



BETTINA BOECKER

Imagining  
Shakespeare's  
Original Audience,  
1660–2000

Groundlings, Gallants, Grocers

palgrave shakespeare studies

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# Imagining Shakespeare's Original Audience, 1660–2000

Groundlings, Gallants, Grocers

Bettina Boecker

*Senior Lecturer, University of Munich, Germany*

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*For Martin*

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# Introduction: *Those Nut-cracking Elizabethans*

In 1935, William John Lawrence published a collection of essays called *Those Nut-Cracking Elizabethans*.<sup>1</sup> To the specialist audience at which it is aimed, the fact that the book focusses on the Elizabethans in their capacity as theatregoers need hardly be mentioned: a nut-cracking Elizabethan is, by definition, located in the theatre. This assumption is part of a whole set of sometimes surprisingly specific and detailed beliefs about the Elizabethan audience current among both amateurs of and specialists in Shakespearean drama. Perhaps the most persistent of these tenets is that Shakespeare wrote certain passages (not necessarily his best) especially for those who had paid for standing room only – the notorious ‘groundlings’. Over the centuries, a plethora of critics has claimed that this was a section of the audience of which he did not think too highly, citing the following passage from *Hamlet* as proof:

*Hamlet*: [...] O! it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise.<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare, so this line of argument runs, is using *Hamlet* as a mouth-piece to vent his frustration with an audience essentially unworthy of his plays. That the dramatist addresses a confident ‘Work, work your thoughts’<sup>3</sup> to the same audience in *Henry V* is a fact often ignored – or quoted in support of the counter-position, which conceives of Elizabethan theatregoers as particularly attentive and alert.

Since the re-opening of the theatres in 1660, Shakespeare criticism has produced many and often contradictory versions of those who

frequented the theatres during the dramatist's lifetime. The comparative dearth of hard facts on theatregoers in Shakespeare's London has aided rather than abetted this process – even today, scholars acknowledge that when it comes to the Elizabethan audience, 'there is a point at which imagination must take over where evidence leaves off'.<sup>4</sup> The imagined audiences that result are not contingent. The discourse on Renaissance theatregoers is part of what Michael Dobson has called 'the making of the national poet'.<sup>5</sup> The early modern audience, as much as the Bard himself and, by extension, his age, are fashioned in the image of the later-born critic, reflections of the needs and sensibilities that are brought to Shakespeare as a site of cultural meaning. The 'reinvention'<sup>6</sup> of Shakespeare by each subsequent age or school of criticism goes hand in hand with a similar reinvention of his audience – an audience that is conceived as singular (in the sense of constant and uniform) rather than plural. With regard to the historical realities of Shakespeare's theatre, it is certainly apt to think of both *audience* and *audiences*: the one 'a collective entity – one that dramatists might know and appeal to', the other 'the variety of experiences and viewing practices that individuals brought to the early modern theatre'.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the critical discourse on Shakespeare's first receivers, however, this is not necessarily the case. To the extent that the Elizabethan audience is always an imagined audience, it is a fiction with a purpose: it explains, exonerates or extols the national poet. Shakespearean drama is what it is because its audience was what it was. This logical pattern is immensely complicated by introducing a plurality of audiences, hence a majority of critics over the centuries prefer to think of Elizabethan theatregoers as one stable entity.

Ever since the eighteenth century, the brunt of critical attention has been directed at the audience of the Globe. It is only comparably late that the indoor theatres and their customers enter the critical picture, and discussions of them are rarely as politically charged as the discourse on the open-air theatres. Because of the lower entrance fees, the latter were, at least theoretically, within the means of a larger share of the population – a continual source of irritation to the London authorities during Shakespeare's lifetime. This irritation has considerable resonances in the four hundred years of Shakespeare criticism that ensue, for in effect, the comparatively low cost of an afternoon at the Globe is at the core of a majority of the uses to which the Globe audience is put by later-born commentators. It has allowed for the Globe to be labelled as 'popular', a sobriquet that, though not unchallenged, remains firmly in place to this day. The question, of course, is just what the popular

nature of the early modern theatre means to later generations. From the twentieth century onwards, it is usually presented as part and parcel of Shakespeare's greatness, of his claim to iconicity:

Many people feel that the theatre of Shakespeare should be a kind of model. Though holding a mass audience, it was intimate, human, fast-moving, passionately real though without any fuss about stage illusion, and all this made it very democratic. Of course some critics want to refute the picture and prove that he wrote for the palace or for stately homes, but they still regard it in political terms.<sup>8</sup>

