DOI 10.35218/tco.2024.14.2.14

Shakespeare and Reflecting on Space as an Invitation to Interaction

Ovidiu IVAN•

Abstract: This paper seeks to trace the organic process by which the architecture of *The Globe* theater influenced Shakespeare's drama in the sense that the playwright's relation to his audience encouraged him to cast them in the role of accomplices, urging them to compensate for the scenographic deficit through their own imagination. The first part of our research will provide a description of The Globe's architecture and the categories of spectators in order to exemplify the ways in which the scenery provided a minimalist support for the imagination of Elizabethan audiences. The second part of our research will focus on the rhetorical devices that Shakespeare used in his plays, particularly in his play's prologues, to establish a kind of convention in which the dialogue with the audience and the smooth running of the performance depended on the involvement and the indulgence of those present in the theater.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *The Globe*, interaction, imagination, space.

Introduction

In 1599, from the remains of its predecessor, *The Theatre, The Globe* was built, a theater whose name will be linked for posterity with the dramatic and spectacular work of William Shakespeare. Its entire architecture, while maintaining the dynamics of the famous *bear-baiting* arenas of Elizabethan England, has two interesting spatial aspects: the distribution of seats so that social categories are separated, and the stage design. With a seating capacity of around 3000 and the shape of a twenty-sided polygon with three tiers of balconies, *The Globe* was an open invitation to the common merchant as well as to the nobility and even royalty. Differentiation was also made by the cost of the ticket, so that the upper classes opted for the more expensive balcony seats, while a heterogeneous mass of people crowded into the arena. In spite

• PhD student, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași, Romania.

of this, Shakespeare manages to build a genuine bridge of communication with the aim of getting his message to the farthest reaches of the theatre.

Theater and performance space

As far as the limited scenographic possibilities are concerned, we can note that Shakespeare supplements the limited technical effects by elaborate speeches in the prologues or epilogues of his plays. Basically, the playwright appeals to the audience's willingness to imagine, that is, to reflect on the dramatic action and to complete it in thought. An example is the prologue to Henry V:

”But pardon, gentles all,/ The flat unraised spirits that hath dar’d/ On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth/ So great an object. Can this cockpit hold/ The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram/ Within this wooden O the very casques/ That did affright the air at Agincourt? O pardon! since a crooked figure may/ Attest in little place a million,/ And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,/ On your imaginary forces work./ Suppose within the girdle of these walls/ Are now confin’d two mighty monarchies, […] Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts./ Into a thousand parts divide one man,/ And make imaginary puissance./ Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them/ Printing their proud hoofs i’ th’ receiving earth./ For ’tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,/ Carry them here and there, jumping o’er times, […] Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,/ Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.”[1]

The plea in the prologue quoted above illustrates a lever of functionality that will continue to appear in Shakespearean drama: creating, or rather creative input from both sides. The spectator is thus left with two alternatives: to become a creative member of the dramatic art or to exclude himself by non-participation.

As for the stage scenery, the legacy of ancient architecture was characterized by two imposing columns at the sides of the proscenium and ten pillars positioned in the background, a distribution which, depending on the

[1] William Shakespeare, *Henry V* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html#chap11

position of the actors near one type of pillar or another, produced optical effects of enlargement or shrinkage. By positioning the actor in relation to these pillars, he could appear either larger, imposing, or smaller, vulnerable and confessional. Passages of authority, by this process, became more convincing when addressed from the back of the stage, from a distance the actor appearing as tall as the pillars in the background, as opposed to the moments of intimacy addressed to the audience, when the actor became small in the front part of the stage, flanked by the Pillars of Hercules. Mention should also be made of the paintings on the ceiling of the stage, which reiterate, along with the name of the theater in which they were located, the idea of the stage as a whole world. So the actors' playing space was between the Heaven or the sky painted on the ceiling, along with elements such as the moon, the sun or the constellations of the zodiac, and the Hell under the stage, allusively suggested by the trapdoor through which spirits or ghosts appeared as needed.

The arrangement of the audience in an almost completely enclosed circle around the stage metaphorically emphasizes the theater's notion of belonging to this world. What is more, the stage was not very high (about one and a half meters), emphasizing once again that the performance does not dissociate itself from the spectators' reality but manifests itself as a play in which their contribution is meant to complete the artistic act. Thus, the space of the theater and the space of the performance constitute two intertwined worlds, since the raw material that constitutes them is human nature itself. The magic act is to bring subjects from different corners of the world within the walls of *The Globe* theater, and from the inside the spectator has the sensation of traveling to the outside.

