

# William Shakespeare: Genius at Work [C1]

Il Globe Theatre di Londra, ricostruzione dell'antico teatro in cui Shakespeare lavorò nel XVII secolo, offre una visione unica del processo creativo del geniale drammaturgo inglese

---

The circular, [roofless](#) Shakespeare's Globe on London's South Bank is a reconstruction of the 1614 theatre where William Shakespeare's theatre company The King's Men was based and where many of his plays were first performed. Shakespeare and his company worked day-to-day at the Globe as they prepared and performed plays. Going to the theatre was a much more popular form of entertainment in Shakespeare's time. Audiences were noisier and ready to talk back to the actors. The process of creating and directing plays for The King's Men (known as The Lord Chamberlain's Men until 1604) seems to have been fast and dynamic, too. Shakespeare was not only the writer and director of the plays, but even acted in them from time to time. Notes added to the [scripts](#) show that [lines](#) were often changed during [rehearsals](#).

## COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Dr. Hanh Bui, Teaching and [Research Fellow](#) at Shakespeare's Globe, tells us more about the Globe past and present. First, she takes us back to the early 1600s for a [close-up](#) view of Shakespeare and his company at work. For Shakespeare and his company, the process of getting plays ready for performance at the Globe was collaborative as The King's Men knew each other well, as Dr. Hanh Bui explains. **Dr. Hanh Bui (American accent):** Shakespeare was [involved](#) in lots of different ways in addition to writing the play [scripts](#). It was [fairly](#) unique though that Shakespeare spent practically his entire career writing for one company. What this means is that he knew the actors really well. He knew their strengths, he knew their weaknesses and he wrote roles with specific actors in mind. So he likely had [input](#) in casting decisions, [tailoring parts](#) for specific actors. But again, we can't say [positively](#), but this is the context of the world that he was living and

working in. And so Shakespeare would have been there at [rehearsals](#) to provide direction or make adjustments to the script or explain [lines](#). But I should clarify that this was the age of theatre before the celebrity director, right? So they were very much an [ensemble](#), a company together. But nonetheless, we can imagine that he helped his [fellow company members think through](#) the play and how [to enact](#) the vision that we imagine that he had in his head when he was writing the plays. The other thing we'd like to keep in mind though is that given that the company was performing a new play almost every day, that means they were [putting on](#) thirty to forty plays a season. They didn't have time for weeks of rehearsal, this was before the age of three months of rehearsal before [opening night](#). So the company basically had the morning for a group rehearsal where they'd [work out](#) more complicated scenes, like fight scenes, combat scenes, [swordplay](#) and dancing, before the performance would start probably around two o'clock.

## MALE ACTORS ONLY

There were no women in Shakespeare's company; women rarely performed in theatre of this type at the time. So, together, the actors needed to find some [workarounds](#) given that Shakespeare wrote some prominent female roles. Dr. Bui explains how this [lack](#) of female actors had an effect on performances. **Dr. Hanh Bui:**Female [parts](#) were typically played by boy actors. Now by 'boy', that could mean anywhere from twelve to fourteen years up to the early 20s. And, as someone with a seventeen-year-old, I can [attest](#) that's quite a big [spread](#) in terms of male physiological development. [Scholars](#) are doing lots of interesting research around how [skilled](#) these boy actors were. I mean, they had to be, right?, to play [demanding](#) roles like Cleopatra or Lady Macbeth. Some of these actors only acted in their youth, while others would continue to act and were, hopefully, picked up to become adult members of a company. And so it's interesting, this idea of women not performing on London's commercial stages.

## SOCIETAL NORMS

Wouldn't it have made sense to have some female actors in the company? Dr. Bui talks about why this didn't happen. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** There was actually no legal prohibition to that. It was more societal norms and expectations that resulted in this practice. Acting and going to the theatre were not considered elevated high art forms or activities. It was considered rather disreputable, by English moralists, at least. So even though women attended the theatre in droves, and we know that not just prostitutes, but from all ranks of society, there were nonetheless social concerns that women's modesty precluded their participation in such a morally dubious profession as acting. But women did perform as tumblers, as tightrope walkers, as singers, as dancers, in touring companies outside London. And of course, women performed on the continent. But women didn't start acting on the London commercial stages until after the 1660s, after the Restoration. And so scholars are doing lots of interesting research into the queer lives and the trans experiences of boy actors who played these female roles in theatre.

## SOCIAL MOBILITY

Shakespeare himself wasn't from a noble family but he made contacts with members of the elite in Elizabethan and Jacobean society. Dr. Bui talks about how Shakespeare's ability to move between social classes helped him professionally but also creatively. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** Shakespeare had several connections to royalty and elite social circles, which significantly influenced his career and the reception of his works. And so The Lord Chamberlain's Men, the Globe Acting Company, was patronised by Henry Carey, the Lord Chamberlain, and then later his son, George Carey. And the company frequently performed at court. It was one of Elizabeth's favourites, which brought Shakespeare into close contact with royal households, not just Queen Elizabeth, but also later King James I, who succeeded her in 1603. In fact, when James ascended the throne, he himself became the patron of the company and he renamed it into The King's Men. And so this patronage granted the company lots of special privileges, including greater licence to perform plays and more financial security, heightened prestige. And so in addition to this royal patronage, Shakespeare was part of an elite coterie of

social circles that included luminaries like William Herbert or Henry Ridsley, the [Earl](#) of Southampton. And this put Shakespeare in touch with other intellectuals and artists, people like John Florio, the Italian who translated Montaigne's [essays](#) into English. I'm not sure how often Shakespeare went to the pub with these members of the elite, but you can imagine that, if you think of [code switching](#), or you think of Hal in the Henry IV plays who [hangs out](#) in taverns but then is a member of the royalty, you can start [to piece together](#) and understand how Shakespeare was able to create these different worlds, because he had access to them himself.

