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CHAPTER 4

Performances, Playhouses, and Players

Going to a Play, Circa 1595

Let us imagine ourselves transported back to the London of Queen Elizabeth, where we are attending the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. The date is sometime in 1595 or 1596, probably in the autumn or summer, just before two o'clock in the afternoon. We are seated on benches in a gallery of the Theatre, one of the first permanent structures built for drama in England; constructed in 1576 by James Burbage, it is located just north of the walls of the City of London in a district called Shoreditch. The Curtain, another public theater that stands nearby, was built a year later. We are not attending the Globe because it has not yet been built. (All of these playhouses are indicated on the map printed on p. 127.) Today's play was written by William Shakespeare, a poet (as dramatists are known) who has made his name with a series of comedies (*The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labor's Lost* being two of his successes) and history plays based on the Wars of the Roses. The company preparing to perform, resident at the Theatre, is known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a group of players who left other companies in 1594 to join under the patronage of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, and has rapidly become the most successful troupe in England. William Shakespeare is a permanent member of this company, a shareholder, as is its leading actor, Richard Burbage, son of the carpenter-entrepreneur who built the Theatre. Musicians are warming up, actors are rushing around in the *tiring-house* ("attiring house," or dressing room) behind the stage, refreshments are being sold in the playhouse by vendors who move among the crowd, and spectators — having paid their admission in cash to *gatherers*, the early modern equivalent of ticket takers or ushers — are

filling the seats in the galleries or standing in the yard in front of the platform or stage. (Laurence Olivier's 1944 film version of *Henry V* opens with a visual reconstruction of this preperformance activity; *Shakespeare in Love* [1998] also gives a fair idea — except for the secret presence of the Queen — of what it might have been like to attend a performance in an Elizabethan amphitheater.)

Once the play has begun, we quickly notice that some of the conventions and performance practices common in the Elizabethan theater differ markedly from our own. To begin with, the stage is bare, without pictorial scenery; there is no souvenir program to introduce the characters; we must deduce such information as setting and time from the dialogue. The Prologue informs us that the play will last about two hours and that the action will occur in Verona. When the characters Sampson and Gregory enter, we know that they are outdoors because they are carrying swords and shields, which are customarily removed on entering a building. We gather that the area is public since they encounter their enemies, the Montagues ("I will frown as I pass by"), and citizens rush in with clubs and spears. The Prince's judgment confirms our conclusion: "If ever you disturb our streets again . . ." This first scene has much coming and going and falls into several sections, but it does not end until Romeo and Benvolio exit together at line 238, and the stage is momentarily empty. But only momentarily. Without delay "Enter CAPULET, COUNTY PARIS, and the Clown" — they may even be entering from one door as Benvolio and Romeo go out the other — and the second scene begins. But we are not necessarily in the same place.

Scene in Elizabethan usage refers not so much to a unit of dramatic organization as to a location ("In fair Verona, where we lay our scene . . ."), a place where characters meet and converse: when the place changes, the scene changes. On occasion the scene will change — or slide to an adjoining location — even with characters still on the stage, as occurs between what modern texts call scenes 4 and 5 of the first act. In scene 4, the Montagues are clowning and listening to Mercutio's account of his Queen Mab dream in the street, presumably in front of the Capulet house; they then "march about the stage" and presumably stand to one side. Next the Capulet servants enter to prepare for the party (scene 5), and the host and guests enter at line 16; thus, the Montagues have crashed the party without moving. The indoor scene has come to them.

The point of all this detail is to demonstrate that the Elizabethan stage is what the great modern director Peter Brook, speaking of his ideal stage, refers to as "the Empty Space." Although large scenic properties such as beds, scaffolds, and tents were used, the public theaters did not employ backdrops or sets in the modern sense. There was no front curtain to raise and lower between scenes. The stage was bare so that it could be filled imaginatively and then instantaneously emptied and refilled. This nonpictorial theatrical style affords flexibility and a rapid pace. It also requires that the spectators activate and exercise their curiosity and intelligence, as the Prologue to *Henry V* states explicitly: "Suppose that you have seen," "O, do but think / You stand upon the

rivage [shore] and behold a city. . .," "Work, work your thoughts," and "eche out [supplement] our performance with your mind." As audience members we must participate by "playing along."

Such engagement also permits us to mark the passage of time. Since the drama is being performed in full daylight — this being London, full sunlight is infrequent — the dramatist gives verbal and visual codes for day and night. The play apparently begins in the morning — "You, Capulet, shall go along with me, / And, Montague, come you this afternoon" (1.1.99–100) — a point clarified by Benvolio's "But new strook nine" (161). If we are attentive, we can chart the passage of the day. As scene 2 begins, Capulet has already had his interview with the Prince, and perhaps Montague has too — "But Montague is bound as well as I, in penalty alike" — although the Prince may merely have promised Capulet that Montague would be so warned. In any case, we move through the day as the first act proceeds. Scene 3, the discussion of Juliet's possible marriage to Paris, ends with the Nurse's bawdy "Go, girl, seek happy nights to happy days." The women exit, whereupon night arrives immediately with scene 4: "Enter ROMEO, MERCUTIO, BENVOLIO, with five or six other MASKERS; TORCH-BEARERS." Ironically, the illuminating presence of torches serves to indicate darkness on stage. Night continues through several scenes — during the Capulet party (1.5), as Romeo escapes from his friends after the party (2.1), as he enters the Capulet orchard and woos Juliet (2.2). There are more torches at the party ("she doth teach the torches to burn bright"); the Montagues very likely carry them in searching for Romeo, who in order to elude his pursuers does not carry one; perhaps one burns at Juliet's window. In a play that exploits the imagery of dark and light, day and night, and black and white, the presence of such stage props would enrich the text as well as serve as signals to the audience. At the end of Romeo and Juliet's "balcony scene" (2.2), morning approaches, or at least threatens to: "Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, / That I shall say good night till it be morrow" (2.2.184–85). Four lines later, at the beginning of 2.3, the dawn has indeed arrived with Friar Lawrence's entrance: "The grey-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning night." The remainder of the play continues the pattern: we are told about the passage of time when it is helpful for us to know about it, but if such knowledge would be confusing, we are discouraged from thinking about the clock.

