

CHAPTER ONE

# THE MALONE TRADITION

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Among its first acts at the beginning of the English Civil War, the puritan Parliament in London issued an edict called *A First Ordinance Against Stage Plays and Interludes*; thus it abolished, as it hoped for ever, the whole profession of play-acting and all its works. It had been, in the view of that Parliament a notorious offender against public order and morality for half a century. The edict came into effect on 2 September 1642, and on that day the few ‘playhouses’ still working in London – they had all been feeling the pinch of the troubled times – finally shut their doors, became slowly derelict, and were eventually pulled down. The players disbanded their companies and went out to find what other employment they could. Some took service in the king’s army and fought through the war: some were killed in it. Afterwards a few came together again and tried surreptitiously to put on a season of plays at a small theatre, a converted cockpit, which they found still standing; but at their third performance they were broken in upon by a company of soldiers and marched straight off the stage into prison, still in their stage clothes. That was the last scene ever played upon the stage of the great playhouse tradition that had survived from Shakespeare’s time.

The Shakespearean theatre, which from its character and date of origin is usually allowed to be known as ‘Elizabethan’, even into the reign of James I and later, had thus come to an end after a continuous career of just sixty-six years. It had begun with the building of the first public playhouse, called The Theatre, in the London suburb of Shoreditch in 1576, and it ended with the Ordinance of 1642. Within that span it had been a phenomenon unsurpassed by anything in theatre history. There at that historic moment in London, for the first time anywhere, certain companies of common actors established themselves as an independent profession, with their own

ENTER THE WHOLE ARMY

managers, their own writers, their own finances and, above all, their own specialised buildings where, at their own gates, they collected the entrance money from their own large and enthusiastic audiences. In that sixty-six years in and around the City of London there had been built at one time or another no less than sixteen permanent playhouses, a thing not equalled in any other city in the world for another two hundred years. Often there might have been five or six of these playhouses in work at the same time, and it was claimed that the largest of them could hold audiences of up to three thousand people. Considering the type of buildings they were, that was probably an exaggeration, but even so, from such information as we have it is likely that some of them were capable of cramming in at least two thousand. To try to estimate a total of great numbers of people, some standing, some seated, all moving about, with little to estimate from but common report, and with no standard method of checking the count, cannot be very reliable, but it is worth noting that the total of people who were the regular patrons of those London theatres in those sixty-six years may certainly be numbered in millions. It is therefore the more remarkable that when this prodigy was brought to its abrupt end in 1642, it all vanished like smoke. Of the theatres themselves, their stages, methods and traditions, nothing remained; and out of all those millions of witnesses, no-one in England, it seems had ever thought it worth while to describe any of them, or what it had been like to see a play there. Visitors from abroad, for whom the London theatres were an outstanding feature, like nothing to be seen in any other city in Europe, had occasionally written to friends about them in letters, some of which have survived. But for Londoners themselves to visit a playhouse was simply an everyday thing, nothing to write home about, nothing to put on record. They could not have known that these common buildings, during their brief time of popularity, had been unique. Their form, style and theatrical usage had been unlike anything of the sort ever seen before or since, and when they were abolished they disappeared completely. After the Restoration in 1660, when playgoing was resumed in London, it took place in other theatres, newly built and of an entirely different kind.

