13. Audiences and Playgoing

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English audiences had been watching plays for many years before William Shakespeare began to write for the theater in the early 1590s. Yet going to see and hear plays performed in playhouses, buildings specifically designed or adapted to serve the needs of actors and audiences only or primarily, was a relatively new cultural habit, only one generation old. Moreover, it was a habit confined, with one or two minor exceptions in the early seventeenth century, to the capital city, London. If one lived in other major urban centers – Norwich, Coventry, or Gloucester, for example – throughout Shakespeare’s lifetime one continued to see plays as one’s parents and grandparents had done, occasionally, as actors happened to visit the town and receive permission to perform, and to see them in town halls or innyards and other spaces temporarily adapted to serve as places to assemble for the shared experience of the theatrical show.

Such had been the conditions in London also for roughly the first decade of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, but within a few years of Shakespeare’s birth, we hear of the first custom-built theatrical structure, the Red Lion at Mile End (1567). It had a large playing platform facing wooden galleries for an audience, open to the sky and lit by daylight; playhouses like it continued to be used for the next hundred years. Before playhouses existed in London, playgoing had already become a popular activity, and after their advent audiences continued to see plays in other spaces. Yet the presence throughout Shakespeare’s active life in the theater of a number of London buildings permanently available for the pleasures of playgoing evidently produced a considerable change in cultural life.

(See Chapter 12, “Playhouses.”) As modern city-dwellers or tourists can stroll around Times Square or along Shaftesbury Avenue to see what shows they might be interested in attending, so Londoners in Shakespeare’s day had some choice of what they might see. One fashionable phrase on the lips of men about town, John Marston suggested in 1598, was “What’s played today?” A year later, a Swiss visitor noted that “daily at two in the afternoon, London has two, sometimes three plays running in different places, competing with each other, and those which play best obtain most spectators,” the visitor himself having seen a performance of Julius Caesar at the Globe on September 21, 1599 (Gurr, Playgoing 255, 256–67).

A relatively small number of play texts survive from the period when considered in relation to a competitive repertory system that generated about a hundred new productions each season. The plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries together with the titles of plays now otherwise entirely lost give an idea of the range of taste and interest among audiences: contemporary news, scandal, and crime; romance both chivalric and amatory; the exciting and half-believed realm of magic, conjuration, and supernatural beings; the history and legends of England, Greece and Rome, and other places; satirical and romantic comedies, with both exotic and local settings; and tragedies of revenge, pride, and desire. Plays popular with audiences tended to generate imitations and sequels; as with modern films, a hit could produce its own genre, providing further similar entertainment to those who had initially hailed it. There was, in short, a great variety in both the material and the sophistication of early modern plays, and we might fairly conclude that audiences of Shakespeare’s day were eclectic and varied in their tastes.

Constituencies of the audience

Audiences are not, of course, homogeneous bodies, although audiences watching Shakespeare today are made up of individuals a good deal more socially and culturally alike than those who watched the first performances of Romeo and Juliet or Hamlet. Hamlet himself has things to say about the taste and capacity of particular audience members. Some are there for “a jig or a tale of bawdry” (Ham. 2.2.458), light, salacious entertainment, others for “inexplicable dumb-shows [silent pageants] and noise” (Ham. 3.2.10); he no doubt would place himself in the ranks of “the judicious” (Ham. 3.2.22), who pay properly informed attention to the matter and manner of the performance, and whose opinion the actors should chiefly respect. The constitution of audiences and theaters changed over time, between Shakespeare’s birth and the effective end of the kind of theater he knew, at the outbreak of civil war in late 1642, but for most of his professional life he wrote for a large, mixed audience that watched and listened in the theaters we think typical of Elizabethan London, the “wooden Os”: the Globe, the Curtain, and the Theatre.


