The issue at hand is the Elizabethan acting companies and how to read them. We have been trained to read playwrights, not acting companies, probably because playwrights are easier. They come along one at a time, they have identities for the same reason we assume we do, and they write plays. Yet every playwright who had work staged in the early commercial playhouses would have known that reading the author alone stops well short of reading the drama of the time. I can think of some authors who would have approved of stopping short in just that way, but in an age when ‘performance’ and ‘material culture’ rank among our critical concerns, we should recognize a need to see the drama through to production, and that means seeing the drama into the hands of the organizations that copied it, rehearsed it, costumed and staged it, tried to profit from it, and sold some of it to the publishers. My vote for the most important advance that could be made just now in Elizabethan drama studies is for taking the companies as the organizing units of dramatic production. That does not mean neglecting the playwrights. It means reading their plays more fully than we have been trained to do, taking them not as authorial texts but as performed texts, seeing them as collaborative endeavours which involve the writers and dozens of other theatre people, and placing the staged plays in a social network to which both the players and their audiences – perhaps even the playwrights – belonged.

The ground has been solidly laid for this approach. The basic information about the acting companies has been set forth and examined in Andrew Gurr’s stunning Shakespearian Playing Companies (Oxford, 1996), which in effect revises major parts of Chambers’ Elizabethan Stage and Bentley’s Jacobean and Caroline Stage. William Ingram is in the process of assembling all the documentary evidence uncovered to date for individual Elizabethan actors, in what
will be a computerized revision of Nungezer’s *Dictionary of Elizabethan Actors*. The REED project continues to publish the complete extant record of the visits of the companies throughout the country (among much else). The foundations of two of the playhouses the companies used have been laid bare, at least in part. We are in position to build new histories of Elizabethan drama based on the acting companies and their playhouses – if we can learn how to read them.

We have a body of textual criticism for Shakespeare, source studies for Shakespeare, dramaturgy for Shakespeare, versification for Shakespeare, reception theory for Shakespeare, not to mention Jonson, Marlowe, and Webster, but we do not have textual criticism for the Chamberlain’s Men, source studies for the Admiral’s Men, dramaturgy for Strange’s Men, versification for the King’s Men, reception theory for Queen Anne’s Men (a special case of which will be seen below). It seems to me evident at a glance that the textual problems which have tantalized Shakespeareans since the eighteenth century could be opened to new solutions if the field were widened to include all the texts of the Chamberlain’s/King’s Men, where the good work that has been done on the Beaumont and Fletcher quartos could be joined to that done on the *Sir John van Olden Barnavelt* manuscript, or to a dozen or so other isolated textual issues that involve the company, forming a context for seeing the Shakespeare texts anew. That is just one of the advances that could be made.

The papers that follow by Lawrence Manley, Roslyn Knutson, and Mark Bayer do not take up the textual questions, but they do read acting companies in challenging ways. They were presented at the Shakespeare Association of America seminar on Acting Companies in Miami this past March. Sally-Beth MacLean and I had been asked to organize the seminar because we had just published a book on an acting company everyone hears about and no one reads, the Queen’s Men of 1583–1603. We wanted to see how many theatre historians would take up the Acting Companies topic (nineteen did – it was one of the largest seminars) and what kinds of work in progress would emerge. We were not asking for imitations of our study. We were asking for work that would have been in progress anyhow, work that was knowledgeable about acting companies in some way. The majority of the papers were documentary – half of them derived from REED projects, for example, the kind of archival research without which there would be no ‘issues in review’ in the first place. The others, represented by the three papers that follow, either crossed over from the documentary record to the plays themselves or looked into the social networks in which the acting companies and their theatres took part. These are two ways of reading the companies – by sorting out and interpreting the play texts.
company by company, or by studying the sociology of the scene in which the companies and their plays took part. (I am thinking of London as that scene, although in fact some of the REED-oriented papers touched on the society of towns and great houses in the countryside.)

Lawrence Manley shows that one must read acting companies for stage effects among other things. The repertory of Strange’s Men in the early 1590s repeatedly called upon pyrotechnics and fireworks – sensational bits of staging which sharpen the impression that this was a flamboyant, risk-taking company. There were real fires in London at the time Strange’s Men were staging these special effects at the Rose, Manley notes. Punishments for heresy and witchcraft formed a serious issue in the early 1590s, and the ‘apparent preoccupation in the Strange’s repertory with human immolation’ was alert to this controversy.

Roslyn Knutson looks into the plays of Pembroke’s Men, who acted in these same years and bore a relationship we do not yet grasp to Strange’s Men. For Pembroke’s Men it was not fire but the severed head that makes the staging stand out – six heads are put on display in *The First Part of the Contention* and *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York*. To read Pembroke’s Men is to think about stage representation from a grisly angle. The Earl of Suffolk in *1 Contention*, for example, would be represented first by an actor who is embraced by Queen Margaret, then by a property head that is still embraced by the queen (4.4 in the 2 Henry VI division), while the actor in question goes on to double one of the late-appearing characters in this crowded play. Would all severed heads have looked alike in the Pembroke’s staging? Then the queen would fondle something that looks just like Jack Cade’s head in 5.1. Or would the heads have been individualized if there were to be six in all? Knutson has no reason to take up these macabre questions, but once she points out the severed-head device in the Pembroke repertory, the questions are there to be asked, preferably in a full study of the dramaturgy that also called for heavy doubling among its actors. (Doubling roles and using property heads are concomitant matters to an acting company.)

