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1
Introduction

The strongest way of registering the essential difference between playgoing in Shakespeare's time and now is to register the etymological difference of an audience from a spectator. 'Audience' is a collective term for a group of listeners. A 'spectator' is an individual, seeing for him or herself. Modern playgoers are set up, by their physical and mental conditioning, to be solitary spectators, sitting comfortably in the dark watching a moving picture, eavesdroppers privileged by the camera's hidden eye. In fundamental contrast the early modern playgoers were audiences, people gathered as crowds, forming what they called assemblies, gatherings, or companies. They sat or stood in a circle round the speakers who were enacting what they came to hear and see. An audience comes to hear, and therefore it clusters as closely as possible round the speaker. Spectators come to see, and so they position themselves where they can confront the spectacle. The Elizabethan stage, being the centre of a circle, had no front.

This difference between then and now, between the early audiences and modern spectators, is both a consequence and a cause of the fundamental changes the design of theatres underwent in the centuries since the Shakespeare period. Almost all modern theatres and cinemas are based on the assumption that viewing is two-dimensional. The viewer sits in front of the screen or the stage, acquiring information primarily with the eye. Shakespearean playgoers were members of a crowd surrounding the speakers, their priority listening, not viewing. Early playhouses were designed to position audiences in a complete circuit all around the stage. Like anything in the centre of a circle, the stage had therefore no two-dimensional front or back. While fewer members of the playgoing community were positioned at what we think of as 'behind' the stage, their smaller numbers were counterbalanced by their higher social eminence. The playgoers who sat at what we think of as the rear of the stage were the richest and the highest in social status. Proximity to the speakers was far more important than a 'frontal' viewing position.

One of the basic difficulties that modern reconstructions of early playhouses like the new Globe in London suffer from is that modern

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spectators, trained for viewing, automatically position themselves at the 'front', and modern actors therefore automatically play to them in two dimensions instead of the original three. This may be unavoidable, since the social distinctions that gave weight and potency to the elements of the audience positioned at what we think of as the 'back' of the stage have also gone, even when they are media celebrities, with the result that no modern audience, whether spectator-minded or not, can reproduce the conditions that prevailed at the original Globe. This change in mental conditioning from early audiences to modern spectators is only the most obvious of the many differences that can help us to identify the telling features of that dynamic interaction between plays and playgoers that is the essence of theatre, and what Shakespeare and his peers were catering for.

Those regrettable differences give an enormous incentive to study of the complex interactive process that was early modern theatre, the subject of this book. Its interactivity makes it a far from simple matter, not least because the participants of the time had widely divergent views about the process they were involved in, whether on the stage or around it. Spectator-minded playgoers were a major component in the interactive process then too. Writers for the stage like Ben Jonson strongly preferred their audiences to listen to their words rather than view the actors, a position with implications that will be looked at in detail later. The inclination even of the earliest players and some of their playgoers was to favour spectacle. Since it was the players who controlled what playgoers paid for, in a sense Jonson and Shakespeare were on the losing side from the outset. Priorities varied hugely, not just between writers and players but between categories of playgoer such as the handicraft apprentices who applauded *The Shoemaker's Holiday* in 1599 on the one hand and the Earl of Pembroke who quarrelled with the king's uncle over priority for a box at the Blackfriars in 1636 on the other.

It was of course the playwrights who voiced the best-publicised views. In the argument about satire and raillery which occupies the Induction to Jonson's *Every Man Out of his Humour*, the principal railer Asper is prodded by his friends into expressing the poet's ambition for his play and its reception:

> To please, but whom? attentive auditors,
> Such as will joine their profit with their pleasure,
> And come to feed their understanding parts.

Auditors, not spectators. Asper is not Jonson, but here he voices the hope Jonson put into his prologues in the plays he wrote between 1599

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and 1626. Ignorance, says Asper at the end of his speech, is the enemy to art. A good playhouse audience will listen to the poetry and be properly rewarded in the mind. A poet wants listeners, not spectators, merely viewing the scene without the thought that listening entails.

Every Man Out was performed at the Globe in 1599. Some time later in the same year Jonson left Shakespeare's company for the company of boys at the newly opened Blackfriars playhouse. His reasons may not have been entirely divorced from his sense of the Globe audience, and the wrong kind of 'understanding' which he felt a large proportion of them displayed. The prologue to his first play for the boys, *Cynthia's Revels*, openly appeals to the 'learned eares' at the new venue. There can be no doubt that he expected a better-educated and more attentive audience at the smaller and more expensive playhouse. It would be nice to know how far this new 'auditory' met his expectations. By 1626 he was looking to the court to give him the audience of 'Schollers' who might understand his play. We might also wonder how many of his fellow poets wrote for the scholars of the time.

