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Shakespeare's Elizabethan Audience

When thinking about how William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would have been performed in the day of its authorship, many people picture a theater whose seats were much less comfortable than the average theater today, an audience more divided by class, but other than that, too many often assume it would have looked much like a modern day performance—the audience watching quietly and intently in a low-light, enclosed space anxiously attentive to the lines pouring from the actors' mouths. Research shows, however, that this was not the case. Even more common, though, the focus is put entirely upon the works, the plays, themselves with little attention paid to the actors, the stages, and the audience for which they were written. It is very interesting, however, to delve into the books of history and try to piece together an image of the cross-section of Elizabethan English men and women Shakespeare or any other actor of the time would have seen when he looked out upon his audience. What classes were represented? How accessible was the theater financial and physically to all sections of Elizabethan society? How did the audience behave? What was their world like? All of these questions are involved in trying to piece together as author Alfred Harbage writes "some idea of the several thousand representatives sent forth from the city to gather about Hamlet one weekday afternoon a long time ago" (53). To understand the audience one has to look at the society in which they worked, were entertained, and lived.

"The Renaissance came late to England; but after a hiccup in the mid-sixteenth century . . . 'high' art worked down into a still vigorous

popular culture,” writes R.E. Pritchard in his *Shakespeare’s England: Life in Elizabethan and Jacobean Times* (189). Elizabethan London saw what was really the first appearance of an entertainment sector in England. Though at the beginning of the period plays were not found outside the courtyards of inns, by the end of the period several playhouses had been built around London. Pritchard continues, “The sheer number [of playhouses that were built] suggests the demand” (190). The primary players of various companies and playhouses quickly became the first “stars,” as the theater quickly became the primary source of entertainment for an Elizabethan resident of London. And unlike other things, it was a uniting element, as the audience of most any public theater would contain representatives from all strata of London’s populace.

Elizabethan London can perhaps be best divided into three groups. At the top of the social ladder was the aristocracy—what Harbage calls the “Gentry, professional men, and officials” (55). Harbage and other scholars such as Jeffery Singman estimate that this section, the social elite, made up somewhere around ten percent of the population of London as a whole. This was a slightly higher percentage than found in the averages for the entire English nation but is to be expected as London was the center of societal and political action. At the base of the societal hierarchy is the group about which the least is known. Composed of discharged soldiers, peddlers, paupers, and vagrants, scholars estimate that this group also made up as much as ten percent of the people living in London.

The vast majority of the population, however, was made up of artisans and those who depended on them, together referred to by many as guildsmen. The biggest section of this group consisted of the craftsmen, themselves—button makers, carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, cobblers, etc. Apprenticeship was the means by which one entered the field. An apprentice lived with his master who provided food, sometimes education, and, obviously, training in a specific and potentially profitable trade. Apprenticeship lasted for seven years and offered some hope of “real economic and social advancement” (Singman 30). Slightly above the craftsmen in class standing and slightly smaller than them in group size were the merchants who sold their goods.

The work life of the craftsmen and merchants was a hard one by today's standards but was much more personal. Singman writes, "There was less distinction between people's work and their personal lives or between work spaces and personal spaces" (27). The days of offices and factories were still far in the future. Their day began early, four to six, and often lasted until sun-down or beyond. Lighting a home after sunset was an expensive and frivolous luxury so they might be in bed by eight or nine in the evening. This was the schedule Monday through Friday. Saturday was a half work day, so it left the afternoon and evening for some self-indulgences such as the theater. Harbage quotes Elizabethan pamphleteer Thomas Nashe as listing the following options for spending an afternoon in London, "that pleasure they diuide (howe virtuously it skills not) either into gameing, following of harlots, drinking or seeing a Playe" (57). And Sunday, the Sabbath, was reserved for worship, of course.

The schedule of the aristocracy would have been significantly less regimented. Though dinner was regularly served around five or six in the homes of London's elite, they might, as Singman suggests, "carouse late into the night" (57). Given that they were more apt to wine, dine and "carouse" later into the evening, it can be deduced that they might sleep in later, beginning their day as late as noon or so. Their daily schedule, though, was dictated by various business and, more likely, social obligations. At any rate, the amount of time one had for entertainment was largely dependent upon his position in society as was the amount of money he had available to spend.

The Elizabethan economy used two types of monetary units. Silver and Gold coins of varying sizes, the value of which was tied directly to the value of the gold or silver comprising the coins, were the most commonly used. The other form, called "Moneys of Account," did not actually exist as currency but was used to deal with large sums of money. One could, however, obtain a letter of credit from banker upon making a deposit.

