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Some Personalities and Conventions of the Elizabethan Theatre

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PAT

THEATRE

SOME PERSONALITIES AND CONVENTIONS
OF THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

H491

A Special Studies

Presented to

Mr. Dennis Holt Sr.

Ouachita Baptist University

*D. Holt, Sr.
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
the Honors Program

by

LeElla Ratcliff

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A history of the stage is no trivial thing to those who wish to study human nature in all shapes and positions. It is of all things the most instructive, to see not only the reflections of manners and characters of several periods, but the modes of working their reflections, and the manner of adaption of it at those periods, to the taste and disposition of mankind. The stage indeed may be considered as the republic of active literature, and its history as the history of that state.⁶

The most outstanding era of dramatic development was the Elizabethan Age which took its name from Queen Elizabeth, the reigning monarch at the time. Her "Age" is one of heroic achievements in the history of the English-speaking peoples, and in literature, no other period has been more brilliant. Not only was Queen Elizabeth one of the most popular rulers England ever had, but her cities and streets provided excellent sources of literature for the English dramatists. This was especially true of London which was considered the heart of England by those in the theatres of that day.

When William Shakespeare was a boy, there was no such thing in all England as a theatre. Nobody had ever heard of a building especially set aside for the performance of plays. "Play-acting", the little there was of it, had always been done on wooden scaffolds in market places or in streets and yards as part of the celebration of the great festivals of the Christian Year.

Provincial theatre left much to the imagination of its audience, for there were no lighting effects nor elaborate scenery, few props, and none of the trappings that were later used to suggest real settings. The acting was vigorous and unrealistic with performers relying mainly on the volume and pitch of their own voices to convey youth or age, virtue or wickedness. The major roles in the popular dramas of the day were passionate and/or violent.

The "strolling players", as they were called, performed the plays and traveled in small, well-practiced groups of six or seven actors each. They were used under the patronage of some nobleman whose livery they were entitled to wear; thus, one group would call itself the Earl of Sussex's Men, another Lord Hume's Men, and there was even a company of Queen Elizabeth's Men. As these players came to Stratford on days in 1568, they were no doubt masters of many tricks. For example, "a bladder of animal blood might be concealed in the actor's costume, to spurt forth at the critical moment in an axing or stabbing."⁵

During this period, the content of plays was changing and so were the places of presentation---from the church to the street to the inn-yard. The players were no longer amateurs but professionals formed into companies who made their living by no other craft.

In 1572, city authorities in London issued an edict that threatened to snuff out touring companies like those that came to Stratford. By the terms of this edict, only actors who were actual servants of a nobleman could go on tour.

To counter the ban, members of the Earl of Leicester's company sent a letter to their patron with an urgent plea. They requested his license to certify---'that we are your household servants when we shall have occasion to travel amongst our friends, as we do usually once a year and as other noblemen's players do.' The request was granted, and the actors were free to go on tour.⁵

Leicester, the Queen's favorite, was a powerful and magnificent nobleman. In the summer of 1575, when Shakespeare was eleven, Elizabeth and her entourage descended upon Leicester's country home at Kenilworth. The occasion, known since then as the Princely Pleasures of Kenilworth, is remembered as having been the most splendid display of pageantry in her

reign---a reign famous for pageantry."³ Day after day there were huntings and feastings, masques and dances, plays, music, and fine dresses everywhere. Indeed Queen Elizabeth, like all great sovereigns of her time, whenever she traveled in state through the country, would expect to be received with ceremonial pageantry at every important town to which she came. Much money and skill were spent upon the presentation of these shows, which usually took the form of recitals or music and poetry given by people in costume as the founder of the town would come to welcome the Queen within the gates. All this would be done with lavish decoration or ornamental stages, or with triumphal arches surmounted by figures in pageant dress, scattering flowers and perfumes on the Queen as she passed by.

The actors in these performances were usually ladies and gentlemen of the court, but professional players were often employed as well, probably for the longer speaking parts where trained voices were required.

The Earl of Leicester had his own company of players which would have certainly been at Kenilworth during the Queen's visit. This company was led by a certain James Burbage, who may rightly be said to have been one of the founders of the English theatre as we know it today; because on his return to London after the Pleasures of Kenilworth, in the year 1575, he opened the first theatre ever built in England."³

Before James Burbage built his theatre, it is recalled that the best places for these performances had been in the open yards of the great inns. That was where the people gathered during the performances and all the streets outside would be crowded with folk going in---folk not always of the finest class. All the commotion, the blocking of the streets, to say nothing of the numerous beggars it brought together, caused these people to be looked upon with great dislike by the city authorities and the more

respectable citizens. And as the plays were so often given on Sunday and religious feast-days, they were especially disliked by those religiously minded people who were then beginning to be called Puritans. The Lord Mayor wrote to the Privy Council complaining that the plays caused all kinds of undesirable occurrences. Yet, for all these complaints uttered from almost every pulpit in London year in and year out, the plays became increasingly popular, and larger and larger crowds gathered to see them. New plays, new poets, new actors, and new playwrights had to be found to cope with the growing demand for this new field of entertainment.

However, whatever else one may have thought about the rights and wrongs of going to the plays in those days, there was one good reason for staying away which nobody could deny. Queen Elizabeth's London was never quite free of the plague. It came nearly every summer, and of course, where there were big sweating crowds of people who did not wash very often---and that is what most of the audiences were like---the infection spread rapidly among them. So it was wisely decreed by the City Council that whenever the plague appeared in London, all performances, if plays, should cease.

The Lord Mayor and his Council tried hard to get rid of the players altogether, but as all the principal player's companies had powerful friends and patrons at Court, they never succeeded in doing so. Doing what they could, however, they made life so hard for them in the cities that in the end most of the companies found it more worthwhile to stay in the suburbs where the City Council had less control.

