

THEATRES IN SHAKESPEARE'S ERA

Before the Great Plague of 1592–1593, in the time when Shakespeare first came to London, the city boasted several acting troupes. In 1558, when Queen Elizabeth I ascended the throne, any gentleman could maintain a troupe of actors. By 1572, it became illegal for any nobleman below the rank of baron to maintain a troupe, although other companies could perform by obtaining a special license, which had many performance restrictions. Although this arrangement severely restricted the number of acting troupes, it extended governmental sanction to the remaining licensed companies.

When the Great Plague of 1592–1593 hit, closing the theatres and decimating the population of England, many acting companies dissolved, while others were forced to amalgamate with other troupes for survival. Two significant companies emerged in 1593, and they would rival each other for years. One company, The Lord Admiral's Men, was headed by Edward Alleyn with financial backing from Philip Henslowe. The other dominant troupe, The Lord Chamberlain's Men (the troupe in which Shakespeare was an actor, dramatist, and shareholder, later renamed The King's Men when James I took the throne in 1603), was run by the Burbage family.

It wasn't until 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death in 1616, that all his plays were assembled into one volume. This collection, referred to as *The First Folio* (because it was printed in folio format, the largest, most expensive, and most prestigious kind of book), included previously published plays as well as plays never before published. Some of the works in *The First Folio* can be traced to the author's original version of the text, yet some were recreated from annotated versions of the play script including detailed directions for the action, settings, etc. or even the memories of the actors themselves.

THEATRICAL CONDITIONS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Globe and its predecessor, the Theatre, were public playhouses run by the Chamberlain's Men, one of the two leading theatre company of which Shakespeare was a member. The Globe was built in 1599 by Chamberlain's Men theatre company and was destroyed by fire in 1613. It was rebuilt the next year and closed in 1642. A modern reconstruction opened in 1997 to learn more about Shakespeare's plays.

In Shakespeare's time, almost all classes of citizens, excepting many Puritans and like-minded Reformers, came to them for afternoon entertainment.

Entertainment was an important part of life in Shakespeare's England. Popular sports were like bear-baiting (the encouragement of a dog and chained bear fighting), cockfighting and an early form of bowling. In London, a main form of entertainment was the theatre. Some theatres were very large and could hold more than two thousand people. Entrance was cheap and even poor people could attend the theatre.

The actors were also summoned to court, to perform before the monarch and assembled nobility. In times of plague, usually in the summer, they might tour the provinces, and on occasion they performed at associations of law students, at universities, and in great houses. Popularity led to an avid demand for plays: early in 1613 Shakespeare's theatre company could present "fourteen several plays." The theatre soon became fashionable, too, and in 1608–09 the King's Men started to perform on a regular basis at the Blackfriars, a "private" indoor theatre where high admission charges assured the company a more select and sophisticated audience for their performances.

The drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries is regarded by modern audiences as one of the supreme artistic achievements in

literary history; in its own day, however, it was viewed by many as a scandal and an outrage—a contested and controversial phenomenon that religious and civic authorities strenuously sought to outlaw. In 1572, in fact, players were defined as vagabonds—criminals subject to arrest, whipping, and branding unless they were “liveried” servants of an aristocratic household.

Furthermore, “popular” drama, performed by professional acting companies for anyone who could afford the price of admission, was perceived as too vulgar in its appeal to be considered a form of art. The city regularly petitioned the court for permission to shut them down. Theatres were closed twice during the plagues to reduce the spread of the disease. Queen Elizabeth I liked to see well-written and well-rehearsed plays at court during Christmas festivities, but was not inclined to pay for the development and maintenance of the requisite repertory companies herself.

Religious antitheatricity, whether Anglican or Puritan, extended to issues of content and the specific means of theatrical representation employed by acting companies. Puritans were particularly incensed by the transvestite character of all English companies prior to the Restoration. Women onstage would have outraged them as well, but the practice of having boys don women’s apparel to play female roles provoked a host of irate charges. Such cross-dressing was viewed by Puritans as a violation of biblical strictures that went far beyond issues of costuming.

The drama that developed in the arena playhouses of early modern London was rich in its diversity, aesthetically complex, and ideologically powerful in its far-reaching cultural and political resonance.

Born of the contradiction between court license and civic prohibition, popular theatre emerged as a viable cultural institution only by materially embodying this contradiction, dislocating itself

from the strict confines of the social order and taking up a place on its margins.

Between 1588 and 1613, Shakespeare wrote 38 plays. His dramatic work is commonly studied in four categories: comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances.

In 1603, Shakespeare's reputation earned his acting troop the sponsorship of James I, who requested one play performance per month. By this time, Shakespeare had written most of his comedies and histories.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare's reputation as one of the world's best dramatists did not begin until the late eighteenth century. His sensibility and storytelling captured people's attention, and by the end of the nineteenth century his reputation was soundly established. Today, Shakespeare is more widely studied and performed than any other playwright in the Western world.