

## Shakespeare's Audience



Theatre-going was a popular activity in London in Shakespeare's lifetime. The social spectrum of attendance was wider than it is today. All sorts of people went to the theatre: rich, poor, men and women. Admission varied from 1 penny to 3 pennies, which meant the theatre was accessible to almost anyone. Royalty never visited the public playhouses themselves, as the actors performed for them at court.

Once your entry fee was paid, you were admitted to the appropriate area. No 'seat' was allocated and audience members jostled for the best views standing or sitting on. There was no interval, but refreshments were sold throughout the performance by sellers moving amongst the patrons. The audience responded physically and vocally to the play by applauding, calling out, heckling and responding to the questions asked by the actors. Play-goers often commented that they only heard part of the play at any one time, and would return until they felt they had understood the whole play.

In a book called *Play-going in Shakespeare's London* written by Andrew Gurr, over 160 real people were identified as having gone to the theatre in Shakespeare's time. This may seem like many, but it is estimated that the playhouses in London welcomed over 5 million visitors in about 75 years. Here are a few example of real members of Shakespeare's audience.

[image credit: Arnoldus Buchelius (Aemoutvan Buchell) (1565-1641), after a drawing of Johannes de Witt (1566-1622). Utrecht, University Library, Ms.842, fol. 132r. Reproduced under the Creative Commons License.]

## Johannes De Witt



A Dutch visitor to London in 1596. He described the playhouses and sketched the Swan theatre, then the most newly built of the amphitheatres. De Witt's sketch is now famous because it is the only drawing we have from the time period of inside a theatre space.

## Henry Peacham

Saw *Titus Andronicus* in about 1595, and drew a scene from it, which is now very famous because it is the only contemporary drawing of a Shakespeare play in performance. It depicts the play set in ancient Rome but with actors mostly in Tudor-style costumes, so we think Shakespeare's plays were performed mostly in 'modern dress'.



## Anne Overall

Wife of John Overall, who was Professor of Theology at Cambridge and Dean of St Paul's. Mrs Overall seems to have attracted the attention of lots of young men when she visited the playhouse. Simply because she had 'the loviest Eies there were ever seen'! Young men and women would often meet and flirt at the theatre.

## Hallam

Servant to Sir William Cavendish. He accompanied his master to St Paul's in October 1601, paying threepence. Hallam seems to have enjoyed the performance from the best seats because he accompanied his master to a performance.

## Thomas Platter



A Swiss scholar who visited England in 1599. His travels included a visit to the Globe on 21 September, where he saw a performance of *Julius Caesar*. He was so intrigued by the theatres in London that he described them at length in his diary.

## Antoine Le Fevre

French ambassador. He and his wife took the Venetian ambassador and the Secretary of the Florentine embassy to the Globe in 1607-8 to see *Pericles*. Theatre-going was very popular with visitors to London, especially foreign ambassadors and nobles.

## Simon Forman



Physician. He went to the Curtain in 1599, and to the same company at the Globe in the summer of 1611, where he saw four plays, including *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline*. He wrote about seeing these plays and these are some of the very few accounts we have of performances of Shakespeare's plays during Shakespeare's lifetime.

## Sarah Archdall

Wooed by Simon Forman as a possible bride, they met twice at the Curtain Playhouse in April 1599, sometimes in the company of her uncle. At this time Shakespeare's company was using the Curtain Theatre while they waited for the completion of the Globe.

## Gilbert Borne

A butcher charged with starting a fight at the Fortune Theatre in 1611 together with Ralph Brewyn and others. Small skirmishes often broke out after theatre performances. This is one reason why many people protested against the number of theatres in London.

## Elizabeth Cary



Author of *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613). Her daughter's biography states that Elizabeth was a frequent playgoer in her earlier years. Women did write during this period of history – but it was considered a rather disreputable thing to do for a lady.