



# SHAKESPEARE'S THEATER

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*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS*

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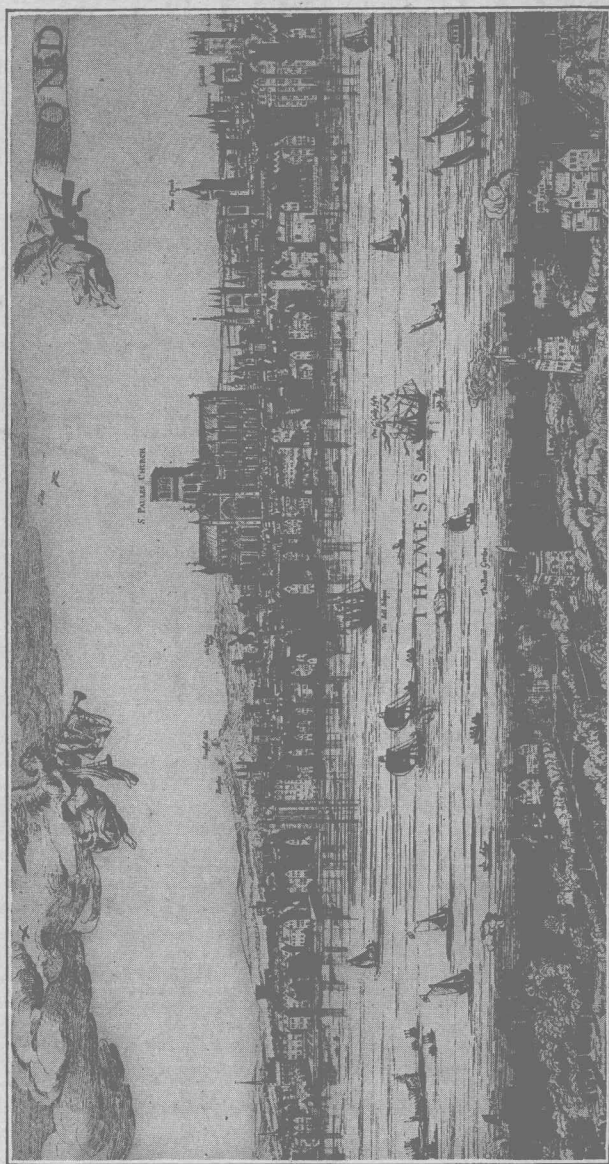
SHAKESPEARE'S THEATER



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THREE BANKSIDE THEATERS-  
From Vischer's Panorama of 1616.



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## PREFACE

IN this book I have tried to survey all the information that we possess in regard to the theater of Shakespeare's time. On matters offering difficulty I have endeavored to indicate the evidence and to arrive at some conclusion, in the hope of presenting within the compass of a single volume a synthesis of the subject that will be of service both to the student and the general reader.

Although sometimes the material is of a sort better suited for reference than for reading, it is hoped that other chapters may not wholly lack that wider interest belonging to a history of the stage, and so finely justified in the words of Burke:

"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 at several periods, but the modes of making their reflection, and the manner of adapting 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."

The study of Shakespeare's theater virtually began with the researches of Edmund Malone, which were embodied in his *Historical Account of the English Stage*, included in his 1790 edition of Shakespeare's



works. Although valuable additions in this field were made by the publications of Collier, Halliwell, Fleay, and others, it could still be said, a century after Malone's essay, that our knowledge of the theater of Shakespeare was much less than our knowledge of the theater of Sophocles. The last twenty-five years have changed that. Many investigators have been at work, important documents have been discovered, and the existing evidence has been given new significance. With this large and rapid growth of information and discussion, the general subject has passed into the hands of many specialists. But in hardly any part of the subject have the specialists come to a conclusion. Unfortunately, from the days of Steevens and Malone down to the present time, opposing interpretations have often resulted in prolonged and personal controversies. The time would seem ripe for an amicable approximation toward agreement on essentials. Perhaps this book may be a first step in this direction and prepare the way for a more thorough synthesis.

In undertaking a more comprehensive survey than has hitherto been attempted, I have been at every step indebted to preceding writers, yet often obliged to rely mainly on my own study or judgment. My plan has been to avoid detailed consideration of the arguments pro and con on disputed questions. Nor have I usually been able to take the space to state precisely my points of difference or agreement with the various disputants. In the Bibliographical Notes at the end of the volume, however, I have tried to indicate my obligations to preceding investigators and to furnish the student with directions for more specialized inquiries.

