

# William Shakespeare:

an overview of his life,  
times, and work

**an NAC English Theatre company  
educational publication**

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE  
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES**

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## **Section I: Introduction to Shakespeare**

- 1. William Shakespeare:**  
Who was he, and why do we study him?
- 2. Shakespeare's biography**
- 3. Shakespeare's plays**

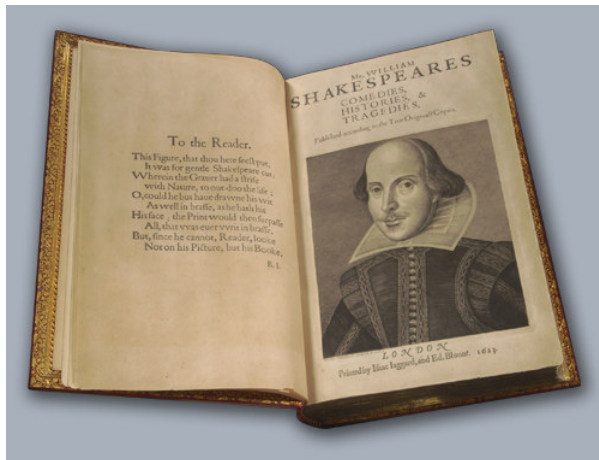
## Section I: Introduction to Shakespeare

### William Shakespeare: Who was he, and why do we study him?

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is widely acknowledged as the world’s greatest English-language playwright. He and his works have been loved and admired by scholars, actors, and everyday people for hundreds of years.

Why? Well, because he wrote exciting stories that are still relevant today. Because he tells stories about kings and queens and princes, and makes us cry. Because he tells stories about tricks and mistaken identities and falling in and out of love, and makes us laugh. Because he gets inside our heads and hearts and has us all saying, “Yes, that’s exactly how I feel! I know what you mean.”

And because he has written some of the most beautiful lines of poetry that ever filled a hall or a page or a heart. Shakespeare moves us with the courage of heroes, the foolishness of clowns, the aching of lovers. He seems to know about everything. He writes with music, with a soaring imagination, with tenderness, with passion and with humour. He is inside us all.



And so it is really not a marvel that almost 400 years after he wrote his plays, we are still reading them and watching them on stage and screen. We strive to learn his language and to understand his writing because he is worth it. When we read and watch Shakespeare we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the human condition.

### Shakespeare's biography

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small town in south western England, possibly on April 23, 1564. He was

the third of eight children (four boys and four girls), six of whom survived. Their father, John Shakespeare, worked on leather and wool.

Young William grew up in a house with a thatched roof, and went to a public school where he learned Latin and Scriptures and Logic. One story has it that he went to see a pageant at nearby Warwick Castle when Queen Elizabeth I was visiting, and was entranced, influenced forever by the excitement and drama around him.

In 1582, when he was just 18, he married Anne Hathaway. Their first child, Susannah, was born shortly after that. They had two more children, twins, Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585. Hamnet contracted the Black Plague and died at age 11, in 1596.

There are various theories about what Shakespeare did as a young man: one holds that he ran away to London, where he looked after the horses of theatregoers; one that he was a teacher in a school nearby; one that he went to Italy. He is first mentioned in London in 1592, by the playwright Robert Greene, who describes him as "a young upstart Crow".

Shakespeare's plays were so popular that his company became the official theatre company of the Lord Chamberlain, and performed often for Queen Elizabeth I. After her death in 1603, the new king, James I, asked Shakespeare's company to be his official theatre company, to be known as the King's Men. Shakespeare took small roles himself in his plays, and he and some friends built and opened their own theatre, The Globe.

He found his stories wherever he could in busy, bustling London, and often referred to the history written by Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (first published in 1577).

Over the years he wrote 37 plays, some long poems, and 154 renowned love sonnets. He wrote with the sweeping vision of a storyteller and the intimacy of a poet.

Shakespeare retired to Stratford. By then he had applied for and received a coat of arms and been recognized as a "gentleman" in class-conscious Britain; he had bought New Place, a much grander home.

He died in 1616, at age 52. Again, there are various theories about why and how he died, including a theory that he was poisoned; we will never know for sure—but what is certain about Shakespeare is that he poured his huge heart and talent and work ethic and imagination into wondrous stories that have been acclaimed, enjoyed and discussed ever since.

## Shakespeare's plays

Listed in probable order of performance.

### Tragedies

1. *Titus Andronicus* first performed in 1594 (printed in 1594)
2. *Romeo and Juliet* 1594-95 (1597)
3. *Hamlet* 1600-01 (1603)
4. *Julius Caesar* 1600-01 (1623)
5. *Othello* 1604-05 (1622)
6. *Antony and Cleopatra* 1606-07 (1623)
7. *King Lear* 1606 (1608)
8. *Coriolanus* 1607-08 (1623)
9. *Timon of Athens* 1607-08 (1623)
10. *Macbeth* 1611-12 (1623)

### Histories

1. *King Henry VI, Part 1* 1592 (printed in 1594)
2. *King Henry VI Part 2* 1592-93 (1594)
3. *King Henry VI Part 3* 1592-93 (1623)
4. *King John* 1596-97 (1623)
5. *King Henry IV Part 1* 1597-98 (1598)
6. *King Henry IV Part 2* 1597-98 (1600)

7. *King Henry V* 1598–99 (1600)
8. *Richard II* 1600–01 (1597)
9. *Richard III* 1601 (1597)
10. *King Henry VIII* 1612–13 (1623)

### **Comedies**

1. *The Taming of the Shrew* first performed 1593–94 (printed in 1623)
2. *The Comedy of Errors* 1594 (1623)
3. *Two Gentlemen of Verona* 1594–95 (1623)
4. *Love's Labour's Lost* 1594–95 (1598)
5. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1595–96 (1600)
6. *The Merchant of Venice* 1596–97 (1600)
7. *Much Ado About Nothing* 1598–99 (1600)
8. *As You Like It* 1599–1600 (1623)
9. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 1600–01 (1602)
10. *Troilus and Cressida* 1602 (1609)
11. *Twelfth Night* 1602 (1623)
12. *All's Well That Ends Well* 1602–03 (1623)
13. *Measure for Measure* 1604 (1623)
14. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* 1608–09 (1609)
15. *The Tempest* (1611)
16. *Cymbeline* 1611–12 (1623)
17. *The Winter's Tale*, 1611–12 (1623)



## **Section II:** **Shakespeare and the *Sanders Portrait***

**1.** What did Shakespeare look like?

**2.** The *Sanders Portrait* –

An actual likeness of William Shakespeare?