Though there were some laws governing wages, the craftsman was largely underpaid. Today the skilled labor has negotiated very respectable hourly wages through our unions which were unavailable to the Elizabethan craftsmen. Singman's book provides a glimpse of how wages and income would have broken down, the craftsmen mak-

ing four to ten pounds per year compared to the nobleman's 2500 pounds. This information helps in understanding and appreciating the cost of admission as well as in comprehending who could afford to sit where in the Elizabethan theater.

The theater of Shakespeare's day resembled the courtyards from which it evolved, with a stage thrusting out into a courtyard and multi layered balconies, called galleries, overlooking and surrounding at least three sides. There were sometimes even small rooms directly above the stage that would hold only three or four of the wealthiest playgoers. The aristocracy would be found in the galleries with the standing room on the ground around the stage containing most of the working class plebs. General admission to the Globe and other public theaters of the day was as low as a penny, the price of a couple of quarts of ale, making it within the financial reach of most. The cost was, as Singman notes, "analogous to going to the cinema today, although the low wages of working people meant they could not do it very often" (151). Scholars estimate that the theater was within walking distance of 160,000 people in 1605, but only two in fifteen Elizabethan Londoners went weekly to the theater as compared to ten in fifteen modern Americans who go to the movies (Harbage 65). This was due in large part to "the scarcity of pennies but also the scarcity of leisure." Plays were performed usually just once per day. The theater competed with work because it took up valuable daylight time.

The location of many theaters outside districts where they were forbidden helped create business where transportation was concerned. Andrew Gurr writes, "Wealthier patrons heading for the Globe and its neighbors made us of the nearest thing London then had to a taxi service, paying sixpence to be rowed in one of the thousands of wherries across [the river]" (60). Horse drawn carriages might also be commissioned to transport patrons if one did not own his own. Perhaps the highlight of going to the theater for some wealthier patrons was the coming and going itself, as it sometimes still is today.

The conditions of an Elizabethan performance differed significantly from those of today. Andrew Gurr in his book *Rebuilding the Globe* describes the conditions of the average performance, at least at the Globe, in some detail. Of the three thousand spectator capacity, Gurr writes about a thousand of them would have been those stand-

ing around in the yard. The rest would, of course, be seated on benches in the galleries. The performances had no intervals, and venders circulated the audience with food and beverages. Gurr notes performances would have started around 2 o'clock, ending three hours later with a "jig or song-and-dance act" (53). The time of day means sunlight would have provided a well lit space where the audience was very aware of their surroundings. This means the theater depended much more upon the audience's willing suspension of disbelief to except as Gurr notes, "the first twelve lines of Hamlet, spoken in broad daylight on a warm afternoon, [telling] them that the air was bitterly cold and the time [was] midnight" (54). This convention is much easier to accept in modern lighting and temperature-controlled theaters. If it looked like rain, one had to decide if the roof of the gallery warranted the extra penny or two that it cost. Most Elizabethans wore hats, so some jostling, particularly among those standing, would have been likely as patrons secured a good view of the stage. Wealthier patrons in the galleries would likely have required cushions to make their seats more comfortable. The seating accommodations and physical attributes are far from the only differences that separate Shakespeare's theater from ours. The behavior of the audience was also significantly different.

Modern audiences are extremely well behaved. As Harbage writes, "We sit in decorous rows...applauding generously and in cautious unison...suffering in docile silence whatever is feeble, dull, or foolish" (92). Shakespeare's audience was not so well behaved, however, the degree of their rowdiness has been significantly overestimated in popular myth. Truly bad actors or hated characters could expect jeers from the audience and an occasional object hurled towards them, but the playhouse was still above the poor picture often painted where the play, itself, is seen as an intrusion or irrelevant part of the bustling action. Harbage reminds us that "pickpockets and prostitutes in an audience do not mean an audience of pickpockets and prostitutes" (93). These kinds of petty thieves and trouble-makers were a much more likely feature of local ail-houses where there was no admission fee. One has to remember that at one penny the theater was one of the few places where the common man could really feel like he was getting his money's worth. The patrons paid to see a play and this

remained their primary focus even though, as Gurr concludes, “the conditions and the time of the day were closer to those for a modern football match than a play” (53).

With only a little research, one sees that many elements of the Elizabethan theater differed significantly from those of today. The playhouses, themselves and the seating accommodations have been far out done by contemporary technology-packed theaters. Where modern audiences sit in the dark and feel an individual connection with the stage, Shakespeare’s audience would have definitely been keenly aware of the other members of the crowd not only because of lighting but because of their behavior. Though many things were different, the factors determining the attendance of Elizabethan audiences were very similar to those today, including financial resources, time, and personal interests. The actors may have had to work harder to keep the audiences’ attention, but at the heart of it, Elizabethan’s gathered around Shakespeare’s stage for the same reasons we do 400 years later—to be entertained by a playwright they had come to love.

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