Rhetorical devices and dialogue with the audience

In *Unearthing Shakespeare. Embodied Performance and the Globe*[2], Valerie Clayman Pye identifies a series of juxtapositions in which the Elizabethan spectator is distributed according to the proposition of the dramatic text. The author illustrates the way in which the reflection on the events on stage invites the audience to react as confidant, accomplice or mirror, while reminding them that the characters' problems are not fictional

[2] Valerie Clayman Pye, Unearthing Shakespeare. Embodied Performance and the Globe, ed. 1, Routledge, 2017.

but are inspired by their everyday lives. In the role of confidant, the spectator is witness to the characters' confessional soliloquies, and the audience becomes the sounding box for the thoughts expressed on stage. An eloquent example of this is Isabella's monologue in the play *Measure for Measure*: "To whom should I complain? Did I tell this,/ Who would believe me? O perilous mouths,/ That bear in them one and the self-same tongue/ Either of condemnation or approof"[3]. This procedure incites the empathy of the audience because within the convention it advertises the powerlessness of a dialogue partner while outside the convention there are thousands of eyes watching, which becomes, in fact, also the powerlessness of the spectator to intervene. The second hypostasis pointed out by Pye is that of the mirror, the means by which the dynamics of the dialogue on stage ricochet into the audience, which becomes a third party, like the wall in a *squash* match. In this case, we can speak not only of reflection in the sense of thinking but also of reflection in the sense that the audience-mirror allows the interlocutors on stage to exchange lines not directly but with an allusive and incisive nuance, dressed up by the amusement generated. The third role in which Shakespeare casts his audience is that of accomplice, a role in whose functionality we have identified a distinct nuance, namely that of figuration. An example of complicity is Petruchio's monologue in which, while waiting for Katherina, he describes the ways in which he intends to tame her. On a discursive level, the character develops a series of possible scenarios and possible ways of resolving the problem that he proposes, all of which are somehow against the spectators' horizon of expectation: "Say that she rail; why, then I'll tell her plain/ She sings as sweetly as a nightingale:/ Say that she frown; I'll say she looks as clear/ As morning roses newly wash'd with dew: [...]If she do bid me pack, I'll give her thanks,/ As though she bid me stay by her a week:[…]"[4]. On the one hand, in this monologue Petruchio gives the impression that he is responding to a short interrogation from the audience, while on the other hand he reveals the means of counterattack he will use, giving the audience the satisfaction of knowing in advance, at least to some extent, what is about to

[3] William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html#chap11

[4] William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html#chap11

happen. Another way of stimulating action through reflection is cleverly worked out in Richard III's monologue after his encounter with Lady Anne where defiance of the villain blends with deftness of speech and thus can generate both revulsion and admiration among the audience. Richard reflects on his actions, making the audience a part of his actions while at the same time reiterating the events that have transpired thus far. We cannot fail to mention the hint of self-admiration that comes through in the line: "Was ever woman in this humour wooed?/ Was ever woman in this humour won?"[5]. This monologue encompasses the past, the present and the future of the show, like a crossroads at which we stop to draw conclusions from all that has been and to choose what is to come. Reminiscent of *the* heterogeneity of *The Globe'*s spectators, the moment is specifically designed to provoke reactions, like a point from which good seems to have no chance of triumphing. This detail serves to reinvest the spectators in the role of extras, we might say, as Richmond's "oration" to the soldiers shows: "More than I have said, loving countrymen,[…] Richard except, those whom we fight against/ Had rather have us win than him they follow./ For what is he they follow? Truly, gentlemen,/ A bloody tyrant and a homicide;/ One raised in blood, and one in blood established;[…] One that hath ever been God's enemy./ Then, if you fight against God's enemy,/ God will, in justice, ward you as his soldiers;/ If you do sweat to put a tyrant down,/ You sleep in peace, the tyrant being slain;/ If you do fight against your country's foes,/ Your country's fat shall pay your pains the hire;/ If you do fight in safeguard of your wives,/ Your wives shall welcome home the conquerors;[…]"[6]. The parallel invoked by this moment marks a thin line between Richmond's hypostasis as a squire and that of a citizen of England, with strong symmetries that promote the spirit of justice, national conscience, love of country and aversion to usurping tendencies.