- a) the Discovery
- b) the Questions
- c) the Trail



## Section II: Shakespeare and the *Sanders Portrait*

### What did Shakespeare look like?

The short answer is that we don't know. There are a number of portraits, but which one (if any) depicts the "real" Shakespeare? We know roughly what he might have worn given his time and his class, and the clothing shown in the portraits seems authentic, but which face belongs to this enigmatic figure?



One candidate has a distinctly Canadian connection.

### The *Sanders Portrait*: An actual likeness of William Shakespeare?

#### The Discovery

An exciting discovery came to light in 2001 in Ottawa. Incredibly, a previously unknown portrait of William Shakespeare, painted by one John Sanders, had been found: it had been kept for generations in a cupboard in the upstairs hall of the Sullivans, a Canadian family descended from the same John Sanders. The portrait was painted in oil on wood, and a label on the back read:

*"Shakspere, born April 23rd 1564, died April 23rd 1616, aged 52, this likeness taken 1603, age at that time 39 years."*

#### The Questions

Initial scientific tests indicated that the frame, paint and style are consistent with 17<sup>th</sup>-century painting. Later tests showed that the ink and the material of the label are genuine. The portrait has not been re-touched, nor was it painted on top of an older picture. Although the scientific results prove that the portrait is genuine, they cannot confirm that the image is in fact the Bard, as even if the label is genuine it could only have been written some time after his death.

#### The Trail

In May 2001, acting on a tip from her mother, *Globe and Mail* journalist Stephanie Nolen met with Lloyd Sullivan in Ottawa to discuss the painting that *may* be a portrait of Shakespeare. (Sullivan inherited the painting from his mother in 1972.) She wrote,

"Lloyd Sullivan believed he knew this much from family tradition: the portrait was painted a dozen generations ago by his ancestor, John Sanders, born in 1576, the eldest son of a family in Worcester, England. Young John left home to make his fortune in London. There he became an actor, or at least a bit player, in Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which was formed in 1594, when Shakespeare was thirty. John Sanders also dabbled in oils and did odd bits of painting around the theatre. He liked to try his hand at portraiture."

And sometime in 1603, he prepared a sturdy oak panel and some bright oil paint and recorded the face of his colleague, William Shakespeare. At some point Sanders or one of his children labeled the picture 'Shakespere' (in a spelling the poet himself used), and included the playwright's birth and death dates, noting that this was his likeness at the age of thirty-nine. The portrait was handed down, passing from the first John Sanders to his son, and so on through the family." (Nolen, 10)

Stephanie Nolen later wrote *Shakespeare's Face*, a book about the testing of the portrait.



Five of the seven authorities she consulted in the course of her research do *not* believe that the picture is of Shakespeare.

"However, the results of the tests that were done were conclusive: the painting was executed on wood that dated from the correct period; the materials and the way in which they were used were consistent with a painting done in England in 1603; no anachronistic material was found; and the label identifying the subject of the portrait was made of rag paper dating from 1640 at the latest. All these elements indicate that the painting is indeed an old painting and not a relatively modern copy or fake."

Marie-Claude Corbeil, Senior Conservation Scientist, Analytical Research Laboratory, Canadian Conservation Institute, Department of Canadian Heritage.

The National Portrait Gallery in London, England, has accepted the results of these scientific tests and no retesting is required. According to Gallery experts,

"In addition to the success of the scientific tests carried out on the Sanders portrait, recent genealogical evidence, together with a number of documents and letters that have been discovered over the past twenty years, go a long way to authenticate the portrait as being a true image of Shakespeare painted in his lifetime (1603)."

The painting has been exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), the National Portrait Gallery (London, UK), and the Yale Center for British Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts).

The *Sanders Portrait* is currently in the collection of the John Rylands University Library at the University of Manchester, England.

Is the man in the *Sanders Portrait* the real William Shakespeare? We may never know.



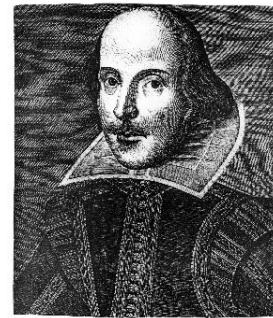
## **Section III: Shakespeare's Life – The Dates**

### **Shakespeare in Stratford and London, 1564-1616**

- 1.** 1558: Six years before Shakespeare's birth
- 2.** 1564: Shakespeare's birth
- 3.** 1564-1578: Early Years
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- 5.** 1582-1590: Marriage and Children
- 6.** 1590-1597: First Records of Shakespeare in London
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- 10.** 1608-1616: London and Home
- 11.** Afterwards

## Section III: Shakespeare's Life – The Dates

### 1558: Six Years before Shakespeare's birth



#### In England

England is in turmoil. When Elizabeth I becomes Queen in 1558 (on the death of her half sister Mary), she restores Protestantism as the official religion of England and it becomes illegal to be Roman Catholic. Mary and Elizabeth are the daughters of the legendary Henry VIII, who established the [Protestant] Church of England and persecuted Catholics, executing many of them for treason (see [Section IV:](#)). During her reign, Mary, a Catholic, persecuted Protestants. Under Protestant Elizabeth, Catholics in England are watched carefully and are in danger once again.

