Introduction

Shakespeare's working life in the theatre started around 1590 and lasted for nearly 25 years. He was a poet, an actor and a remarkable playwright. His reputation since then has been so spectacular that we can be misled into thinking of him as a genius working in inspired solitude. But theatre is practical, collaborative and commercial. Shakespeare was a shrewd businessman in a flourishing company. He knew how to work with the many talents around him; he knew what types of play were popular; he could exploit the facilities and traditions of different (indoor and outdoor) playhouses. Staging a play is a communal activity: a group of artists gathers to create and express the play; a larger group is persuaded to attend as audience. The act of communication that follows can be complicated, exciting, joyful, inspiring, alarming – sometimes even dangerous. Therefore a play's script is generally more vibrant in performance than in its reading as a text.

Plays emerge from the historical, cultural and social influences of their birth, and so it is helpful to audiences who see his plays 400 years later to know about Shakespeare's world. However, England between 1580 and 1620 gives only one period of context. This book aims to explore a wider context too. Like all great artists, Shakespeare has had a rich afterlife. His plays have been constantly performed since his death in 1616. His friend, the playwright Ben Jonson, believed that 'He was not of an age, but for all time.'

The plays are not simply repeated. They are re-interpreted, re-expressed, sometimes even rewritten, often according to the beliefs of the times when they are performed. For example, a 1980 feminist production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in a small studio space may feel a very different play from a lavish Victorian version at the height of the male-dominated British Empire. A Marxist *Richard II* will present the monarchy differently from Shakespeare's company in the 1590s or an elegantly poetic 1930s production.

This 'fate' that comes upon a work of art (or 'rich variety', depending on how we judge the changes) is more striking for a play than is likely for the afterlife of a poem, novel, painting, symphony or sculpture. A play in performance requires more varied types of collaboration: from actors, directors, designers, lighting, theatre spaces. It also embodies flesh-and-blood encounters – thus audiences may respond to the appearance and personalities of the actors, as well as to the words they speak and the stories they tell.

These complex relationships of plays to their many contexts may seem bewildering. You may feel that all treatments of Shakespeare can become equally justified. But actors and directors constantly make judgements about what they want the plays to communicate. It is right that audiences and performance critics do the same. This book aims to help you with your own informed judgements, too.

How this book is organised

Part 1: The theatre in Shakespeare's lifetime

Part 1 examines the stage conditions and styles of playing that influenced Shakespeare's writing.

Part 2: Shakespeare in performance after 1660

Part 2 considers Shakespeare's reputation and how this has affected productions of his plays and approaches to acting up to the present day.

Part 3: Critical approaches

Part 3 outlines some of the critical and theoretical perspectives that influence the ways in which directors and actors may approach the playing of Shakespeare.

Part 4: Extracts and performance issues

Part 4 contains passages from the plays and discusses performance issues.

Part 5: How to write about Shakespeare on stage

Part 5 offers guidelines for those for whom this book is chiefly intended: students studying Shakespeare as part of an advanced course in Literature or Theatre Studies.

Part 6: Resources

This part contains a chronology, together with guidance on further reading, films, videos and websites, and a glossary and index. (Terms which appear in the glossary are highlighted in bold type when they first appear in the main text.)

At different points throughout the book, and chiefly in Part 4, there are tasks and issues for discussion designed to help the reader reflect on ideas discussed in the text.

All extracts from the plays are taken from the New Cambridge Shakespeare series.

1 The theatre in Shakespeare's lifetime

- What was the theatre of Shakespeare's day like?
- Who performed, and who watched, plays in the Elizabethan theatre?
- How were the plays acted?
- What mattered more: hearing or seeing a play?

The playhouse

Much has been researched, guessed and written about what an Elizabethan playhouse looked like. The new Globe in Southwark (1995) has been built to imitate Shakespeare's Globe of 1599 and to revive the physical conditions for his plays. It would be a mistake, however, to think that there was only one type of playhouse. In 1576 James Burbage built the first permanent public playhouse in London. He called it 'The Theatre' because this was a dignified Roman word connected with oratory and would help in the marketing of his plays.

