Shakespeare's Playhouse and Audience

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Not everyone supported Shakepeare's theater in his lifetime. Note the following petition from complaining neighbors. (James Burbage, the father of Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's star actor and future business partner, was trying to convert the Blackfriar's theater into a larger venue.)

"…the said Burbage is now altering and meaneth very shortly to convert and turne the same into a common playhouse, which will grow to be a very great annoyance and trouble, not only to all the noblemen and gentlemen thereabout inhabiting, but also a generall inconvenience to all the inhabitants of the same precinct, both by reason of the great resort and gathering together of all manner of vagrant and lewd persons that, under cullor [color] of resorting to the playes, will come thither and worke all manner of mischeefe, and also to the great pestring and filling up of the same precinct, yf it should please God to send any visitation of sicknesse as heretofore hath been, for that the same precinct is already growne very populous; and besides, that the same playhouse is so neere the Church that the noyse of the drummes and trumpets will greatly disturbe and hinder both the ministers and parishioners in tyme of devine service and sermons."

- Petition to the Privy Council from the inhabitants of Blackfriars, 1596.

There are also contemporary records of theater going. See the following record by the Swiss humanist and linguist Thomas Platter:

"On September 21st after lunch, about two o'clock, I and my party crossed the water, and there in the house with the thatched roof witnessed an excellent performance of the tragedy of this first Emperor Julius Caesar with a cast of some fifteen people; when the play was over, they danced very marvelously and gracefully together as is their wont, two dressed as men and two as women […] Daily at two in the afternoon, London has two, sometimes three plays running in different places, competing with each other, and those which play best obtain most spectators. The playhouses are so constructed that they play on a raised platform, so that everyone has a good view. There are different galleries and places, however, where the seating is better and more comfortable and therefore more expensive. For whosever cares to stand below only pays one English penny, but if he wishes to sit he enters by another door and pays another penny, while if he desires to sit in the most comfortable seats which are cushioned, where he not only sees everything well, but can also be seen, then he pays yet another English penny at another door. And during the performance food and drink are carried round the audience, so that for what one cares to pay one may also have refreshment. The actors are most expensively and elaborately costumed, as it is the English usage for eminent lords or knights at their decease to bequeath and leave almost the best of their clothes to their serving men, which it is unseemly for that latter to wear, so that they offer then for sale for a small sum to the actors […] Good order is also kept in the city in the matter of prostitution, for which special commissions are set up, and when they meet with a case, they punish the man with imprisonment and a fine. The woman is taken to Bridewell, the king's palace, situated neare the river, where the executioner scourges her naked body before the populace. And although close watch is kept on them, great swarms of these women haunt the town in the taverns and playhouses."

- Thomas Platter, *Travels in England, 1599*. Trans. Clare Williams, p. 166-75.

An Appendix in Andrew Gurr's *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, 1987), offers a glimpse of some of those who attended early modern plays, including:

Alderson, Thomas. Sailor, of Stepney. On 16 May 1626 he was bound over for the sum of 100 marks (33 pounds) for his part in an affray [fight] at the Fortune.

Blount, Sir Christopher. Younger brother of the Earl of Devonshire, he fought in the Netherlands, and at Cadiz and in Ireland with the Earl of Essex, whose father-in-law he was. He went with other conspirators to the Globe on 7 February 1601 to see *Richard II*. He was executed on 18 March of that year.

Cavendish, Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle. With her sisters she was used 'in winter time to go sometimes to plays, or to ride in their coaches about the streets to see the concourse and recourse of people' (*The Life of William Cavendish*, ed. Firth p. 285).

Chamberlain, John. Professional letter writer. He saw 'a new play of humors' in midsummer 1599, 'drawne alonge to yt by the common applause' but was not impressed (*Letters*, ed. McClure, I.32).

Cholmely, Sir Richard. In 1603, aged 23, he went to a play at Blackfriars, where being late he had to take a stool on the stage. When, 'as the custom was,' he 'stood up to refresh himself,' a young gallant took over his stool. Cholmley led the young man outside and challenged him. When the youngster said he had no sword Sir Richard offered to buy him one. A constable appeared, and Sir Richard had to be content with giving the gallant 'two or three good blows.'

Frith, Marion. Cross-dresser, who attended a performance of a play about her, *The Roaring Girl*, at the Fortune in 1611. [You can see the frontispiece here and the RSC for a contemporary production.]

Heath, Edward. A student of the Middle Temple. His accounts show that he attended 49 plays in eighteen months through 1628-29, and bought ten playbooks.

Howe, John. A barber surgeon, who visited Paul's Boys in 1603 to see himself portrayed as Snipper-Snapper in Chapman's *The Old Joiner of Aldgate*.

Lewis, Prince Frederick of Wurttemberg. A visitor to London in 1610, he went to the Globe to see *Othello* (William B. Rye, *England as Seen by Foreigners*, 1865, p. 61).

Rich, Mary, Countess of Warwick, her autobiography records her staying in London in about 1640 with her sister-in-law, who enticed her 'to spend (as she did) her time in seeing and reading plays and romances' (*Autobiography of Lady Warwick*, 1848, p. 4).

Williams, Elizabeth. On 30 June 1614, Chamberlain wrote to Alice Carleton saying that he had tried twice to see her sister, but 'the first time she was at a neighbours house at Cards, and the next she was gon to the new Globe to a play' *(Letters*, I. 544).