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part ii. Theater

The Globe and its inhabitants – both actors and audience – have often been reimagined since the disappearance of the theater itself in the middle of the seventeenth century. (See Chapter 204, “English-Speaking Audiences: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.”) Relatively recently, a version of the building has been rebuilt, not far from its original site. Going there can produce the comparative strangeness of watching Shakespeare in daylight, from a position standing in the yard, with the actors above you on a raised, open stage, much of the rest of the audience visible to you in the circular sweep of the galleries, and under whatever weather conditions happen to prevail on the day you choose to go. Otherwise, a visit is not made by time machine, and the other members of the audience around you will not look, smell, or react as a Globe audience did in 1600. A reconstructed playhouse cannot reconstruct its surrounding culture or the ways of performing, listening, and watching that culture produced. The behavior of early Globe audiences and actors was reimagined by Laurence Olivier in his outstanding film version of Henry V (1944). Perhaps influenced by the still-remembered tradition of the music hall, favorite actors and characters are cheered, barracked, and applauded by an enthusiastic and vociferous crowd of ordinary-looking people, who fall silent when the ringing voices of the king and the Chorus fill the circle of the theater with their sound (manipulated on the soundtrack, of course, by engineers). Partly a romance of a spirited, united nation emerging from a terrible war, inspired by the oratory of a leader, Olivier’s version of the Globe is colored by the time of its making, as any history tends to be.

Playgoers

How many people went to the early theaters, and who were they? We have no very precise information to answer either of these questions as fully as we might wish, but our general impression that audiences at the large playhouses of the sixteenth century were both numerous and socially mixed has been borne out by continuing research in the area. Estimates by contemporaries of the sizes of audiences at such places speak in terms of thousands rather than hundreds, perhaps as many as three thousand when the Globe was full; the Rose, a smaller building, could hold perhaps two thousand on a busy day. (As with the Tokyo subway system, the practice of jamming as many as possible through the doors was followed; modern safety regulations governing theaters were unknown.) Busy days tended to be holidays, when everyone had some spare time and the inclination to enjoy themselves: Christmas and Shrovetide, Whitsuntide, Midsummer, and the late summer and autumn feast days of St. Bartholomew and Michaelmas.

During the two decades when Shakespeare wrote most of his plays, 1590–1610, at least two large playhouses were offering daily entertainment to the London public, and for much of that time three or four similar playhouses were open for business. Ten thousand people might have been accommodated at playhouses on the busiest days of the year. Daily business naturally fluctuated; for all the playing companies to have enjoyed full houses would have been a rare event. The fluctuations of business at the Rose playhouse in the late 1590s can be followed by consulting Philip Henslowe’s records of the daily receipts he recorded in his so-called Diary (Foakes); they vary, we would reasonably conclude, with the size of the crowd. A potential total audience of ten thousand people must be set against the estimated population of London in 1600 of two hundred thousand, a figure that doubled over the next fifty years. If five percent of the city’s population might go to theaters on holidays, to sustain daily business through the year the actors would have relied on an average of about one percent doing so reasonably regularly.

How often individual people might go depended, obviously, on how keen they were on theater, although in the centuries before cinema, radio, and television, live theater had a rather different cultural place than it does today. Otherwise, the better off would have had the leisure to visit more frequently. In 1611, Simon Forman, a man from what we would now call the professional middle class, though an unusual individual, recorded visits to four plays at the Globe within two months, although it is impossible to tell how indicative such frequency might be of his playgoing throughout his life. Visitors to London, then as now, also went to playhouses, and since the repertory at each active theater changed daily, it might have been possible to spend an entire week seeing a different show each day.