### 1564: Shakespeare's birth

#### In Stratford

April 23, 1564: William Shakespeare is born in the village of Stratford-upon-Avon to John and Mary Shakespeare. He is baptized on April 26 in Holy Trinity Parish Church. William is the third of their eight children (although the two born before him died in infancy) and their first son.

The entry in the church registry reads:

1564  
April 26

*Gulielmus filius Johannis Shakespeare*

---

*Gulielmus filius Johannes Shakespeare*  
(William, son of John Shakespeare).

## In London

Two of Shakespeare's most important colleagues are born: Christopher Marlowe, playwright, in 1564, and Richard Burbage, actor, in 1567.

## 1564–1578: Early Years

### In Stratford

#### Shakespeare's family

- Shakespeare's father, John, holds several official posts in Stratford, including Alderman, Bailiff (mayor), and Chief Alderman. However, he is accused of lending money at excessive interest, and in 1570 his application to bear a [coat of arms](#) and have the title of "Gentleman" is rejected.
- Shakespeare's five younger brothers and sisters are born and baptized in this family home on Henley Street, in Stratford: Gilbert (1566–1612), Joan (1569–1646), Anne (1571–1579), Richard (1574–1613), and Edmund (1580–1607).
- Shakespeare is exposed to theatre as a child when various traveling theatre companies visit Stratford: Leicester's Men (in 1572, when Shakespeare is 8 years old), Warwick's Men (1574), Lord Strange's Men (1578), Essex's Men (1578), Berkeley's Men (1580 and 1582), and Worcester's Men (1581).
- In 1571 (at age 7) Shakespeare begins attending the Stratford Grammar School for a classical education. Classes are held six days a week, from 6:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.



## In London

Two open-air theatres open. In 1576 James Burbage (father of the actor Richard Burbage, who will become a member of Shakespeare's theatre company) builds **The Theatre** in Shoreditch, and in 1577 **The Curtain** opens in Finsbury Fields, Shoreditch.

## 1578–1582: Lost Years

1578: William is thought to have left school at age 14 to help earn money for the family by working in his father's glove business, his father having lost his status and his wealth.

## 1582–1590: Marriage and Children

### In Stratford

- November 27, 1582: A marriage licence is issued to Wm Shaxpere and Anne Whateley of Temple Grafton, Warwickshire.
- November 28, 1582: A marriage bond is issued to William Shagspeare and Anne Hathway of Shottery, Stratford. (It is believed that the first clerk mistook Anne's name.)
- May 26, 1583: William and Anne's first child, Susanna, is baptized (six months after her parents' wedding).

- Recent research tells us that Shakespeare may have earned a living working as a teacher in a private Catholic home in Lancashire.
- 1583: **Michael Wood**, writer and presenter of the PBS series ***In Search of Shakespeare***, speculates that Shakespeare may have joined the Queen's Men when they performed in Stratford, and travelled with them.
- 1585: William and Anne's twins, Hamnet and Judith, are born.
- 1586: John Shakespeare is removed from the Board of Aldermen.
- 1589: William Shakespeare and his parents are named in a legal land action against a neighbour, John Lambert.

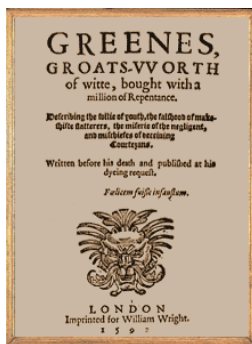
### **In London**

- 1583: **The Queen's Company** is formed in London. Another open-air theatre, **The Rose**, Bankside, Surrey is opened.

## **1590–1597: First Records of Shakespeare in London**

### **In London**

- 1590–92: Shakespeare writes *Henry VI*, Parts 1, 2, and 3.
- 1592: *Henry VI*, Part 1 is produced by Lord Strange's Men at the **Rose Theatre**.
- 1592: Writer and actor Robert Greene dies. In his pamphlet, *Groatsworth of Wit* (left), he described Shakespeare as an "upstart crow":



*Yes, trust them not, for there is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that, with his Tygers heart wrapt in a Players hide, supposes he is as well able to bumbast out a blanke verse as the best of you; and being an absolute Johannes Factotum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrie.*

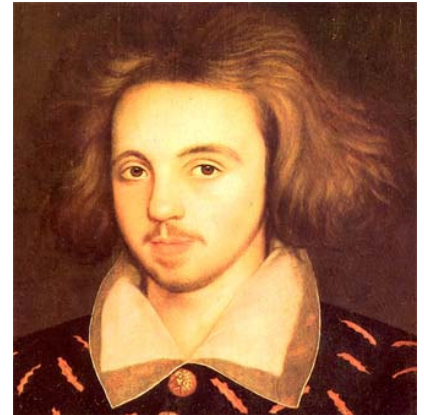
- Two months after Greene's death, his editor, Henry Chettle, apologizes publicly to Shakespeare for the insults.

### **Meanwhile in Stratford**

December 25, 1592: Shakespeare's father is fined for missing church.

## 1593–1597: Shakespeare in London In London

- 1593: An outbreak of **bubonic plague** (also called the Black Death) closes the theatres.
- May 30, 1593: Shakespeare's friend and rival, Christopher Marlowe (right) dies, after being stabbed over the right eye. Records show that Marlowe was a spy for Queen Elizabeth's spymaster, Walsingham.
- 1594: **Lord Strange's Men** become **The Lord Chamberlain's Company**.
- 1595: **Earliest official record of Shakespeare in the theatre:** an entry dated **March 15, 1595** in the Declared Accounts of the Treasurer of the Royal Chamber. Shakespeare is listed as a payee, along with **Richard Burbage** and **William Kempe**, receiving 20 pounds for a Christmas performance before the Queen.
- 1596: The company moves to the **Swan Theatre** on Bankside, because the London authorities ban public plays within the city limits.
- Tax returns show that Shakespeare is a resident of Bishopsgate in London, a thriving area of inns, rooming houses, merchants and artists.



