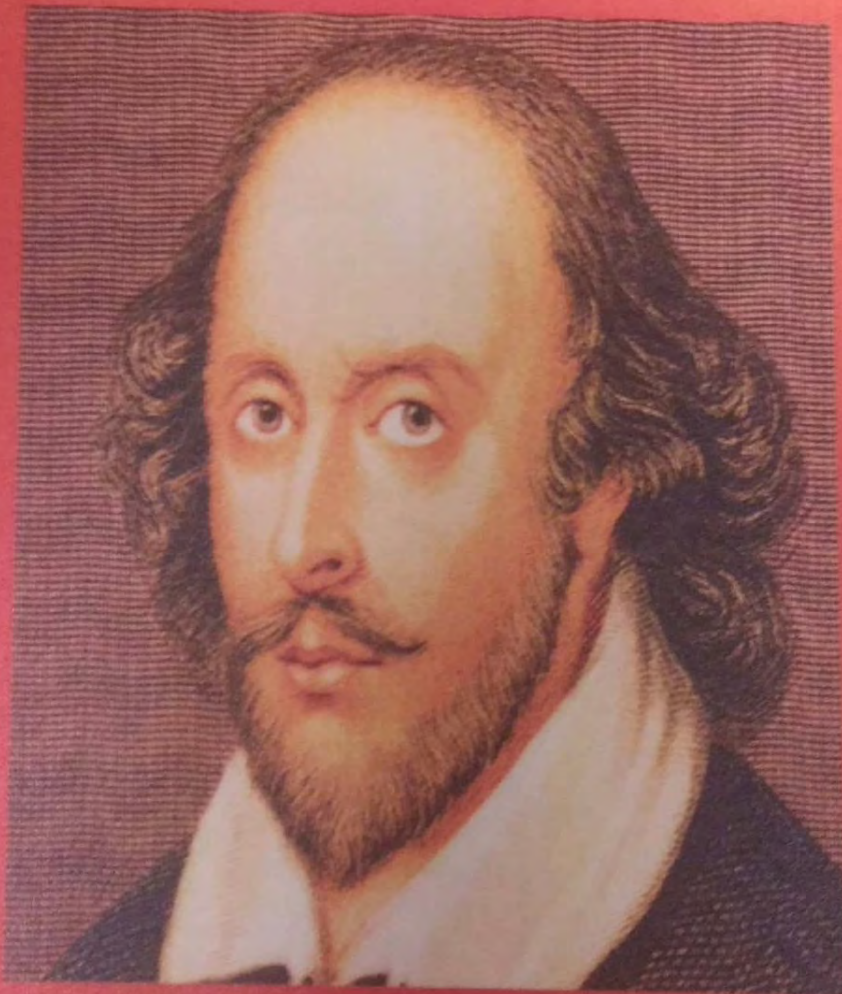


SHAKESPEARE FOREVER

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SHAKESPEARE'S STAGE CRAFT

R.VAISHNAVI

"Shakespeare's beginnings were not courtly, but popular." He wrote for the popular stage and not for our easy-chair study and 'the world that he lived in, the stage that he wrote for, these have left marks broad on his plays', in order to appreciate his works properly, it is essential to form a clear idea of the Elizabethan stage, and of the tastes of the play-going public which conditioned his art. He was an actor before he was a dramatist, and as such he had acquired a thorough knowledge of stage craft. This enabled him to make a virtue of necessity and to write plays which were box-office hits, as well as works of art, not for an age, but for all ages. His plays were performed on various stages-the Elizabethan public theatres, at inns in London, in great halls, at court, in provincial towns. In thinking of his stage it is best to consider only the most general features of the Elizabethan stage, those about which scholars are in agreement. Some of these are to be found in stages used in previous centuries.

Shakespeare's plays were born on stage. They might have been conceived 'in the quick forge and working-house of thought', but for Shakespeare that house where you should 'Work, work, your thoughts' was itself a play house. Shakespeare did his thinking in theatres. My muse labours', Shakespeare wrote 'and thus she is delivered'. What the muse conceives is not properly born until it cries out, giving voice to

what had before been only 'bare imagination'. So it should not surprise us that Shakespeare imagined being 'born' as an entrance onto 'this great stage'. He compares the walls of a circular amphitheatre to a 'gridle', encompassing a 'pit'. He asserts that a 'hollow womb resounds', as though a womb were a resonating auditorium.

For several centuries before theatres were built in Europe strolling players-groups of actors, tumblers, dancers and jugglers- travelled from place to place performing improvised sketches and entertaining audiences with their tricks. In medieval times plays on religious subjects had been performed in churches and cathedrals, raised platforms were specially constructed. As these plays increased in popularity, they moved out of church into church precincts. Plays were performed throughout the sixteenth century in great halls, like the dining-halls of Oxford and Cambridge colleges and those of the professional bodies of lawyers in London.

