

Did being a shareholder transform Shakespeare's writing?

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(Phys.org) —Shakespeare's experience as a shareholder in a theatre company transformed the way he wrote characters, an English literature expert has claimed.

Dr Bart van Es of Oxford University's Faculty of English Language and Literature argued that Shakespeare's decision in 1594 to buy a one-eighth share in the Lord Chamberlain's Men not only made him wealthy but meant that he got to know the actors he was [writing](#) for.

'Shakespeare is known as the first playwright with deep, distinctive characterisation and I believe he developed this because of his relationships with the company's principal actors, which comes across in his plays after 1594,' explained Dr van Es. 'He began like his literary contemporaries – writing for many different companies, often writings

parts of plays, and living on a breadline type of existence. His early writing seems designed to achieve fame and to secure patronage by publishing poems like the *Rape of Lucrece and Venus and Adonis*.'

Dr van Es says that his decision to buy a share in the company not only freed Shakespeare financially – he soon bought the second biggest house in Stratford and even loaned money to his contemporaries – but brought him into close contact with the actors performing his plays.

He said: 'Shakespeare came to be in the unique position of working and socialising with the actors in Lord Chamberlain's Men. He knew and understood their personalities, and this shaped the characters he wrote for them. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Love's Labour's Lost* even feature rehearsal scenes where a large number of characters (such as Flute, Snug, and Bottom) are physically distinct; this kind of writing had never been attempted before.

'This separated Shakespeare from the world of the jobbing playwright, whose plays would have been performed by different companies and frequently rewritten.'

Dr van Es has identified direct examples where Shakespeare's relationships with his principal actors influenced his writing. In particular, his lead comic actor Robert Armin and lead tragic actor Richard Burbage.

He said: 'Shakespeare writes roles as fools and jesters for Armin which directly reference Armin's own life as a poet and pamphleteer. Then after Shakespeare takes shares in the Globe, which is half-owned by Richard Burbage and his brother, Shakespeare begins to write major tragic roles for Burbage – including *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Lear*.'

Dr van Es suggests that Shakespeare's years of company-specific writing

came to an end as the company changed its structure in 1608. He said: 'The company increased in size and only two of the original actors remained so [Shakespeare](#) became disconnected from the [actors](#) and began to mingle more with playwrights. This in turn influences his work as he takes part in more collaborations with other authors than previously.'

Dr van Es' book, *Shakespeare in Company*, has recently been published by Oxford University Press.

Provided by Oxford University

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