Shakespeare's Theatre and King Henry the Fifth

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Needless to say Shakespeare was the most brilliant, successful playwright of all the dramatists of his days. He alone survives in the twentieth century. There has never been a time in the history of the English speaking stage when some of his plays were not performed on the stage. Today throughout the world his plays are loved and admired, respected and praised. In particular in the current yeart (in 1965) all Shakespeare-loving people celebrated his four hundredth anniversary and remembered him again as our greatest playwright.

Why are his plays so influential? Why are his plays great and magnificent producing many actors on the stage at one time? Why are his plays so vivid and energetic, creating on the stage numerous characters, each bearing his or her own characteristics? Why could he give clear and fresh color to the old history, revising the ancient tales? Where was the fountain from which, through the players' mouth, a stream of powerful and rhythmical poems were produced, appealing straight to the heart of the listener? Why did he love such witty dialogues, pans, wordplays and set speeh packed in his plays? Why are his plays so imaginative, letting hearers

imagine in their minds raw battlefields, gorgeous court rooms, castles, and lovely green woods?

A variety of answers will be given to respond these questions. There are many approaches to the problems from both the literary and technical point of view, each providing endless interest and provocation.

First we must think about Shakespeare himself, his dramatic ability; his free imagination, his keen sense of rhythm, his wide view concerning the race and his deep sympathy for the human mind. Secondly the age, the actors, the audience, and the theatre are to be taken into consideration.

For this article I would like to concentrate our attention solely on the theatre. The study of his theatre gave me a new knowledge and better understanding of his plays. If Shakespeare had written for the modern stage, his plays would have been completely different. How his plays were influenced by the construction of the theatre he used will be explained taking *Henry V* as an example.

Shakespeare wrote comedies, tragedies and historical plays. *Henry V* is one of his series of historical plays. The play begins with Henry V's victorious expedition to France. It ends with a treaty between the two nations and his marriage to a lovely princess of France. Henry V is represented in the play as an ideal English king, a perfect Renaissance man, able and active. He is mentioned as "the mirror of all Christian Kings;"

in wisdom, courage and humor.

In studying historical plays it is essential to take into consideration the connection between the historical fact, the political background and the dramatization. But I will, for the time being, set aside this problem, not because it is an uninteresting theme but because I was much more interested in the relation between the theatrical construciton and the performance of this play.

Shakespeare lived during the Elizabethan age, therefore an understanding of the Elizabethan theatre in general is a neccessity.

At the beginning of the Elizabethan age, people enjoyed the plays in the inn-yard. They erected a platform in the yard and used it as a stage. When James Burbage built his theatre he planned it following the inn-yard in which he had been accustomed to play. His building had two entrances; one in front for the audience, one in the rear for the actors and musicians. Inside the building a rectangle platform projected a good way into the yard.

The common spectators stood in this yard. Around and above the yard were three galleries, divided into rooms. The upper class of spectators paid a high price to enjoy the performance with the privilege of sitting on the stools. On the projecting platform which had no front curtain such as we see on the modern theatre, the greater part of action took

place.

Over this platform an extended wooden roof supported by strong pillars was provided. Across the bank of the platform ran a wall. Behind the wall there was a rear stage, an alcove which was cut off from the stage by a curtain, on either side a door, through which the actors came out on the stage.

Above this alcove, was the upper stage, a balcony, protruding over the platform, provided with a curtain. Therefore except on the galleries, and over a large part of the platform, the whole building had no roof, to protect the common spectators from rain. A flag was hoisted on the balcony roof to show that the theatre was open on fine days. The most critical audience was on the stage sitting on the stools very near the players.

This was the general structure of the Elizabethan theatre. The Swan and the Globe were the famous Elizabethan public theatres. There were also many private theatres where Shakespeare's plays were enjoyed.

Now that the structure is clear, we can better understand how he used his stage.

I. The front stage without curtain.

(a) Device showing the changing of the scene.