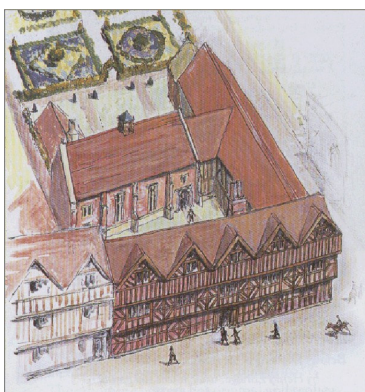
### Shakespeare Writes

- 1593: Shakespeare begins writing the Sonnets; his long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* is published.
- 1594: A busy year for Shakespeare. *Titus Andronicus* is first performed, and *Henry VI, Part 2* is registered. The poem *The Rape of Lucrece* is registered. On December 28 there is a confirmed performance of *The Comedy of Errors*.

### Meanwhile in Stratford

- August 11, 1596: Shakespeare's son Hamnet dies, probably of the plague, at the age of eleven. He is buried in Stratford.
- October 20, 1596: William's father John Shakespeare is finally granted the coat of arms he seeks, with the motto *Non Sans Droict* (*Not Without Right*) (right).
- May 1597: Shakespeare buys **New Place**, the second largest house in Stratford, for £60.





## 1597-1600

### In London

- 1598: Shakespeare and other members of the company finance the building of the **Globe Theatre** ("The Globe"), and Shakespeare is described as a "principal comedian."
- 1599: **The Globe** (left) is built on Bankside (illustrations on page 20).

### Shakespeare Writes

- 1597: The first quarto editions of *Richard III*, *Richard II*, and *Romeo and Juliet* are printed, and *Love's Labour's*

*Lost* and *Henry IV*, Part 1 are written and registered.

- 1598: *The Merchant of Venice* is written and registered.
- 1600: The first production of *Julius Caesar* opens at **The Globe**.  
*As You Like It*, *Henry IV*, Part 2 and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are written.

### In Stratford

- 1598: Shakespeare is mentioned as being a chief holder of corn and malt in Stratford.
- 1599: He is recorded as having sold a load of stone to the Stratford Corporation.

## 1601–1607: Great Events, Great Plays In London

1603:-

- Sir Walter Raleigh is arrested, tried and imprisoned.
- The bubonic plague (the Black Death) again ravages London, killing 33,000 people.
- March 24: Queen Elizabeth dies, and James VI of Scotland (son of Elizabeth's half sister, Mary Queen of Scots) becomes the new monarch, James I of England.
- Shakespeare acts in Ben Jonson's play *Sejanus*, and is mentioned as "a principal tragedian."

1605: The Gunpowder Plot is foiled. Guy Fawkes is arrested and executed.

### Shakespeare Writes

- 1601: Shakespeare's acting troupe, The Chamberlain's Men, is commissioned to stage *Richard II* at the Globe.
- 1602: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is registered (January) and *Twelfth Night* is produced (February).
- 1603: First printing of *Hamlet*.  
May 19: James I becomes the official patron of The Lord Chamberlain's Men and the company is renamed The King's Men.



- 1604: First performance of *Othello*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure*.
- December 26, 1606: First recorded performance of *King Lear*, starring Richard Burbage in the title role.

### **In Stratford**

- 1601: Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, dies and is buried on September 8.
- 1602: Shakespeare buys land in Stratford for £320, and in November he buys a cottage across from New Place.
- June 5, 1607: Shakespeare's daughter Susanna marries Dr. John Hall.
- December 1607: Shakespeare's youngest brother, Edmund, dies.

## **1608–1616: London and Home**

### **In London**

- 1608: The bubonic plague again kills many thousands in London. Shakespeare is mentioned as one of "the men's players." The King's Men buy the **Blackfriars Theatre**; Shakespeare becomes part owner.
- June 29, 1613: The **Globe Theatre** burns.
- 1614: The **Globe Theatre** is rebuilt.

### **Shakespeare Writes**

- 1608: *Pericles* is registered.
- 1609: Thomas Thorpe publishes Shakespeare's sonnets without Shakespeare's permission.
- 1611: First recorded performance of *The Winter's Tale*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline*. First production of *The Tempest* (Shakespeare's last play as a solo writer).  
November 5: *The Winter's Tale* is performed at court.

### **In Stratford**

- 1608: Shakespeare's granddaughter (Susanna's daughter), Elizabeth Hall, is baptized; his mother, Mary Arden, dies and is buried.
- 1612: Shakespeare's younger brother Gilbert dies.
- 1613: Shakespeare's younger brother Richard dies.



- March 25, 1616: William Shakespeare signs his will (left).
- April 23, 1616: William Shakespeare dies, after a brief illness.
- April 25, 1616: William Shakespeare is buried in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford (right).



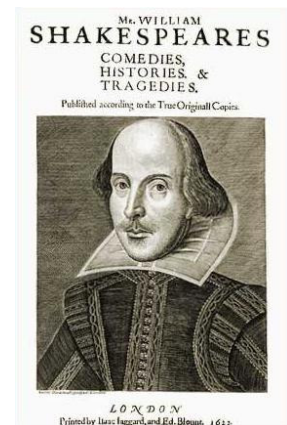
- His tombstone bears the inscription:  
 "Good frend for Jesus sake forbear  
 To digg the dust enclosed heare.  
 Blest be ye man yt spares thes stones,  
 And curst be he yt moves my bones."

which in modern English reads:  
 "Good friend, for Jesus' sake  
 Please leave my dust alone.  
 Blessed be those that leave my tomb alone,  
 And curses on those who move my bones."

