

# SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIMES: AN OVERVIEW

## Who was Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare was an English playwright and poet who lived in the late 1500's and early 1600's (around 400 years ago). His plays are now performed all over the world in hundreds of languages, and he is known as one of the greatest writers of all time. The reason his work is so popular is that Shakespeare wrote about human nature and how people behave. That is why, although his words can be hard to understand, his ideas are as relevant now as they were four centuries ago.

## Shakespeare's Works

At least two of Shakespeare's plays have been lost, but 38 survive. Two of these, *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, were co-written with John Fletcher. The other 36 are divided into comedies, tragedies and histories. Shakespeare also wrote poems, including a series of sonnets (a type of poem). Nobody knows exactly when each of these works was written. Some experts have even said that "Shakespeare's" plays are really the work of other writers, such as Francis Bacon, a philosopher who lived at around the same time. This may be because people cannot believe that Shakespeare, who came from an ordinary background, could have written such great works of literature.

## Performing Shakespeare

Whenever a new production of a Shakespeare play is staged, directors, designers, and actors think of new interpretations, or ways to understand and present it. Plays can be performed in modern dress, or set in any historical period. Directors sometimes cut or change the text of a play. The same scene can be funny, frightening or exciting, depending on how the stage is set and how the actors say the words.

## Shakespeare's language

Language changes all the time. The way people spoke 400 years ago was different from the way we speak now, and Shakespeare's language can be hard to understand. He used many old words like *slubber*, *lustihood*, and *welkin*, as well as words such as *sad*, *fell*, and *marry*, which have different meanings today. Most editions of Shakespeare's works help by providing notes which explain the meanings of words and phrases.

## **Myths and Magic**

Fairies, magic, witches, spells and prophecies (utterances that foretell the future) all formed part of the Elizabethan view of life. Folklore and superstition were, often as important to people as the official religious beliefs taught by the Church. Many Elizabethans thought that fairies, goblins, and sprites came out at night to play tricks on innocent people. I was believed they could make people go insane, give them terrible nightmares or even lure them into a devilish underworld. Diseases and disasters were often blamed on witches,. Many women who didn't fit into society were branded as witches and accused of working for the devil. Astrology - the belief that the position and movement of the stars can foretell and influence events on Earth - was more important than it is today. Respected astrologers could have great influence over people's lives. The astrologer John Dee was said to influence Elizabeth I.

## **The Human Body**

The human body was thought to be a miniature representation of the universe as a whole. Various parts of the body were linked to the planets and the signs of the zodiac. Things that happened in the universe, which was known as the "macrocosm", were supposed to happen on a much smaller scale within the human body (the microcosm). The body was also thought to contain four "humours", or fluids - black bile, phlegm, blood, and choler. A person's temperament depended on the way the humours were mixed. In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Anthony describes Brutus as a man in whom all these humours are mixed perfectly. But most people were thought to have one humour that was more dominant than the others. Illness and mental disorders were blamed on an imbalance of the humours. For example, melancholia (depression) was thought to be caused by an excess of black bile.

## **Elizabethan Beliefs**

Life in Elizabethan England could be cruel and hard. The poor often went hungry, disease was widespread, medical remedies often felt more like tortures, and many women died in childbirth. But through their beliefs, people found ways of making sense of their existence.

## **Religion**

People in Elizabethan England were, in general, much more religious than people today. Almost everyone believed in God, and expected to go to heaven or hell after death. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet won't kill his stepfather, Claudius, while Claudius is praying because he doesn't want him to go to heaven. At this time, England was a Protestant country - it had

broken away from the Catholic church of Rome. This was part of the European movement called the Reformation, which had started with attacks on corruption in the Catholic Church and led to the founding of non-Catholic, or Protestant, churches. As many wars were fought in the name of religion, all English Catholics were seen as potential traitors to their country and were forbidden to hold any public office. Some Protestants, called Puritans, felt the Church in England hadn't gone far enough in its rejection of Catholicism. They wanted to "purify" the Church of its remaining Catholic elements, such as bishops and ceremonial robes. Puritans also had strict ideas about what was sinful, or could lead to sin: fine clothes, drinking, gambling, and going to see plays were all thought to pave the way to hell.

### **The Chain of Being**

The Chain of Being was a concept the Elizabethans inherited from the Middle Ages. It was an attempt to give order (or "degree" as the Elizabethans often called it) to the vastness of creation. The idea was that God created everything in a strict hierarchy, or chain, that stretched from God Himself down to the lowest things in existence. Everything had its own place. Humans occupied a place in the chain below the angels but above animals, plants, and stones. Some humans were higher in the chain than others. The monarch was the highest, with nobles and churchmen below. Then followed gentlemen and finally commoners. All women were considered to be inferior to men, with the obvious exception of Elizabeth I. Her position as monarch outweighed the fact that she was a woman. Accepting one's place in the chain was a duty that would be rewarded by God in heaven. Disrupting the chain was thought to lead to chaos, but of course many people still did challenge their position in society.

### **Elizabethan Theatre**

Until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, most plays were performed outside London. Craftsmen or tradespeople put on traditional plays in town squares and on village greens. As it grew in size and importance, though, London became the center of English theatre. In Shakespeare's lifetime, theatre became hugely popular. At first it was not considered a very respectable pastime, and most of the theaters were in the rougher parts of town.