Burbage was also aiming to continue the loose and varied traditions of the travelling players, who had no fixed home and were prepared to play whatever and wherever seemed profitable. Often they played beneath the outdoor galleries of inn-yards, but they might also be found in market squares, village greens, private gardens and inside large houses. Travelling players had to be versatile – even after 1576 most had no permanent playhouse to play in. For example, in London in the 1590s there were regular outbreaks of plague and other infections during the summer months. Then playhouses would be closed and the players returned to the road, touring the towns and villages and performing in different types of space. And nowadays too Shakespeare's plays invite equally versatile treatment: in pubs, village halls, gardens and other spaces that are not always designed as theatres.

Drawings and other written evidence suggest that, although the public playhouses of London varied in many details, there were a few basic and repeated requirements. J.L. Styan summarises these in his book *Shakespeare's Stagecraft*:

- a tight enclosing auditorium
- a projecting platform almost as deep as it was wide
- two **upstage** entrances onto the platform
- at least one balcony

The circular or polygonal building hemmed in the audience around three sides of the platform, so that everyone was very close to the action, whether standing in the yard around the platform or sitting in greater comfort in the balconies. Audiences were mixed: apprentices, lawyers from the Inns of Court, fashionable young men and women. Though there would be noise and movement during performance, they were certainly not the lewd rabble that hostile **Puritan** critics described them as.

The platform was raised, ensuring clear vision for audiences in the yard, and allowing a trapdoor for surprising entrances and special effects such as ghosts or Ophelia's grave in *Hamlet*. Generally, actors appeared at the upstage doors in the facade (decorated screen) but processions might pass through the yard. An actor could cover the large distance down towards the audience to command the centre of the building for soliloquies and other intimate scenes. The balcony was an extra asset; it could add another dimension to the scenes below:

- In *Richard II* the king self-dramatises his fall to 'the base court' where Northumberland stands beneath him: 'Down, down I come, like glistering Phaëton.'
- Cleopatra, taking refuge in her monument, has the dying Antony carried 'aloft' to her.
- Richard of Gloucester (planning to be King Richard III) takes part in a tableau to impress the London crowds: he pretends to be a devout Christian by holding a prayer book and standing between two bishops.

But these pictorial moments above the platform were not extra decoration: the actors entered to begin or continue part of the play's action. Telling the story was their main purpose.

The Globe

Burbage's company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, occupied the land for The Theatre on a 21-year lease. In 1598 that lease had expired. It was a particularly frosty winter, but the company dismantled the building, carried the timbers across the River Thames and settled on the south bank in Southwark. There they built a new playhouse near to The Rose, where their rivals, The Lord Admiral's Men, played. Such was their confidence that they named their new home 'The Globe'. The new title, another marketing decision like 'The Theatre', referred not just to its circular shape, but also to the purpose and scale of its enterprise. The playhouse mirrored the world; stories of all people and events could be staged there. The stage imitating the world or, as Jaques put it in *As You Like It*, the world being a type of stage, was not a new metaphor. It caught exactly the adventurous spirit of the age, the drama and passion of spectacular lives. The Elizabethan courtier Sir

Walter Raleigh lived such a life and understood the metaphor. He was a statesman, historian and discoverer as well as being a fine poet:

> What is our life? A play of passion.
> And what our mirth but music of division?
> Our mother's wombs the tiring houses be
> Where we are drest for this short comedy.
> Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is
> Who sits and marks what here we do amiss.
> The graves that hide us from the searching sun
> Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.
> Thus playing post we to our latest rest,
> And then we die, in earnest, not in jest.

The Globe was ready within six months for the busy summer season of 1599. It was large and well-equipped. Like most playhouses, the Globe was 'sumptuous' and 'gorgeous', according to some Puritan critics. Some of the woodwork was carved and some painted to look like Italian marble. The canopy above the platform was painted as 'the heavens' with sun, moon and stars. It was designed to excite and delight audiences, even before the play started. But its life was short. Like all wooden buildings, it was vulnerable and was burnt down in 1613, when a cannon fired flaming material into its roof during a performance of *Henry VIII*. A second Globe was erected in 1614 and demolished in 1644.