Whether public theatre or stately home, in both cases the issue is not, or not primarily, what the intended place of performance was, but what kind of people assembled there. By way of their original recipients, the plays are intended to be socially defined, to be given an 'owner' – and not just an early modern one. Whether Shakespeare wrote for the early modern populace or for the period's social elite decisively affects his position within the cultural framework of a given critic's own present. Obviously, however, there is no simple, historically constant mapping of the various locations in which Shakespeare's plays were performed onto a good/bad dichotomy, i.e. not every critic who assumes that Shakespeare 'really' wrote for the Globe necessarily considers this a good thing. The Globe, and with it the Globe audience, partakes of the essential ambivalence of the popular, which, as Robert Shaughnessy puts it:

is itself hardly a singular or uncontested term or frame of reference: seen from some angles, it denotes community, shared values, democratic participation, accessibility, and fun; from others, the mass-produced commodity, the lowest common denominator, the reductive or the simplified, or the shoddy, the coarse, and the meretricious.<sup>9</sup>

Over the course of the centuries, criticism has produced many and often extremely controversial hypotheses about the social composition, intellectual abilities and emotional reactions of those who frequented the amphitheatres of early modern London. To some extent, the critical discourse on Elizabethan theatregoers thus reproduces the bias that characterises many contemporary accounts of them, whether the source is the London city council, to whom the theatres were a potential source of unrest, Puritan ideologues, or finally the dramatists themselves.<sup>10</sup> Again and again, scholars have therefore castigated what they present

as the inventiveness of earlier publications in the field. Ann Jennalie Cook's 1987 *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London*, itself highly controversial at the time of its publication, describes the situation as follows:

[Contemporary] [r]eports of [the] nature of [the Renaissance playgoer] varied wildly. Was he ignorant or intelligent, riotous or refined, libertine or law abiding, plebeian or privileged? The answers depended always upon the nature of the report and the reporter. And so they still do. Modern accounts of the audience suffer from the bias of the writer fully as much as did the contemporary accounts. [...] As often as not, an interpretation reveals more about the interpreter's mind than it does about the mysteries of the past.<sup>11</sup>

The focus of this study is on the interpreter's mind. Any given period's notion about Shakespeare's first audiences is shaped by that period's needs and sensitivities at least as much as by what early modern sources tell us about the early modern theatre. This is not to say that an 'objective' account would be possible; like any aspect of history as reconstructed by later generations, any version of Renaissance theatre-goers is to a greater or lesser degree a fictional construct. Accordingly, this study does not aim at separating the chaff of fictionality from the wheat of the factual. Instead, it treats the Elizabethan audience as an integral part of Shakespeare as a site of cultural meaning – a site that is permanently renegotiated and redefined, and that extends well beyond the Shakespearean text.

The discourse on Shakespeare has created an entire historical 'context' in which to embed the great dramatist, a period that is in effect evoked as an aspect of him. This is even more true of the period's theatre-goers – the Renaissance become flesh, as it were. They turn abstract concepts like Tillyard's 'Elizabethan World Picture'<sup>12</sup> into lived historical realities. Conversely, they play an important role in determining just what kind of historical reality the Bard was faced with in the first place. Certain versions of his audience support – or preclude – certain versions of his age, as well as certain interpretations of his plays. Drawing on the principle of theatrical collusion, critics can use the audience to explain (away) virtually every feature of every play. These attempts at 'excusing' Shakespeare take on a particular urgency where the text is treated as a more or less direct reflection not only of the author's likes and dislikes, but also of his artistic integrity and general moral stamina.

Shakespeare's œuvre has been both extolled as a testimony to the unusual intellectual prowess of Elizabethan theatre-goers and berated as indicative of their moral depravity and general simple-mindedness. In both cases, the aim has been not so much to establish a certain version of the early modern theatre-goer as to establish a certain version of Shakespeare, who – with the help of his original clientele – can thus either bask in the glory of having successfully catered to a demanding audience or be unburdened of any responsibility for his perceived 'lapses', and sometimes both at the same time.