Drama, especially Shakespearean drama, is a performance art. Francis Beaumont called the printed text of a play a 'second publication' after the first on the stage (see Appendix 2, no. 91; hereafter in the form 2.91). Shakespeare himself was evidently not concerned to immortalise his plays by any second publication, and rested content with the transient fame of his company's performances. As performance texts, the plays were composed for a tight grouping of people, a more immediate and readily recognisable social entity than the individuals who might buy a printed text. Performed texts of course also supply an immediate response from the recipients, so that playwrights engage in a form of communication more thoroughly intercommunicative than any other form of publication. The more intimately you know your audience, the less simply verbal will the communication be. We should never lose sight of the wide gulf between the fixative written text and the flexible basis out of which the play was actually performed.

For Shakespeare's contemporaries the intimacy that grew up between player and playgoer when commercial theatre became a daily event in London was an extraordinary and uniquely rewarding novelty. London playgoers in the 1580s and 1590s created the unprecedented phenomenon of an audience paying money to hear poetry. For the poets this novelty gave them the first direct and regular contact with a large and committed crowd of hearers that poets in England had ever enjoyed. For the poets who were also players it must have been a revelation: poetry as a performing art speaking directly to an

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expectant crowd who had paid money to enjoy the offering. Audience response could be directly manipulated, known audience tastes could be catered for, fresh devices could be tested in the confidence that they would be welcomed as novelties. What we see in the texts of plays composed between about 1590 and 1610 is very largely an exploration of the new possibilities seen in this direct relationship between poet and playgoer.

All we have now of these early novelties is their second publication. It is a commonplace that the written play-texts of Shakespeare's time need supplementing and amplifying through knowledge of the stage conventions and the iconography of performance, what has been called the 'art of orchestration' of the performance text.[1] This approach has brought substantial dividends both to our understanding of the texts in detail at the verbal level and to the larger performance dimensions. Mostly however it has worked by identifying conventional techniques of staging evident either implicitly in the play-texts themselves or explicitly in the stage structures they were written for. We now know quite intimately how a play like *Hamlet* might have been staged at the Globe in 1600. What we do not know is how the players and playgoers interacted with it to create the performance experience. Indeed, unless we take the contemporary audiences into account, the full complex of intercommunication through performance for which Shakespeare designed his plays must remain uncertain. We do know that *Hamlet* was first staged at the Globe in 1600, in the broad daylight of what was probably an autumn afternoon on Bankside. We do not know how the audience in the heat and daylight of that London afternoon received the news, delivered in the play's opening lines, that the time was supposed to be shortly after midnight and the weather bitterly cold. We know that they would recognise Hamlet's pun about the distracted Globe he finds himself in, and possibly connect it with the 'distracted multitude' which Claudius later says loves Prince Hamlet. We cannot be so sure how they would receive Hamlet's soliloquies, spoken ostensibly in solitude when in fact he was visibly surrounded by thousands of people, some of whose heads and ears were literally at his feet. A performance text is a transmission tuned to a highly specific wavelength, and a specific set of atmospheric conditions. The receivers are a part of the mechanism of transmission, and need to be incorporated in the business of trying to recompose the performance text for what it can add to our knowledge of Shakespearean dramaturgy.

Shakespearean receivers were far from passive objects. They are likely all too often nowadays to be invoked in a vicious circle of internal evidence, as arbiters of this or that otherwise inexplicable

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or undesired feature of the plays. Understandably, because they are the most inconstant, elusive, unfixed element of the Shakespearean performance text, their contribution is presented as an easy means of explaining away features of the dramaturgy which seem incongruous to modern audiences. Shakespearean theatre is such a complex phenomenon that historians have found it easy to spin the evidence until it reflects their own wishes for an ideal performance text by means of the shapes they manufacture from that plastic entity the audience.

Of the many complicating factors that make assessing the nature of Shakespearean audiences difficult the chief one is historical change. The seventy-five years between the building of the first amphitheatre playhouse in 1567 and the closing of the three hall playhouses and three amphitheatres operating in 1642 saw huge shifts, in audience taste as much as in the physical nature of the auditoria and the social composition of the playgoers. The reopening of the hall playhouses in 1599, which Jonson tried to exploit for the learned ears he expected them to provide, entailed a complete switch of priorities in the auditorium, for instance. Whereas at the Globe and the other amphitheatres the nearest people on three sides of the stage were the poorest, the groundlings who paid a minimal penny for the privilege of standing on their feet next to the stage platform, at the Blackfriars and the other hall playhouses the wealthier a patron was the closer he or she could come to the action. In those precursors of modern theatres the cheapest places were furthest from the stage.