1599 was also a year of great achievement for Shakespeare. He was by then the most experienced and talented playwright in London. He helped to supervise the building of the Globe, and the year saw the first performances of *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It* and *Henry V*.

Shakespeare and The Lord Chamberlain's Men were so successful at The Globe that they were honoured by James I and after 1603 were known as The King's Men. In 1608, needing an indoor playhouse, they took over The Blackfriars to supplement The Globe and to provide a winter home. Blackfriars had once been a monastery, then from 1576 was used as a private playhouse for one of the children's companies (see page 29, below) and subsequently became a public playhouse. It was smaller than The Globe, seating about 500. More indoor playhouses began to be built at this time, charging higher entrance prices and providing more comfort and refinement. Such playhouses led gradually towards the late 17th-century **proscenium** theatres with their greater interest in spectacle. In The Globe the company aimed to 'play to the gallery', where the wealthier, better educated audience would be sitting. In the smaller Blackfriars such audiences were very close to the stage and this invited a quieter, more intimate style of playing (similar to today's theatres where the most expensive seats are in the stalls).

The King's Men were already performing at court; they were a versatile company and Shakespeare was used to writing for different types of playhouse. The Blackfriars had a music-room in a curtained gallery above the stage for the original boys' companies. These companies included trained musicians, both choristers and instrumentalists. Sometimes plays performed there had been preceded by a concert. It is unlikely that Shakespeare wrote any plays exclusively for Blackfriars, but his last plays, written after 1608, like *The Tempest*, *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, are chiefly mysterious **romances** that depend heavily on different types of music.

The masque

After about 1610, playhouse history included performances at court, notably the **masque**. This was an elaborate entertainment that would include song and dance to decorate a fanciful story loaded with **allegorical** meaning. It was often staggeringly expensive. It was also used as part of court display to impress visiting dignitaries. The masque looked ahead to the development of opera, which also demands scenery and complicated stage effects behind a proscenium arch. Ben Jonson (see page 13, below) wrote several masques in partnership with the great architect Inigo Jones. Jonson complained that the scenery drew more applause than the poetry; this indicates how spectacle was replacing both language and robust interaction with an audience.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* includes three moments that are strongly influenced by masque:

- Ariel's fantastical banquet for the 'three men of sin'
- the masque of goddesses to celebrate the betrothal of Ferdinand and Miranda
- the lovers' game of chess for the on-stage audience of lords.

Some later revivals of *The Tempest*, especially in the late 17th century, have treated it more as a masque than a play (see page 46).

The companies

Early in Queen Elizabeth's reign the government wanted to reduce the threat of political and religious unrest. One measure in 1572 was to encourage people to remain in their locality. It was called the Act for Restraining Vagabonds. This badly affected troupes of players, who needed to be constantly travelling between towns and villages searching for audiences. The Act compelled the more talented players to gain security by attaching themselves to noble families. They would then perform in large households on special occasions. Shakespeare drew on this

tradition in *Much Ado About Nothing* when Don Pedro and his soldiers have just arrived in Leonato's house. The party on their first night begins with the soldiers masked, pretending to be a group of players, 'invading' the house, probably with a robust performance like a sword-dance. When they have made their noisy contribution, they dance with the ladies.

Even though companies wore their patron's livery (uniform), they were also highly commercial and continued to perform popular plays for the general public. The major companies settled in London in new playhouses that became their permanent homes. The Theatre, managed by James Burbage, was the first of these in 1576, but protests from city authorities forced the company to build it just outside the city's northern walls. The Theatre was so successful that soon more playhouses were built, eventually within the city, and permanent London companies competed for audiences and for the best players. Each one also required a constant supply of new plays. Thus hardship followed by commercial activity helped to bring about the great burst of play-writing between 1580 and 1640.