The bare stage is peopled with actors in sumptuous clothes. In fact, eye-popping costumes were one of the great attractions of the English stage, provoking comment from foreign visitors and Puritan critics. Wealthy citizens in their wills sometimes left their best clothing to favorite servants who, not legally allowed to wear it, sold it to the players. Clothing was so expensive that the Elizabethans carefully recycled it, creating a vigorous trade in secondhand apparel. The Prince in *Romeo and Juliet* would most likely wear rich robes of velvet or another plush fabric, trimmed perhaps in fox or rabbit or ermine; doublets were often embroidered in silver and gold; ladies' gowns were made of taffeta, silk, cloth of gold, and satin, and then finished with sleeves

n complementary fabrics. Hats, gloves, boots, ruffs, cloaks, jerkins, chopines (high-heeled shoes), stockings, handkerchiefs, and other such accessories would be equally impressive.

Whether the costumes were appropriate to the Veronese setting of *Romeo and Juliet* appears to have been less important than their magnificence. In other words, credibility and cultural specificity were outweighed by the claims of spectacle for its own sake and the impracticality of faithfully representing the proper apparel of ancient Rome, ancient Greece, ancient Britain, Elsinore, Venice, the Forest of Arden, and Illyria. The crude sketch by Henry Peacham, reproduced on page 128, may represent a performance in an Elizabethan theater. One expert has very recently argued that the sketch shows a scene from another *Titus* play, not Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* as previously thought (see Schleuter). In either case, the drawing gives a sense of the visual eclecticism that must have characterized the staging of virtually any play with a non-English, noncontemporary setting. Apparel could be employed specifically, however, to fulfill the same semiotic function as torches and other props: nightgowns signified a late hour or surprised awakening, riding gear a journey, and various kinds of headwear the social or economic status of the wearer. Color could also be indicative, as we know from Hamlet's "customary suits of solemn black." The spectrum of colors reflected the rage for novelty characteristic both of the age of discovery and of fashion in most ages: popular hues included carnation, puke (dark brown), tobacco, and goose-turd green.

A theatrical troupe's wardrobe of magnificent costumes was one of its most valuable assets. Careful expense records were kept, as we know from the transcription of a handwritten list of costumes given on page 129. This inventory was prepared by Edward Alleyn, chief actor of the Lord Admiral's Men and son-in-law to Philip Henslowe, the theatrical manager. A glorious costume stolen by a disgruntled actor could be very costly to the company. For a production of Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* in 1603, the Lord Worcester's Men paid the author six pounds for the play, but spent six pounds, thirteen shillings, for the gown worn by the heroine (see Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare: His Life, His Language, His Theater* 52). The cost and brilliance of costumes served as a primary target of Puritan attacks on the stage, such as the ranting in William Prynne's *Histriomastix* (1633): "Those plays which are usually acted and frequently in over-costly effeminate, strange, meretricious, lust-exciting apparell, are questionlesse unseemely, yea unlawfull unto Christians" (qtd. in Barish 86). Into this assault on costume Prynne manages to smuggle a favorite complaint about the sexual indeterminacy associated with the theater: young men were wearing dresses in public.

Women did not act on the English stage until after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. In our imaginary performance, the roles of Juliet, the Nurse, Lady Capulet, and Lady Montague, as well as some of the extras at the Capulet party and in the street, are probably being played by boys, although some scholars contend that certain female parts, especially older women, may have been taken by men. London offered a few theatrical companies made up exclusively of boys, referred to in the gossip between Hamlet and Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern as the "little eyases" [unfledged hawks]. Some of these, like the company called Paul's Boys, were attached to schools or cathedrals and offered public performances intermittently over several decades. But in the major troupes most of the boy actors were apprenticed to members of the company and played women's roles until their voices changed or their physical growth made them no longer credible. This transvestite theater, as it has come to be known, had a palpable effect on the playwrights' creative choices; for example, it could limit the number of female parts called for and help to shape those roles. Moreover, it encouraged playwrights generally and Shakespeare in particular to develop the thematic possibilities of cross-dressing.