That transfer reflects a social shift in playgoing priorities that splits the period in two. The gentlemen students of the Inns of Court and the city's artisan apprentices were equally prominent as playgoers throughout the period, but not always in the same proportions, the same positions, or the same playhouses. And just as the social composition of playgoing crowds varied, so did their mental composition and their expectations. The establishment of a popular repertory by the end of the 1580s gave the poets a chance to build an intimate framework of allusion to familiar traditions and conventions which by the very process of building became subject to constant change. A historical perspective, applied to the physical structure of playhouse auditoria and to the varying social and mental structure of the playgoers, will underline the importance not just of the play as performance text but of the original performance text. A properly detailed historical perspective is a necessary component in any analysis of the original audiences and their contribution to performance.

The evidence about audiences falls into four main categories, each determining the contents of one chapter. Each builds on its

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predecessor. We have to start with the first and most tangible category, the physical circumstances of performance. This includes the shape and design of the auditorium, the numbers in an audience, and the consequent behaviour patterns characteristic of Shakespearean playgoing, down to the material provision the playhouses made for the playgoer's physical comfort in such things as cushions and toilets. The second body of evidence is demographic. It entails identifying the main social groupings in Elizabethan and Jacobean society, which helps to clarify the elements and conditions most likely to have generated playgoers. A detailed analysis – audience sampling – can show the people in these social groupings known to have attended plays at the time, whether real people or types identified by contemporary comment. The most potentially valuable body of evidence that follows is the kind of contemporary comment that says or implies something about the type of playgoer who would be regarded as a normal (or exceptional: the distinction is important) member of the audience at a particular playhouse at a particular time in its history. This third body of evidence, most elusive but potentially by far the most rewarding, is used to identify the mental composition, the collective mind of people in company, the kind of playgoer the hopeful poet might expect to find in the crowd at the venue intended for his play. The hermeneutics of the theatre, the complex interactive communication between stage and audience, depends as much on the audience's state of mind as it does on the author's and the players' expectations of what, mentally, their audience will be prepared for. That mind-set is a consequence of the mental furniture the Shakespeare playgoer might have been equipped with much more than it is a consequence of his or her state of stomach or bladder. It comprises the education, the routine prejudices, the playhouse traditions, and everything the playgoer expected from the playgoing experience.

That kind of evidence then needs to be anchored firmly in the more solid matter of the preceding kinds, and given its place in a historical sequence of play fashions. It has also to be approached with the reservation that the detail is fragmentary, and that even when framed carefully in its historical place it can more easily lead to misinterpretation than any other sort of evidence. This study takes only the most tentative steps towards the final kind of evidence. Perhaps, though, the solidity established with the other three may provide an anchorage for further exploration of this fourth kind, and a reduction in the speculation which has stood in for it in the past.[2]

The majority of the available evidence is contemporary comment. It may be useful to cite one example as a measure of what can reasonably be extracted from any one comment when it is properly located in its

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context. It should also indicate the importance of that context. A not untypical anecdote appears in a small pamphlet by Henry Peacham the younger which he published in 1642. It must have been written before March of that year, when the playhouses were closed, because it gives no hint that playgoing was not currently available, but it was probably made not long before, since the pamphlet was clearly written for publication and there is no reason why the printing should have been delayed. It made a small supplement to Peacham's *Compleat Gentleman*, originally published in 1622 and reprinted in 1625, 1627 and 1634. Its title is *The Art of Living in London*, and basically it describes the dangers of London life for a gentleman newly arrived from the country. The principal dangers of course were the idle pastimes of gambling, drinking and playgoing, together with their attendant costs. Near the end of the pamphlet Peacham offers a little story.

> A tradesman's wife of the Exchange, one day when her husband was following some business in the city, desired him he would give her leave to go see a play; which she had not done in seven years. He bade her take his apprentice along with her, and go; but especially to have a care of her purse; which she warranted him she would. Sitting in a box, among some gallants and gallant wenches, and returning when the play was done, returned to her husband and told him she had lost her purse. 'Wife, (quoth he,) did I not give you warning of it? How much money was there in it?' Quoth she, 'Truly, four pieces, six shillings and a silver tooth-picker.' Quoth her husband, 'Where did you put it?' 'Under my petticoat, between that and my smock.' 'What, (quoth he,) did you feel no body's hand there?' 'Yes, (quoth she,) I felt one's hand there, but I did not think he had come for that.'

There is more than a hint in this anecdote of Peacham's gentlemanly contempt for a money-conscious citizen and his wife who is little more than a foolish and vulnerable sex object. But there is a good deal more too, and when it is stitched into the pattern made by equivalent pieces of evidence it makes a surprisingly strong fabric.

