

## Shakespeare and His Theater

William Shakespeare, playwright, director, actor, and poet, lived from 1564 to 1616. The greatest writer in the history of literature in the English language, he is known and his works are read in the original and in translation all over the world. Shakespeare is especially well-known for his plays—comedies, histories, and tragedies—which he produced in London during the last part of Queen Elizabeth I's reign and the first part of the reign of King James I. Because of Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare's time is often called the "Elizabethan Age."

Attending Shakespeare's theater was quite different from attending theater today. Whereas the modern theater is usually thought of as a very quiet, austere place, in Elizabethan England it was a noisy, popular gathering place for people of all ages and from all walks of life. Because the theaters were open to the sky, favorable weather was a necessity. A flag flown atop the theater served as a signal that a performance would be given on a specific day. Artisans, apprentices, laborers, gentlemen, and ladies would then assemble to see a play.

Elizabethan theaters were constructed in such a way that the lower classes would stand in the pit, the area surrounding the stage. Drinking and eating were permitted in this area, which sometimes became very noisy. If one of these spectators did not like a particular character or situation in the play, he or she would feel free to hiss or boo or throw anything he or she might have at hand.

It was possibly with this in mind that Shakespeare included the phrase "with patient ears attend" in the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*. He seemed to anticipate noise in the audience. The rowdy atmosphere of the pit also accounted for the exaggerated acting that was common at the time. To compensate for lines that the audience could not hear, the actors used exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, unlike the natural method of acting that is used today. The last line of the Prologue seems to indicate that the actors with "toil" (exaggerated acting) would try to compensate for "what here (a play on the words "hear" and "ear") shall miss." The nature of the crowd also contributed to the haste with which the lines were spoken. While a performance of a Shakespearean play today often takes three hours or more, the restless crowd caused the actors to rush through lines, thereby completing a play in two hours or less—"the two hours' traffic of our stage."

The diagram of the theater is a depiction of a particular Elizabethan theater called the Globe. This theater has become famous because it is the one where the majority of Shakespeare's plays were performed. He not only wrote, but also directed and acted in his plays at the Globe.

