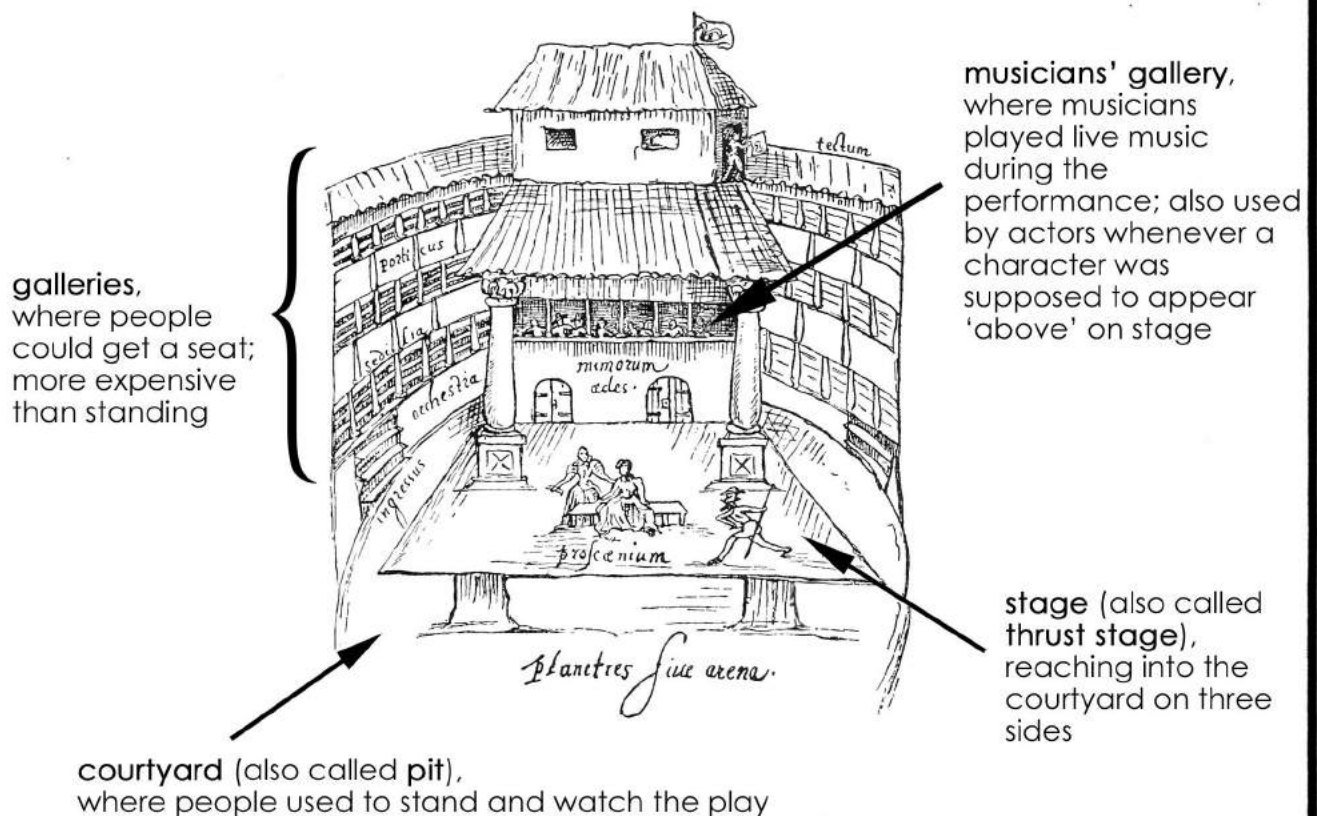# Shakespeare's Language of the Theatre

Shakespeare used language not only to tell the story of his plays but also to let it come alive in the special context of the theatre. Theatres at the time looked very different from theatres today: they were round buildings without a roof over the courtyard and a big part of the audience stood on three sides around the stage, which reached far into the courtyard. The drawing below gives you an idea of what the stage area looked like in Shakespeare's time.

galleries, where people could get a seat; more expensive than standing

musicians' gallery, where musicians played live music during the performance; also used by actors whenever a character was supposed to appear 'above' on stage

stage (also called **thrust stage**), reaching into the courtyard on three sides

courtyard (also called **pit**), where people used to stand and watch the play

In a theatre like this, you cannot use a lot of scenery to make the audience understand where the action was taking place because you would block the view of some of the people standing in the courtyard. In addition, they could not turn down the lights for scenes set at night. The only source of light was normal daylight, and performances usually started in the early afternoon. In order to make the audience understand where the play is set and at which time of the day the scene is happening, Shakespeare put a lot of information about this into the lines the characters speak.

In addition, the lines also help the actors to remember what they are actually meant to do on stage while speaking them: they mention the props the actors need and they even say what they have to do with them during the scene. For an actor who needs to keep several plays in his mind and who had very little time to learn their part off by heart and to rehearse the play, this is a great help.

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Let's have a look, for example, at this text excerpt from the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo is about to break into Juliet's tomb to commit suicide next to her and to be with his wife forever. His servant Balthasar has accompanied him until here but now Romeo needs to be alone.

[Enter ROMEO and BALTHASAR, with a torch, mattock, &c]

Romeo. Give me that mattock and the wrenching iron.
Hold, take this letter. Early in the morning
See thou deliver it to my lord and father.
Give me the light. Upon thy life I charge thee,
Whate'er thou hear'st or seest, stand all aloof,
And do not interrupt me in my course.
Why I descend into this bed of death,
Is partly to behold my lady's face,
But chiefly to take thence from her dead finger
A precious ring, a ring that I must use
In dear employment. Therefore hence, be gone.
But if thou, jealous, dost return to pry
In what I farther shall intend to do,
By heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint,
And strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs.
The time and my intents are savage-wild,
More fierce and more inexorable far
Than empty tigers or the roaring sea.

(*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 5, scene3; lines 22-39)

1. Read the passage and use the vocabulary on the next page to understand what Romeo is saying. Look up any other words that are unfamiliar to you, either in a normal dictionary or in a Shakespeare Glossary, like this one online: www.shakespeareswords.com

2. Now highlight all those words or phrases that tell us **where** we are.

3. Use a different colour to highlight those words that tell us that a certain **action** is carried out while saying these lines.

4. Then highlight those that mention **props** Romeo needs in this scene in another different colour.

5. And finally, identify those words and phrases that tell us something about Romeo's state of mind in this scene: what do we learn about his **emotions** in this passage?

Vocabulary

scenery – *n.*, the walls, furniture, trees, etc., that are used on a stage during a play or other performance to show where the action is taking place

prop – *n.*, an object that is used by a performer or actor during their performance

mattock – *n.*, a tool shaped like a pickaxe

wrenching iron – *n.*, a metal bar that has a thin flat edge at one end and is used to open or lift things; today more often known as a crow bar

to charge – *v.*, here: to order, to command

aloof – *adj.*, not involved in or influenced by something

to descend – *v.*, to go or come down

to behold – *v.*, to look at something, to see something

chiefly – *adv.*, mainly or mostly

thence – *prep.*, from that place, from there

hence – *prep.*, away from here, from this place

to pry – *v.*, to try to find out about other people's private lives

to strew – *v.*, to scatter, to spread over

joint – *n.*, a place in your body where two bones meet

churchyard – *n.*, a piece of land close to a church and that is often used as a place to bury people

limb – *n.*, a leg or arm

intent – *n.*, a plan

savage – *adj.*, cruel, violent

fierce – *adj.*, violent, angry

inexorable – *adj.*, very cruel, relentless