The greater part of the acts took place on this stage. As

there was no front curtain, a dramatist had no means to show the changing of the scene. In the beginning a signboard, for instance, saying "The Palace" or "The Castle" was hung over the back door. This naive device, however, discontinued and then later the actor indicated the place in their dialogue, as Rosalind says in *"As You Like It"* :

> Rosalind: "Well, this is the forest of Arden."
> Touchstone: "Ay, now am I in Arden," (Act II, Scene 4)

Then another device was suggested. When all the actors of the scene on the stage left together and a different group of the actors appeared, it meant a new scene. Furthermore, if the tempo of the play was decreased, it also meant the end of the scene. Accordingly it was impossible for the Elizabethan audience to enjoy the scene end amid the excitement and intenseness with the massive curtain falling gradually on it.

(b) Swift flow of his plays.

The lack of the front curtain made it impossible to prepare any elaborate setting on the stage. This saved a great deal of time. Therefore when the actors moved freely in very swift action on the stage without intermission, a very long play could be performed through say in two hours or two and a half. Nowadays a long play will take six hours or more. Availing himself fully of this advantage Shakespeare wrote

rather long plays such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, *King Henry V* being another lengthy one.

(c) Use of the imagination.

Due to the absence on the stage of scenes and properties and setting, the playwright was in no position to suggest either situation or atmosphere, and worse still he had no such things as printed programmes presenting the actors' names, to help the audience with. Another naive device was that each act was preceded by a Chorus. This still remained in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. In a Chorus Shakespeare, strongly appealing to the imagination of the audience, described the embarkment of the battle ships or introduced the character of King Henry. He led them, on the wings of imagination, to the battlefield which he could not represent on the stage.

"Thus with imagin'd wing our swift scene flies"

〔Act III, Prologue〕

"On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls....."

〔Act I, Prologue〕

"Play with your fancies,....." 〔Act III, Prologue〕

"O, do but think
You stand upon the rivage and behold" 〔Ibid〕

Thus with imagin'd wing our swift scene flies
In motion of no less celerity
Than that of thought. Suppose that you have seen
The well-appointed king at Hampton pier
Embark his royalty, and his brave fleet
With silken streamers the young Phoebus fanning:
Play with your fancies, and in them behold
Upon the hempen tackle ship-boys climbing;
Hear the shrill whistle which doth order give
To sounds confused; behold the threaden sails,
Borne with the invisible and creeping wind,
Draw the huge bottoms through the furrow'd sea,
Breasting the lofty surge; O, do but think
You stand upon the rivage and behold
A city on the inconstant billows dancing;
For so appears this fleet majestical,
Holding due course to Harfleur. follow, follow
Grapple your minds to sternage of this navy,
And leave your England, as dead midnight still 〔Ibid〕
.....

A very beautiful Chorus, it leads us to the embarkment at Hampton Pier. You can easily imagine the brave departure of King Henry, his ships, his English soldiers and armors. The next scene is supposed to be in France on the same stage.

The rising of the waves, the shrill whistle and the rotten sails come into the andience's mind. Towards the end of this Chorus they also embark the harbour of France along with the King and his soldiers.

Chorus

From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fix'd sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch;
Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
Each battle sees the other's umber'd face;
Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs
Piercing the night's dull ear; and from the tents
The armourers, accomplishing the knights,

〔Act IV, Prologue〕

.....

Walking from watch to watch, we could, in our imagination, have a look over the battlefield at night, when the watchmen kept their watches amid the dead silence and the King went around from tent to tent caring about each warrior.

(d) Historical plays

Because of the swift action on the stage a very long play

could be done through within more or less limited time. Without the burdensome shifting of scenes, the dramatist was able to provide scenes as he liked. As in *Henry V*

Act Ⅳ	Scene	1	The English camp at Agincourt
		2	The French camp
		3	The English camp
Act Ⅴ	Scene	1	France. The English camp
		2	France. A royal palace

Such quick alternation of the scene and again the repetition of the first scene is impossible on the modern stage. Still more by appealing to the audience's imagination he could even describe battles he could not really show on the stage. These factors combined made him write historical dramas. He wrote long historical plays narrating the fact.

(e) Why are his plays so poetical?