As for the impact the companies made on their audiences and the neighbourhoods of their theatres, the challenge in the London of the early 1590s was to draw playgoers to one playhouse day after day, getting them not just to attend, but to *return*. By now the largest companies were in ‘permanent’ playhouses, places they could aim to remain in for years to come, but the drawing power of those theatres over the workaday week had to be developed. Changing the play every afternoon was the obvious method, but connecting several by theme or subject-matter was sometimes tried for the sake of
continuity and the return visit. Knutson spots Strange’s Men playing *The Jew of Malta, Tamar Cham, Part I*, and *Moly Mollocco* on successive days in January, 1593, a trio on the exotic East at the playhouse that would soon bring Londoners the two-part *Tamburlaine* if it had not already done so. At about the same time Shakespeare was building up his first series of connected English history plays, at least two of which were played by Pembroke’s Men. Knutson’s *The Repertory of Shakespeare’s Company* (Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1991) is a basic study of repertory-building in the commercial theatres, and Gurr’s *Shakespearean Playing Companies* mentions a number of trends in passing (the Admiral’s Men specialized in religious plays in the later 1590s, for example, unlike the Chamberlain’s Men). Shakespeare’s history plays were an amazing venture for their time, but they were an inspired variation on these efforts to run threads of continuity through a varied repertory.

Mark Bayer’s paper passes beyond the reception of any one play to argue that there was an ‘implicit social contract’ between the acting companies and the neighbourhoods where the theatres stood. Bayer takes a fresh look at the apprentice riots of March 1617, in which the playhouse (and alehouse) in Drury Lane to which Queen Anne’s Men had just moved were severely damaged by apprentices who marched from the Clerkenwell neighbourhood the company had just left. This was not the ‘boys will be boys’ Shrove Tuesday outbreak that it is usually assumed to have been, Bayer insists. Christopher Beeston’s decision to leave the Red Bull and move his company ‘upmarket’ to Drury Lane and a new indoor theatre left a residue of anger in Clerkenwell. So this time the Shrove Tuesday rampage had a target – the Cockpit in Drury Lane, along with Beeston’s dwelling, which was also damaged. Queen Anne’s Men had provided entertainment at prices ordinary people could afford, they had contributed to poor relief, and made a sizeable contribution to highway funds in Clerkenwell, and some of them had resided there – including, to his death in 1612, the famous clown Thomas Greene, whose antics had built up the drawing power of the Red Bull. The company at the Red Bull was part of the ‘moral economy’ (E.P. Thompson’s phrase) of the neighbourhood, an economy which the model of the marketplace does not encompass, and it is this broader social network that Bayer wants to bring to the centre of theatre history.

There are more ways of reading acting companies than three papers can show, of course. I have mentioned textual criticism above. Casting and doubling practices are another topic – Sally-Beth MacLean and I found that the casting practices of the Queen’s Men, about which there is no direct evidence, were implied by the patterns of role-distribution in their published
plays, and this may be true of other companies. The staging practices of the Admiral’s Men and Strange’s Men can now be tested against the configuration of the Rose stage-and-tiring-house uncovered in the Bankside excavation. The sociological theory which Bayer applies to the 1617 disturbances can be carried across to other well-documented occasions of playhouse and acting-company involvement in their neighbourhoods, and the plays themselves can be brought into this picture as the most specific form of impact actors have on their neighbourhoods. In that regard, Mary Bly, in *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford, 2000) has recently read the plays of the King’s Revels company of the early Jacobean years and has found an abundance of sexual humour running through them that seems designed to appeal to trendy audiences at the Whitefriars. This same company will soon be the subject of a major paper by Richard Dutton in *ELR*.

Things are moving along. For the moment, here are the latest three provocative acting-company papers, different in origin but converging on what may become the centre of attention for early theatre history in the years to come. Read on.

**SCOTT MCMILLIN**

*Playing with Fire: Immolation in the Repertory of Strange’s Men*

In the study of acting companies and their repertories, Strange’s Men must loom large. By name an older company that was reinvigorated by actors taken from other companies in the late 1580s, and dissolved by the end of 1593, this unusually large and successful company helped to transform the drama of its time. In the records associated with Strange’s Men are found the names of the principal actors – George Bryan, Thomas Pope, Augustine Phillips, William Kemp, John Heminges, and Richard Burbage – who became partners with Shakespeare in the newly-formed Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1594. Aside from the Lord Admiral’s Men’s, Strange’s is the best-documented repertory in our single best source of evidence about repertory companies, the diary of the theatre impresario Philip Henslowe. Henslowe’s diary documents two periods of daily activity by Strange’s Men: an extended period from 1 February – 22 June 1592, during which they offered 105 performances (24 different plays) at the Rose theatre, and a shorter run of 29 performances at the Rose between 29 December 1592 and 1 February 1593.