Writing with a certain group of actors in mind and with a financial stake in suiting his matter to his means, Shakespeare usually created only three or four female roles for each play. In *Julius Caesar* there are thirty-four men's roles, not counting messengers, senators, attendants, and spear-carriers, but only two women's parts. To some degree this paucity of female characters is a function not just of personnel but also of subject: historically, the assassination of Caesar was committed by men. And yet it may be that since the company consisted primarily of adult males Shakespeare dramatized stories without large numbers of female roles. Even in comedy, where the topic is courtship, men outnumber women: of the twenty-one named characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, only four are female. If he had especially gifted boy actors, as he must have had in at least two phases of his professional career, Shakespeare exploited their talents by writing challenging parts for them. At the end of the 1590s, for example, the company probably included two exceptionally talented boys for whom Shakespeare wrote such parts as Portia and Nerissa (*The Merchant of Venice*), Beatrice and Hero (*Much Ado about Nothing*), and Rosalind and Celia (*As You Like It*). Then around 1606 he must have found an actor with star quality, one who partly inspired the creation of three of Shakespeare's greatest parts — Lady Macbeth, the irrepressibly talkative Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, and the monumental role of Cleopatra. Although these parts may have been performed by one or more adult males, the actor was probably a gifted juvenile. If so, his youth would have added even greater irony to the Egyptian queen's fears, expressed in her speech to Iras near the end of the play, of being taken captive to Rome and made to watch "Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I' th' posture of a whore" (5.2.220–21).

The convention of boys dressed as girls led early modern playwrights to explore ideas of sexual roles and deceptive appearances. Often Shakespeare elected to return the boy actor to doublet and hose by disguising the female character as a boy, as when Rosalind in *As You Like It* disguises herself as Ganymede, taking the name of the beautiful, androgynous cupbearer of Jove. The layers of reality become dizzying in the wooing scenes of acts 3 and 4, where Rosalind as Ganymede plays Rosalind allowing herself to be courted by Orlando. Thus a boy actor plays a female character who plays a boy who pretends to be a girl. Recent scholarship has emphasized the homoerotic implications of these conventions, suggesting that the relationship between adult and apprentice actors may have been sexual, and that the dressing up of pretty boys

as pretty girls had a frankly sexual appeal to the males in the audience.¹ Thus the Puritan opponents of the theater may have had a point in complaining about the erotic atmosphere and the "effeminacy" of stage practices. In *Twelfth Night*, Orsino describes his new manservant Cesario (actually Viola disguised) in erotic terms:

For they shall yet belie thy happy years,
That say thou art a man. Diana's lip
Is not so smooth and rubious; thy small pipe [throat, voice]
Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
And all is semblative a woman's part. (1.4.30-34)

Whatever the strength of the sexual charge, whether powerful or muted, Shakespeare was aware of it and eager to exploit the ironic discrepancies it generated. And modern directors have been quick to highlight these ironies as well. In Ian Judge's 1994 production of *Twelfth Night* at Stratford-upon-Avon, Orsino kissed Cesario on the lips at the end of act 2, scene 4, well before the public revelation of the character's gender in the final scene.

The Playhouses

As recently as 1989 a construction crew working on the south bank of the Thames, demolishing one office building to replace it with another, uncovered the architectural remains of the Rose Playhouse. What they found embedded in the mud was not much to look at: the foundations of pillarlike corner supports for the polygonal building's sides, the foundational outline of the original and the redesigned stage, a narrow trench or drip line made by rainwater falling off the thatched roof, bits of mortar and hazelnut shells that served as flooring in the yard in front of the stage, and evidence of a major reconstruction project apparently undertaken to increase the capacity of the building. A photograph of the foundations and a conjectural drawing of the outlines of the building are found on pages 132-33. This new tangible evidence, limited though it is, has been enormously helpful to scholars' efforts to ascertain the size and shape of the building before and after renovation, the dimensions of the stage, and other structural details that have a bearing on what the building looked like and how it was used for the presentation of stage plays. The original building was a fourteen-sided polygon about 72 feet in diameter, with an inner yard measuring not quite 50 feet in diameter; the stage was rather shallow, only about 15½ feet, and 35½ feet across at the rear, tapering to about 27½ feet at the downstage end. The roof was thatched.

The importance of the Rose find encouraged archeologists to dig just a few yards away, across Park Street, where they promptly unearthed (in October 1989) some of the remains of the Globe: a small section of outer wall, the foundations of a turret stairwell attached to that wall, and a small section of the

gallery wall (an inner wall facing onto the yard). More may yet be uncovered: some of the ruins seem to extend under existing buildings, which will have to be moved or removed before further excavation can occur. (The reconstruction of the Globe that opened on the South Bank in 1996 is slightly closer to the river than the original building was. For more on this re-creation, see pp. 372-73 in Chapter 10.) As incredible as it may seem, it took almost four hundred years to uncover the foundations of two of the most important buildings in British history. Now that we have studied them, we know considerably more about these structures and the plays that they housed than we did ten years ago; however, there is still much to learn. None of the public playhouses is still standing, and the archeological and pictorial evidence is sketchy and often conflicting.

The surviving drawings from the period, for example, often contradict what we know about the size of the theaters or seem inconsistent with recorded details of their structure. The Globe foundations discovered in Park Street are, after all, a physical record of the second Globe Playhouse, built immediately after the first Globe burned to the ground during a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* in June 1613. The second playhouse, about which we know a little, was said to have been built on the foundations of the first structure, in which many of Shakespeare's plays were originally performed, but we cannot be sure whether changes or improvements were introduced as the building was reconstructed. C. Walter Hodges's drawing on page 134 provides a conjectural view of the second Globe. The survey of the playhouses that follows, therefore, offers a useful lesson in the problems of theater history: much of it is speculative, details are still emerging, and even now there is detective work to be done.

