An introduction to the Elizabethan (and Jacobean) theatre

In England as elsewhere, the Middle Ages had two main dramatic forms: mystery plays and moralities, based mainly on allegorical representations and scenes from the Bible.

After the rediscovery of the Ancients during the Renaissance, the Elizabethan era witnessed the development and rise of a new literary genre and social phenomenon: the theatre.

The setting

The last decades of the 16th century (with the Theatre in 1576) saw the advent of a new phenomenon: **permanent theatres**, or **playhouses**, specifically designed for staging plays. Perhaps the most famous of them, the Globe, opened in 1599.

Mainly for legal reasons, they developed just **outside the City of London**, first in Shoreditch to the north, then in Southwark, on the South bank of the Thames: it had for some time been London's pleasure district: pubs, bear dens—and much more (in modern terms, it was London's red-light district)...

Southwark by W. Hollar (1642)

The Globe recreated

The playhouse

The Elizabethan stage was very different from what we know today: there was no specific (movable) décor that would change, allowing the audience to see the setting of a specific scene in a given play, but an **all-purpose stage and backdrop**: the audience's imagination had to make up for it. This made the staging of the play particularly important; for example, the candles that characters held (in *Othello* for instance) were more than simple props: they were a sign that the scene was taking place at night, even though the play was performed in the afternoon. Here is how the Prologue to *Henry V* presents it:

> Pardon, gentles all,
> The flat unraised spirits that hath dar'd
> On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
> So great an object: can this cockpit hold
> The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
> Within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt?
> O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
> Attest in little place a million;
>
> And let us, ciphers to this great account,
> On your imaginary forces work.
> Suppose within the girdle of these walls
> Are now confin'd two mighty monarchies,
> Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
> The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:
> Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts:
> Into a thousand parts divide one man,
> And make imaginary puissance;

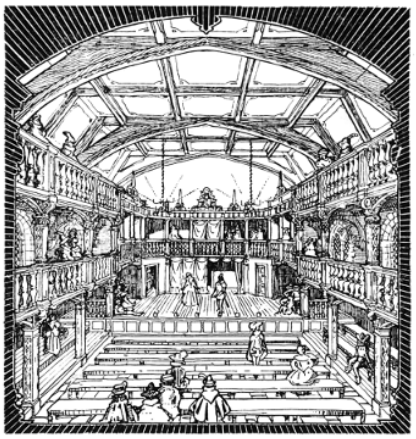
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i'th'receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,
Turning th'accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass

This does not mean that it was dull — far from it! There were special effects all round: a trapdoor could open on to Hell or a basement, special machinery (as in *deus ex*) could be used, smoke and light effects were common (and led to the first Globe burning down in 1613: theatres were mainly built with wood and had thatched roofs), and music was a frequently used device. A band was usually playing on the gallery (balcony).

One important moment in many plays (mainly comedies) was *the masque*, when actors and audience (including, sometimes, the highest nobility, perhaps even the Queen) performed an elaborate interlude of singing and dancing (cf. Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme* for a French analogue).

As R. A. Foakes puts it (introduction to *King Lear*, Arden 1997), "the audience stood or sat on three sides of the stage, in close proximity to it, and in the same light as the actors, so that the relationship between players and spectators was an intimate one".

Around the stage, **many trades thrived on the audience**: people selling food and drink (think of the opening scene in *Cyrano*, or any rock concert hall today), prostitutes, pickpockets, and so many others.



The Blackfriars (1921)

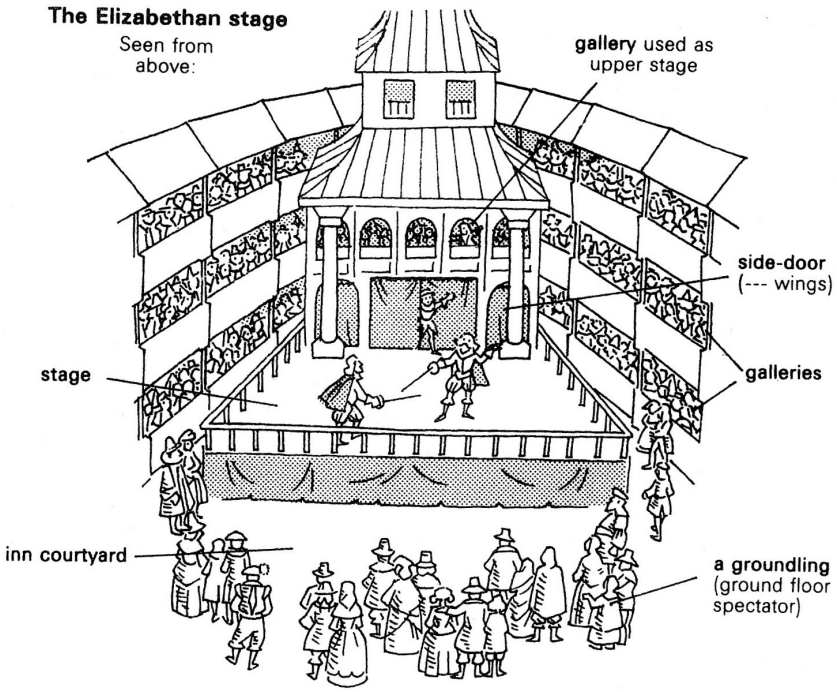
Another, slightly later, development was the advent of **indoor venues**, such as the Blackfriars Theatre. These were intended for a more select audience, and offered evening performances, as opposed to the afternoon plays of outdoor playhouses. Seats were more expensive (sixpence was the lowest admission price), and courtiers came there to be seen as much as to see plays, the wealthiest of them paying for seats on the stage (a situation comparable to what took place in France during the *Grand siècle*).