A day at the theatre was really something to behold. The actors rose at dawn and began rehearsing---finally giving their performance in the

late afternoon. The most expensive part of the houses were the "Lords' Rooms" which were next to the stage, rather like the boxes in a modern theatre. The common people sat on stools or stood as "groundlings" down in the yard, while sellers of nuts and apples did a good trade and boys from the ale-house went in and out with trays of pot ale.

Suddenly, a trumpet sounded from the top of the house! It was the first of three soundings and warned the late-comers in the road to hurry; the second sounding was a signal that the players were ready; the third meant that the play would begin.

During the play most of the audience listened closely, for the Elizabethans liked hearing good music, good poetry, and witty talk. They would stay for an hour or more listening to a good sermon, and for as long as one liked at a good play. They applauded the good actors and "mewed" the bad ones but remained relatively quiet otherwise.

The play at last drew to a close; the trumpets sounded a slow march; the "bodies" were carried off and thereupon disappeared through a trapdoor in the floor of the stage. The audience roared approval and then settled down for the last part of the show, for the afternoons were always rounded off with a jig which the better patrons did not stay to enjoy. Thus, ended a day at the theatre.

The early theatre had many good writers besides Shakespeare to add to its list of performances.

Most famous of all the poet-dramatists before Shakespeare was Christopher Marlowe. He found a way to choose and combine words so that they had an effect of enchantment in which he carried his audience away in their imaginations to share the life of a kind of tapestry-world which he created for them on the stage, full of extreme and violent romance.⁷

His greatest plays, Tamburlaine and Doctor Faustus, are among the finest to come out of England, and had Marlowe lived longer he might have rivalled Shakespeare himself. Yet, his life was spent in unsettled times, and at the age of twenty-nine he was mysteriously stabbed, leaving Shakespeare without any rival at all.

Although these playwrights held a position of renown during the age, an even more popular group with the people of London were the actors---especially Richard Burbage, the star of his father's company at the Theatre, and Edward Alleyn, star of the rival company at the Rose. Burbage became a particular friend of Shakespeare and is thought to have been the creator of many, if not all, of his great tragic heroes---Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, and Othello. He was particularly famous for his performance of Richard III.

Burbage ended his life in 1619 with a famously appropriate epitaph which was simply: "Exit Burbage." Meanwhile, his great rival, Alleyn, was being noted for his performances in the plays of Christopher Marlowe: as Doctor Faustus and Barabbas.

The two greatest comic actors of the period were Will Kempe and Richard Tarlton who was the Queen's favorite clown. He was at one time the leader of a company called "The Queen's Men" for whom he wrote plays and jigs.

Clowning and dancing went together, especially in the case of the famous clown, Will Kempe. As a dancer, he held the world's longest record for distance, for in 1597 he laid a wager that he would dance a "morris" from London to Norwich---which he did! He is also known to have played in some of Shakespeare's many plays.

The most colorful part of an Elizabethan production was undoubtedly the costumes which are seldom equaled on the modern stage. Not only did the costume of any young gentleman display crimson and gray, purple and gold, but the styles were so that no two gentlemen looked alike.

Elizabethan costume was thus of great value to the actors and dramatists of Shakespeare's day, who took the fullest possible advantage of it in giving color and variety to their plays. On several occasions one producer was known to have spent twice as much for the costume of one actor as he paid the dramatist for the play in which the costume was worn. In addition, the variety of costumes, haircuts, and beards offered certain possibilities which have practically disappeared from modern life. When these costumes, beards, and haircuts differed as they did in Shakespeare's day, it was fairly easy for a clever man to deceive even his close friends for a limited time.²

The most common disguise in Shakespeare's plays, and the most puzzling to modern readers and actors, is that of young boys as ladies. Here the Elizabethan actor and playwright had one other advantage in addition to the variety in costume. Since all women's parts were taken by boys, as they had been in all English plays for hundreds of years, it was necessary for them to be apprenticed to actors for several years. They lived with the players, listened to stage talk, attended rehearsals, and saw a play nearly every afternoon while practicing female impressions and impersonations at every opportunity.

It is little wonder that after several years of such life, with the help of a careful dramatist, a good make-up man, and an intelligent costumer, a bright talented young boy could present a convincing portrayal of Viola or Portia. Yet nothing could be simpler than for him to stop pretending to be Portia for the formal role of Balthasar, the young lawyer.⁴

Elizabethan plays moved much more rapidly than do more modern ones. The numerous act and scene divisions in modern versions of Shakespeare

suggest to us many curtains and intermissions, but these divisions were scarcely noticeable to the Elizabethans. One scene followed another without pause since there was no curtain to fall and no scenery to be moved. In the audience, people simply concentrated on the actors and gave no thought to the setting.

With the burning, ruin, and evacuation of many of the theatres of Shakespeare's day, many people thought the drama of this period would be lost or forgotten. However, even with the death of Shakespeare, this great period of Elizabethan actors went on.

As the Seventeenth Century was ushered in, Elizabeth's reign began to terminate, for her death was becoming more and more imminent. Yet, even at the point of death, she was still England's most gracious lady and the theatre's most avid patron.

Some great monarchs of history have chosen to die with the treasure of their kingdoms piled high about them. But Elizabeth commanded a distinguished company of players to come and entertain her---the Lord Chamberlain's Men. They arrived at the palace gates in February, 1603. At one end of a lofty hall they set up their platform stage, the musicians sounded a flourish, and the brilliantly costumed Queen feasted her eyes on a dramatic spectacle for the last time. A few weeks later she died, and an era ended.²

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