Economics, class, and gender

The cost of playgoing rose between the 1560s and the 1640s, but when the Globe was built in 1599 it remained possible to attend the older playhouses for a penny, the price of basic admission to a place standing in the yard. Relative to contemporary wages and the cost of living, this was not a large sum, so attending the theater was within reach of all but the very poorest. Ordinary people, including servants, unskilled laborers, soldiers, sailors, and apprentices, did indeed go, to the extent that some of the opposition to Elizabethan theater business, a matter we will come to, may have arisen from the theater’s democratic nature within a society that officially insisted on hierarchy. One other matter of concern to ofﬁcials was the evident freedom women felt in going to the theater, creating a further target for moralistic opposition. How equally matched in numbers the sexes may have been is hard to guess, but men and women mingled together in all sections of the audience. The epilogue to As You Like It, spoken by the male actor of Rosalind, in female dress, addresses the women and men of the audience, facetiously, as two constituencies of taste in judging a comedy of love. Women may not have gone to the theater completely unaccompanied; more likely they
went in social groups, with husbands, families, servants, and friends.

For men and women alike, going to the theater with companions seems to have been common, and therefore the audience consisted of a variety of social groups, as well as individuals. In the satirical comedy The Knight of the Burning Pestle (1607), Francis Beaumont portrays such a social group arriving in the wrong theater; they have come to a children's playhouse, whereas the kind of material they evidently enjoy was to be seen in the larger outdoor houses. The group is made up of a freeman of the Grocers' Company, a citizen tradesman, his wife, and his apprentice. Apprentices, trainees in the various London trades, are often mentioned in contemporary accounts of audiences, frequently for being riotous and unruly. They were young men aged from their early teens to their early twenties, hence perhaps their reputation for unruliness; a line in Shakespeare and Fletcher's Henry VIII speaks, anachronistically, of "the youths that thunder at a playhouse" (H8 5.3.53), presumably by stamping their feet against the boards of one of the higher and cheaper galleries. In fact, each apprentice was bound to his master in a paternalistic relationship and was not free to take time away from work without approval. Individual relationships between masters and apprentices undoubtedly varied in their strictness, and Beaumont's parody of a family afternoon out was probably a reflection of cultural practice among some inhabitants of the city.

Children came with parents to see plays (a child was saved from burning during the destruction of the first Globe playhouse by fire in 1613), and later in life family groups of adolescent brothers and sisters continued the habit of theatergoing. Citizens like Beaumont's Grocer were reasonably prosperous people; those higher in rank, if not always richer, also attended the playhouses. The Earl of Essex actually commissioned a play to be performed at the Globe in 1602 as part of the propaganda for his ill-judged rebellion, and possibly he went to the performance. Other lesser members of the nobility were frequent patrons of the large theaters, and the "lords' room," a particularly select area of the gallery seating in such buildings, is a clear sign of their continued presence. Even after more socially select playhouses began to be used by the adult acting companies, from the second decade of the seventeenth century, the Globe continued to draw crowds, among which were numerous "fine folk," as an observer in 1635 put it (Gurr, Playgoing 292).

**Other audiences**

We have so far been considering audiences as Shakespeare experienced them at the large outdoor playhouses, the "public" theaters, to which anyone with a penny in hand might be admitted. His plays and his own performances as a player were, however, seen by other, more select groups of people. When Love's Labour's Lost was published in 1598, it advertised itself "As it was presented before her highness this last Christmas." Only in Victorian romance, and in Shakespeare in Love, did Queen Elizabeth go to the playhouse; she rather saw plays in her own chambers in the various royal palaces, accompanied by her attendant ladies and courtiers. On such occasions, the actors packed their costumes and properties in good time for an important and well-rewarded performance, given in the evening, indoors, under candlelight, on a temporary stage before a grand, richly dressed audience assembled on raised ranks of seating, the queen positioned in the symbolic center of the auditorium, directly facing the stage. The highest-ranking lords and ladies of the court, including Shakespeare's patrons Henry and George Carey, successively Lord Hunsdon and the queen's Lord Chamberlain, and Charles Howard, Baron Howard of Effingham, Lord High Admiral and hero of the Armada sea battles, patron of the Lord Admiral's company of players, saw plays chiefly in the company of the queen in palace chambers a few times each year. Such audiences were restricted to the immediate members of the court and their families, a group of 200–300 people at most, and since the performances were commissioned by the queen, rank was the only condition of admission.