### **London's Theatres**

The first London theatre was called The Theatre. It was built in 1567 in north London, just outside the city walls. In 1587, the Rose Theater was built south of the Thames, among the prisons and brothels of an area called Bankside. The Rose flourished and drew large crowds. In 1595, the huge Swan Theatre, said to hold up to 3,000 people, was built just a few yards to the west. All these theatres were deliberately built outside the city limits, so they were free from the

restrictions of city regulations. As an aspiring dramatist, Shakespeare could not have been in London at a better time. Not only were people flocking to see plays at the theatre, but Queen Elizabeth I loved the theatre and often held performances of plays at her court.

## **Theatre Companies**

In London, plays were put on by theatre companies (groups of professional actors). By law, a company had to have a patron, a rich friend who would support it financially. Theatre companies were named after their patrons. For example, the company supported by the Earl of Leicester was called Leicester's Men. Shakespeare spent much of his career with a company called the Chamberlain's Men. Its patron was the Lord Chamberlain. As well as performing in theaters, the company gave private shows for students, noblemen, and even the Queen. In 1603, James I became king. He wanted to be a patron, and started supporting the Chamberlain's Men. From then on, they were known as the King's Men.

## **The Audience**

Theatre in Elizabethan London was an entertainment for everyone, a bit like the cinema today. The cheapest tickets cost one penny, which most ordinary people could afford. Workers earned a basic wage of about 12 pence a week.) The most expensive tickets were sixpence and were bought by rich merchants and nobles. Foreign traders and tourists often made a trip to the theatre as part of their visit to London. With so many people crowded together, the theaters were also popular with thieves and pickpockets. Audiences were not as well-behaved as they are today. People jeered at the actors and shouted out rude remarks. Some even climbed onto the stage and joined in with swordfights. People also brought food with them to eat during the performance, or to throw at bad actors.

## **Stagecraft**

Special effects and scenery did not play a big part in Elizabethan theatre. Musicians provided sound effects with drums and trumpets, and the actors often wore extravagant, show costumes. But audiences were expected to use their imaginations for different locations and backgrounds.

## **Plague and Players**

Theatres were closed during severe outbreaks of plague, because it was feared that the disease spread more quickly

in crowds. Many companies left London for tours of the countryside. Players often had to see their costumes and scripts in order to survive. Some Puritans, who thought theatre-going was a sin, believed that plague was sent by God as a punishment for such wickedness.

## **Shakespeare's Players**

Shakespeare is thought to have joined the theatre as an actor, or "player", and become a writer later. It was normal for actors to help write plays, or to change them a lot during rehearsals. Shakespeare probably started gradually writing more and acting less. Actors often specialized in one type of part. Stars like Richard Burbage and William Sly got the big parts, such as leading roles in tragedies. Comic actors or clowns, such as Will Kempe, played a fool or a comic character. There were no actresses. Women's roles were played by boys. Women did not act on stage until the Restoration, after the English Civil War,

## **The Globe Theatre**

From 1599 onwards, Shakespeare's plays were usually performed at the Globe, a huge, open-air circular theatre in Southwark in London. The theatre could hold 3,000 people, and there were two performances a day. Along with other members of his theatre company, the Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare owned a share in the Globe and made a lot of money from it. Like many theatres at the time, the Globe was a wooden circle built of oak beams, with no roof over the middle. The only lighting was daylight, so performances were put on in the afternoons. A flag was flown from the roof to let people know a play was pending. The stage, known as an apron stage or thrust stage, stuck out into the middle of the yard. It was covered by a roof which helped to keep the players dry. The ceiling over the stage was called the "shadow" or "heavens." It was painted with sun, moon, and stars and positioned so the sun didn't shine in the actors' eyes. Behind the stage there was a backstage area where the actors got changed. Two wooden pillars supporting the roof were painted to look like marble. There was not much scenery on the stage. Props and elaborate costumes were used instead. The stage was 1.5m (5 ft.) high, so people couldn't jump onto it. The members of the audience who stood in the yard around the stage were known as groundlings. They weren't sheltered from the rain, but they were nearest to the action on the stage. There were three levels of covered galleries around the yard where it cost more to sit with an extra penny charged for a cushion.

## **Plays, Plots, and Poetry**

Although there was a great variety of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, most playwrights followed a few basic methods,

or conventions. Playwrights didn't often make up new plots; they used traditional tales or borrowed ideas from other books. Shakespeare often took two old stories and combined them to make a new one, as in *The Merchant of Venice*. Many plays were set in other countries and in times gone by. Plays were written in poetry or prose, or a mixture of both. Playwrights mainly used a kind of unrhymed poetry called blank verse. This uses a type of verse line called an iambic pentameter, made up of five units called iambic feet. An iambic foot has two syllables, an unstressed one followed by a stressed one.

## The Changing Texts

Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed, not printed as books. When they were printed, they weren't always exactly the same as the original version. These are the different stages between Shakespeare's handwritten manuscripts and the texts we have today.

Foul papers - original manuscripts that contain cross-outs and corrections and can be hard to read. None of Shakespeare's foul papers have survived, but three pages of a play called *Sir Thomas More*, written jointly by several authors, are thought to be in his handwriting.

Fair copies - copies written out for rehearsals which were often changed by the actors.

Quartos - small books made of large sheets of folded paper. Eighteen of Shakespeare's plays were printed as quartos, but he probably didn't check them. Some quartos were based on what actors could remember of their lines.

The First Folio - Thirty six of the plays were collected and published in 1623, in a book now called the First folio. Shakespeare had died seven years earlier, so he couldn't check the text.

Printers - typeset by hand in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mistakes were often made and revisions often made to make the text to make it fit the pages.

Modern editions - Most modern editions are based on the First Folio, but experts still argue over what exactly Shakespeare wrote, and they sometimes try to change passages in the text to what they might have been originally.