### **Identity, alterity, authenticity**

The driving force behind such manoeuvres is of course the special status of Shakespeare within British culture. As the still undisputed national poet, Shakespeare embodies literary as well as extra-literary norms and values, and has been doing so for the almost four hundred years since his rise to iconicity. He has helped define national identity as it changed over the centuries, and been a considerable asset for certain social groups in shaping (or attempting to shape) this identity according to their own preferences. Shakespeare's rise to literary stardom is therefore subject to mechanisms that govern the constitution and constant negotiation of collective identities.

As a relational term, identity cannot exist without alterity: the existence of an outside, a 'not-us', is decisive for the constitution both of the subject and of the group. The latter's set of auto-stereotypes is commonly matched by a corresponding set of hetero-stereotypes:<sup>13</sup> we generally know what we are as well as (sometimes more distinctly) what we are not. Regarding the Elizabethan audience's implication into the formation of a collective national identity, what is crucial is that the dividing line between us and not-us, between self and other, need not necessarily be drawn vis-à-vis another, alien culture (such as classical Greece as opposed to the 'barbarians', colonial Europe as opposed to the 'savage'). Another means of defining cultural identity is the concept of historical alterity, which permits a nation/culture to define its own present as a counter-model to, even a refutation of, its own past: 'we' are not what 'we' used to be. This logic is particularly useful where the past or certain aspects of it would suggest the historical relativism of accepted norms and values. If the past is indeed totally different from (and ideally patently inferior to) the present, its disregard for the standards of the latter poses less of a threat. A past being used in this manner must change as the culture's self-image changes, for a different identity

requires a different kind of 'other', an alterity to match. In the words of Sander Gilman:

[e]very social group has a set vocabulary of images for [its] externalized Other. These images are the product of history and of a culture that perpetuates them. None is random; none is isolated from the historical context. From the wide range of the potential models in any society, we select a model that best reflects the common presuppositions about the Other at any given moment in history.<sup>14</sup>

The history of Shakespeare reception, and more particularly the discourse on his original audience, throw this into sharp relief. The meaning of Shakespeare is not conclusively defined either by his works or by the known facts of his life, but 'invented' to suit the cultural needs that are brought to him. It is only because Shakespeare is treated as to some extent conceptually separate from the actualities of his text that his – or, rather, his critics' – claims to timelessness and universality become viable. This, however, cannot be openly acknowledged. The national poet must seem stable and unchanging, despite the fact that he is continually being refashioned. In creating this semblance of stability, of 'timelessness', the Elizabethan audience plays an important role, one based on a dichotomy established already by Ben Jonson in the First Folio: 'for an age' versus 'for all time'. There are effectively two Shakespeares: a practically meta-historical figure who wrote 'for all time' and serves as a cultural point of reference on the one hand, and 'Shakespeare the Elizabethan' on the other, a figure who wrote 'for [his] age' and whose fundamental alterity explains those features of the Shakespeare canon not compatible with current norms and values as occasioned by his historical situation. The Elizabethan audience is this historical situation become flesh, as it were, the embodiment of the historical alterity criticism ascribes to early modern England. Gilman points out that 'stereotypes can [...] be perpetuated, resurrected and shaped through texts containing the fantasy life of the culture, quite independent of the existence or absence of the group in a given society.'<sup>15</sup> Especially within continental European traditions of literary criticism (particularly of German *Literaturwissenschaft*, the 'science' of literature), which have traditionally emphasised objectivity and analysis, it may appear like a bit of a stretch to think of Shakespeare scholarship as part of the 'fantasy life' of British, or, for that matter, of any culture. But the critical history of Shakespeare's first audience makes clear that this is not the case.

From a historical point of view, the primary aim of the audience as imagined by later-born critics has been to explain and thus defuse those elements of Shakespeare's plays perceived as incompatible with his (rise to) iconicity. In eighteenth-century England, this process operates both in the theatre and in the increasingly numerous editions of Shakespeare. In their history of English drama, Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack write:

The Shakespeare cult [...] led to the general diffusion of a printed text which partially failed to confirm the deity of the cult's own object. SHAKESPEARE, as bardolatrous typesetters preferred to call him, was undoubtedly immortal, but somehow not everything written by Shakespeare was SHAKESPEARE. The rhetorical struggle to deal with this central instability is a rich source of eighteenth-century critical metaphor: gold and ore, flowers and weeds, jewels and rubbish, sun and cloud. Most of these images implicitly recommend a programme of purification, and this is what the theatre of Garrick did. The scripts were adapted to fit the mid-eighteenth-century theatre's production values, literary conventions and canons of decency. [...] In 1773, when the acting editions were printed, the editors made the best of it; they had, they said, preserved Shakespeare's beauties while expunging his deformities [...].<sup>16</sup>