In the 1590s several outdoor playhouses, what we tend to call public theaters, were operating around London. Indoor playhouses, or private theaters, had been in use in the 1570s and '80s; after the turn of the century they became increasingly important. (A leading theater historian, Andrew Gurr, regards the distinction between public and private as misleading, the main differences being the presence of a roof and the price of admission, so he calls the first type *amphitheatres* and the second *hall theaters*.) The outdoor playhouses were designed as theaters and located outside the City walls because they were thus beyond the reach of the London authorities, who tended to have Puritan sympathies and were therefore opposed to theatrical performances. The indoor playhouses were converted spaces within existing buildings. Their presence within the City was ambiguous, since the Blackfriars district where the main indoor playhouse stood was geographically within the walls but was legally known as a *Liberty*, a site not subject to City statutes.

The convenient notion that the Theatre was the first permanent playhouse in England — a sentimental choice, given its appropriate name and its connection with Shakespeare's plays — has recently been superseded by awareness that the Red Lion had been built as a playhouse for James Burbage almost ten years earlier. The principal outdoor playhouses were the Theatre (built 1576), the Curtain (1577), the Rose (1587), the Swan (1595), the Globe (1599),

¹See several of the essays in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman, particularly those by Lisa Jardine and Peter Stallybrass.

and the Fortune (1600). The Theatre and the Curtain, along with others such as the Fortune and the Red Bull (c. 1604), stood north of the City; the Rose, the Swan, and the Globe to the south just across the Thames, on the Bankside. A fascinating historical footnote concerns the connection between the Theatre and the Globe. In 1596 Burbage lost his lease on the property where the Theatre stood, and so the Lord Chamberlain's Men were unable to play in their accustomed place. After renting spaces and moving around for two seasons, the company devised a scheme: they hired workmen to dismantle the Theatre, hauled the timbers and ironwork across the river in January 1599, and engaged a contractor named Peter Street to use the materials to construct the Globe.

The major indoor playhouse was Blackfriars. It took its name from the old monastic neighborhood where in 1594 James Burbage purchased the Priory, a building that had been used as a theater between 1576 and 1584. His attempts to convert it for use by the Lord Chamberlain's Men were blocked by an early modern version of a neighborhood alliance that feared the effects of traffic and mischief. Over a decade later, in 1608, the space came into its own when the King's Men were authorized to use it as a theater. A year or so later they began to play there regularly while continuing to perform at the Globe.

Understanding the London playhouses and their function as performing spaces must begin with the so-called de Witt drawing of the Swan on page 135. The sketch we have was actually made circa 1596 by the Dutch scholar Arend van Buchell: he copied it into his notebook from a drawing sent him by his friend Johannes de Witt, who had just visited London. To some scholars the sketch raises more questions than it answers — the perspective is off, there are no spectators except perhaps a few above the stage, and there is no “inner stage” — but it does provide an introduction to sixteenth-century theater architecture and stagecraft. Another important picture that helps us to visualize these spaces is Wenceslas Hollar's 1644 engraving known as the *Long View of London* (p. 136), although one error in it demands correction: the arenas labeled “The Globe” and “Beere bayting [bearbaiting]” have been mistakenly reversed. Other relevant information comes from builders' contracts, financial details recorded in Henslowe's *Diary*, and the excavations of the last decade.

The amphitheater stage was elevated several feet and protruded into the center of the arena, jutting out from the housing that contained the backstage area and extended to the outside circular wall. The size of the stage at the Fortune was about 43 feet wide and 27 feet deep, larger than the Rose's platform described on page 114. Two columns on the stage itself supported a roof that partly covered the playing area; this canopy, known as the *heavens*, was adorned with paintings of the sun, moon, and stars visible from below. The *heavens* corresponded to the *hell* beneath the stage. A trapdoor in the stage gave access to the area beneath the stage so that in plays like Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus could be taken into hell. The hidden area under the stage platform also allowed for special effects: at a mysterious moment in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the stage directions stipulate that the “*Music of the boboys [oboes] is under the stage*”; in *Hamlet*, the Ghost disappears through the trapdoor and

then speaks from “the cellarge.” Andrew Gurr has brilliantly concluded that, in the de Witt drawing, what appear to be curved trestles or pilings supporting the stage are in fact gaps in the curtains that concealed the below-stage area from the audience's view.

At the back of the stage were doors, through which entrances and exits were made. The number of doors is much disputed and may have varied from theater to theater. Some stage directions include the words “*at the other door*,” which would seem to specify two. On the other hand, certain texts obviously require a *discovery space* at the rear of the stage, an area hidden by a curtain or perhaps a door similarly covered: such a place could conceal Polonius when he hides behind the arras in the closet scene of *Hamlet*, or hide Desdemona's bed until it was thrust forward in the final scene of *Othello*. In other words, some playhouses may have had a middle door or hidden space; even in the Swan, with its two doors, such a concealed area could have been rigged up temporarily with curtains. Scholars still debate the existence and importance of the *discovery space*, but the most recent thinking suggests two kinds of spaces, one of them, according to Gurr, “permanent, a curtained alcove or *discovery-space* in the tiring-house wall, which served as a shop, tomb, cell, study or closet,” the other “a special property, a raised platform, or even a curtained ‘booth’ set up on stage” that served as a tent (in the history plays) or Cleopatra's monument or an executioner's scaffold (*Shakespearean Stage* 149).

