

**Dr Peter Sillitoe, ShaLT**

**Collection Enhancement Report No. 21 for the V&A, Theatre and Performance  
Department (June 2013)**

***The Cockpit-at-Court***

**NB:** Earlier, the ShaLT Collection Enhancement Reports have used the printed collections at the National Art Library (particularly the unique Dyce Collection) to highlight printed texts in terms of issues such as authorship and genre. However, bearing in mind that the key outreach goal of the AHRC funding for the project was to further public awareness about the actual theatre sites (The Theatre, Blackfriars, and so on) it seems highly appropriate for a series of reports to focus on the actual theatre spaces. Thus, this report highlights the Cockpit-at-Court. Indeed, it is envisaged that the T&P Department at the V&A might be able to host a small exhibition of Dyce material in terms of the actual Shakespearean London Playhouses. With this in mind, this report picks-out printed work at the V&A that links to the Cockpit-at-Court. This topic should prove interesting to visitors to a potential exhibition because often the title page is the only evidence we have for the performance of a play at a certain location.

The Cockpit-at-Court was a playing space redeveloped from 1629 by Inigo Jones for court performances for Charles I and his elite circle. This indoor royal theatre was contained within the confines of Whitehall Palace. It staged plays until 1642 and the outbreak of civil war, then reopened in the early part of the Restoration. It was originally the site of a cockfighting space at court (though used as a makeshift theatre for plays in the earlier Jacobean period), and the plays put on at this exclusive courtly space were actually plays from the indoor and outdoor theatres of our period.

The Cockpit-at-Court allows us to see a link between the public stage and the activities of the court. Records show that in the Jacobean period the cockfighting space was used for the performance of various plays but in the Caroline period greater plans were put

into place. As chief court architect Inigo Jones was asked to redesign the space as a theatre (he had previously built the Jacobean Banqueting House). The new theatre opened for plays in November 1630 and the indoor playhouse was meant to allow the leading companies to perform their publically staged narrative tales for an exclusive courtly audience. It was designed with a dais with private access up a special stairway, so that the king and queen could sit confronting the stage, his courtiers and ambassadors all round him.

As an indoor theatre, the Cockpit-at-Court staged numerous dramatic works for the king, including some of the old classics by Marlowe, Heywood, Fletcher, Jonson, Ford, Beaumont and Fletcher, Webster, Massinger and Dekker. This activity continued until 1642 when playing ceased at all theatres owing to the outbreak of war.

### **The Cockpit-at-Court and the V&A Collection**

The image below (courtesy of the V&A Museum) shows the titlepage of Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, an old Elizabethan play revived and performed at the Cockpit-at-Court during the reign of Charles I.

*The Famous*  
**TRAGEDY**  
 OF  
**THE RICH IEVV**  
**OF MALTA.**

AS IT WAS PLAYD  
 BEFORE THE KING AND  
 QUEENE, IN HIS MAJESTIES  
 Theatre at *White-Hall*, by her Majesties  
 Servants at the *Cock-pit*.

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*Written by* CHRISTOPHER MARLO.

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LONDON;  
 Printed by I. B. for *Nicholas Vavasour*, and are to be sold  
 at his Shop in the Inner-Temple, neere the  
 Church. 1633.