. In this research one is charged to find connections between the popular reception of books, specifically in Paul's Cross Churchyard, and the influence of this reception in Elizabethan plays and ultimately in the plays of Shakespeare.

Having now enjoyed teaching *Romeo and Juliet* since a prior century, I have always been

³ Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1972), D6v. See also STC (2nd ed.), 12095.

⁴ More on the non-extant plays can be found in their respective entries at *Lost Plays Database*. Ed. Roslyn L. Knutson and David McInnis. Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2009. Web.

bothered by the obscurity of some of the exchanges between Romeo and Mercutio in the play, and even more bothered by the fact that I cannot fully explain these exchanges to students. The thought occurred to me that maybe it would be best not to follow the ruse, that is, not to view these two young men simply as Verona youth. Instead they might be seen also as among the young London gallants who would have been a common sight in the St Paul's precinct and in the boisterous cathedral nave, Paul's Walk. But what about trying to place their sentiments more precisely within the book selling frontage of Paul's Cross Churchyard?

To do this, I would have to find the location of key printed works in precise bookshops using keywords referenced by Mercutio. In Act II, scene IV, of *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio sardonically references six romantic heroines, who, he asserts, Romeo wishes to place his own love interest above.

Now is he [Romeo] for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in: **Laura** to his lady was but a kitchen wench—marry, she had a better love to berhyme her—**Dido** a dowdy; **Cleopatra** a gipsy, **Helen** and **Hero** hildings and harlots, **Thisbe** a grey eye or so, but not to the purpose. Signor Romeo, *bonjour*: there's a French salutation to your French slop. [Boldface type added]⁵

Here Mercutio seems to be showing off his classical and humanistic learning and perhaps an understanding of the source texts that featured these heroines and that only the well educated would encounter. In each case, however, an EEBO-TCP text search shows that the names of the mythological women Mercutio mentions had a comeuppance in then popular printed translations and other works in English, particularly during the 1590s, that were readily accessible to the populace before the performance and printing of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Two things are made apparent by this search: first, one did not have to read Latin or Italian or French to know these stories, and two, Mercutio seems to be purposefully echoing well-known names that would be recognized, not only by the well educated, but by the common reader.

The title pages of these works and other records indicate that popular texts in English with the names of these heroines were available from bookshops in Paul's Cross Churchyard in

5. Qtd. from William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Rene Weis (London: Arden, 2012), 2.4. 28-35.

the years subsequent to *Romeo and Juliet*. I have gone through these texts, perhaps somewhat tediously, in another article.⁶ Instead of just being arcane banter, Mercutio's speech points to the bookshops in the churchyard and shows how a Shakespearean play echoed stories and fashions that were then popular in the City of London and specifically in Paul's Cross Churchyard.

But this point needed to be proved, and the methodology here required three essentials. First comes the EEBO-TCP search, one that saves months and perhaps years of trying to find, say, the name *Dido* throughout roughly 40 years of publications that preceded the printing of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Though some texts will not show in the search at this point, a vast majority will, and more than enough to expedite evidence for thesis presented here. Second, one still needs to cross-reference digital findings with hard copy research, in this case Blayney's diagrams of the physical location of Elizabethan bookshops that have yet to be digitalized. Third, the researcher must parse significant data from insignificant data, indeed a labyrinth of texts and title pages must be explored and managed that together make the researcher feel that he might be working in an area that hovers above the researcher's knowledge and even his IQ. The researcher must bring to the examination an intuitive understanding of poetic trends and some knowledge of the Elizabethan publishing industry to draw the full picture, much of which is based on hard historical evidence, but there remains an unnerving portion of the picture that is the composite of the researcher's instinct.

Not all texts are yet available for searching, not all bookshops have been located, and gaps must be bridged by bits of speculation. We still do not know precisely how books were retailed, how long they were held in stock, or precisely how popular they were. These pitfalls noted, here we will abide by the idea that digital and other traditional resources can together bring us much closer to an accurate view of a lost, physical world and also to human consciousness during the early modern period.

We can to a degree determine popularity and popular reception by tracking reprints, by understanding that affordable quarto editions were more readily available to the common reader than folio editions, and by identifying how many references to a popular text appear in other

6. "Paul's Cross Churchyard and Shakespeare's Verona Youth," in *Renaissance Papers, 2012*, ed. Andrew Shifflett and Edward (Rochester: Camden House, 2013).

texts and then placing these texts in a physical location. When a book is marked by its title page to be sold by a specific bookseller in the precinct or the churchyard, it argues strongly for its echoing reception in the same locale.

The digital search from Mercutio's list, found in early print quartos of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597, 99), begins with nothing more sophisticated than simply typing the names of the romantic heroines into the search bar at EEBO-TCP. As mentioned above, the results show that the six mythical women mentioned by Mercutio had been canonized in popular print before the 90's and had enjoyed exposure contemporaneous with Mercutio's speech on stage and in print.

The search for Dido of Carthage presents a fine single example of what can be done quickly with EEBO-TCP. Among the romantic heroines, *Dido*, second on Mercutio's list, returns quite a few hits. Dido of course had been in the popular consciousness from translations of the *Aeneid*. These translations are returned by the search, but one is also reminded from the results that the story of Dido is in the Second Tome of the *Palace of Pleasure*. She is also mentioned in other texts that would be laborious to cover here but that also would not immediately come to mind. What the EEBO-TCP search reveals most significantly is that her tragic tale is prominently included in George Turberville's version of Ovid's *Heroides*, reprinted from the 1560's until 1584. This Englished version of Dido shows how she shifted in the popular consciousness from being the tragic queen of a heroic epic to being also and oxymoronically the passive feminine object of romantic love found in sonnets and other lyric forms.