## Afterwards

### In London

- August 6, 1623: Anne Hathaway dies and is buried beside her husband, William Shakespeare.
- 1623: The **First Folio** (right), a collection of Shakespeare's plays compiled by his comrades Heminges and Condell, is published.
- 1637: Ben Jonson dies.
- 1644: The Puritans demolish **The Globe Theatre**.



### In Stratford

- 1649: Shakespeare's daughter Susanna (Shakespeare) Hall dies, and is buried next to her mother and father in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, Stratford.
- 1662: Shakespeare's daughter Judith (Shakespeare) Quiney dies. Judith had three children, but all of them died before she did.
- 1670: Shakespeare's granddaughter (Susanna's daughter) Lady Elizabeth Hall Bernard dies, leaving no heirs—and ending Shakespeare's direct line.

### And elsewhere

Nearly 400 years after his death, the world is still obsessed with Shakespeare's work, on stage, on screen and in books.

Shakespeare's friend Ben Jonson was right when he wrote,

*He was not of an age, but for all time!*



## **Section IV:**

# **Religion in Shakespeare's England**

- 1.** History of Religion in Shakespeare's England
- 2.** How Religion Changed in England: The Reformation
  - 3.** Edward as King
  - 4.** Mary as Queen
  - 5.** Elizabeth as Queen
- 6.** Differences between the Protestant and Catholic Faiths
  - 7.** Shakespeare's Own Religion
  - 8.** Shakespeare and the Bible
  - 9.** Shakespeare and the Gunpowder Plot

## Section IV: Religion in Shakespeare's England

We should remember that:

- Religion is extremely important in Shakespeare's England. Religion influences everyone's actions and thoughts. It is a part of the fabric of life, like sleeping and working and breathing, and the Sunday church service is a central activity. After 1559, church attendance is compulsory: if you are absent (a *recusant*) you are fined.
- The official religion of England changed three times in 12 years.

### History of Religion in Shakespeare's England

- At first all Christians everywhere are Roman Catholic. The Pope is the head of the Church. The Church is very powerful, and becomes very wealthy.
- Then there is rebellion against the excesses of the Church, by a few men in particular: **Martin Luther** in Germany, **Huldrych Zwingli** and **John Calvin** in Switzerland, **John Knox** in Scotland, and (for very different reasons) **King Henry VIII** in England.
- The rebellions lead to **Protestantism, via the Reformation.**



### How Religion Changed in England: The Reformation

- Henry VIII (1491–1547) becomes heir to the throne in 1502 after the death of his older brother, Arthur. He is crowned in 1509, at 18, and marries Catherine of Aragon, his brother's widow. Henry wants a son, but as the years go by he and Catherine have only one child, a daughter, **Mary**. A male heir is necessary, everyone thinks, to keep the Tudor power on the throne and to keep peace in England.
- Henry, a man of many appetites, falls in love with Anne Boleyn, lady-in-waiting to the Queen. He asks the Pope in Rome for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine. When the Pope refuses, Henry breaks away from the Catholic Church, divorces Catherine, and marries Anne Boleyn.
- The Pope excommunicates him, and parliamentary legislation in England confirms Henry's decision to break with Rome. Henry establishes himself as "the only supreme head on earth of the Church in England" and orders the dissolution of the monasteries; other reforms follow.
- His **Act of Supremacy** (1534) insists that everyone admit his authority, and swear loyalty to him as the head of the Church of England. Many people who cannot bring themselves to do so are beheaded. One of these is the brilliant humanist Sir Thomas More. (Watch the Academy Award-winning film *A Man For All Seasons*, made in 1966.)

- England is now no longer Roman Catholic under the Pope, but officially Protestant under Henry VIII. Naturally, many people remember Catholicism, and perhaps keep it in their hearts.
- Anne Boleyn soon bears Henry a daughter, **Elizabeth**, to Henry's immense disappointment. Wearying of Anne, he falls in love with Jane Seymour, and has Anne beheaded for treason, accusing her of adultery. He marries Jane Seymour, who gives him the son he wants, **Edward**; Jane dies 12 days later from complications of the birth.

### Edward as King (reigned 1547–53)

- After three more wives (Anne of Cleves, Kathryn Howard and Katherine Parr), none of whom bears any children, **Henry VIII** dies. His only son, **Edward VI**, becomes king in 1547, at the age of 9. Edward's protector (guardian) is his mother's brother, Edward Seymour.
- Edward keeps his father's religion. During Edward's short reign (1547–53), the Church of England is reshaped by his strong Protestant advisors. The initial reforms are modest, but eventually radical Protestants gain power and try to eliminate all traces of Roman Catholicism from the Church. Edward dies of consumption (tuberculosis) at 16. England is without a ruler.



### Mary as Queen (reigned 1553–58)



- Henry's first-born, **Mary**, daughter of Catherine of Aragon (Henry's first wife), ascends the throne of England in 1553. Raised in the Roman Catholic faith, Mary plunges England back into Roman Catholicism. In 1554, by an Act of Parliament, she cancels Henry's divorce from her mother, Catherine of Aragon, repeals all the religious legislation made under Edward VI, and returns England fully to the Pope's authority.
- Nearly 300 people are burned to death at the stake for refusing to change their Protestant religion. Among them are Thomas Cranmer, the former Archbishop of Canterbury; Nicholas Ridley, the former Bishop of London; and the reformist Hugh Latimer. Almost as many people are put to death for religious reasons in 34 months under Mary as in the whole 45 years of Elizabeth's reign, earning Mary the nickname "**Bloody Mary**". After five years on the throne, Mary dies childless (possibly of tuberculosis) at age 42.

## Elizabeth as Queen (reigned 1558–1603)

- Mary's half sister **Elizabeth**, Henry's daughter by Anne Boleyn, becomes Queen in 1558 at the age of 25. Raised as a Protestant, Elizabeth I reinstates Protestantism as the official religion of England. She tries to be even-handed and allow freedom of belief as long as it does not openly flout the law or promote treason. However, throughout the country there is constant spying and constant worry about who is what religion, and who may be trying to usurp the throne (and to whom it rightfully belongs).
- The new Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity re-establish England's independence from the Pope, but also make broad concessions to Catholics. Elizabeth, a strong female ruler, reigns for 45 years.