In his plays there are many poetical lines besides ordinary dialogues. On the stage without an elaborate setting of scene, the audience's attention was directed only to the action and the spoken words of the actors. The whole mind and soul vibrated into the words. Sonorous rhythmical lines are very attractive to the ear of the audience. Like other Elizabethan playwright Shakespeare was a poet as well as a dramatist and as an poet he excelled as he did as a dramatist.

Let us listen to the beautiful poetical lines in *Henry V.*

Now entertain conjecture of a time
When creeping murmur and the poring dark
Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fix'd sentinels almost receive
The secret whispers of each other's watch:
Fire answers fire; and through their paly flames
Each battle sees the other's umber'd face;
Steed threatens steed, in high and boastful neighs
Piercing the night's dull ear; and from the tents
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II The advantage of using the Elizabethan stage consisted of three parts.

His main act was usually planned for the projected main stage. But occasionally the balcony was used as in the case of *Romeo and Juliet* after their wedding night, and the alcove, as in *The Tempest*, as a cave where Prospero hid himself to overhear the dialogue between his daughter Miranda and Prince Ferdinand.

Opening the balcony and the alcove at the same time, the playwright was able to use the stage in three parts to enhance the depth of space and the beauty. The numerous actors dis-

played in their colorful costumes on the different levels of the stage. Thus he used grand scene such as:

Before the gates of Harfleur. [Henry V: Act III, Scene 3]

The Governor and some citizens standing on the wall, with English forces below, followed by the entrance of King Henry and his train. Here we can imagine the multitude of people standing on the balcony, representing the French citizens, and supposed English forces in their uniform arrayed on the projected stage below. Where both parties stand face to face, King Henry and his train enter. Between the Governor of Harfleur and the King below, they carried on a dialogue discussing the opening of the City before the latter. Finally they come to an agreement. The Governor and the Citizens come down the balcony. The city gate (the back door) is opened. The King and his forces enter the gate, ending the great scene. Now let us hear the King's address to the Governor.

> How yet resolves the governor of the town?
> This is the latest parle we will admit:
> Or like to men proud of destruction
> Defy us to our worst: for, as I am a soldier,
> A name that in my thoughts becomes me best,
> If I begin the battery once again,
> I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur

Till in her ashes she lie buried.
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
And the flesh'd soldier, rough and hard of heart. [Ibid]
.....

Ⅲ The audience on the stage.

(a) Soliloquy

The audience was standing in the yard before the stage and also in the galleries around the theatre. The more earnest audience, however, was even on the stage itself. Those who loved the drama looked at every action and movement of the actors and heard every word spoken. Accordingly as the dramatist put great strength into the words of the actors, more technique was brought into play by him to fetch the eager spectators. For instance, as the audience was nearer to the actor than he to his fellow actors, soliloquy was one of the devices, in which the author expressed the hero's character or his notion of life. The following soliloquy of King Henry that occurs in He*n*ry *V*: Act IV, Scene 1, will serve as a good example:

Upon the King! let us our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children, and our sins lay on the King!
We must bear all. O hard condition,

Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing! What infinite heart's-ease
Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!
And what have kings, that privates have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?
What kind of god art thou, that suffer'st more
Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?
What are thy rents? What are thy comings in?
O Ceremony, show me but thy worth!
What is thy soul, O adoration?
Art thou aught else but place, degree, and form,
Creating awe and fear in other men?
Wherein thou art less happy being fear'd,
Than they in fearing,
What drink'st thou oft, instead of homage sweet,
But poison'd flattery? O, be sick, great greatness,
And bid thy Ceremony give thee cure!

Though the common people can enjoy their lives, the king must bear everything for his people's sake. Amid the hardship he is very brave, deciding to confront all the difficulties. He is highly noble in his decision, because he is sustained trusting in God. He feels his men all brothers, friends and

countrymen.

(b) Set Speech

Set speech is another device of the Elizabethan stage. To the attentive audience a long set of speech was very effective. Henry's speech before the gate of Harfleur and his famous speech to his soldiers on the City Wall are the typical examples.