From the time of the old-style playhouses, however, there did remain a

## THE MALONE TRADITION

great legacy: hundreds of books of printed plays, headed by the collected works of Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare. As it happened, the style of Jonson's plays could transpose fairly easily into the mode of the new Restoration stage. Making only a little allowance for Jonson's censorious temperament, *Every Man In His Humour* and *The Silent Woman* could fairly easily share a stage with Congreve's *The Way Of The World* or Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife*, and it can be said that onward from this point the characteristic mainstream of English drama was marked out chiefly by Jonson, not by Shakespeare. Though the supremacy of Shakespeare's genius was never in doubt, the eighteenth-century scholars who were editing from the original hurriedly-printed, and sometimes confused texts (which often had not been seen through the press by their author) though such scholars may have been able to clarify his meanings in terms of literature, the outlines of his intended stagecraft were difficult for them to find, let alone understand. For example Dr Johnson, whose admiration for Shakespeare could not be doubted, and whose own edition of the plays was published in 1765, found it appropriate in his editorial Preface, to make some excuse for what he considered Shakespeare's laxity of proper dramatic construction. He attributed this to the 'barbarity' of the age the poet lived in. He notes that 'Shakespeare found the English stage in a state of the utmost rudeness', and that the public he wrote for was 'gross and dark'. Thus, Johnson supposed, Shakespeare as a dramatist was simply doing his best with a barbarous state of theatrical affairs. What else could he have thought? He was a close friend of David Garrick, familiar with the great Drury Lane theatre with its own traditions and all its sophisticated array of changeable painted scenery and the rest: what, then, was he to make of Shakespeare's staging arrangements as in Act 4 of *Antony and Cleopatra*, with its rapid succession of fifteen separate and differently located short scenes on one supposed battlefield? It must have seemed to him primitive in construction and impossible in practice. And what, even, of the whole construction of *Romeo and Juliet*? For all its enduring popularity, this play, as Shakespeare left it on the page, seems to contain such a maze of inconsistencies in the matter of its staging that even today it is rarely seen without some if not many alterations.

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C. Walter Hodges

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## ENTER THE WHOLE ARMY

For Johnson, as for all the editors of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century, a principal difficulty, unconsciously with them, lay in the basic tradition of their scholarship, which was simply the study of literature. The theatre and its drama, from the classical world of Sophocles and Seneca onwards, had come down to them as literature. There was a long and continuous history of literature: but of the theatre, in its own terms, there was no history at all. A play put upon the stage was simply literature in another form, personified by actors. But such a view was now altogether too limited. What had become needful was a study of the methods used by actors to make their transition from the page to the stage effective: in other words, a history of the stage and staging itself. Such a study was now about to be made for the first time.

Edmund Malone, an Irish lawyer and scholar of literature, had come to London in 1777 to work with George Steevens in the preparation of a new edition of Shakespeare's plays. Steevens had earlier collaborated with Dr Johnson, and Malone himself presently became a member of the Johnson circle. It may have been through Garrick that Malone also became specially interested in theatrical technique as a subject in its own right, for it was at this time in his work on the new Shakespeare edition that he conceived the idea of an appendix to it, which would have the purpose of explaining certain puzzling elements in Shakespeare's stage directions, and of his dramaturgy in general. This led him back into theatrical folk history, and much more, and what had been started as an appendix rapidly outgrew that function and became a work on its own. Malone published it in 1780 as a volume separate from his Shakespeare, which he called *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the English Stage*. In it Malone, having traced the English theatre from medieval times to 'the period of its maturity and greatest splendour' in the age of Shakespeare, then said he would 'endeavour to exhibit as accurate a delineation of the internal form and economy of our ancient theatres as the distance at which we stand and the obscurity of the subject will permit'. Here he included a picture of the old Globe playhouse on Bankside (fig. 3). It was his printer's woodcut made from a sketch specially copied for him by a clergyman friend in Cambridge, from the Bankside portion of C. J. Visscher's panorama of London

THE MALONE TRADITION



2 Edmund Malone. Engraving by Bartolozzi, from a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1787 (National Portrait Gallery).