Above the stage in the de Witt drawing we see a gallery or a series of windows or rooms that may have served, like expensive boxes in a modern sports stadium, as private viewing rooms for the wealthy; known as the *tarras*, this section may also have been “the lords' rooms” referred to in a contemporary play script. One or more of these gallery rooms may have housed musicians for performances in which their services were wanted. The *tarras* was also used for plays in which two levels were specified, such as the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Perhaps one of the above-stage rooms was reserved for such action in plays that required it, or perhaps the spectators were temporarily pushed aside. Higher still, above the *tarras* and the heavens, was the *hut*, an enclosed space that permitted hidden stagehands to create special effects, such as shaking sheets of metal for thunder, and to operate machinery for “flying” immortal or magical characters, such as Ariel in *The Tempest*, onto the stage. In the Swan drawing, a trumpeter makes use of a small platform attached to the hut, perhaps to announce the beginning of a performance. Most of the outdoor playhouses seem to have been constructed more or less according to this model, with minor variations. The key to theater architecture in this period is that its relative uniformity — a bare stage with heavens, hell, a trap, doors leading to the tiring-house, and a *tarras* — promotes the flexible, nonspecific nature of the staging implicit in the play texts that survive. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, the stage can represent a sumptuous room in Orsino's house at one moment, the deserted Illyrian seacoast at the next, and Olivia's garden immediately thereafter. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the action moves fluidly back and forth among various indoor and outdoor locations from Egypt to Rome to Athens. The playing areas of the hall theaters may have been slightly smaller

different in detail, but they probably resembled those in the amphitheatres, or the King's Men performed the same repertory at both the Globe and Blackfriars.

What we call the *auditorium*, the area for the spectators, differed significantly in the outdoor and indoor theaters. The amphitheatres were large structures, much bigger than the faulty perspective of the Swan drawing suggests. The Globe was a polygon with perhaps as many as twenty sides (i.e., virtually round), a diameter of about 100 feet, and a capacity of some 3,000 spectators. The dimensions of the Swan were similar. The inside gallery walls were about 10 feet from the outer walls, which means that the diameter of the yard must have been about 80 feet (Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage* 143). The Rose, before its enlargement in 1592, was considerably smaller, about two-thirds the size of the Globe. Spectators would have entered at a single door and paid a gatherer one penny to be admitted to the yard, where they then stood around the base of the stage. Those who wanted to watch the play in greater comfort would have sought entry into one of the galleries, at the price of another penny; a seat in the higher galleries with a more expansive view would have cost a third penny. (See p. 8 in the Introduction as well as pp. 233–36 in Chapter 7 for contexts and equivalents of these prices.) The best seats in the house were located in the *lords' rooms*, those private portions of the gallery nearest the stage (and perhaps even over the stage itself) which cost sixpence. One benefit of the recent archeological discoveries is that they reveal the different forms of entry at the Rose and the Globe: at the Rose, a spectator entered the yard first and then the gallery; at the Globe, as the presence of outer stair turrets indicates, people entering the gallery did so directly from the back, without going through the yard (Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage* 134).

Who were the spectators entering the yard and the galleries? The makeup of the audience at the outdoor playhouses is much contested because such demographic information is hard to obtain. One view holds that Shakespeare's plays drew spectators from all but the lowest economic and social strata, that the audience was truly heterogeneous: merchants and their wives, aristocrats, whores, lawyers from the Inns of Court, laborers, visitors from the country and from abroad, apprentices, servants. Another account describes a more privileged crowd made up of people who could afford not only the price of admission but also time for pleasure in the middle of a workday. Such a view also relates attendance to literacy, noting that drama would have first attracted the educated, who would have been comparatively well-off. The repertories of particular theaters apparently drew different audiences: James Wright, writing a century later in 1699, reports that the Fortune and the Red Bull "were mostly frequented by Citizens, and the meaner sort [lower classes] of People" (qtd. in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 251). Whatever the majority at any given house, the evidence suggests that most social classes, from apprentices to gallants, were represented in the amphitheatres. If a woman was respectable, she was necessarily escorted by a man; if not, not. Men outnumbered women — once again literacy may be a factor — but there

was a substantial number of women among the 3,000 people who packed the Globe for Shakespeare's most popular plays.

The indoor playhouses were considerably smaller, although the price of admission was higher, so they were at least as profitable to the companies as the larger amphitheatres. Blackfriars, the private theater about which we have the most information, comprised one large upper room in a large building, much like a giant ballroom or other public space at the top of a modern structure. The room's dimensions were about 66 feet by 46 feet. The stage stood at one of the smaller ends of the room, with a tiring-house behind it. Galleries curved around the length of the other three walls, with benches rather than standing places in the central area in front of the stage, here known as the *pit*. Whether there were boxes at the back of the Blackfriars stage is uncertain. In structure and detail, the stage apparently resembled that in the amphitheatres, with a trap, doors leading from the stage to the tiring-house, space for musicians, and a mechanism for flying.

The stage at Blackfriars had one feature that the amphitheatres probably lacked — spectators.² About ten stools around the edges could be hired by fashionable theatergoers who wished to see well and be seen. These gallants paid two shillings (twenty-four pence) for such a privilege. The price for entry into the hall, guaranteeing a place in an upper gallery, was sixpence. An additional shilling purchased a bench in the pit, and the expensive boxes, partitioned sections of the gallery, cost half a crown (two shillings and sixpence). These prices meant that ordinary citizens did not usually patronize the indoor theaters, and this exclusivity contributed, of course, to their popularity. Their location in town rather than in the suburbs or across the river also gave them special appeal for the socially and economically prominent (and those who coveted such prominence). Their sudden vogue was mainly attributable, however, to their location indoors, away from sources of natural light: since all illumination was supplied by candles and torches, it was possible to play at night.

