

Prologue: The ‘Room’ Where It Happened

The Globe Theater, Play-Making, and Play-Going in Shakespeare’s Time

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After this introduction, consider taking a [virtual tour of the Globe theater!](#)

When working with Shakespeare, it’s important to keep in mind the context of his time period – how and why his plays were written and performed. Below is some basic information to get you started.

- Shakespeare came long before a stage curtain or the idea of a ‘fourth wall’ was invented. For Shakespeare’s actors, the audience is *always* there to be engaged, entertained, interacted with, and spoken to. (The ‘fourth wall’ of a theater refers to the imaginary and invisible wall that separates the actors from the audience – the ‘fourth wall’ of the room depicted on the stage or playing space that creates a sense of a closed/separate reality of time and place for the actors and story.)
- Shakespeare’s Globe Theater was a radical innovation for its time: an enclosed space dedicated to theatrical entertainment*. Many performances still happened on streets and in the courtyards of Inns & ‘public houses’.

“Theatrical entertainment” refers to humans performing stories for other humans. Plenty of enclosed spaces existed in London for other kinds of entertainment, most famously the bear-baiting rings that were right down the road from the original Globe.

- The Theaters were on the south bank of the London River, outside the city limits. Playhouses were considered dens of immorality and lewd behavior, and were outlawed in the city proper.
- Plays were performed during the day, starting around 2 pm, and wrapping up by 5 pm. (No electricity yet! – No way to light the actors after dark!)
- You didn’t go to “see” a play in Shakespeare’s day, as we would say today. You went to “hear” it.
- Only 25% of Shakespeare’s audiences could read at all.
- Shakespeare’s plays were never meant to be published. The First Folio was a compilation created after his death, from the various ‘rolls’ / ‘roles’ of script collected by previous members of his acting company.
- All the stories of Shakespeare’s plays were familiar to his audiences. They didn’t go for the plot; they went to hear how Shakespeare would tell the story, and what his characters were going to say.
- Most audience members were accustomed to listening for three hours, as this was the typical length of a Sunday church sermon. They were also very familiar with the rhetorical structure of Shakespeare’s dialogue, because that’s the structure that the church sermons (and most formal communication) used.

