

## Shakespeare's Audience: A Very Motley Crowd

1992: <http://www.bard.org/SectionEducate/shakesmotley.html>

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords' box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In *Hamlet*, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were "for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise." His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in *Julius Caesar*.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown. Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o'clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baitings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare's theatre filling an educational need is probably that of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed, and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others, the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers, historians, humanists, and playwrights.

The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality, and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.