The people

The plays could develop profound political or philosophical considerations, but it was first and foremost **showbusiness**...

A major characteristic of the Elizabethan theatre was the **multilayered nature of the audience**, at least in the case of outdoor theatres. Far from being appreciated only by the elite, the relatively new form of entertainment appealed to the whole of the English population (in modern terms, it should be compared to the cinema, or to Broadway shows, rather than to highbrow drama). At the bottom of the social hierarchy, and literally the lowest part of the audience, were the *groundlings*, who had bought the cheapest tickets (usually one penny) and stood in front of the stage. Access to the galleries was more expensive, but it meant a seat and shelter from the rain. The most expensive seats, usually occupied by the nobility, were directly in front of the stage in the upper gallery. It was rather a popular form of entertainment in all senses of the word, with spectators eating and drinking, chatting, sometimes even shouting at the actors, throughout the performance; it seems that they did not hesitate to show their discontent if they found fault with the show... All this implied that the playwright had to be able to address all of the audience during a play, frequently at the same time. Devices such as double entendres, double enunciation, puns with several layers of understanding, etc. allowed the text to work on several levels at the same time, with multiple possible interpretations for some puns or passages; for example, the title *Much Ado About Nothing* can in itself be understood at least in three ways: the literal meaning (the villain's scheming brings about disorder from nonexistent events), "much ado about noting" (i.e. about seduction), "much ado about an O-thing" (the theatre itself?).

Beside the need to captivate the audience, this is also a reminder that drama was above all a verbal (textual and oral) form of entertainment. To quote R. A. Foakes again: "It is hard now in our increasingly visual culture to imagine the excitement of listening to eloquent poetry and prose in stage dialogue, a



From F. Grellet, *An Introduction to English Literature*, Hachette 1993

pleasure that drew thousands to the theatres of London. [...] The absence of modern technical devices meant that the atmosphere, the sense of location, time, external scene, as well as ideas and emotions, had to be generated mainly through the dialogue."

Acting companies were male-only, for it was forbidden for women to be actors. So **female parts were played by young boys**, who later "graduated" to male roles when their voices broke, although some female parts could still be played by adult male actors for comic effect. This obviously gives additional depth to the many cross-dressing scenes in plays like *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night* for example. Some actors had specialities: William Kemp, for instance, was particularly famous for his skill as a clown; playwrights sometimes wrote roles into their plays that were specially tailored for a given actor.

It is worth remembering that in most cases, **the author was before anything else a member of the troupe** — frequently combining the roles of writer, director and actor, as well as shareholder and (associate) manager of the commercial venture that the building itself represented. This may be an explanation for the scarcity of stage directions in Elizabethan plays: most of the time, the actors did not build their show from an established text, the staging of a play being rather a work in progress, where everyone could offer suggestions that the author incorporated into the play as they went along, each participant editing their own (manuscript, for books were a very expensive commodity at the time) copy of the text when a change was accepted. Other probable consequences of that are the frequent **topical references** to be found in the plays — some of which could be added at a time, and possibly dropped if the play was reprised later, as was common practice; the actors would also sometimes extemporize (improvise) references to the news of the day — and the differences between different versions of some plays (see also "The text" below).

Given the considerable costs involved by the running and maintenance of a theatre, the costumes, props, and so on, and the relatively small income that it generated, playing companies could easily find themselves in perilous financial situations. This was even more true if, as it regularly happened, the authorities ordered the theatres to be closed temporarily, either because of an outbreak of the plague (such a crowd in such a small place was sure to help the spreading of the disease) or of political and social unrest (such a crowd could easily turn into a mob, then into a riot). What is more, not everyone was in favour of drama: the Puritans condemned it, many public figures distrusted it, and powerful courtiers

regularly took offence at jokes which they thought were directed at them. And an actor's or playwright's life had yet other dangers in store, as evidenced by the deaths of Thomas Kyd, of hunger at the age of thirty-five, Robert Green, of "a surfeit of wine" at the age of thirty-four, or Christopher Marlowe, who was stabbed in a tavern brawl when he was twenty-nine...

