



Shakespeare's World

Shakespeare's England

Cultural Blossoming

William Shakespeare is considered by many to be the world's greatest playwright. Shakespeare lived in England during the Renaissance, the blossoming of European learning that followed the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages, the European world view had focused on God and the afterlife, but with the Renaissance came a renewal of interest in individual human achievement. This new emphasis spurred human beings to expand their horizons in all sorts of ways—scientifically, geographically, commercially, philosophically, artistically. In 1564, when Shakespeare was born, England had already embraced the spirit of Renaissance creativity. In the decades that followed, Shakespeare himself would help carry the Renaissance to even greater heights.



William Shakespeare
1564–1616

Queen of the Arts Six years before Shakespeare was born, Elizabeth I became queen of England, and the period of her reign, from 1558 to 1603, is known as the Elizabethan Age. Elizabeth I supported all the arts—literature, painting,

sculpture, music, and theater. She was also a frugal and clever leader who, despite frequent political in-fighting and religious turmoil, managed to steer England down a middle road to stability and prosperity.

During Elizabeth's reign, London, the capital of the nation, flourished as a great commercial center, the hub of England's growing overseas empire. London was also the hub of the artistic efforts that Elizabeth championed, and it attracted talented and ambitious individuals from all over the land.



Queen Elizabeth I
1533–1603

Because a true Renaissance figure was supposed to excel in many fields, Elizabeth's courtiers often dabbled in writing. In fact, some of them, like Sir Walter Raleigh, produced memorable poetry that is still being read today. Topping the list of the era's fine literature, however, was its verse drama, plays in which the dialogue consists mostly or entirely of poetry. Several outstanding dramatists appeared, none more notable than William Shakespeare; and by the end of the 16th century, London had more theaters than any other city in Europe.

Shakespeare's Theater

The World's a Stage From the early 1590s, Shakespeare was affiliated with a theater company known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Its chief sponsors were a father and son who served consecutively as England's Lord Chamberlain, an influential member of Elizabeth's court. Shakespeare not only wrote the company's plays but also was a company shareholder, or part owner, and even performed occasionally as an actor. In 1599, with the other company shareholders, he became part owner of the Globe Theatre, the new London home of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Four years later, when Queen Elizabeth died, the company at the Globe acquired a new sponsor, King James I, and became known as the King's Men.

Located on the south bank of the Thames (tēmz) River, just outside of central London, the Globe Theatre was a three-story wooden building that held up to 3,000 theatergoers. In the center was an open-air courtyard with a platform

stage on which the plays were performed. Those paying the lowest admission charges, known as groundlings, stood in the pit, the part of the courtyard right near the stage. Wealthier theatergoers sat in the building's interior galleries, which surrounded all sides of the courtyard except for the part of the building directly behind the stage.

Insight and Excitement Judging from the success of Shakespeare's company, all classes of theatergoers seem to have enjoyed his plays. That's probably because they included something for everyone—powerful speeches, fancy sword fights, humor, eerie supernatural events, and insightful observations about human nature. Such a mixture was important to Shakespeare. As a playwright, he wanted to explore human behavior, to understand how different people deal with universal problems. Yet he was also part of a commercial venture, writing for an audience that wanted, first and foremost, to be entertained. He made sure that his plays included enough action and excitement to keep just about anyone interested. The groundlings were particularly loud in their appreciation, cheering the heroes, yelling insults at the villains, and laughing loudly at humorous characters and jokes. In fact, by the standards of today's theater, Elizabethan performances were rather rowdy events.

Since the Globe had no artificial lighting or heat, performances were given in daylight in warmer weather. The stage also had no scenery; usually, lines of dialogue told the audience where a scene was taking place.

Despite the lack of scenery, productions were by no means drab. Costumes could be quite ornate, and props such as swords, shields, and swirling banners added to the colorful display. From behind the stage came sound effects—the chiming of a clock, for instance, or the sound of a cannon. The stage had no curtain. Instead, performers usually walked on and off in full view of the audience.

THE GLOBE THEATRE

The Globe was rebuilt in 1996.

- 1 raised platform stage
- 2 the pit
- 3 inner balconies
- 4 doors for actors' entrances



Shakespeare's Life

Mystery Man Though the works of William Shakespeare have probably been seen or read by more people worldwide than those of any other author, the man himself remains something of a mystery. This is particularly true of his early life, before he became a famous playwright. Literary biographies were uncommon in the Elizabethan period, and Shakespeare did not belong to a prominent family. What we know of his early life and family background comes from scanty documentary evidence—church records and property deeds, for example.