After the 1570s companies gradually improved their status, thanks to enthusiastic audiences and support from nobility and crown. They took their titles from their patrons: The Lord Chamberlain's Men (which included Shakespeare and Burbage), The Lord Admiral's Men, The Queen's Men, The Earl of Leicester's Men. When King James I came to the throne in 1603, he developed further the tradition of players performing at court, and so The Lord Chamberlain's Men, the leading company at the time, gained extra dignity in becoming The King's Men.

Much of the information about the companies comes from Philip Henslowe's diaries, written in the early 1590s. Henslowe was a financier who saw that profits could be made from flourishing playhouses, as well as from brothels and other places of entertainment. He went into partnership with Edward Alleyn, London's leading player, and they were shrewd enough to sign up the great playwright, Christopher Marlowe. This powerful association made them, as The Lord Admiral's Men, London's pre-eminent company. But by the mid-1590s The Lord Chamberlain's Men had overtaken them.

Each company had a core of about eight to twelve leading players, known as 'sharers', who took the financial risks and expected to make handsome profits. This small number of players was not enough to stage plays whose cast lists might stretch to 35 named parts, even with doubling the parts. Hired men had to be brought in to double most of the smaller roles, and boys to play the women and the younger servants.

Plays were commissioned and written rapidly. Most were given only a few performances, though the more popular ones might be revived a few years later. Henslowe records that in one period of 25 days, 15 different plays were presented at his theatre. Given the length of some (*Richard III* is over 4000 lines) the leading

players, like Alleyn and Richard Burbage (James's son) must have developed prodigious memories. Rehearsal was not the thoughtful, analytic, time-consuming process expected from today's major productions. Each play was hurried onto the stage. Performing it depended heavily on the players' technique and experience and a readiness to improvise. For example, there would be almost formulaic staging of court scenes and processions, with each player knowing his character's position in the social hierarchy.

Audiences flocked to the playhouses for the sense of occasion, for vigorously told stories and to see the star performers. Clowns like Richard Tarleton, Robert Armin and Will Kempe (see pages 31–32, below) established a lively rapport with their fans. Performances, with up to 3000 people packed tightly round the three-sided stage, could be vibrant occasions. By the mid-1590s players of passionate tragedy had become the new stars: Richard Burbage was the lead actor in The Lord Chamberlain's Men for several years. Shakespeare wrote parts like Richard III, Macbeth and Othello for him, and perhaps Lear and Antony too.

Popular plays and playwrights

When Shakespeare first came to London to begin his career as a player in the late 1580s, John Lyly was the most popular and prolific playwright. His elegant artificial romances, many written specially for the children's companies (see page 29, below) influenced Shakespeare in writing his romantic comedies: *Love's Labours Lost*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Most of Lyly's plays include: girls dressed as boys; wit-contests between lovers; clowns echoing the play's **themes** in their subplot; an idyllic pastoral setting; journeys, songs, coincidence and fantastical events. All this sounds very Shakespearean, but Shakespeare was shrewdly exploiting what Lyly had already made popular.

Thomas Kyd (1558–1594) is a more mysterious figure. His great achievement was to develop revenge tragedy, one of the most popular genres of the age. His play *The Spanish Tragedy* was an often-revived theatrical triumph. It includes a ghost, madness, disguise, deceit, a play-within-a-play and a bloodthirsty conclusion. Shakespeare understood the value of this mixture when in 1593 he wrote his first Roman play *Titus Andronicus*, also a popular and much-revived work, and then in 1600 his own version of *Hamlet*. Kyd may also have written a play about Hamlet (now lost).

Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) led a notorious and dangerous life. Many characters in his plays seem to express his own subversive tendencies: they can be violent, blasphemous, rebellious and highly assertive. Like Shakespeare, he was born in 1564, but had a more academic background and worked as a spy in Queen Elizabeth's secret service. Writing for The Lord Admiral's Men in the early 1590s, he was an obvious rival for Shakespeare and The Lord Chamberlain's Men. In just

six explosive years of playwriting he produced memorable tragedies, boldly laced with strands of grotesque **farce**. His *Dr Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta* were two of the most popular plays in the period and were continually revived until 1642, when Puritan objections to immoral and subversive plays led to parliament closing the theatres. Marlowe's promising career was brutally ended: he died in a violent brawl when only 29.

