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THE STAGE OF SHAKESPEARE  
THE ELIZABETHAN PLAYHOUSE  
THE PLAYS AND THE PLAYERS

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# SHAKESPEARE IN THE THEATRE

## I

### THE STAGE OF SHAKESPEARE

#### THE ELIZABETHAN PLAYHOUSE.\*

THE interdependence of Shakespeare's dramatic art with the form of theatre for which Shakespeare wrote his plays is seldom emphasized. The ordinary reader and the everyday critic have no historic knowledge of the Elizabethan playhouse; and however full the Elizabethan dramas may be of allusions to the contemporary stage, the bias of modern dramatic students is so opposed to any belief in the superiority of past methods of acting Shakespeare over modern ones, as to effectually bar any serious inquiry. A few sceptics have recognized dimly that a conjoint study of Shakespeare and the stage for which he wrote is possible; but they have not conducted their researches either seriously or impartially, and their conclusions have proved disputable and disappointing. With a very hazy perception of the connection between Elizabethan histrionic art and its literature, they have approached

\* Part of a paper read before the Elizabethan Literary Society, November 1, 1893.

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a comparison of the Elizabethan drama with the Elizabethan stage as they would a Chinese puzzle. They have read the plays in modern printed editions, they have seen them acted on the picture-stage, they have heard allusions made to old tapestry, rushes, and boards, and at once they have concluded that the dramatist found his theatre inadequate to his needs.

Now the first, and perhaps the strongest, evidence which can be adduced to disfavour this theory is the extreme difficulty—it might almost be said the impossibility—of discovering a single point of likeness between the modern idea of an Elizabethan representation of one of Shakespeare's plays, and the actual light in which it presented itself before the eyes of Elizabethan spectators. It is wasted labour to try to account for the perversities of the human intellect; but displays of unblushing ignorance have undoubtedly discouraged sober persons from pursuing an independent line of investigation, and have led many to deny the possibility of satisfactorily showing any intelligible connection between the Elizabethan drama and its contemporary exponents. Nowhere has a little knowledge proved more dangerous or more liable to misapplication, and nowhere has sure knowledge seemed more difficult of acquisition; yet it is obvious that investigators of the relations between the two subjects cannot command success unless they allow their theories to be formed by facts.

To those dilettante writers who believe that a poet's greatness consists in his power of emancipating himself from the limitations of time and space, it must sound something like impiety to describe Shakespeare's plays as in most cases com-

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positions hastily written to fulfil the requirements of the moment and adapted to the wants of his theatre and the capabilities of his actors. But to persons of Mr. Ruskin's opinion this modified aspect should seem neither astonishing nor distressing; for they know that "it is a constant law that the greatest poets and historians live entirely in their own age, and the greatest fruits of their work are gathered out of their own age." Shakespeare and his companions were inspired by the prolific energies of their day. Their material was their own and their neighbours' experiences, and their plays were shaped to suit the theatre of the day and no other. It is therefore reasonable for the serious critic and historian to anticipate some increase of knowledge from a thorough examination of the Elizabethan theatre in close conjunction with the Elizabethan drama. Students who reject this method will always fail to realize the essential characteristic of one of the greatest ages of English dramatic poetry, while he who adopts it may confidently expect revelations of interest, not only to the playgoer, but to all who devote attention to dramatic literature. Above all things should it be borne in mind that the more the conditions of the Elizabethan theatre are studied, the better will it be perceived how workmanlike London's theatrical representations then were, and that they had nothing amateurish about them.

One of the chief fallacies in connection with the modern notion of the Elizabethan stage is that of its poverty in colour and setting through the absence of scenery—a notion that is at variance with every contemporary record of the theatre and of its puri-

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tanical opponents, whose incessant taunts were, "Behold the sumptuous theatre houses, a continual monument of London's prodigality and folly." The interior of an Elizabethan playhouse must have presented an unusually picturesque scene, with its mass of colouring in the costume of the spectators; while the actors, moving, as it were, on the same plane as the audience, and having attention so closely and exclusively directed to them, were of necessity appropriately and brilliantly attired. We hear much from the superficial student about the "board being hung up chalked with the words, 'This is a wood,' when the action of the play took place in a forest." But this is an impression apparently founded upon Sir Philip Sidney's words in his "Apology of Poetry," written about 1583: "What child is there that, coming to a play and seeing Thebes written in great letters on an old door, doth believe that it is Thebes?" And whether these words were "chalked" upon the outside door of the building admitting to the auditorium, or whether they appeared exhibited to the eye of the audience on the stage-door of the tiring-room is not made clear, but this is certain, that there is no direct evidence yet forthcoming to prove that boards were ever used in any of Shakespeare's dramas or in those of Ben Jonson; and, with some other dramatists, there is evidence of the name of the play and its locality being shown in writing, either by the prologue, or hung up on one of the posts of the auditorium. Shakespeare himself considered it to be the business of the dramatist to describe the scene, and to call the attention of the audience to each change in locality, and moreover he does this so skilfully as to make his