Another kind of court was established by the "Christmas Prince" elected by the law students at the Inns of Court, legal colleges and communities lying between the city of London and the royal court at Whitehall. In 1594, the celebration of such an event at Gray's Inn saw a performance of The Comedy of Errors in the hall there, under conditions similar to those at the royal court, Shakespeare and his fellows visiting to provide an essentially private show. Such were the conditions also of a performance of Twelfth Night within the hall of the Middle Temple, another legal inn, in February 1602 (see Figure 18). Law student John Manningham recorded that he saw the play "at our feast," a private assembly of the Middle Temple community and perhaps select guests, as at a college dinner (Gurr, Playgoing 260). For such performances, evidently, there would have been considerable homogeneity among the individual members of the audience in terms of background, outlook, and behavior. Whether an audience of lawyers was as much fun to play for as what we might imagine to have been the rather livelier audience at the Globe is a matter of speculation; they probably, at least, had a certain amount to drink before the time of the play. (See also Figure 13, which shows a staging of Twelfth Night in the same space four hundred years later.)

**"Private" theater audiences**

Commissioned private performances in candlelit halls perhaps had a certain fashionable cachet. Otherwise, indoor performance was not particularly socially select: actors touring provincial towns played inside, in town halls and other assembly spaces, before public audiences at
least as often as they performed in such unroofed venues as inn yards. Within London, the connection between indoor playing and elitism probably arose from associations with the court. Court patronage from the 1560s on favored not only the professional actors but also the amateur boy performers from certain prominent schools, as well as the choirboy actors of the Chapel Royal and St. Paul’s Cathedral. The directors of these latter groups began giving performances open to a paying public during the 1570s. Their season was only a few weeks long, and although their spaces are sometimes called theaters, they were quite unlike contemporary playhouses. That at Paul’s was a small rectangular hall used for most of the year as a schoolroom and for choral rehearsal; it was a chamber theater, holding an audience of only a hundred people at the very most.

Because these theaters showed plays being prepared for court performance, they tended to attract a fashionable set, and their aura of being somewhat select probably gave rise to the term “private” theaters to characterize them, as opposed to the “public” theaters, which admitted large audiences at cheap prices. There was nothing essentially private about the choirboy theaters, although from the start they seem to have charged a higher admission price, creating a raw economic selectivity. In 1596, before the Globe was built, James Burbage, father of the famous actor Richard, attempted to set up an indoor playhouse within the medieval walls of the Blackfriars, former convent buildings of the Dominicans, south and west of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Local opposition stopped him, but some years later the space – in this case permanently set up with stage, galleries, and seats – was rented to the Children of the Chapel, whose playing activities had been revived and who became a fashionable troupe for roughly a decade, in direct competition with Shakespeare and his fellows at the large playhouses.

In 1608, however, the Blackfriars reverted to the control of Shakespeare’s company, by then the King’s Men, and over the next thirty-four years it would become the most fashionable playhouse in London, frequented by the elite and those wishing to be thought so. Many of Shakespeare’s earlier successes were restaged there, and it has been claimed that the final plays he wrote were composed with the special conditions of the Blackfriars in mind: a smaller audience paying more for their places, entirely seated, and therefore likely quieter, surrounding a smaller, candlelit stage around which spectators sat, in boxes, galleries, and indeed on stools at the edges of the stage itself. Close contact between performers and audience would seem to have been a feature of the Blackfriars, but whatever its advantages (and it was certainly weatherproof, for example), the Globe also continued to be used as a playing space, and audiences continued to go there long after Shakespeare’s retirement and death.