To help face such difficulties and uncertain times, the best that could happen to a troupe was to find **a patron**, i.e. a noble personage who would offer them protection and, of course, financial support. The company would then bear his (or her) name: for instance, the troupe around Shakespeare and Richard Burbage was under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain, and was thus called The Lord Chamberlain's Men; they reached an even better situation when the new sovereign, James I, took them under his protection, and the company became The King's Men in 1603 — this also meant that they performed a number of plays at court in the following years and were lavishly paid; Shakespeare was a respected and prosperous man when he retired and later died.

The plays

When the (almost) complete works of Shakespeare were published in 1623 (an edition termed **the First Folio**), his editors divided his works into three categories: *tragedies*, *comedies* and *histories*. Already in 1603, the Royal Patent for the King's Men mentioned "the art [...] of playing comedies, tragedies, histories, interludes, morals, pastorals, stageplays, and others". This suggests that it was a shared categorization, and that Elizabethan spectators expected a play to fall into one of those genres, although to our modern mind many histories look like tragedies, except for their subject-matter. And Francis Meres (*Palladis Tamia*, 1598) called Shakespeare "the most excellent [playwright] in both kinds for the stage", apparently considering only tragedy and comedy. Modern critics and editors sometimes add other categories, such as *problem plays* and *romances*. Besides, some plays have been reassigned with time; *The Changeling* (1622) by Th. Middleton and W. Rowley, for example, was published as a comedy in 1652 but is now considered a tragedy.

Tragedies followed the structure and analysis given in Aristotle's *Poetics*: because of *hamartia* ("tragic flaw" or error, frequently *hubris*, i.e. overweening pride), a hero experiences a sudden and radical reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*), leading him to a pathetic moment of *anagnorisis* (recognition, acknowledgement, realization of his tragic fate), the *mimesis* (imitation, representation) of which arouses "fear and pity" in the audience, thus leading to *catharsis* (emotional cleansing, purification). In other terms, a tragedy is made of *rising action*, *climax* and *falling action* (ending with the *denouement*). At least, that's what Philip Sidney asked for in his *Defence of Poesie* (c. 1580, published 1595), adding that "the stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precept and common reason, but one day. Moreover tragedy and comedy must be kept severely apart".

But it is quite obvious that Shakespeare — or most of his colleagues, or their audiences — couldn't care less about Aristotle's rules. On the contrary, many plays pointedly have a subplot that acts as a parallel or counterpart to the main plot (Gloucester and his sons in *Lear* for example). Another specificity of the time is the use of *comic relief*, or comic (including burlesque) passages and characters within a tragedy that both temporarily alleviate and finally enhance the tragic tension (the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, or the porter in *Macbeth*) — this lack of a clear division between the comic and tragic registers is precisely why V. Hugo summoned Shakespeare in his Romantic manifesto. And in terms of respecting the proprieties, the Elizabethan theatre has little in common with French Classical drama: many characters fight and die on stage, much of the plot is about sex and blood, bawdy or even obscene jokes abound, etc. In a similar way, any clear-cut division into scenes or acts is a reconstruction: at the time, scenes simply followed one another. That Shakespeare didn't follow Aristotle's definition closely is one reason why one should be careful not to apply the phrase "tragic flaw" too rigidly: it doesn't necessarily mean that the tragic plot stems from one specific, identifiable character flaw in the hero (Othello's jealous nature e.g.), and such a mechanical application of the concept can lead to misunderstandings.

Still, some lines couldn't be crossed — not literary rules, but social, political, and religious limits. On the one hand, it was impossible actually to perform a wedding at the end of a comedy (see below), i.e. to utter the actual words of the rite, which the Church would have considered blasphemous and which

would have led to the play being censored. On the other hand, one couldn't afford to make powerful enemies, let alone incur the displeasure of the Sovereign.

In **histories** (or **historical plays**), the plot revolves around episodes from the more or less recent history of England, especially the lives and reigns of kings (Richard II, Henry VIII, etc.) in so far as they represented moments of crises. Their structure is frequently that of a tragedy, but there is, most of the time, an added stake: the past episodes found an echo in the Elizabethan (or Jacobean) present, emphasizing the legitimacy of the sovereign or her (or his) politics, for instance. One telling example of it is *Richard III*: the whole play can be read as showing how it was a good thing to kill that tyrant, which Elizabeth I's grandfather did, *ergo* she is England's legitimate monarch — one has to remember that her position as a once-illegitimate child and a woman was fragile.