I must also express my indebtedness to the investigations carried on by students under my direction at Columbia University. Some of them have been published, as the monographs of Dr. Albright and Dean Gildersleeve, on which I have leaned very heavily in certain chapters. Others, which have not been published or perhaps even completed, have been of much assistance. My students, indeed, have been my collaborators.

Documents on the theater have been reprinted with so much care and are now so readily accessible that I have rarely reprinted them or even quoted from them at length. In quotations, I have often retained the old spelling, but have not hesitated to adopt a modernized version if demanded by clearness or convenience. Through the great kindness of Mr. W. A. White, I have had access to his large collection of Elizabethan quartos. I am also indebted to Mr. Henry Huntington for use of his copy of *Messallina*; to Miss Henrietta C. Bartlett for bibliographical assistance, and to several of my colleagues, who have read or criticized the manuscript or proofs.

ASHLEY H. THORNDIKE.

February 15, 1916.

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# SHAKESPEARE'S THEATER

## CHAPTER I

### THE PLACE OF SHAKESPEARE'S THEATER IN THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH STAGE

IN 1576 James Burbage leased a plot of land to the north of London, just outside Bishopsgate, and built there a wooden building which he called "The Theater." A new epoch had begun in the modern stage; for this was the first permanent London playhouse. Indeed, it was one of the earliest theaters in Europe to be planned and built as a commercial venture. Burbage, a carpenter by trade who had turned actor, had been for some time a member of a theatrical company under the patronage of the Earl of Leicester, and now foresaw that a permanent playhouse might afford larger profits than the innyards and rooms where the professionals had hitherto acted. His enterprise was not accomplished without financial and managerial difficulties, but in the end his shrewd foresight in meeting the public demand for plays brought ample reward to himself and his family.

For more than twenty years the Theater continued in constant use; here Shakespeare acted, here many of his plays were performed, and when, in 1599, the materials of the building were transferred to the south bank of the Thames and rebuilt into the Globe, the

great traditions of the Elizabethan drama and stage had been well established. The elder Burbage was succeeded by his two sons, one of whom, Richard, became the most famous actor of his time and the first interpreter of the leading parts in Shakespeare's plays. Through the brothers the family interests were carried on into the Globe and the Blackfriars theaters; so that from 1576 until the Puritan revolution in 1642, the Burbages were leading managers or stockholders in London playhouses. The importance of Burbage's original venture extends, indeed, beyond the lives of his descendants and through the entire course of the English drama. The Theater was the direct ancestor of all English theaters. The careers of its immediate successors were ended temporarily by the Revolution; but some reopened later; and, as we shall see, gave place to the houses of the Restoration, to Drury Lane and Covent Garden, which in turn became the parents of all modern theaters in England and America. From Burbage's Theater we have received, through a direct line of descent, the traditions and practices of the stage, actors, and management.

Our interest in the playhouses which Burbage and others established in Elizabethan London arises primarily from their connection with Shakespeare. He belonged to their companies, and for their stages, actors, and audiences he designed his plays. Such ancient and mutilated records as survive of their methods and activities become precious memorials of his genius, and the imagination is ever vivifying these relics in terms of "Twelfth Night" and "Hamlet." This interest, however, gains a new scope from the discovery that this theater for which Shakespeare

wrote was in many ways peculiar, temporary, and transitional. The theatrical conditions were not only very different from those of to-day, they were also different from those which had obtained fifty years before his birth or from those which characterized the stage fifty years after his death. It happens that our greatest dramatist was intimately associated with theatrical affairs at this era of greatest change. His stage is a transitional stage, halfway between the medieval and modern, partaking in some respects of the characteristics of each, but partaking also of the imperfections that come with the breaking from the old and beginning with the new. Even apart from Shakespeare's plays, his era is still one of extraordinary interest in the history of the stage.

It becomes necessary, therefore, at the beginning of this study of Shakespeare's theater to recall its inheritance from the practices of the medieval stage and to note its place in the great changes which characterize the theatrical history of Europe in the sixteenth century. For the sixteenth century stage is everywhere transitional. The new developments in comedy and tragedy that followed the new knowledge of classical drama and theater found the medieval methods of acting and staging already changing. A new class, that of the professional actors, was making itself indispensable; and in each nation of western Europe the modern theater comes into existence as the home of the professionals. The transition from the medieval miracles and moralities is made through various experiments in staging and acting, and often under the direction of school or court; but it ends by placing the modern drama in the hands of professional actors. In different nations, however, this