**Pleasures and perils of playgoing**

The classical formula frequently used to describe imaginative literature in general in the Renaissance, but by transference also applied to live theater, was that it had a twofold purpose: to teach and to give pleasure. When the theater was under attack from the stricter kinds of critics or from hellfire preachers, its defenders tended to stress the moral and uplifting effects of seeing plays, but audiences did not flock to the playhouses as if they were going to church. They expected to experience novel and exciting stories, to witness unusual and memorable events, to hear fine phrasing thrillingly delivered, and, importantly, to be amused and to laugh. The collective experience of doing these things together, supporting one another in immediate and spontaneous reaction to the surprises and delights the performers are producing on the stage, is still one of the primary pleasures of being in an audience. The French phrase is that one “assists” at a live performance; one’s presence and one’s reactions form part of the entire event.

One kind of excitement in Shakespeare’s day was found in inspiring and moving characters and events, like those in the reanimations of medieval military history that became so popular with audiences in an age when England was constantly under threat from hostile continental powers. In the early 1590s, Thomas Nashe wrote in the following terms about a hero Shakespeare put on the stage in the first of his plays about the reign of King Henry VI:

How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb he should triumph again on the stage,
and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at the least (at several times), who, in the tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding!

(Gurr, Playgoing 251, modernized)

The pleasure of sympathy for terrible or moving events performed on the stage is a complex phenomenon; “delight” is perhaps a rather lightweight word for the experience, but it is among the deeper satisfactions of being at the theater. A deliberate enlistment of the imaginative goodwill of the audience, their willingness to believe in the actors’ fictions, is written into Shakespeare’s Henry V (in the version of the play published in 1623). Since the huge scope of an event such as the Battle of Agincourt clearly cannot be encompassed “[w]ithin this wooden O,” the audience is to allow the actors to “On your imaginary forces work” (H5 Prologue 13, 18). The observers are to be active partners in bringing the events of 1415 to life again onstage.

Comic fictions and individual comic performers gave widespread pleasure. “Clown” characters, from those played by Richard Tarlton in the 1580s on, were hugely popular. Laughter tends to be infectious, and the roars of collective laughter from an amused audience provide a social bond of unusual strength. Some contemporary critics looked down on laughter as relatively unreﬁned and base, but Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s great contemporary in dramatic writing, speaks of it enthusiastically as one of the ends of comic performance. The Prologue to Volpone, ﬁrst spoken from the stage of the Globe in 1605–06, announces that the author has renounced the bitterness of satirical comedy: “All gall and copperas from his ink he draineth, / Only a little salt remaineth; / Wherewith he’ll rub your cheeks, till red with laughter, / They shall look fresh, a week after” (Jonson 33–36). The therapeutic effect of “mirth,” the “merry,” and of shared laughter in the theater, physiologically, morally, and socially, was repeatedly celebrated in theatrical texts.

**POLEMICS, POLITICS, AND PLAGUE**

Some contemporary accounts of theaters and their audiences paint a picture of decadence and lawlessness: theaters, they announce, are deviant and sinful places, and those who go there become corrupted and ruined. The rhetorical exaggerations of preachers, magistrates, and writers in the pay of those who favored stricter regulation of London’s growing culture of leisure enjoyment are evidently not to be taken at face value, particularly when they repeat old tropes from the classical authors and the church fathers. That there was a certain amount of “rough trade” at the theaters is very likely, but whether there was signiﬁcantly more than at other large public gatherings—parades, musters, the August fair in Smithﬁeld, and Lord Mayor’s day in late October, for example—seems doubtful. Thieves and prostitutes would have congregated wherever customers might be had, and an audience of a thousand or more would have been a tempting target.

That theaters were sites of unusual sexual license, one repeated charge against them, seems fairly unlikely on the face of it. In an evenly lit building, much of the audience was visible to many other people; the theater would have been an odd place to choose for illicit liaisons. There certainly were occasional disorders at or near playhouses and other places used for performance, such as riots, quarrels, and violent demonstrations of displeasure, but that people regularly felt under unusual threat at the theater is not to be believed, given the continued popularity of playgoing with women and men, old and young.