A Small-Town Boy According to those records, an infant named William Shakespeare was baptized in April 1564 in the local church in Stratford-upon-Avon, a bustling town on the River Avon, northwest of London. His father was a tanner and glove-maker and also served as a local politician. It is likely that Shakespeare attended Stratford's grammar school, where he would have studied Latin, the language of ancient Rome; classical literature written in Latin; and translations from ancient Greek. It is here that he would have been introduced to the writings of the ancient Greek biographer Plutarch, whose *Parallel Lives* provides the historical basis for the events in *Julius Caesar*.

Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford-upon-Avon



Off to London Records further tell us that in 1582 William Shakespeare married one Anne Hathaway, probably the daughter of a well-to-do Stratford farm family, and that over the next three years the couple had three children, an older daughter named Susanna and twins named Hamnet (a male) and Judith. After the birth of the twins in 1585, nothing is known about Shakespeare for the next several years, after which he turns up again, living in London and working as an actor and a playwright. Clearly he was recognized as a promising talent, for he became a shareholder in the prestigious acting company the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which had strong ties to Elizabeth's court. Shakespeare's plays helped make the company even more successful, and he was soon allowed—probably even encouraged—to give up acting in order to focus on his writing.

The Years of Fame By 1599, the year in which *Julius Caesar* was first produced, Shakespeare is known to have written 18 of his 38 plays, including early pieces such as his history *Richard III*, his comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*, and his tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. He was also a rich man. As a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, he was now one of the owners of the company's new home, the Globe Theatre. He also made money by having his plays produced and by publishing some of his nondramatic poetry, although his sonnets did not appear in print until 1609.

The Final Years About a year before the sonnets appeared, Shakespeare began curtailing his theater activities. He seems to have spent less time in London and more back in Stratford. He wrote no plays after 1613, when he probably moved back to Stratford permanently. No one knows for sure just when, where, or how he died, but his gravestone in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church lists the date of his death as April 23, 1616.

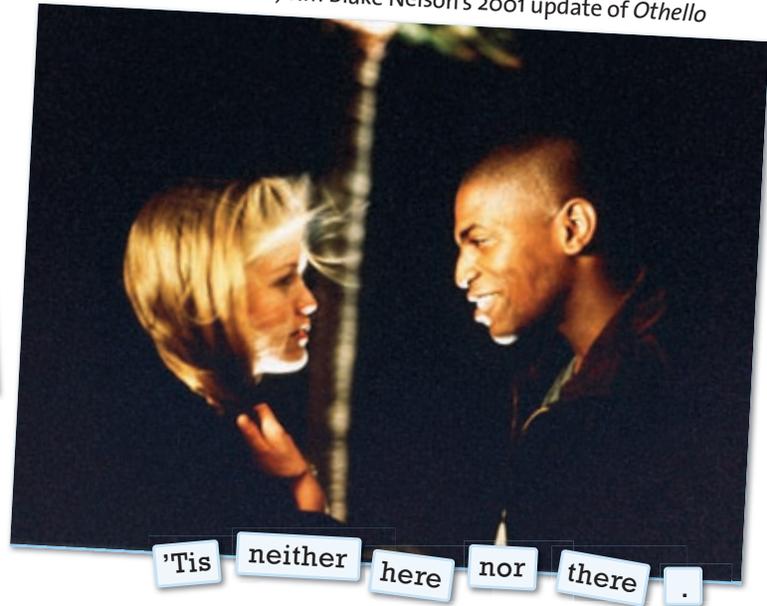


A scene from Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 film *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's Legacy

The Test of Time Some of the most familiar lines in the English language come from the plays of Shakespeare: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears” (*Julius Caesar*), “O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?” (*Romeo and Juliet*), “To be or not to be” (*Hamlet*). Why do readers and theatergoers continue to enjoy Shakespeare’s plays four centuries after they were written? One answer is that Shakespeare thoroughly understood the theater and knew all the tricks of stagecraft—how to move an audience, create an exciting scene, and sketch out a setting using only the spoken word. Another answer lies in Shakespeare’s language—the beautiful lines and phrases that resound in the minds of all who experience his plays. No other writer, before or since, has developed the potential of the English language to such heights. Still another answer lies in Shakespeare’s profound understanding of human psychology, revealed in the unforgettable characters he created. Today, as much as ever, to understand Shakespeare’s plays is to understand what is most important about being human and about life.

A scene from the film *O*, Tim Blake Nelson’s 2001 update of *Othello*



OTHER PLAYS BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

As You Like It (1599)
King Lear (1605)
Macbeth (1606)
The Merchant of Venice (1596–1597)
A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1595–1596)
Richard II (1595)
The Tempest (1611)
Twelfth Night (1601–1602)

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