Ben Jonson (1572–1637) is considered to be another rival. Jonson was meticulous, more evidently an intellectual than Shakespeare and not especially popular in the public theatres. He wrote for indoor theatres and eventually joined with the architect Inigo Jones to create expensive allegorical masques for the court. However, critics later in the 17th century admired him more than Shakespeare, particularly for his satirical city comedies, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. Jonson himself recognised Shakespeare's genius, but also felt that Shakespeare's writing was a little rough and that he could have taken pains to revise and edit.

After 1610 the most performed playwright was John Fletcher. His play *The Tamer Tamed* was an answer to the male dominance of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and was far more popular. When parliament closed the theatres in 1642, actors trying to re-establish themselves chose plays by Fletcher and not Shakespeare. Writing in 1647 the poet Sir John Denham, noted for the elegance of his style, praised Jonson for 'Art', Shakespeare for 'Nature', but Fletcher's 'Wit' combined the virtues of the other two. Being university educated, he was thought to surpass Shakespeare, the rustic provincial. And Fletcher was again more popular when Charles II became king and the theatres re-opened in 1660.

Shakespeare's own most performed plays were *Henry IV Part 1*, *Richard III*, *Pericles*, *Hamlet*, *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet*. All of these plays, except *Pericles*, were written before 1600, towards the middle of his career. Three history plays are among these six but, surprisingly, no comedies and nothing from the group of mature tragedies – *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear* – which appear so frequently on today's exam syllabuses and are often described as his highest achievement.

A playwright was rarely working alone. The play was generally fashioned on stage with the players and often written in collaboration. Beaumont and Fletcher wrote as a well-known partnership, and Shakespeare joined with Fletcher at the end of his career to write *Cardenio*, *Henry VIII* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*. Even when a play was written, it was often revised and adapted by someone else, especially if it was popular enough to be revived. Thomas Middleton made significant changes to *Macbeth*. Indeed, most early plays, first written as continuous action, needed adapting to include intervals.

Where did Shakespeare find his material?

Elizabethan playwrights were not expected to be original, in the sense of having to create everything themselves from scratch. In fact, the modern meaning of the word 'originality' didn't appear in the English language until the late 18th century. The Elizabethans valued imitation in education, literature and popular culture, and they enjoyed familiar stories and genres, especially in classical writers like Ovid, Horace and Seneca. But Shakespeare's contemporary Ben Jonson condemned imitation that was merely slavish. He believed the poet must 'be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use … Not as a creature that swallows what it takes in crude, raw and undigested, but that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment.'

Like most of his contemporaries, Shakespeare was a sort of literary magpie: he found fragments of useful material from his reading and from watching other plays. As an actor, he played only smaller roles, but the company employed him to rework and update earlier plays. He was alert to topical events and a close observer of both London and rural life. An exasperated contemporary playwright, Robert Greene, criticised him as being an impudent upstart, lacking both the sophistication of court and the academic distinction of university. But some critics believe that it was Shakespeare's rural Warwickshire background, combined with his robust London life, that made him especially versatile as a playwright. Note, for example, how easily comedies and romances (for instance, *As You Like It* or *The Winter's Tale*) use the interplay of court and country scenes.

Most of his plays were based on one prominent source, a story or an old play, that could supply the main characters and events. None are exclusively reworkings of this one source; they all depend on other influences too.

Prose romances

Shakespeare used material from prose romances for his comedies. The story of *As You Like It* comes from a popular English source, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, published in 1590. Lodge got *his* material from a vigorous romance poem from the Middle Ages. Shakespeare also used two stories from *Hecatommithi*, a collection of 100 stories published in 1565 by Giraldi Cinthio, an Italian author, to give him the basis of *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*. Some stories gave Shakespeare valuable but slighter amounts of material: Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* influenced *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Another important influence was the infamous handbook for political success: Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532). Machiavelli explains how to gain and to keep power without being bound by conscience or other moral concerns. The '**machiavel**' even became a character on stage and his attitudes merged with those of the medieval Vice