## PRIVILEGE AND COLONIALISM

Would Shakespeare's work be the global phenomenon it is today if England hadn't been a colonial superpower in the 1800s, [spreading](#) British culture across the world? Dr. Bui talks about how the Globe [is facing up](#) to questions of privilege and colonialism. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** That Shakespeare and the Globe Company benefited from their links to royalty and the elite is something that actually we have [to reckon with](#) as an arts and culture institution. So Farrah Karim Cooper, who's our Director of Education here, she has a book called The Great White Bard, where she talks about how the rise in Shakespeare's global status in the 1800s was intricately [bound up](#) with England's rise as a colonial superpower and their involvement in the transatlantic [slave trade](#). But all of these events are nonetheless part of his [legacy](#) and part of the history of how we've come to value Shakespeare as readers, as educators, performers and theatregoers.

## ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

A theatre reconstructed to look almost exactly like a building from the early 1600s might sound like a project all about history. However, a key [aim](#) of today's Globe is to make Shakespeare's work accessible for everyone now and in the future. Ticket prices are a relevant factor; seeing a play in London can be inaccessible because it's so expensive. But you can watch a play at the Globe for just £5 if you're prepared to be a '[yardling](#)' and [stand throughout the performance](#), as many people did in Shakespeare's

time. There are other accessibility issues that the creative team at Shakespeare's Globe are [keen to address](#). Shakespeare was writing over four centuries ago when society and its values were very different. Some of Shakespeare's work includes themes that we now see as misogynistic. Interpreting the four-hundred-year-old plays in a way that speaks to diverse modern audiences is central to the Globe's mission. Dr. Bui [acknowledges](#) some of the many issues the Globe has [to address](#). **Dr. Hanh Bui:** Since 2018, we have a regular festival called Shakespeare in Race, where we put theatre artists and scholars in conversation with each other [to address](#) these questions about access. Questions like who owns Shakespeare, questions about what to do with Shakespeare's language that throughout his plays [ripple](#) with misogyny and racism and [ableism](#) and heterosexism. And acknowledging that this is a part of our literary history, that we want to acknowledge, that we want [to look straight in the eye](#), but as well, we need to take into consideration audiences today. And we have different sensibilities. We have different political commitments and [awarenesses](#). And so how do we use Shakespeare in a way that's going to be creative, constantly opening new meanings in the plays while at the same time, taking into account how these plays land with contemporary audiences.

---

# Glossary

- **slave trade** = tratta degli schiavi
- **tumblers** = acrobati
- **granted** = concedere
- **Earl** = conte
- **code switching** = cambiamento di codice
- **fairly** = abbastanza
- **work out** = lavorare, risolvere
- **involved** = coinvolto
- **skilled** = qualificato
- **disreputable** = disdicevole, riprovevole
- **coterie** = cricca
- **to piece together** = mettere insieme
- **to look straight in the eye** = guardare dritto negli occhi
- **roofless** = senza tetto
- **lines** = battute
- **to enact** = rappresentare
- **concerns** = preoccupazioni
- **ensemble** = gruppo
- **precluded** = escludere
- **aim** = obiettivo
- **workarounds** = soluzioni alternative
- **patron** = mecenate
- **heightened** = aumentare
- **from all ranks of society** = da ogni ceto sociale
- **essays** = saggi
- **bound up** = legare
- **close-up** = da vicino
- **lack** = mancanza
- **attest** = affermare
- **demanding** = esigente
- **opening night** = notte di debutto
- **stand throughout the performance** = stare in piedi per tutto lo spettacolo

- **ripple** = vibrare
- **rehearsals** = prove
- **input** = contributo
- **Scholars** = studiosi
- **keen** = ansiosi
- **acknowledges** = riconoscere
- **royal households** = case reali
- **hangs out** = passare il tempo
- **is facing up** = affrontare
- **to address** = affrontare
- **to reckon with** = prendere in considerazione
- **awarenesses** = consapevolezza
- **tailoring** = adattare
- **positively** = con certezza
- **swordplay** = arte della scherma
- **dubious** = moralmente discutibile
- **fellow company members** = altri membri della compagnia
- **yardling** = spettatore in piedi
- **putting on** = mettere in scena
- **Research Fellow** = ricercatore
- **parts** = ruoli
- **think through** = riflettere attentamente
- **walkers** = funamboli
- **scripts** = copioni
- **spread** = distanza
- **legacy** = eredità
- **ableism** = discriminazione dei disabili