In terms of Mercutio's ramblings during the 1590's, though, Dido's most conspicuous appearance would have been at "Thomas Woodcocke, dwelling in Pauls Churchyarde, at the signe of the black Beare," where, according to the title page, Marlowe's, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, was sold in 1594. Blayney's diagram, reproduced here, shows the Black Bear as being one the bookshops central to the book selling frontage in Paul's Cross Churchyard during the 1590's. Were we to cover the names of all of the romantic heroines mentioned by Mercutio in popular printed works roughly during the time that *Romeo and Juliet* was performed and then printed, we would find the others heroines at the Black Bear and other churchyard bookshops, including the Crown, the Queen's Arms, the White Greyhound, and the Bishop's Head.

This type of study can only attest to the bookshops mentioned by title pages, and not all

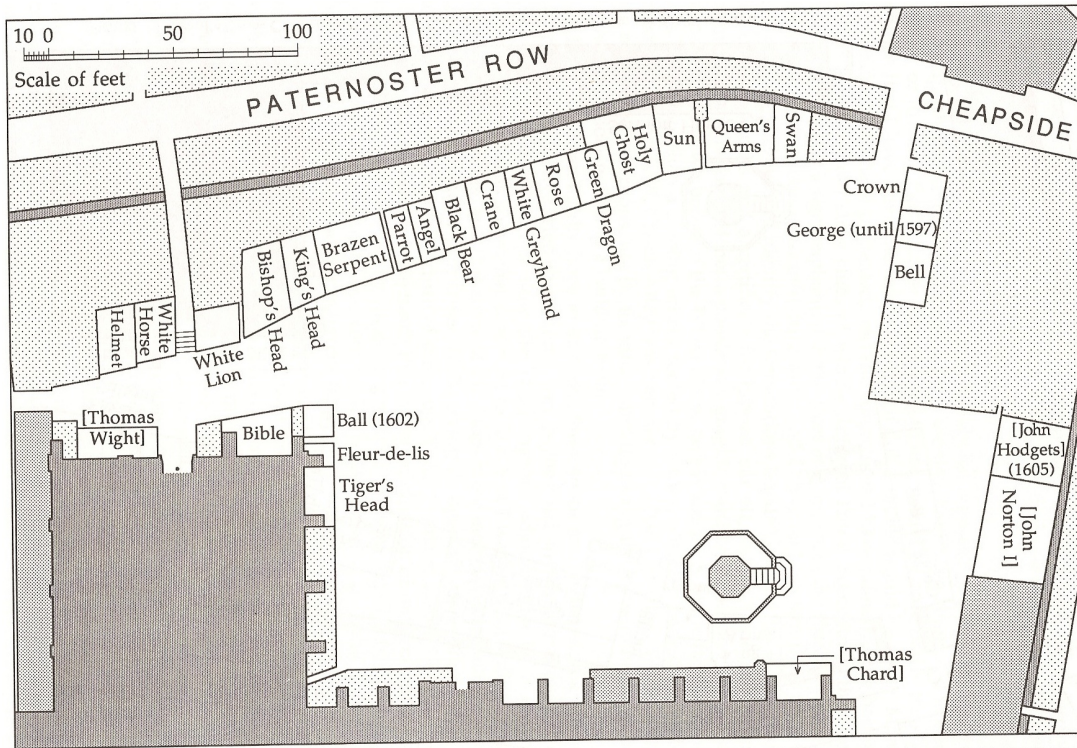


FIGURE 11. Paul's Cross Churchyard in 1600. Parenthetical dates indicate one shop last recorded in 1597, and two first recorded in 1602–05.

From Peter M. W. Blayney, *The Bookshops in Paul's Cross Churchyard*, (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1990), 76.

of the bookshops labeled here necessarily carried their signs throughout the 1590s. The Black Bear, among other venues, though, had a central location within the churchyard shops and also, it seems, within what would have been a public recognition of the heroines mentioned in Mercutio's speech. This type of research, in sum, seeks to forward the idea that the books held in these and other shops provoked impromptu public reception of them in the open space that had long been the site for sermons, public proclamations, and broadcasts. An even more ambitious notion would be that Mercutio's speech sparked in theatre audiences the recognition of churchyard gallants, the holdings of surrounding bookshops, and the attendant churchyard chatter about such holdings.

There is of course no way to determine if Shakespeare had bookshops and the reception of books in Paul's Cross Churchyard immediately in mind when composing *Romeo and Juliet*. Though here, using the powerful EEBO-TCP search function in conjunction with Blayney's seminal research (now in hard copy but probably soon to be digitalized), we can determined

something novel and enlightening about how plays were crafted for the popular ear by attempting to locate more precisely the areas in which information was broadly shared and exchanged, echoed and re-echoed, in Elizabethan London. Whatever Shakespeare may or may not have intended, his company developed a strong repertoire of plays that were sophisticated enough for court and private theater audiences but that also drew in popular crowds in large public amphitheatres. In all venues, these plays engaged audiences by echoing popular books and trends. Mercutio's speech is just one small example of how what seem to be bookish classical references for the educated ear were also popular references that were readily accessible in translations in the St Paul's precinct and specifically in Paul's Cross Churchyard.