The Elizabethan stage was divided into four parts. The inn-yard stage was another platform on which players performed. The inn-yard was built round a yard used by vehicles and their passengers. The inn itself provided a back-wall for the stage, and served as dressing room for the actors. *The front stage* which projected far into the auditorium was conventionally used for a scene in some open place as a wood, a field, a garden etc. It was in this part that street brawls took place, or battles were fought.

Then there was *the back stage*, the part behind pillars. For example, it was on this part of the stage that *Dogberry and*

Verres examined the culprits. At both end of this wall, there were doors at the 'farthest end of the stage' in Will's description. This third door which opened into a small inner recess called the rear stage. It served many purposes. It was *Juliet's tomb*, *Prospero's cell*, *the canopy of Desdemona's bed*, or *the hovel where Tom in King Lear* is found taking refuge from the storm. Over this 'alcove' or 'the rear stage' there was *an upper stage* which was used for a scene on the upper storey. It was used for the balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*. The stage direction 'above' would refer to this stage, either a platform raised higher than the main stage.

Below the main stage was what was called the basement or the cellarage, from which voices or persons might issue, and into which persons would 'disappear' or 'vanish'. The area below the stage was used in many Elizabethan plays. It must have been used in *Macbeth* for the disappearance of the cauldron, and also for the vanishing of the Weird Sisters. This primitive stage could be boasting of no drop curtain or movable scenery. These peculiarities have moulded Shakespeare's art in several ways. As there was no curtain to cover to cover the stage, a scene began with the entrance of the actors, and ended with their exit.

In tragedies, the dead bodies are frequently carried off the stage in a funeral procession; and in the comedies the characters generally dance off the stage. The dead body of Caesar in *Julius Caesar* is given to Antonio, in the murder scene, to be carried away by him. Both in comedies and tragedies alike the lack of the drop curtain had a profound effect on the structure

of Shakespeare's plays. In some public playhouses there was a *turret*, or hut, above the gallery or galleries in which a few simple machines were placed, one of which must have been a crane, or hoists, with a chair, or some special piece of property, which could be lowered on to the main stage. In *Cymbeline*, the god Jove descends in thunder and lightning, sitting on an eagle, from the turret to main stage where he addresses the sleeping Posthumus.

"Two prominent characteristics of the Shakespearean drama may be referred directly to this absence of painted scenery; the continual change in the locality of the action, and the frequency of descriptive passages, in which appeal was made to the imagination of the spectators" says Hudson. He could throw the unity of place to the winds and changes his scenes as frequently as he liked. At one moment he could transport the audience to *Bohemia* and at the very next to *Messina*. In *Antony and Cleopatra* there are as many as forty-two scenes laid all over the Roman world. In the absence of painted scenery, the scene of action is frequently indicated through dialogue.

And the absence of movable scenery made a wealth of poetic description necessary to appeal to the imagination of the audience. The illusion created on the modern stage by lighting, scenery and orchestra, is created by Shakespeare through an abundance of vivid and poetic description. In the age, "Poetry was the natural medium for dramatic speech, especially at exalted moments: and a good actor could carry his audience with him by the emotional effect of rhetoric." Thus imagination was the prime need for the enjoyment of the drama.

The costumes worn by the actors could be both rich and expensive. If the Shakespearean stage had no curtain and scenery, it was rich in stage-properties and gorgeous costumes. They were used symbolically and suggestively. Sir Henry Wotton described a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry VII* at the Globe in 1613. He says, "It was presented with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty...the knights of the Order with their Georges and Garters, the Guards with their embroidered coats". Like properties, costume helped to build up theatrical illusion. The colours of the materials were used often symbolical.

The actors who presented the plays on the stage contributed something to them too. Legend has it that Shakespeare played *Adams* in *As you Like It* and the ghost in *Hamlet*. He is, in the plays, always alive to the transforming and creative power possessed by the player. Actors were professionals who had from an early age studied their craft under accredited masters. Much depended upon the actors, and the art of acting was brought to high pitch of perfection. But there were no actresses on the Shakespearean stage, women's parts being taken up by boys and young men specially trained for the purpose. In the tragedies the ladies usually remain in the background, in comedies they frequently make raids on masculine wardrobes and appear dressed as men. Portia, Nerrisa, Jessica, Viola, Rosalind, are only a few of the female characters who disguise themselves as men. As the women were played by boys it was a pleasant irony to have a double pretence. There were clever and witty women. Thus Shakespeare has carved his stage craft very

elegantly to feast the eyes of his audience. He always receives a great expectation from them and he satisfies them. His imagination reaches his audience by his unique stage craft techniques and his perfect actors. His choice of props, and costumes, everything contributes their part to make his plays more memorable.

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