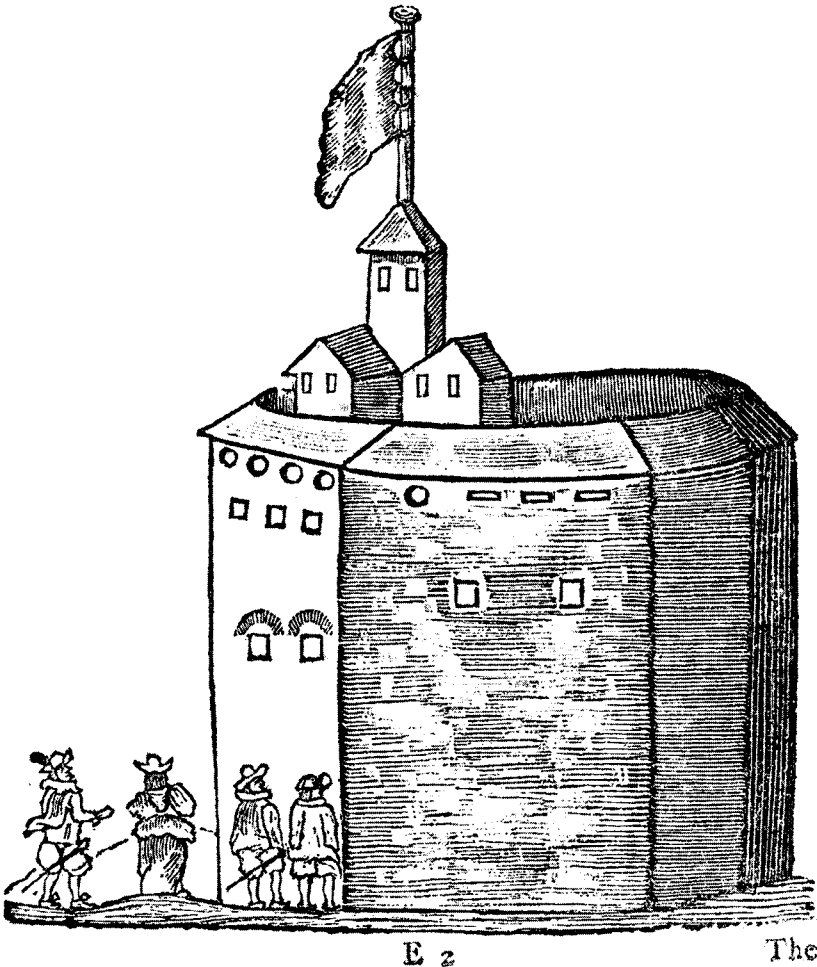


ENTER THE WHOLE ARMY

HISTORICAL ACCOUNT 51

It was situated on the Bankside, (the southern side of the river Thames,) nearly opposite to Friday-street, Cheap-side. It was an hexagonal wooden building, partly open to the weather, and partly thatched<sup>2</sup>. When Hentzner wrote, all the other theatres as well as this were composed of wood.

<sup>2</sup> In the long Antwerp View of London in the Pepysian Library at Cambridge, is a representation of the Globe theatre, from which a drawing was made by the Rev. Mr. Henley, and transmitted to Mr. Steevens. From that drawing this cut was made.



<sup>3</sup> The Globe. Woodcut (after Visscher) from Malone's *Rise and Progress of the English Stage*, 1780.

## THE MALONE TRADITION

engraved in 1616. That print is now well-known, but was then of course a rarity. Malone's friend had found it in the Pepysian Library in Magdalene College. Visscher's Globe detail is quaint enough in itself (fig. 4), but Malone's woodcut is quaintier, and it cannot have helped very much to correct Johnson's opinion of the old theatres as being in a 'state of the utmost rudeness'. Quaintness, though, was in those days a quality expected, and indeed enjoyed, in objects of antiquity, and it continued to haunt the rediscovery of the Globe theatre's real nature for all of the next hundred years.

Malone said he had been unable to ascertain when the Globe was built, but he believed (incorrectly) that it was 'not long before 1596'. Of the form of the building, he supposed it was 'hexagonal on the outside, but perhaps a rotunda within'. Thus he combined his woodcut version of a polygonal Globe with Shakespeare's famous reference to a theatre interior as a 'wooden O'. He then goes on to describe the Globe's characteristics and stage practices, so far as he could deduce them comparatively from play texts, in an account which remained in general use for over a hundred years, and which we may here call the Malone tradition.

First, he conjectured that the general arrangement of the Elizabethan public theatres had been derived from that of the inn-yards where the travelling players in former times, and still in Shakespeare's day, used to set up their stages: it was an open yard where the stage would be surrounded by a standing audience, the yard itself being closed round by the galleries which normally gave access to the upper rooms of the inn, but which during performances would also be thronged with spectators. He found that the stages were commonly fitted with curtains, though it was evidently not clear to him how or where. He stresses, however, that these curtains, wherever they were, were not drawn 'by lines or pulleys' which were 'an apparatus to which the simple mechanism of our ancient theatres had not arrived'. And then he says: 'towards the rear of the stage there appears to have been a balcony, the platform of which was probably eight or nine feet from the ground. I suppose it to have been supported by pillars . . . and in front of it curtains likewise were hung'. He then goes on to speak of scenery, taking several pages to explain to his readers, presumably to their surprise, that

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4 The Globe playhouse. Detail from C. J. Visscher's etched panorama of London, 1616.