Accidents with stage effects also sometimes happened—juries and at least one death from mismanaged stage violence—but they were probably felt worth recording precisely because they were freak events. The most dangerous part of being among a crowd at a theater would have been the risk of contagious or airborne infection, and the London authorities were well aware of the peril. Once weekly deaths in London from plague, a recurrent scourge of most large urban centers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, rose over a set ﬁgure, theaters were ordered to be closed, and in particularly bad years, 1603, 1625, and 1636, for example, audiences did not assemble to see plays for many months on end.

**SEEING PLAYS, HEARING PLAYS**

“Audience” is a term drawn from the Latin verb for listening, and “spectators” from that for watching. Audiences, of course, do both simultaneously, and when in A Midsummer Night’s Dream Theseus insists, against advice, that “I will hear that play” (MND 5.1.81) – the play of Pyramus and Thisbe, that is— he is not suggesting he will close his eyes in ecstatic enjoyment of the spoken verse alone. Nor does his new wife, at a pause in the performance, indicate that she has found the appearance of the players any less ridiculous than their spoken parts in saying “This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard” (MND 5.1.204; emphasis added). Theater demands our combined attention to what we see and what we hear, and that we draw conclusions from both; the two kinds of information are not infrequently at odds or in an oblique relationship with one another.

That early modern audiences took pleasure in watching as well as listening is partly attested to by the spectacular effects in many plays. Hamlet, Macbeth, and The Tempest all produce unusual and striking sights, and the visual jokes of double identity, two different people who look confusingly alike, are played in The Comedy of Errors and again in Twelfth Night. Details of character and situation were read by interpreting costume, sometimes wrongly. John Manningham, watching Twelfth Night in 1602 without listening as carefully as he might, thought that Olivia’s black dress indicated that she was a widow rather than a mourning sister (making her situation parallel to that of
Viola). He also noted the “good practice” of Malvolio’s letter, “prescribing his gesture in smiling, his apparel, &c.,” but he does not directly comment on the startling comic effect of the transformed Malvolio’s entry in act 3, scene 4, of the play (Gurr, Playgoing 260, modernized).

Eyewitnesses
Astrologer Simon Forman’s notes on the four performances he witnessed at the Globe in 1611 are rather disappointing as records of what he saw, although he was evidently listening carefully enough to give a fairly full account of the plots of the plays he attended. (For more on Forman and other eyewitnesses see Chapter 134, “First-hand Accounts of the Theatre.”) Forman tends to use the word “observe” in the sense of “note”; his own observations of a performance of Cymbeline record Iachimo’s trick to gain access to Imogen’s bedchamber: “he opened the chest and came forth of it” (Chambers 2: 339, modernized). The surprise and threat of this moment in the theater are remarkable; the bed and the sleeping woman allude to the tragic end of Othello, and the audience has not been told that Iachimo will hide himself in the chest he delivers to Imogen’s care. Forman simply flatly reports it, as he does the grotesque scene of Imogen’s lament over what she takes to be the decapitated body of her husband (and which we know is not). Chiefly, he makes no mention at all of the most spectacular moment of the play as the printed text represents it, the descent of Jupiter from the theatrical heavens, sitting astride an eagle.

At the supremely visual play Macbeth, Forman noted some unusual details, and at least one that clarifies the early staging of the play. He first says that Macbeth and Banquo were “riding through a wood” when they were confronted by “three women fairies or nymphs” (Chambers 2: 337, modernized). If these details were not influenced by Forman’s also reading the story of Macbeth in Holinshed’s Chronicles, which includes a woodcut picture corresponding to his version of the meeting, the detail of “riding” must have been read through indicative stage costume – riding boots and spurs which Banquo and Fleance would have worn in act 3, scene 3. Horses, says the Chorus in Henry V, are talked of only at the Globe. As to the witches being “nymphs,” the language of the play itself seems fairly consistently indicative of their grotesqueness, with “withered” bodies, “skinny lips,” and “beards.” (See H5 1.3.37–54.) Forman notes the bloody hands of act 2, scene 2, but rather-blurs the difference of reaction to them on the part of the murderers. He is clearest about something he must have seen happen onstage in the banquet scene; as Macbeth stood, Forman writes, “the ghost of Banquo came and sat down in his chair behind him” (Chambers 2: 338, modernized). Burbage, we may presume, was downstage, where he had moved to speak to the murderer, with his back to the table, upstage; the audience registered the arrival of the spectral guest and anticipated its likely effect. When Macbeth turned to rejoin the assembly, the audience waited for his attention finally to settle on the accusing figure facing him.