This dehistoricisation of the text does not, however, quite suffice to establish why Shakespeare is 'for all time'. If his works indeed transcend history, then why do they need to be purged from the historicity they are claimed not to be subject to in the first place? What is called for is the integration of the merely 'historical' bits into a coherent whole: 'the age of Shakespeare', which effectively comes to embody the Bard's historical alterity.<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience (a concept which for the overwhelming majority of critics is general enough to include Jacobean theatregoers as well) thus emerges as a site of cultural meaning along the lines of the Bard himself. Whenever Shakespeare is claimed for the norms and values of a given time and place, his original audience is used to explain those elements of his works that are incompatible with them. Where he is turned into 'self', his audience is turned into 'other'. An object of projection *par excellence*, Renaissance theatregoers throw the mechanisms of selection, appropriation and exclusion that enable Shakespeare's rise, and continuing claim, to iconicity into particularly sharp relief.



Critics have not been unaware of this fact. In an article published in the 1951/52 volume of *Modern Philology*, the most sustained treatment of the topic up to that time, Moody Prior described the Elizabethan audience as the unacknowledged *ultima ratio* of Shakespeare criticism:

Most of those who interest themselves in the Elizabethan audience [...] are concerned not primarily [...] with restoring the theatrical life of the past but with discovering in such information support for certain conclusions about the plays. [...] The selection of the elements which in any given instance are combined to define the audience is not governed usually by the requirements of disciplined historical procedure. Rather, it seems to follow the demands of some critical end. [...] [S]ome significant characteristic of the audience [...] proves invaluable in illuminating some feature of the plays. In reality, the dramatic problem comes first, the audience is selectively created to meet the problem, and the 'explanation' follows. [...] By this means the critic can meet any difficulty.<sup>18</sup>

Under the influence of the critical developments of the following decades, especially of Cultural Materialism, what Prior in 1952 presents as a not particularly reputable kind of cure-all for the logical impasses of Shakespeare criticism turns into an important aid in adapting Shakespeare to the value systems of a given period – or perhaps more precisely, a given social group, for the discourse on Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience bears witness to the fact that national identity, and with it the national poet, is an object of intra-cultural contention. Cultures are never as homogeneous as the idea of a shared self-image would seem to imply. Different parts of the nation proffer competing definitions of what the nation actually is, and this struggle is reflected in varying ideas of what Shakespeare actually is – and was. Contrasting versions of the age that he lived in and the theatre that he wrote for are not simply different interpretations of the historical evidence (however much of it was actually accessible to a given critic), but rival bids for cultural power.

Many publications which study Shakespeare as an intrinsically political site of cultural meaning display an implicit knowledge of the importance of the Elizabethan audience for Shakespeare's continuing iconicity. Sustained engagements with the topic are rare, however. The German version of Robert Weimann's *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre* (*Shakespeare und die Tradition des Volkstheaters*, 1967) has a short chapter on the popular stage in eighteenth-century criticism, and Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack's *English Drama: A Cultural History*

features an important chapter on the nineteenth-century invention of the groundling to which this study is deeply indebted. More recently, Amy Rodgers has looked at representations of the Elizabethan audience in films and historical novels,<sup>19</sup> most of which draw heavily on the idea of the groundling as developed by Victorian Shakespeare critics. The mystique of the groundling is indeed alive and well: it has decisively influenced audience behaviour as displayed (some would say endorsed) at the New Globe in Bankside and other replica theatres.<sup>20</sup> There, the standees in particular contribute in significant ways to the bona fide early modern experience which the structure (and the institution behind it) promises its patrons.

This reflects a trend in the discourse on Shakespeare's original audience to be observed from the late nineteenth century onwards: early modern theatre-goers are increasingly imagined as a repository not only of alterity, but also, and increasingly more importantly, of authenticity. The Renaissance and its 'inhabitants' turn into guarantors for the correctness of a given interpretation of Shakespeare. By claiming to approach his plays in the same way that the early modern audience did (the belief that this early modern meaning is both unambiguous and accessible to the later-born inquirer is an integral part of this line of argument), scholars legitimise their own interpretations in powerful ways, particularly where these interpretations are presented as based on seemingly objective historical givens. In an almost paradoxical manner, the concept of authenticity combines Romantic subjectivity and historicist objectivity. The quintessentially Romantic idea of the author as the ultimate authority over the meaning of his work is combined with positivist claims regarding the feasibility of objective and complete access to the past. The one meaning of the work intended by the author, it is claimed, was unvaryingly picked up by an original audience whose historical situation effectively made other, competing interpretations impossible. In somewhat less abstract terms, every early modern theatre-goer adhered, and could not but adhere, to the same interpretation of, say *Hamlet*: the one (and only) intended by Shakespeare.