The wife's seat in a box, for instance, means that she went to one of the indoor playhouses. In the 1630s the boxes flanking the stage at Blackfriars and the Cockpit were customarily filled by ladies and their escorts. Squeezed in amongst the gentry and their ladies ('gallants and gallant wenches') she might well have felt a little ill at ease, sufficiently so to give her one reason for not objecting in public to the intrusive hand. A seven-year absence from playgoing might well have intensified her discomfort, even though it is apparent from Massinger's *City Madam* of 1632 that the wives of the wealthier London citizens did try to imitate the behaviour of court ladies in boxes at playhouses. This city madam was certainly the wife of a magnate, since her husband was

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1. A merchant's wife, one of a series of engravings by Wenceslas Hollar made in the early 1630s.

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busy at the Royal Exchange, which meant that he was either a merchant trader or a goldsmith-banker, one of the affluent city families living on the borderline between citizenship and gentrification which was the subject of Massinger's play. No respectable lady went alone to a playhouse, so in the absence of her husband his apprentice was there to ape the pages that court ladies took with them to playhouses. He might possibly have had a pretension to being gentry himself. One-third of the apprentices in the Goldsmith's Company were younger sons of gentry. The wife was clearly an affluent city madam, since her purse had four 'pieces' of gold in it. The cheapest gold coins were marks or nobles, at three to a pound, or royals at two to a pound, so she seems to have taken at least £2 in cash to the playhouse, plus the half-crown or more which admission to the box would have cost the two of them. Finally it is evident that the box was crowded enough for the cutpurse to have got his hand inside the wife's dress without being noticed by anyone else, and that not all gallants were as gentlemanly, either in their thieving ways, or in the lecherous groping which the wife expected, as Peacham's own *Compleat Gentleman* would have us assume. The wife's reaction to the groping hand says something about how usual it was for lechery to thrive in playhouse crowds and perhaps how unusual it was for cutpurses to operate in those conditions.

If we were to milk this possibly fanciful anecdote for rather more than it can reasonably be expected to give, we might associate Peacham's city madam with the wife of the Citizen in Beaumont's *Knight of the Burning Pestle*. In the play's Induction the wife explains that she has been trying for twelve months to get her husband to bring her to a play, and she subsequently entertains the gentry amongst whom she sits by her thoroughgoing ignorance of dramaturgy and her innocently lecherous *double entendres*. Her taste is for romance and old-fashioned tales of knight errantry, and she enjoys the stage spectacle with comic literal-mindedness. After seven years without seeing plays it would not be inconceivable that Peacham's city madam should also be romantic in her tastes and gullible in her enjoyment of the spectacle.

The anecdote is useful, then, for deducing some tangible details about the physical conditions the wife endured in her box, the somewhat less tangible details about her social circumstances, and a few markedly fragile conclusions about her mental outlook. These can be related to the repertory of the indoor playhouses in the early 1640s, though the fact that it is the wife's first visit to a play for seven years would hardly make her a typical or normative playgoer. In itself the anecdote offers only a tiny sampling from the range of audience types.

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If several hundred such pieces of evidence are put together, though, the fabric becomes both long and finely detailed. The anecdote certainly tells us something about the normal expectations of playgoing for the wealthier citizens and citizens' wives in the 1630s and early 1640s. It also indicates that we should use constraint because of the increasingly speculative nature of any deductions we make as we move from the tangible details of the physical setting into attempts to calculate what might have been in the particular playgoer's head on that visit.

Despite all the constraints, these possibilities, weaving the evidence into a fabric and limiting speculation over the precise mental processes, have established the structure of this analysis of Shakespearean playgoing. Following the building process identified above, it begins with the physical circumstances of the playgoing exercise, as the playhouses developed and changed through the seventy-five years between 1567 and 1642 when there were specially built commercial playhouses in London, and varied provisions at the different playhouses. It continues with analysis of the social structure and an attempt to identify the social types who are known to have been playgoers throughout the period. It investigates the more tangible pieces of evidence for the composition of the minds of different playgoers, both the learned ears and the 'Nutcrackers, that only come for sight', as Jonson called them in the prologue written for the court in *The Staple of News*, and tentatively it identifies some of the doors to further investigation which the evidence leaves open. Finally it seeks to emphasise the strength of the pressure for continual change inherent in the exercise of playgoing, by sketching a history of the changing tastes and the different kinds of repertory offered by the different playhouses. That history is also, by implication and rather covertly, an attempt to flesh out some of the questions raised by the chapter on the mental composition of playgoers. A history of the evolution of playgoers' tastes in plays has some value in suggesting the preferences which made one kind of play more popular at a given time than another. It also provides an outline of the interaction between the poets and their audiences.

The closing date for the period covered by this study is obvious. Parliament may not have intended to do more in September 1642 than to batten down the hatches in a time of political storm by ordering the closure of all places of public assembly such as playhouses.[3] The order explicitly offered the judgement that the times were too seriously disturbed for such frivolities as plays to be tolerable. It was in its macabre way a repetition of the lengthy closures ordered because of the plague epidemics when Elizabeth and James I died. Charles was not to die for

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