## Differences between the Protestant and Catholic Faiths

Roman Catholic beliefs and practices under attack by Protestant reformers include:

- purgatory;
- particular judgment (i.e., the judgment given by God to a departed soul immediately after death, as opposed to the General or Last Judgment of all souls at the end of the world);
- devotion to the Virgin Mary;
- intercession of the saints (praying to a saint to intercede with God on the believer's behalf);
- most of the sacraments;
- authority of the Pope;
- corruption within the Church.

## Shakespeare's Own Religion

- Although Catholicism is against the law, Shakespeare may well have been Roman Catholic in his heart. His parents certainly had been Roman Catholic. In 1591, the authorities put John Shakespeare on a list of "obstinate papists," and report that he has missed church "for fear of process for debt," a common Catholic excuse. In 1757, a hand-written Catholic statement of faith is found hidden in the rafters of John Shakespeare's home, every page signed by John Shakespeare. Shakespeare's daughter Susanna is also accused of missing church.
- Like everyone else in his day, Shakespeare believes in ghosts and witches and the supernatural. The ghost of Hamlet's father suffers horribly in purgatory "until the crimes done in [his] lifetime are burned away". A belief in purgatory is not a Protestant belief, but a Catholic one.
- We will never know whether Shakespeare was secretly Catholic. You will find an interesting article on the topic here: [www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xCatholic.html](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xCatholic.html)

## Shakespeare and the Bible

- "Shakespeare's debt to Scripture is profound; biblical imagery is woven into every play. No writer has integrated the expressions and themes found in the Bible into his own work more magnificently than Shakespeare." Amanda Mabillard, "Biblical Imagery in *Macbeth*", in [About.com](http://About.com); accessed September 9, 2008
- The Bible and the Book of Common Prayer are sources of Shakespeare's imagery and of many of his explicit or implicit themes. He believes in happy endings, that good eventually triumphs over evil, and that goodness is rewarded and evil punished.
- Here are just a few of the Biblical references in Shakespeare's plays:  
"Golgotha | porter of hellgate | devil-porter | angels pleading trumpet-tongued against the blast | heaven's cherubim | loosed from Hell to speak of horrors | Jephthah | temple | winged messenger of heaven | fiend evangelical | fiend in mortal paradise | mine eternal jewel given to the enemy of man | Heaven finds ways to kill our joys with love"

## Shakespeare and the Gunpowder Plot

The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 was an attempt by a group of English Catholics to assassinate their new King, James I, and to kill much of the Protestant aristocracy by blowing up the Houses of Parliament at the State Opening on November 5.

Shakespeare may have known about the infamous Gunpowder Plot, because Shakespeare's father, John, knew the head conspirator, Robert Catesby.

Here is a contemporary sketch of the conspirators, and the beginning of a modern-day article which suggests that Shakespeare might have been close to the action:



"It was November, 1605, and high treason was on the mind of every English subject. A small group of angry Catholics, fed up with ongoing persecution at the hands of the Protestant monarchy, hatched an elaborate plot to blow King James I and his government to smithereens.

"As luck would have it, a warning letter surfaced at the last minute and James ordered a search of his Palace. The most notorious conspirator, Guy Fawkes, was discovered in the cellar, match in hand, ready to ignite twenty barrels of gunpowder "all at one thunderclap."

"To say that Shakespeare would have been familiar with the conspirators is an understatement. These traitors of the realm had some deep connections to Shakespeare and his family. Shakespeare's father, John (undoubtedly a covert Catholic), was friends with William Catesby, the father of the head conspirator, Robert Catesby. John Shakespeare and William Catesby shared illegal Catholic writings that eventually wound up in the attic of John's home in Stratford. Moreover, the Mermaid Tavern in London, frequented by Shakespeare and owned by his closest friend and confidant, was a preferred meeting spot of the turncoats as they schemed to obliterate the Protestants once and for all..."

Read the rest of this story at

<http://shakespeare.about.com/od/shakespearesbiograph1/a/gunpowderplot.htm>



## **Section V: Theatre in Shakespeare's Time**

- 1.** Who were the English Renaissance Writers?
  - 2.** What sort of plays did they write?
  - 3.** What theatres were built? When? Where?
  - 4.** Shakespeare's theatre: The Globe
- 5.** How did a performance in the 1600s differ from today?
  - 6.** Who was Shakespeare's audience?
  - 7.** What was Shakespeare's company?
    - 8.** Who were the actors?
  - 9.** What props were used by Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men?
  - 10.** Where other than The Globe did Shakespeare's company perform?
- 11.** Who were the Puritans and what did they have to do with The Globe?
- 12.** How long did Shakespeare's company exist?

## Section V: Theatre in Shakespeare's Time

Professional theatre in England was born in the course of Shakespeare's lifetime, a period marked by the reigns of two different monarchs: Elizabeth I and James I.



### Who were the Renaissance writers?

Some of the best-known writers were William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Michael Drayton, John Fletcher, Thomas Dekker, John Lyly, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Heywood, and Sir John Suckling. William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson were also actors.

Plays were in demand, as theatres worked in repertory and put on plays every day. Playwrights often worked fast, in groups, although Shakespeare and Ben Jonson worked alone. Writers were paid only about six or seven pounds for a play, according to the diary of **Philip Henslowe**, an Elizabethan theatre manager and entrepreneur.

### What sort of plays did they write?

There were tragedies and comedies, romances and histories. Plays were followed by a merry jig or dance. There were official censors, and a play would be cancelled if the Master of the Revels felt it was in any way seditious (treasonous).

