

Student 4: High Achieved

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Audience behavior seems to have remained just as powerful and influential to the plays' success in Shakespeare's time as in Aristophanes' and Plautus' time. Crowds strengthen their sense of identity, their collective spirit, by vocal expression of their shared feelings. The audience was an active participant in the collective experience of play-going, and was not in the habit of keeping its reactions private.

The spectators would stand on their feet to applaud or merely see the action on stage. Applause was delivered with voice as well as hands, the viewers managing to get a cheer in with every little pause. However, if the audience disliked the performance, they would not hesitate to hiss and shout at the actors on stage. Open-air acoustics amplified any audience reaction to a higher intensity. Playhouse crowds, for all their violence and exhibitionism, seem to have adopted an effective if anarchic regime of self-regulation. Authority of any kind was signally absent. If a pickpocket was caught, for instance, he could expect to be dealt with by a form of mob rule.

Shakespeare used many of the styles of comedy used by Aristophanes and Plautus, such as slapstick, puns, dry and earthy humour, wit and practical jokes. As many of the storylines of plays have continued and reappeared through Aristophanes to Plautus to Shakespeare, many of the styles of comedy have remained the same. It has been said that "Shakespeare feeds Elizabethan life into the mill of Roman farce, life realized with his distinctively generous creativity, very different from Plautus' tough, narrow, resinous genius." Plautus' *The Menaechmi* and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* are almost identical in plot, incident and character. It is even more remarkable considering the complete difference of audience they were respectively performed to.

Boy actors played the role of female characters, and so seeing them dressed in lavish women's gowns was a comical sight. The use of stock characters in Shakespeare's comedies is also influenced by Plautus and Aristophanes. However, Shakespeare's audience's thought was not restricted to the home and family, rather looked toward the world outside England and Europe. The English were sending expeditions to the Americas in search of gold, and so the audience's frame of mind was always expanding in search of treasure, not restricted by homey comforts. Religion also caused a major separation between the Greek and Roman and English theatre audiences respectively. Whereas Renaissance English society was Christian, and the worship of several different gods was seen as witchcraft – one of the worst crimes of this period – Aristophanes' and Plautus' audiences and the society of their time followed pagan religion, and so could use several deities and any of their own 'witches' in their comedies. Shakespeare was limited in his subjects for his plays, as religion and social class distinctions to name a couple were dicey discussions and unsuitable for public display as a source of entertainment.