Comedies were funny: an Elizabethan comedy was not only a play that ended well (there are exceptions — this is the reason why some critics call such plays as *The Tempest* or *The Winter's Tale* romances: they are not tragedies or histories, but are not particularly comical), it was a play where the audience actually laughed, and there was no clear distinction between "high" (witty humour) and "low" (burlesque, slapstick) comedies then, nor was there any ban on lewd, bawdy humour. Therefore, many of the jokes, whether practical or verbal, are about sex and cuckolds; cases of misidentification (sometimes through cross-dressing characters), misattribution or misunderstanding were also very popular. The overall structure of a comedy is not very different from that of a tragedy: some event or character introduces chaos (disorder, confusion, a disruption of natural, divine or political laws: a kind of *peripeteia*) into the world, but order is restored in the end through the removal of the disturbing factor (the exile of the villain, the resolution of the mystery, etc. : a form of purgation) and the play normally ends on a wedding (or several): all is well that ends well... In some cases, the tone of the play can be quite dark, in moments at least, right to the happy ending: those could perhaps be called tragicomedies (see for example *The Merchant of Venice*, or some passages in *Much Ado About Nothing*).

The text

Formally speaking, the plays can be **in prose, in verse, or some of both**. As a rule, verse is more frequent in the tragic plays (tragedies and histories), but it does not mean that all of them are in verse and only in verse, or that verse is not to be found also in comedies. The general trend is that verse is especially used in highly lyrical or solemn passages (including monologues) by characters who are to be found at or near the top of the social ladder, prose being the style of choice for servants, buffoons and "rustics" (unless they belong, for instance, to the pastoral genre, as the shepherds do in *As You Like It*).

When verse is used, it is for the most part **unrhymed iambic pentameter**; nonetheless, a rhyming couplet is frequently to be found as the close of a monologue ("... The play's the thing // Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." *Hamlet* II.2). Besides, other kinds of verse can be used: in songs or song-like passages (the witches' spells in *Macbeth*) mainly.

Nŏw ĭs thĕ wīntĕr ŏf ŏur dīscŏntēnt
Mādе glōrĭŏus sūmmĕr bў thĭs sūn ŏf Yōrk;
Ănd āll thĕ clōuds thăt lōur'd ŭpōn ŏur hōuse
Īn thĕ dēep bōsŏm ŏf thĕ ōceăn būrĭĕd.
Nŏw ărе ŏur brōws bōund wĭth vĭctōrĭŏus wrēaths;
Ŏur brūĭsĕd ārms hūng ūp fŏr mōnŭmēnts;
Ŏur stērn ălārŭms chānged tŏ mērrў meētĭngs,
Ŏur drēadfŭl mārchĕs tŏ dĕlīghtfŭl meāsŭres.

Iambic pentameter

As far as editing — i.e. establishing the text of a given play — is concerned, the main difficulty lies in the fact that playwrights did not always publish their works, and that the world of publishing was not what it is today. This means that we sometimes have several, very different versions of one play. Only in extremely rare cases do we have access to the author's manuscript drafts, frequently called his *foul papers*, or to a manuscript *fair copy* such as were distributed to the cast. When a play had been performed long enough, and had achieved success, it was sometimes published, usually in a **quarto** edition (a relatively small format, and thus not too expensive); but this was not always done by the playwright or his company: publishing competition was ruthless, and publishers sometimes printed their own version of a very popular play based on the memory of an employee specifically sent to watch the play to that effect — a form of copyright infringement that the Stationers' Register, a system under which a publisher

could record the titles of books he had the rights to (and would or would not publish soon), helped only to contain. Human memory being what it is, such editions were often faulty, or recorded non-final versions of the plays, and often led to what is usually called (especially in the case of Shakespeare's plays) **bad quartos**, as opposed to the **good quartos** published with the playwright's agreement, and possibly under his supervision and from fair copies of the play. The case of Shakespeare is further complicated by the existence of the **First Folio**, the first one-volume compendium of his works, published in 1623, nine years after his death, by former friends and colleagues of his Heminges and Condell: this large-format edition provides yet another version for some of the plays: in some extreme cases (*Hamlet* and *King Lear* most notably), we have two or three *very* different versions, and editors can only try and determine (not to say "guess") which is closest to what Shakespeare actually intended... Even in easy cases, there is of course no guarantee that the printed text was what the actors had actually delivered on stage: Elizabethan texts are frequently much too long for actual performance (or is this only according to our modern standards?), and it is highly possible that only abridged versions ever were performed.

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Cromwell's Puritan Republic brought all this to an end: plays were banned in 1642 along with many other forms of entertainment, and the theatre reappeared only with the Restoration in 1660, leading to a whole new phase in the history of English drama — one with actual women on stage, for one thing...