Shakespeare appears to have noticed the prosperity and fashionability of his evening audiences. In *The Winter's Tale*, when Time, the Chorus, enters to announce the passage of some sixteen years, he also declares his familiarity with recent customs and modes of behavior.

I witness to

The times that brought them in; so shall I do
To th' freshest things now reigning, and make stale
The glistening of this present, as my tale
Now seems to it. (4.1.11–15)

Thus Time asserts the irresistibility and constancy of change, and this passage may have had a particularly chilling effect on the sophisticated Blackfriars audience of 1610. Adorned in their most glittering clothing and jewelry, having paid dearly for their admission, and conscious of their superiority (whether

²Although some scholars believe that spectators may have sat on the stage at the Globe, the evidence is so far inconclusive.

social, political, or financial), the members of this chic crowd are warned that their days are numbered, that the darlings of fashion are always supplanted by others who are wealthier, more beautiful, more powerful. When Shakespeare began his career around 1590, these social considerations were not as meaningful as they unquestionably were by its end. The rise of indoor playing spaces helped to establish the link between attendance at the playhouse and social prominence, to give the theater the function that in some quarters it still maintains, that of social barometer.

The Companies

The fortunes of the London theatrical companies should probably be seen as an episode in the history of economics as well as the history of literature: a professional troupe was a company in both the financial and the theatrical senses. Groups of players had been touring the countryside and performing in town squares and London innyards since the fifteenth century; and as London grew in size and importance in the sixteenth century, the companies naturally began to gravitate toward it. Since actors were low on the social ladder, occupying the same level as vagabonds and beggars, the law required that troupes of players be sponsored by aristocratic patrons, men who accepted nominal responsibility for the companies (although in practice this connection was fairly remote). Throughout the 1570s, '80s, and '90s, many groups of professional players formed, merged, dissolved, and reconstituted themselves under a variety of patrons: Lord Strange's Men, Lord Pembroke's Men, Lord Worcester's Men, the Lord Admiral's Men, and the Lord Chamberlain's Men. (This list does not include the companies of boy actors, mentioned earlier, that were associated with educational institutions and that sometimes performed in the hall theaters.) By the middle of the 1590s, however, the many groups had distilled themselves down to two dominant companies, the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men. In 1598 an order from the Privy Council (the queen's executive committee) established these two as the only adult companies licensed to play in London.

Regular playing in a single location by the same group of actors is largely responsible for the maturing of English drama in this period and thus for the dramatic output of William Shakespeare. The success of these companies owes much to their connection with two strong theatrical families, headed by Philip Henslowe and James Burbage. The Lord Admiral's Men prospered thanks to the business acumen of Philip Henslowe, landlord, moneylender, theatrical promoter, and father-in-law of Edward Alleyn, the celebrated actor who originated heroic roles such as Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Doctor Faustus for the Admiral's Men. In 1587 Henslowe built the Rose, in partnership with John Cholmley, and then in 1592 enlarged it to increase profits. When the Lord Chamberlain's Men disassembled the Theatre north of town and opened the Globe in 1599 just next to the Rose on the Bankside, Henslowe responded to this competitive threat by arranging with the builder of the Globe, Peter

Street, to build a new theater, the Fortune, in the neighborhood just vacated by the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

Henslowe's passion for minute financial detail has been invaluable to theatrical historians. He kept a daily record of loans, expenditures, losses, money collected from performances, and the cost of business lunches. He also kept a log of plays performed on specific dates (see p. 137).³ From Henslowe's *Diary* we learn, for example, that in the 1590s the usual fee paid to a playwright for a new play was five to eight pounds (the fee rose to ten to twelve pounds after 1600); that costumes were exceedingly expensive; that it generally took about three weeks from delivery of the manuscript for a company to mount a production of a play; that his company had among its properties "i [one] Hell mought [mouth]" (presumably for Faustus to be dragged into), "i bores head & Serberosse [Cerberus's] iii heads," and "i lyone; ii lyone heades; i great horse with his leages [legs]"; and that the average wage for a minor actor was ten shillings (or one-half of a pound) per week.

Henslowe's counterpart in the rival company was James Burbage, the carpenter-turned-impresario who arranged to build the Red Lion in 1567 and the Theatre in 1576, who purchased the Blackfriars building in 1595, and whose sons, Cuthbert and Richard, were his partners in his later theatrical dealings. Richard, the principal actor for the troupe, played such parts as Richard III, Shylock, and most of the great tragic figures from Brutus and Hamlet through Antony and Coriolanus. Links obtained among all the major theatrical figures and companies: Edward Alleyn had acted under Burbage's sponsorship at the Theatre in 1591 until the two fell out over money. James Burbage's principal achievement was probably the consolidation in 1594 of the Lord Chamberlain's Men from members of various other companies. This company became the greatest of all the early modern theatrical troupes and the vehicle for the production of all Shakespeare's plays from 1594 to the end of his career in 1612 or 1613. In 1603 the company came under royal patronage and was known thereafter as the King's Men. The company performed at court more than any of its rivals, in fact as often as all the other companies combined, and it continued its domination of the theatrical scene by producing the plays of Ben Jonson, John Webster, Thomas Middleton, and, after the retirement of Shakespeare, John Fletcher, Philip Massinger, John Ford, and James Shirley. Even after Shakespeare's death in 1616 and Richard Burbage's in 1619, the company carried on until the closing of the theaters in 1642.