### What theatres were built? When? Where?

The first London playhouse was the **Red Lion**, built in 1567 on former farmland just outside the City of London. It was a short-lived attempt to provide a venue for the many Tudor touring theatrical companies.

More successful was The Theatre, built in 1576 by English actor and entrepreneur James Burbage, father of the great actor (and Shakespeare's friend) Richard Burbage. The Theatre was home to many acting companies, but after 1594 it was used primarily by Shakespeare's acting troupe, the Chamberlain's Men. Many of Shakespeare's most popular plays would have been staged here.

More theatres rapidly sprang up, most of them on the northern and southern outskirts of London in order to avoid various regulations hostile to the playhouses. The Southwark district, just across the River Thames from central London, had many theatres. Audiences at the plays numbered 2,000–3,000.

### **Elizabethan theatres in London**

The Theatre

The Curtain

The Rose

The Swan

The Globe

Blackfriars Theatre

The Fortune

The Hope

Red Bull Theatre

Red Lion

Cockpit Theatre

Salisbury Court Theatre

Whitefriars Theatre

Newington Butts Theatre

Inn-yard theatres

## **Shakespeare's theatre: The Globe**

Although Shakespeare's plays were performed in other venues, the Globe Theatre in the Southwark district of London was where his best-known stage works were first produced.

### **When and how was the Globe Theatre built?**

James Burbage built one of London's first playhouses, The Theatre, in 1576, on land that he leased in the north of London. When he died, his son Cuthbert inherited The Theatre. Cuthbert's brother was **Richard Burbage**, the most famous actor of the Elizabethan Age, and a member of Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

The landlord, a Puritan who hated theatre, refused to renew the lease to Cuthbert when his father died. So one night in 1599, the members of the company demolished The Theatre and carried the entire structure (which they owned), beam by beam, south across the River Thames to a new site, where they used these original building materials to construct a magnificent new theatre—the Globe. The landlord was furious and took the company to court, but the company won.

The Globe Theatre was built for the most renowned theatre company in London, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and their most successful writer, William Shakespeare.

### **What happened to the original Globe Theatre?**

It burned down. A canon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII* on June 29, 1613. The roof caught fire and the theatre burned to the ground. Amazingly, no one was hurt. One man's trousers caught fire, but a bottle of ale put out the flames. (The theatre was rebuilt and reopened in 1614.)

### How many Globe Theatres have there been?

Three. The first was built in 1599; it burned down in June 1613 and was rebuilt in 1614. It closed when the Puritans forced the closure of all the theatres in 1642.

The New Globe Theatre, a reconstruction of the original Globe Theatre, opened in London in 1997, about 200 metres from the site of the original Globe.

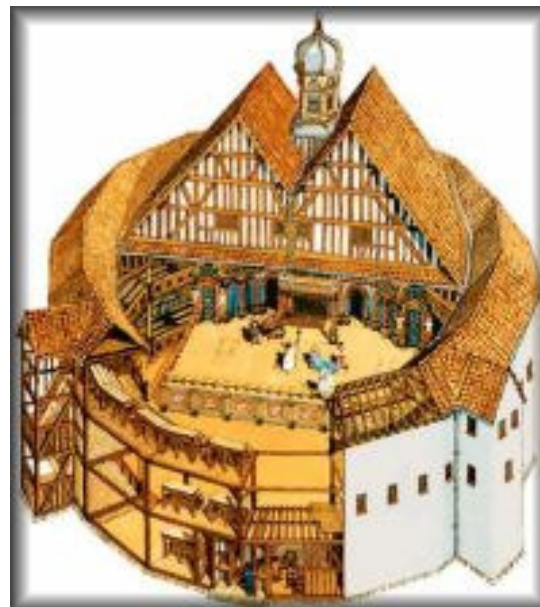
### The stage

There is no official record of the Globe's original dimensions, but evidence suggests that it was a three-storey, open-air amphitheatre about 100 feet (30.5 metres) in diameter. It could hold up to 3,000 spectators. In 1997–98, part of the Globe's foundation was discovered, showing that it was apparently a 20-sided polygon.

Right in front of the stage was an area called the *pit*, where, for a penny, people (the "groundlings") would stand to watch the performance. Groundlings would eat treats, like hazelnuts or oranges, during performances. When the Globe was excavated, nutshells were found preserved in the dirt.

Around the sides were three levels of stadium-style seats. A rectangular stage platform, an "apron stage," extended into the middle of the open-air yard. The stage was approximately 43 feet wide and 27 feet deep (13 by 8 metres), and was raised about 5 feet (1.5 metres) off the ground. A trap door allowed entrance from the cellar.

Large columns on either side of the stage supported a roof over the rear of the stage. The ceiling under this roof was called "the heavens," and was painted with clouds and the sky. A trap door in the heavens let performers descend using ropes and harnesses. The back wall of the stage had two or three doors on the main level, with a curtained inner stage in the centre and a balcony above it. The balcony held the musicians, and could also be used for scenes needing an upper space, such as the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. Backstage was the "tiring house," where the actors dressed and waited for their cues.



## How did a performance in the 1600s differ from today?

Plays were longer than today's average show. There was no artificial lighting, so all performances took place during the day, probably in mid-afternoon. Women's parts were played by young boys. Because the stage and most of the audience area were in the open air, actors had to emphasize their lines, enunciation and gestures. (See Hamlet's speech to the actors on how to deliver their lines: "Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently"). There was no background scenery, no proscenium arch, no curtain, and no crew. Changes of scene and setting were indicated directly or indirectly in the speeches and situations that Shakespeare wrote into the text of the plays. Costumes were very important—actors were richly dressed—and props were used also.

## Who was Shakespeare's audience?

In this class society, all classes went to the theatre.

One penny got you in at the Curtain Theatre in 1590, and the best seats would have cost you three-pence. There was a mixed audience: gentry, soldiers, courtiers, students, working people on holiday, women from the middle classes—wealthy, well-educated people, as well as merchants and street people, and a criminal element. Queen Elizabeth I and James I loved the theatre, and acting companies often gave command performances for them.