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## THE MALONE TRADITION

Shakespeare's theatre did not use any such thing. But, he says, 'the want of scenery seems to have been supplied by the simple expedient of writing the names of different places where the scene was laid during the progress of the play, on boards, which were disposed in such a manner as to be visible to the audience'. But 'though the apparatus for theatrical exhibitions was thus scanty, and the machinery of the simplest kind', Malone found evidence for the use of trap-doors on the Elizabethan stages, and that, above, 'the covering or internal roof of the stage was anciently called *the heavens*. It was probably painted of a sky-blue colour; or perhaps pieces of drapery tinged with blue were suspended across the stage . . .'

Then in 1780, while his *Rise and Progress of the English Stage* was still mint-new in the bookshops, Malone acquired an unexpected windfall. 'Some curious Manuscripts relative to the stage were found at Dulwich College' he wrote in a later edition, 'and were obligingly transmitted to me from thence'. 'Obligingly' is perhaps a mild word for the liberality with which the Master and Fellows of the College allowed Malone to carry the whole remarkable archive of the Henslowe/Alleyn papers back with him to his own study. 'I am unwilling' he then wrote 'that the publick should be deprived of the information and entertainment these very curious materials may afford, and therefore shall extract from them such notices as appear to be worthy of preservation'. He published his extracts in his next edition, in 1790. Among them were the builders' contracts for the Fortune and the Hope playhouses; an inventory of stage costumes belonging to the Lord Admiral's company of players in 1598, ('leaft above in the tier-house, in the cheest'); and a most fascinating list of the company's stage properties. (Malone's transcription of the list in his *Rise and Progress* is now its only source, for since his day the original has been lost.) Besides these were letters to Henslowe from playwrights and actors, mostly about advances of money, and above all Henslowe's so-called 'Diary', a memorandum book detailing his theatrical expenses and other transactions over a period of eleven years. Here were in fact the documentary raw materials of theatre history as never found before.

So from his original inspiration of commonsense Malone was now able to deduce that the dramatical part of Shakespeare's genius had been born not

## ENTER THE WHOLE ARMY

in a desperate struggle against the grain of a primitive set of old theatrical makeshifts, as Dr Johnson had seemed to suggest, but by making the fullest use of the new type of specialised, permanent playhouses, whose styles and techniques were being developed just at the time Shakespeare came to join them, and probably with his help. But, in any event Malone's inspiration at the end of the eighteenth century was itself only just in time to rescue the memory of those unique former playhouses from oblivion. They were already one hundred and fifty years away downstream when his *Rise and Progress* was first published, and we can see now that his retrieval of them in that first edition was by itself barely sufficient. The later discovery of the Alleyn/Henslowe archive at Dulwich, most likely because the keepers of the archive had seen his book, cannot have been other than a conclusive and fulfilling godsend. What was now opened up for future generations of scholars to continue, was to collate and analyse the whole body of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic texts, with a confident assumption that all together their stage directions, and the spoken references to action written into the dialogue, could be taken as representing a stable and methodical code of stage presentation, and not merely as a variable assortment of extempore local suggestions. With this in view, and with two editions of *The Rise and Progress of the English Stage* already to his credit, Edmond Malone had initiated the study of theatrical history itself, with Shakespeare's theatre at the heart of it.

In the last sentence above I had first written 'the *science* of theatrical history', but then cautiously changed 'science' to 'study' because of what follows. The whole subject of William Shakespeare and his theatre was now being embraced by the historical romanticism of the early nineteenth century, and I have to suppose that science and romanticism ought not to be so easily combined. Nevertheless in that prevailing romantic mode, the world of the Elizabethan theatre found itself easily at home. It was, and indeed still is for some, an island in the history of the imagination, closed around within a brief period of historic time, peopled with its coteries of actors, poets and courtiers, expressed in volumes of dramatic literature unlike anything before or since, and now as revealed by Malone and Henslowe, fed and held together by the common details of its daily life and business. It was in itself 'the quick forge and working-house of thought',