Theatrical promoters like Henslowe and Burbage were influential but not all-important, for the permanent adult companies such as the Admiral's Men and the Chamberlain's Men were in fact cooperatively owned and run. The most important members were the shareholders, those men who held a financial interest in the company, jointly owned its assets (play texts, costumes, properties), and profited from its success. Being a shareholder in a London company was profitable, but it also entailed considerable responsibility: a

³Upon Henslowe's death these papers passed to Alleyn, who preserved them; they were discovered in the late eighteenth century by the great Shakespearean editor Edmond Malone and have been published in modern editions.

sharer had to commit his talents and services exclusively to the company, and could sell his share and leave the troupe only with the consent of his fellows. The company had eight shareholders in 1596, including William Shakespeare, Richard Burbage, the clown Will Kemp, Augustine Phillips, and John Heminges, one of the sponsors of the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays a quarter of a century later, in 1623. In 1603, when they became the King's Men, this number increased to twelve. The customary number for the major London companies seems to have been about ten. Although theatrical work was not a socially respectable profession, its financial rewards could provide a kind of social standing: in 1597, as we have seen in Chapter 1, Shakespeare used some of his shareholders' profits to buy the second-largest house in Stratford. In addition he invested in the Globe Theater as a property. Such financial backers were known as *housekeepers*. In the season of 1598-99 the Lord Chamberlain's Men turned the disaster of their eviction into a financial bonanza when they moved the timbers of the Theatre across the Thames and built the Globe. The costs for this venture, which must have been enormous, were shared by the two Burbage sons, who put up half the sum, and by five shareholders, who together raised the other 50 percent. Thenceforth, instead of having to turn over to the landlord half of the gallery receipts from each performance, the company in its new location was its own landlord; with anywhere from 500 to 3,000 spectators paying at least a penny (many of them more than that), the receipts were considerable (Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage* 44-45).

The sharers formed the core of each company, taking major parts (as in the case of Richard Burbage) and supplying scripts (as in the case of William Shakespeare), but they needed help with the multitude of tasks involved in theatrical work. Hired men, paid by the week, filled out the company, taking less important stage roles, playing musical instruments, assisting with properties and costumes, and serving as gatherers. (Interestingly, there is evidence that women sometimes worked as gatherers.) In addition there were the boys who played women's parts, some of whom would have been apprentices to the sharers. Some of Shakespeare's plays could have been performed by as few as a dozen or so actors, but most required considerably more. The average size of a full London company, counting apprentices, hired men, and musicians, was between twenty and thirty; for certain major productions even more performers and helpers were probably engaged; and on tour the number would have been reduced substantially. Actors in each company were almost certainly typed according to their specialties, and Shakespeare wrote with these actors in mind. (In fact, certain surviving printed texts refer to the character by the actor's name.) Burbage assumed the great tragic roles; the other great type was the Clown, for which Shakespeare's specialist changed. Until 1599 Will Kemp, a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, acted the Clown's parts, and Shakespeare seems to have had him in mind in writing the roles of Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, and perhaps Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Kemp's decision to sell his share and leave the company coincided with Shakespeare's increasing attraction to tragedy and to the darker shades of comedy, and so the Clown's parts, now written for Robert

Armin, became more mordant and reflective, roles such as Feste in *Twelfth Night* and the Fool in *King Lear*.

The disproportionate number of characters to actors — the thirty-six parts in *Julius Caesar* and a company of perhaps twenty-four actors — meant that in virtually every play many actors performed several parts. A player taking a major role such as King Lear or Rosalind would not have acted another part in the same production, but other cast members would have. This convention of doubling, combined with the absence of scenery, the lack of artificial lighting in the amphitheatres, and the proximity of the audience, fostered what is known as the *presentational*, as opposed to the *representational*, style of performance. In presentational theater, the illusion of a fictional narrative is maintained at the same time that the audience is reminded that a fiction is being performed. In other words, there is no strict pretense that this is Hamlet striding the battlements at Elsinore; rather, the audience is conscious that they are watching Burbage playing Hamlet on the stage of the Globe. And doubling can augment the spectators' pleasure, first by multiplying the instances of representation (one actor playing several parts) on which drama is based, and, second, by increasing the sense of virtuosity that any good actor brings to any single part.

Whether sharers or hirelings, the actors worked very hard. The major companies played every day except during Lent and on major church holidays, and their repertoires were immense. The Lord Admiral's Men, in the season of 1594-95 (autumn to summer), presented thirty-eight plays, twenty-one of them new (Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage* 103). Even great favorites were not repeated too often lest their potential popularity be damaged. Apparently a new play was added every couple of weeks or so. This repertory system required the actors to do a quick run-through of the scheduled play in the morning and then perform it in the afternoon. After a play had been running for some time, less rehearsal time would have been necessary; but with long gaps between performances, inevitable changes of personnel, and other unpredictable events, touch-up rehearsals must have been needed. Sometimes scripts were altered for revival: Ben Jonson was paid for additions to Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* some fifteen years after its initial run. And then new plays would have to be rehearsed as well. Naturally the company sharers would want to perform as often as possible, but they could not play in Lent, during epidemics of plague, or when vile weather made outdoor performance impossible.