If the elements constitutive of English culture as embodied by Shakespeare are subject to historical change, they are essentially open to random redefinition, and both 'Shakespeare' and 'English culture' become conceptually unstable. Authenticity answers this threat by using the past in a manner completely different from the one that informs the historical apology. The 'other' against which 'self' is defined is not the supposed barbarity of early modern England, as was the case with much of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Shakespeare

criticism, but the period that lies *between* that past and the respective critic's present, more particularly, its supposedly misguided interpretations of the Bard. This essentially Protestant attitude

privileges a return to [the] origin or source, and in practical terms it means both a revival of interest in originating texts and documents themselves (as opposed to established interpretations of those documents) and a radical repudiation of the deadening mass of accumulated interpretation, which is seen as progressively more distant from the source, and increasingly degraded by accumulated historical debris. In addition, the social agency that has claimed the role of preserving tradition is seen in this counter-movement as increasingly venal in promoting the interests of an administrative cadre to the detriment of the primary relationship between the originating source and the faithful subject.<sup>21</sup>

This approach becomes strategically important once a culture no longer conceives of itself as uniform: authenticity is a very effective aid in defining the *authoritative* meaning of a national icon like Shakespeare. As an extension of his creative genius, the age that he lived in is then presented 'as the moment of an original purity'<sup>22</sup> to which all subsequent generations should endeavour to return. Shakespeare is no longer constructed in opposition to his age, and his Elizabethan audience correspondingly turns from a counter-image to an object of identification: it embodies self rather than other.

At different stages of Shakespeare's reception history, alterity and authenticity play different roles in the discourse on his original audience. The exact nature of that role depends not least on how far advanced Shakespeare's ascent to iconicity is at a given point in time. The situation of Alexander Pope and his immediate successors, still engaged in securing a place in the canon for Shakespeare, is not comparable to that of twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics who simply perpetuate (and in some cases can even afford to question) that prestige. If virtually every generation of Shakespeare critics since the late seventeenth century refers to the Elizabethan audience, it is under widely varying auspices. The concept of historical alterity proves far more useful in the early phases of Shakespeare's afterlife, when his claim to canonicity has yet to be established, and those features of his works that are not compatible with contemporary norms and values need to be explained away. Authenticity, by contrast, is ineffective in building and expanding cultural prestige. Embodiments of cultural identity

need to be firmly established before the concept of authenticity can be used in the struggle for their meaning. While the early phases of the discourse on Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience thus routinely fashion Renaissance theatregoers as other, a kind of shorthand for Shakespeare's historical alterity, it is only in later phases of Shakespeare criticism that they come to guarantee the authenticity of a given interpretation of a play, or version of the Bard. This study, despite the inconveniences and inaccuracies necessarily entailed, is therefore structured diachronically. I look at the different versions of Shakespeare's original audience as produced by subsequent phases of Shakespeare criticism and, apart from some few exceptions, I have been very conservative in my periodisation as far as the first 300 years of Shakespeare criticism are concerned. With the beginning of the twentieth century, I distinguish between different 'schools' of thinking about the Elizabethan audience. Sometimes, but not always, these overlap with more conventional critical labels. The subject of my study is Shakespeare criticism from the beginnings to the present. This means that I have not looked, or at least not extensively, at representations of Shakespeare's audience in film or in historical fiction, and neither at the idea of early modern theatregoers marketed by the Original Practices movement.<sup>23</sup> I have limited myself mostly to Anglophone criticism; publications in other languages are referred to only when they have made a significant impact (usually in translation) on the British and/or American discourse.

