

# Written in the stone

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Jean Wilson

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF  
SHAKESPEARE

The material legacy of Shakespeare's theatre  
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The London actors' companies of the 1590s which took up permanent residence at playhouses in Southwark were not the only artists forced to seek refuge beyond the reach of the City authorities. In *The Archaeology of Shakespeare*, Jean Wilson argues that the surviving work of the stonemasons of Southwark, many of whom were foreigners unable to join trade guilds and so required to live and work outside the City boundaries, can help to fill in the unknown details of the interior design of playhouses. In contemporary tomb-sculpture, Wilson finds clues to the decoration of the *frons scenae* (the backwall of the stage), before which the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were first performed.

In his *Art and Illusion* in "*The Winter's Tale*" (1995), B. J. Sokol argued that the fictional "statue" of Hermione was an allusion to the vulgar work of the Southwark stonemasons, but that their best work showed the influence of Continental Renaissance Classicism. Wilson believes that the designers of the theatres shared 'his Continental taste, and hence some of the stonemasons' surviving works reflect the actual appearance of the playhouse interior. The *frons* of the new Globe currently being completed on Bankside will be decorated with statues of Classical gods, which indicates that Wilson is thinking along the same lines as the academic commit-

tee of the Globe, who also see the decoration as part of a blossoming Renaissance sensibility rather than a dying medieval tradition.

Wilson's most important contribution comes in the middle of the book. Rejecting the "hall screen" as a model for the *frons*, because documented performances in halls in fact never used the screen as a backwall, Wilson turns to funerary monuments which show features akin to those found on the stage. The examples with which she illustrates her argument are individually compelling, but it is a pity that there are so few of them. The tomb of Lady Savile at

St Nicholas Hurst, Berkshire, has a carved representation of the deceased and her family at prayer, which forms a tableau vivant "discovered" by two angels drawing back curtains. This monument is constructed as three bays, with the middle one projecting forwards. Two other tombs, that of Sir William Clarke in Hitcham, Buckinghamshire, and that of Ninian Burrell in Cuckfield, Sussex, show similar "discoveries". Wilson draws a parallel between these designs and the "jutting forward" of the upper galleries specified in the contract to build the Fortune playhouse, and suggests that the *frons* generally had an overhanging upper level from which a discovery curtain was suspended.

Apart from this, Wilson's book contains little that is new and much that is better presented elsewhere. The chapters are oddly organized, with each divided into sections which (as in "Acting as a Profession") may be no more than two paragraphs. Such eccentric structure could be overlooked, were it not for some serious lapses of scholarly judgment. The first notable example is in the description of the dismantling of the frame of the Theatre, which, according to Wilson, took place "on the night of 28 December 1598". If this was done in one night by just fifteen or so per-

sons, then it is no wonder that the new playhouse built from these massive timbers, the Globe Theatre, was associated with Hercules. Wilson has overlooked the landlord's legal efforts to stop the dismantling, which make it clear that the job took several days. And when Wilson confidently gives the size of the Fortune's stage as "43 feet wide by 25 feet deep", she neither remembers that her depth is a calculation based on the assumption that the tiring-house was contained wholly within the playhouse frame, nor remarks on the potential conflict between this assumption and her conjecture about a staggered *frons scenae*.

Wilson has strong reservations about the new Bankside Globe. She says that "to claim that this 'Globe' is any more authentic than Olivier's 'Globe' in *Henry V* is to mislead", since "neither is free from the taste of the era which produced it". Unconscious influences on the choices made by the new Globe's academic advisers will undoubtedly become apparent in the future, but the body of scholarship which underpins Sam Wanamaker's project is far more extensive than that made available to Olivier. Wilson endorses A. M. Nagler's dismissal of attempts to reconstruct the interior of an Elizabethan playhouse – "the undertaking strikes me as hopeless", wrote Nagler in *Shakespeare's Stage* – and so contradicts herself, since Wilson's own work on monumental architecture is offered as part of just such an attempt.