The Theater and the Authorities

The municipal government and the Crown were both attentive to the growing popularity of the theater in Elizabethan London. Prohibitions against playing were issued by the Privy Council to defend against the spread of disease in periods of plague. Since medical science had not yet identified the cause of bubonic plague — bites from fleas spread by rats — it was assumed that the

presence of crowds would contribute to contagion, and so the theaters were closed. Virulent outbreaks of plague ravaged London between 1592 and 1594 and again in 1603, when over 30,000 people died (in a population of just over 200,000), and in both cases the theaters were closed for over a year (see the plague bill reproduced on p. 33). The authorities also closed the playhouses during Elizabeth's final illness in 1603. In fact, during the first decade of the seventeenth century, public playing was forbidden repeatedly and for very lengthy periods: had it not been for handsomely rewarded performances at court and additional royal largesse, Shakespeare's company could have suffered financial ruin.

Had regulation of the theater been left to the London authorities, the playhouses would have been closed permanently. The members of the City Corporation, if not Puritans themselves, were responsive to the pressures of their Puritan constituencies, and the Puritans were increasingly antipathetic to actors, the practice of cross-dressing, colorful costume of any kind, the pretense or hypocrisy inherent in acting, and imaginative literature in general. But the theaters, located as they were in those dubious neighborhoods known as the Liberties, fell under the scrutiny of the Crown, not the City, and Elizabeth's and James's governments were more tolerant of the pleasures of playing and concerned that the municipal authorities of London not become too powerful. Government regulation was officially in the hands of the Privy Council, but the agency that executed the monarch's will in the sphere of public entertainment was the Revels Office headed by the Master of the Revels. Henry VIII had created this office to provide courtly performances, and it continued to fulfill that function under Elizabeth and the Stuarts, as well as to ensure that the Crown's interests were protected at all times. The Revels Office, like most bureaucratic agencies, was in an ambiguous position toward those it regulated. The Master found the players to be an easy and relatively cheap source of courtly entertainment: rather than having to devise and fund an elaborate performance himself, he could buy one ready-made by bringing the players to court for a royal performance.

The primary duty of the Master of the Revels was to license plays for performance, so the theatrical companies were required to submit a new script to the Revels Office to be checked for offensive material. The Master received a fee (seven shillings) for this service, and additional payment (five to ten shillings) for licensing the playhouse. During James's reign the Master was also responsible for checking and approving plays for print, again for a fee. The Master of the Revels, in other words, was the government censor, and material considered seditious or irreligious was removed from the text. A few surviving theatrical manuscripts bear the marks of censorship, and the occasional printed text reveals such cuts: *Richard II*, for example, was originally printed, almost certainly for political reasons, without the section in act 4, scene 1, in which the king is actually deposed.

On certain points the government could be extremely sensitive. In February 1601 the earl of Essex led his followers into London in an ill-organized and

Lord Chamberlain's Men, paid specifically for the purpose by the supporters of Essex, mounted a performance of *Richard II*. Augustine Phillips, one of the shareholders of the company, was called before the Privy Council to explain. (An excerpt from his testimony is given on p. 140.) King James could be equally touchy. The satiric *Eastward Ho!*, a collaborative play by Ben Jonson, John Marston, and George Chapman, was presented in 1605 by a children's company at Blackfriars. It is full of topical jokes about the Scots, who had descended on England with their favorite son in 1603 and were purchasing knighthoods; it also ridicules City merchants and the Puritan economic ethic. The Crown was not amused, and Chapman and Jonson went briefly to jail, Marston having escaped arrest by leaving town. In 1606 Parliament passed legislation regulating the language of the stage, establishing a fine of ten pounds for anyone who should "jestingly or prophanely speake or use the holy name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie." Although it could and sometimes did act punitively, the government for the most part maintained a hands-off policy toward the stage, and recently scholars have come to believe that this tolerance may itself have been a political act. In other words, by permitting a small degree of opposition to be expressed or enacted in the controlled space of the public playhouses, the government employed the theater as a kind of safety valve, an outlet for releasing political pressure before it increased to an explosion.

Governmental support of the theater had to do with pleasure as well as with politics: Elizabeth and James (and James's Queen Anne) liked plays. The monarch never attended the theater, however, no matter how fashionable it became or how aristocratic the audience. When the sovereign wished to see a performance, the players were summoned to the palace and paid for their services, as indicated in the records quoted on pages 140-41. The Lord Chamberlain's Men frequently performed Shakespeare's plays at the court of Elizabeth, and while we should be skeptical of the rumors to which the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were susceptible — that Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* because Elizabeth wished to see Falstaff in love, or that Edward Alleyn returned to the stage after retirement because the Queen missed seeing him act — there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that Elizabeth encouraged the players not just because they were useful to her and to the Commonwealth but because she enjoyed their work. Scholars disagree on the extent to which James was engaged directly with the theatrical troupe that bore his name; J. Leeds Barroll has recently claimed that the company's connection with its patron was merely nominal (*Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theater*). But whether or not James gave his players much thought, the company's participation in royal festivities increased markedly under the Stuarts, and court records attest that Shakespeare's plays were extremely popular at court. Performances during the holiday season — from early December through early February — were especially numerous. In addition, this was the age when the court masque flourished in the work of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones. In such extravagant entertainments as *The Masque of Blackness* (1605) and *The Masque of Queens* (1609), players and dancers were