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scenic descriptions appear as part of the natural dialogue of the play. The naked action was assisted by the poetry; and much that now seems superfluous in the descriptive passages was needed to excite imagination. With reference to this question, Halliwell Phillipps very justly remarks: "There can be no doubt that Shakespeare, in the composition of most of his plays, could not have contemplated the introduction of scenic accessories. It is fortunate that this should have been one of the conditions of his work, for otherwise many a speech of power and beauty, many an effective situation, would have been lost. All kinds of elaborate attempts at stage illusion tend, moreover, to divert a careful observance of the acting, while they are of no real service to the imagination of the spectator, unless the author renders them necessary for the full elucidation of his meaning. That Shakespeare himself ridiculed the idea of a power to meet such a necessity, when he was writing for theatres like the Curtain or Globe, is apparent from the opening chorus to 'Henry V.' It is obvious that he wished attention to be concentrated on the players and their utterances, and that all surroundings, excepting those which could be indicated by the rude properties of the day, should be idealistic." The dramatist's disregard of time and place was justified by the conditions of the stage, which left all to the intellect; a complete intellectual representation being, in fact, a necessity, in the absence of meretricious support. "The mind," writes John Addington Symonds, "can contemplate the furthest just as easily as more familiar objects, nor need it dread to traverse the longest tract of years, the widest ex-

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panse of space, in following the sequence of an action." In fact, the question of the advantage or disadvantage of scenery is well summed up by Collier, whose words are all the more impressive when it is borne in mind that his reasons are supported by an indisputable fact in the history of our dramatic literature. "Our old dramatists luxuriated in passages descriptive of natural or artificial beauty, because they knew their auditors would have nothing before their eyes to contradict the poetry; the hangings of the stage made little pretension to be anything but covering for the walls, and the notion of the plays represented was taken from what was written by the poet, not from what was attempted by the painter. We owe to the absence of painted canvas many of the finest descriptive passages in Shakespeare, his contemporaries, and immediate followers. The introduction, we apprehend, gives the date to the commencement of the decline of our dramatic poetry." Shakespeare could not have failed to recognize that by employing the existing conventions of his stage he could the more readily bring the public to his point of view, since its thoughts were not being constantly diverted and distracted by those outward decorations and subordinate details which in our day so greatly obliterate the main object of dramatic work.

As the absence of theatrical machinery helped playwrights to be poets, so the capacity of actors stimulated literary genius to the creation of characters which the authors knew beforehand would be finely and intelligently rendered. Nor were the audiences in Shakespeare's time uncritical of the actor's art, and frequent allusions in the old plays



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show that they understood what “a clean action and good delivery” meant. To quote again from Mr. Addington Symonds, “attention was concentrated on the actors, with whose movements, boldly defined against a simple background, nothing interfered. The stage on which they played was narrow, projecting into the yard, surrounded on all sides by spectators. Their action was thus brought into prominent relief, placed close before the eye, deprived of all perspective. It acquired a special kind of realism which the vast distances and manifold artifices of our modern theatres have rendered unattainable. This was the realism of an actual event, at which the audience assisted; not the realism of a scene in which the actor plays a somewhat subordinate part.”

Noblemen used to maintain a musical establishment for the service of their chapels, and to this department of their household the actors belonged. When not required by their masters, these players strolled the country, calling themselves servants of the magnate whose pay they took and whose badge they wore. Thus Shakespeare’s company first became known as “Lord Leicester’s Servants,” then as the Lord Chamberlain’s, afterwards, in the reign of King James, as “The King’s Company.” And we can imagine the influence of the chapel upon the art of the theatre when we consider that choristers, who were taught to sing anthems and madrigals, would receive an excellent training for that rhythmical and musical modulation so indispensable to the delivery of blank verse. With regard to the boys who performed the female characters, it is specially to be noted that they were paid more than the

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ordinary actors, in consequence of the superior physical and vocal qualifications which were needed. That the boys were thoroughly successful in the delineation of women's parts we learn from the Puritans, and from the insistence that those boys impressed for Queen Elizabeth's chapel should not only be skilled in the art of minstrelsy, but also be handsome and shapely, which seems to point to the theatrical use that would be made of them. To this end, power was given to the Queen's choirmaster to impress boys from any chapel in the United Kingdom, St. Paul's only excepted. A contemporary play has the following allusion to a boy actor: "Afore Heaven it is a sweet-faced child. Methinks he would show well in woman's attire. I'll help thee to three crowns a week for him, an she can act well."

Referring once more to the construction of the theatres, it is important to note that they differed most from modern playhouses in their size; not so much, perhaps, in the size of the stage as in the dimensions of the auditorium. The building was so made that the remotest spectator could hardly have been distant more than a dozen yards, or thereabouts, from the front of the stage. The whole auditory were thus within a hearing distance that conveyed the faintest modulation of the performer's voice, and at the same time demanded no exaggerated effort in the more sonorous utterances. Especially would such a building be well adapted for the skilled and rapid delivery for which Elizabethan players were famous. Added to this, every lineament of the actor's countenance would have been visible without telescopic aid. It was for such a theatre that Shakespeare wrote, says Mr. Halliwell Phillips,