I have consciously not included an account of the current state of research on early modern theatregoers,<sup>24</sup> for the simple reason that I wanted to avoid writing a Whig history of Shakespeare's first audiences – from the 'errors' of older criticism to the 'truth' as uncovered by us, the living. As far as I can see, every generation of critics since Dryden has credited itself with being in possession of the truth about Elizabethan audiences, regardless of the fact that this truth, at least from the perspective of a later-born observer, has always been a truth with a purpose. While this book necessarily charts some of the more vexing rhetorical impasses and logical cul-de-sacs of almost four hundred years of Shakespeare criticism, I have tried to avoid (and I very much hope I have been successful) a kind of faults-and-beauties approach to the scholarship of earlier generations. The Elizabethan audience has been used for purposes one would be hard pressed to describe as disinterested. But in studying these purposes and the ways in which they have been pursued, one cannot help but be impressed by the resourcefulness and sheer determination that scholars over the centuries have brought to the constitution, and continuous adaptation, of Shakespeare as a site of cultural meaning.

# 1

## Shakespeare's Elizabethan Audience in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth- century Shakespeare Criticism

A bare 50 years lie between Shakespeare's death in 1616 and the re-opening of the theatres after the Civil War. Nevertheless, a feeling of dissociation and historical distance is a *leitmotif* of post-Restoration discourses on Shakespeare and his age. The Civil War marked a decisive watershed not only in political, but also in cultural terms, and Shakespeare's times were regarded as belonging to another era altogether, one which had practically no continuities with the present.<sup>1</sup> That this present constituted an advance over the unenlightened and uncultivated past was a view widely held. In the field of culture and the arts, this perceived progress manifested itself primarily in a new 'refinement'. Where literature, more particularly the drama was concerned, many considered refinement a matter of adherence to the neoclassicist poetics imported from France. Meeting these new, or rather re-discovered, requirements concerning content and form was taken for a sign of cultivation, a marker both of the quality of the literary text and of the education of its author. Given these parameters, Shakespeare's disregard for neoclassicist rules posed a considerable problem for, in effect, a newly refined England was in the process of elevating an often patently unrefined author to the status of a national icon.

Because of the plays' presence on the Restoration stage and their enduring popularity, Shakespeare stood not so much for a new beginning as for historical continuity. But as both the period's editions and its adaptations of Shakespeare's works make clear, this persistence came at the price of often rather substantial changes to the received text. From the turn of the seventeenth century onwards, such attempts to align Shakespeare with current moral values and standards of taste were no longer restricted to the plays, but began to extend to the author himself, the man about to become the national poet. Correcting the perceived

faults in Shakespeare's works was not sufficient: the age also felt a need to explain them, and to explain them in a manner which deflected all blame from the Bard himself. For Shakespeare's apologists, the commercial nature of the early modern stage offered what seemed the best of all possible excuses: as Shakespearean drama was a literary commodity available to everyone able to pay the comparably small entrance fee to the theatres, it seemed self-evident that this forced the Bard to cater to the likes and dislikes of his paying customers. This notion is integral to the so-called 'historical apology' for Shakespeare, that is the line of reasoning which explains the 'weaknesses' of his plays as resulting from his historical situation. Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience, as imagined by eighteenth-century critics, is the incarnation of this apology. It embodies everything about his age that post-Restoration England deemed objectionable. Pope's 'Preface of the Editor to the Works of Shakespeare' is a *locus classicus* for this argument:

It must be allowed that Stage-Poetry of all other is more particularly levell'd to please the Populace, and its success more immediately dependent upon the Common Suffrage. One cannot therefore wonder, if Shakespeare, having at his first appearance no other aim in his writings than to procure a subsistence, directed his endeavours solely to hit the taste and humour that then prevailed.<sup>2</sup>

Material need forces Shakespeare to cater to the 'common suffrage', a circumstance which, according to Pope, has an extremely negative impact on his work. This is not least because Shakespeare's audience was primarily composed, or so Pope claims, of 'the meaner sort of people' – 'tradesmen', 'mechanicks', in short: the Elizabethan lower classes.<sup>3</sup> Pope's historical apology clearly includes a sociological one. It is not only the rude, semi-civilised age that is to blame for Shakespeare's shortcomings, it is a specific stratum of the Elizabethan population that keeps him from realising his full artistic potential. Nevertheless, the Bard is not entirely determined by his audience. Almost involuntarily, his genius keeps breaking through the maze of contemporary ideas of good drama. Even in the worst parts of his plays, Pope observes:

[...] our Author's Wit buoys up, and is borne above his subject: his genius in those low parts is like some Prince of a Romance in disguise of a Shepherd or peasant: a certain Greatness and Spirit now and then break out, which manifests his higher extraction and qualities.<sup>4</sup>