Reflection in the ecosystem of Shakespearean dramaturgy can also consist in the invitation to public debates around subjects exposed to discrimination such as the legitimacy of the monarchical birthright received by comparison with the status of illegitimate siblings. One such theme is expounded in Edmund's monologue in *King Lear*: "[…]Wherefore should I/

[5] William Shakespeare, *Richard III* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html#chap11

[6] *Ibid.*

Stand in the plague of custom […] For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines/ Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base? […] Why brand they us/ With base? With baseness? bastardy? Base, base?"[7]. His words thus disseminate a spirit of homogeneity between different social classes that is to be found in the subtext of many Shakespearean plays. It is therefore not only a metatextual or intertextual reflection, an occasion for imaginative collaboration, but also a profoundly social one with the potential to reverberate among Elizabethan audiences, regardless of their position in the arena or in the balconies. Another example with the same functionality can be found in the context of the play *Othello*, in which the subject of racism is touched upon most prominently in the malicious insertions of the character Iago: "Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not serve God if the devil bid you. Because we come to do you service, and you think we are ruffians, you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins and gennets for germans."[8]. Through lines such as those presented above, strategically belonging to the antagonist, Shakespeare encourages empathy for those with a different condition, presenting the human essence with its virtues and weaknesses, altered or condemned by the prejudices of those with obtuse perspectives. This kind of reflection aims to educate the audience to be inclusive and to extend this kind of response beyond *the* walls of *The Globe* theater.

We have mentioned above one of the functionalities of Shakespeare's act of reflecting, namely its contribution to changing the status of the simple spectator by appealing to the imagination, which materialized in transforming the audience into a fellow traveler, a fellow creator upon whom the work depends to be completed. The artistic act is a common good, but it can reach its full potential in the imagination of each individual, depending on his or her level of involvement, affective or cognitive. Shakespeare thus proposes to his spectator not to think about the performance but to think the performance, by

[7] William Shakespeare, *King Lear* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html#chap11

[8] William Shakespeare, *Othello* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html#chap11

displaying, from the outset, the convention, declaring the type of play and its rules. The form of complicity thus elaborated has, in some cases, the benefit of transparency as a form of comic honesty. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, we could say, a reflection on the scenographic shortcomings of the Elizabethan theater, revealed above all in the improvised solutions of the amateur troupe. The way in which they resort to convention to make up for the shortage of elements to provide a realistic space in the scenes with Pyramus and Thisbe is an invitation for the audience backstage and, practically, into the intimacy of their creative process:

"QUINCE: […]Then there is another thing: we must have a wall in the great chamber; for Pyramus and Thisbe, says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall.

SNOUT: You can never bring in a wall. What say you, Bottom?

BOTTOM: Some man or other must present Wall. And let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisbe whisper."[9]

Also in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we find, almost programmatically, the reflection on the audience as a way of appeasing their sensibilities. Shakespeare, through the voices of his characters, shows care for the audience, painstakingly "tailoring" the scenes so as not to frighten or offend. The aforementioned precautions are not characteristic of all Shakespearean dramaturgy, but, being a comedy, these exaggerated intentions are maintained by the naivety and clumsiness of the creator who is eager to please, and who is here avoiding the risk of major problems. Bottom is aware of the fact that "there are things in this comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe that will never please" and that "the ladies cannot abide"[10] and he devises, in anticipation, a strategy of revealing the convention at the prologue level, by which he announces to his audience that props do no harm and that behind the character is, in fact, a real man - the actor: "[...] tell them that I Pyramus am

[9] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/100/pg100-images.html#chap11

[10] *Ibid.*

not Pyramus but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear"[11]. The same debunking strategy is also used in the event that the interpretation of a lion has frightened the "ladies", in which case the appeal to the reality of the backstage, to the truthful and not the plausible, is also made by virtue of a debunking: "[…]'Ladies,' or, 'Fair ladies, I would wish you,' or, 'I would request you,' or, 'I would entreat you, not to fear, not to tremble: my life for yours. If you think I come hither as a lion, it were pity of my life. No, I am no such thing; I am a man as other men are': and there, indeed, let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner"[12].

Conclusion

As we have seen in the brief analysis elaborated above, reflection, be it on the audience, on the space, on the text, or on history, is an important component of Shakespearean dramaturgy and, almost always, invites action on the part of the spectator, whether at the level of imagining, debating, affective involvement, complicity or mirroring of the characters. In concrete terms, *The Globe*'s stage space invited, through its architecture and the way it was decorated, a reflection on the theater as a whole world, the actors as exponents of society and the plays as a reformulation of immediate or historical realities. At the same time, the texts of the plays that were performed on stage at *The Globe* invited the audience, through the artifices of interactivity, to compensate for the limitations of the stage, to be active spectators, with a series of roles to choose from: accomplice, confidant or even extra. This kind of relationship permeates the boundary between the stage and the audience, so that we can say that Shakespeare's intention was to train not just the actors but every pair of eyes in the theatrical game, and to transform his art into a collective good. In the same spirit, just as a whole world cannot be crammed into a stage, neither can the plethora of human characters be reviewed without giving each one enough room for expansion to be emphasized. It is the very act of coming to the theater and the audience's reflective involvement that makes Shakespeare's work whole.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

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