Speech to his soldiers: -- 〔Act III, Scene 1〕

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage;
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect;
Let it pry through the portage of the head
Like the blass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean.
Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,
Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit
To his full height. On, on, you noblest English,

Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,
And sheath'd their swords for lack of argument:
Dishonour not your mothers; now attest
That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you.

He thus appeals to the soldiers for their love of the country.

(c) Vivid Hero.

Last but not least is the problem of how he produced on the stage such life-like heroes as Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear and so on. King Henry V is also a very characteristic hero. He is a manly and decisive King quite different from Hamlet, the prince of Denmark. As mentioned before the earnest audience on the stage would not miss even a winkle of the actors' expression. The intimate and close connection between the actors and the audience, enforced the dramatists to make the actors move energetically and vividly and speak with real expression. Shakespeare's own experience as an actor once, upon the stage caused him to give striking character to every hero and heroine in his plays, producing them as true to the life as possible. Hereupon let us see Henry V himself, our ideal King, represented by Shakespeare as our ideal King, through his lines showing how he was as good as life. We can quote quite a number of his words on the stage that

show his bravery, his kindness to the soldiers, and his royal dignity, such as:

"This ever common
That men are merriest when they are from home.
〔Act II, Prologue〕

Englarge the man committed yesterday,
That rail'd against our person: we consider
It was excess of wine that set him on;
And on his more advice we pardon him.
〔Act II, Scene 2〕

The mercy that was quick in us but late,
By your own counsel is suppress'd and kill'd. 〔Ibid〕

Treason and murder ever kept together
As two yoke-devils sworn to either's purpose. 〔Ibid〕

O, how hast thou with jealousy infected
The sweetness of affiance! Show men dutiful?
Why, so didst thou: seem they grave and learned?
Why, so didst thou: come they of noble family?
Why, so didst thou: seem they religious?
Why, so didst thou: or are they spare in diet,
Free from gross passion or mirth or anger,
Constant in spirit, not swerving with the blood,
Garnish'd and deck'd in modest complement,

Not working with the eye without the ear,
And but in purged judgement trusting neither?
Such and so finely bolted didst thou seem.
〔Act Ⅱ, Scene 2〕

My people are with sickness much enfeebled,
My numbers lessen'd, and those few I have
Almost no better than so many French;
Who when they were in health, I tell thee, herald,
I thought upon one pair of English legs
Did march three Frenchmen.
Did march three Frenchmen. 〔Act Ⅲ, Scene 4〕

Gloucester, 'tis true that we are in great danger;
The greater therefore should our courage be.
〔Act IV, Scene 1〕

Thus may we gather honey from the weed,
And make a moral of the devil himself. 〔Ibid〕

Though it appear a little out of fashion,
There is much care and valour in this Welshman.
〔Ibid〕

I think the king is but a man, as I am: the violet
smells to him as it doth to me. 〔Ibid〕

Every subject's duty is the king's; but every subject's

soul is his own. 〔Ibid〕

What infinite heart's-ease

Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!
And what have kings, that privates have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony? 〔Ibid〕

"Tis not the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
The farced title running 'fore the king,
The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
That beats upon the high shore of this world,
No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
Who with a body fill'd and vacant mind
Gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread;
Never sees horrid night, the child of hell,
But, like a lackey, from the rise to set
Sweats in the eve of Phoebus and all night
Sleeps in Elysium; next day after dawn
Doth rise and help Hyperion to his horse,
And follows so the ever-running year,

With profitable labour, to his grave:

If we are mark'd to die, we are enow
To do our country loss; and if to live,
The fewer men, the greater share of honour.
God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.
.....
I am the most offending soul alive. 〔Act Ⅳ, Scene 3〕

The man that once did sell the lion's skin
While the beast lived, was killed with hunting him.
〔Ibid〕

We are but warriors for the working-day:
Our gayness and our gilt are all besmirch'd
With rainy marching in the painful field.
〔Act Ⅳ, Scene 4〕

This day is call'd the feast of Crispian:
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian:'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day: then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words,
Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd,
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

〔Act Ⅲ, Scene 3〕

Reference Books : --

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