Forman’s account of seeing The Winter’s Tale entirely omits any mention of the remarkable theatrical effect that concludes the play, the magically reanimating statue about which, once again, the audience has had no prior knowledge. Forman was, however, struck with the character Autolycus, who features only in the second half of the play, and notes Autolycus’s indicative costume, “the rogue that came in all tattered” (Chambers 2: 341, modernized) on his first appearance (in act 4, scene 3), singing and addressing the audience, in the traditional manner of the stage clown. Forman’s notes are among the most informative evidence we have about the reactions of those who saw plays in Shakespeare’s lifetime, and their obvious limitations show how difficult it is to make confident conclusions about the thoughts and feelings of contemporary audiences. Yet that, as we would expect, people were moved by what they experienced in the theater is shown by a note, in Latin, from a man who saw Othello in 1610, describing a purely theatrical moment and its effect. Henry Jackson was an Oxford academic who must have seen the play on tour; we do not know where in the town it was staged. Burbage would have played the title part, but it was the performance of an unnamed boy apprentice, playing Desdemona opposite him, that stuck in Jackson’s memory: “although she pleaded her case very effectively throughout, yet [she] moved us more after she was dead, when, lying on her bed, she entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance” (Evans). An effect Shakespeare anticipated, even if he did not exactly write it, was brought to telling life before an audience.

Sources cited

Further reading
A stage property is an object that generally operates to establish a character, create mise-en-scène, or forward action. Such objects are sometimes limited to hand props, a term indicating that an actor can pick them up and carry them, but the category may extend to pieces of stage furniture or even costume pieces such as a crown or handkerchief. When a prop serves more broadly, the term indicates any nonhuman presence onstage that enters the action in some way. Props are things that act.

Establishing character

An important aspect of props is that they can act to establish a character’s identity. A study of Renaissance stage directions shows that when the word “property” is used in plays, it can refer to the symbols that identify a particular role or character:

Time appears “in black, and all his properties (as Scythe, Hourglass and Wings) of the Same Color” (Whore of Babylon . . .), the three Fates “lay down their properties [distaff, spindle, and knife] at the Queen’s feet” (Arraignment of Paris . . .), “Enter Hecate and other witches: (with Properties and Habits fitting)” (Witch . . .). (Dessen and Thomson 172)

In each of these instances, the audience knows that they are to regard a performer as a supernatural entity when he carries the right props. In the directions that Anthony Munday wrote for a civic pageant, he made that function explicit:

For better understanding the true morality of this device, the personages have all Emblems and Properties in their hands, & so near them, that the weakest capacity may take knowledge of them; which course in such solemn Triumphs hath always been allowed of best observation: both for avoiding trouble to the Magistrate, by tedious and impertinent speeches, and devouring the time, which craveth diligent expedition. (Munday C1v)

Munday wants everyone in his audience, even those of “the weakest capacity,” to understand the symbolism, and he wants no problems from a magistrate who might mistake the content. Quite aside from clarity, however, he likes the way that the props free him from having to write long speeches explaining who each character is.

When Renaissance stage directions use the word “property” to refer to emblematic figures in these instances, one can generalize and say that properties often served as markers of identity for nonsymbolic characters as well. At least one illustration of a Renaissance playhouse suggests that many characters carried properties that helped to identify them. In the frontispiece to Francis Kirkman’s The Wits (see Figure 19), most of the characters carry something to let the audience know who each of them is.