Until 1599, the most popular venues were the Rose and the Theatre, with perhaps 2,000 to 3,000 people attending on an average day. The audience was no doubt sometimes rowdy, and would have been more involved in the stage action than today's audience usually is. They were very close to the actors physically, standing in the pit at the edge of the stage, with some of the richer patrons seated on the stage itself.

## What was Shakespeare's Company?

- In 1594, after their patron died, Lord Strange's Men found a new patron in the Lord Chamberlain. They changed their name to the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and played at The Theatre and the Curtain, and at court; they became the favourite company of Elizabeth I.
- Shortly after Elizabeth's death in March 1603, King James I became their patron.
- On May 19, 1603, the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men, and Letters Patent were issued:  
 "William Shakespeare...and the rest of their Associates freely to use and exercise the Arte and faculty of playinge Comedies Tragedies histories Enterludes moralls pastoralls Stageplaies and suche others like as theie have alreadie studied or hereafter shall use or studie aswell for the recreation of our lovinge Subjectes as for our Solace and pleasure when wee shall thincke good to see them duringe our pleasure..."

## Who were the actors?

- The original acting company included William Shakespeare, Lawrence Fletcher, Richard Burbage, Augustine Phillips, John Heminges, Henry Condell, William Sly, Robert Armin, Richard Cowley, "and the rest of their associates...."
- These nine men became Grooms of the Chamber. On March 15, 1604, each was given four and a half yards of red cloth for the coronation procession of James I.
- The First Folio of the Bard's collected plays (published in 1623) lists 26 actors as "Principal Actors" of Shakespeare's company at the Globe.
- **Richard Burbage (c. 1567-1619)** was the best and most famous tragedian of the Elizabethan stage. He was the first actor to play some of some of Shakespeare's most famous characters, including Hamlet, Lear, and Othello. It is believed that Shakespeare wrote these roles for Burbage.

Richard Burbage was Cuthbert's brother, and a major partner in the Globe. He also owned the Blackfriars Theatre. One of his epitaph elegies, this one attributed to "Jo ffletcher," gives us a hint of his greatness:

He's gone & with him what a world are dead.  
Which he revived, to be revived so.  
No more young Hamlet, old Heironymoe,  
Kind Lear, the grieved Moore, and more beside  
That lived in him, have now forever died.  
Oft have I seen him leap into the grave,  
Suiting the person which he seem'd to have  
Of sad lover with so true an eye,  
That there I would have sworn, he meant to die.  
Oft have I seen him play his part in jest,  
So lively that spectators, and the rest  
Of his sad crew, whilst he but seem'd to bleed,  
Amazed, thought even that he died in deed.

- **Will Kempe** (also spelled Kemp) was the leading comic actor of the Lord Chamberlain's Men until 1599. He was a famous jig-dancer and improviser. His roles included those of the servant Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, probably Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and perhaps Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays.
- **Robert Armin**, another renowned comic actor, joined the company in 1599. Armin's wordplay was legendary, particularly in the clown roles of Touchstone in *As You Like It* and Feste in *Twelfth Night*. Armin was blessed with one of the best comic roles in Shakespeare's canon, that of the Fool in *King Lear*. He created a new kind of clown and Shakespeare wrote many roles for him.



- **Will Shakespeare** himself acted in minor roles. Tradition says Shakespeare played the Ghost of Hamlet's Father in *Hamlet* and Adam in *As You Like It*. In 1603, Shakespeare apparently acted in *Sejanus*, written by his friend and fellow author, Ben Jonson; this is the last occasion on which Shakespeare is mentioned as an actor. Shakespeare's main work was as a playwright and producer.

## What props were used by Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men?

**Philip Henslowe** was a theatre entrepreneur of the times who owned The Rose and The Fortune Theatres, and whose account book survives.

His diary is a mine of information about Elizabethan theatre, including stage props. Here is the inventory of all the properties for my Lord Admiral's Men, another theatre troupe from Shakespeare's time, dating back to 10 of March, 1598:

Item, i rock, i cage, i tomb, i Hell mouth... i bedstead.

Item, viii lances, i pair of stairs for Phaethon.

Item, i globe, & i golden sceptre; iii clubs.

Item, i golden fleece, ii racquets, i bay tree.

Item, i lion's skin, i bear's skin; Phaethon's limbs, & Phaethon's chariot, & Argus's head.

Item, Iris's head, & rainbow; i little altar...

i ghost's gown; i crown with a sun.

Best, Michael. *Shakespeare's Life and Times*. Internet Shakespeare Editions, University of Victoria: Victoria, BC, 2001-2005. <<http://ise.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/>>. Accessed September 9, 2008.

## Where other than The Globe did Shakespeare's company perform?

Shakespeare's company also performed at the Middle Temple Hall, Gray's Inn Hall and Blackfriars Theatre. In 1609 the company took over Blackfriars, an indoor hall, as its winter headquarters. It had seats and was lit with candles and lanterns.

## Who were the Puritans and what did they have to do with The Globe?

The Puritans were a strict Protestant faction who became more and more powerful in London after the death of Elizabeth I. They wanted to completely reform the Church of England, and make it plainer and stricter. Their religious views spread to social activities, forbidding any kind of finery or light behaviour. They particularly deplored the Globe Theatre.

### **Why did the Puritans close the theatres in 1642?**

The Globe Theatre and its plays offered Londoners a new form of entertainment. The Globe drew huge crowds of up to 3,000 people at a time. Theatres (including the Globe) were also used for bear baiting and gambling. Young people and many apprentices were drawn to the theatre instead of working. Thieves, gamblers, pickpockets, beggars, and prostitutes were also attracted to the theatre. A rise in crime, fighting, and drinking, and an increased risk of Bubonic Plague resulted.

In 1642, the English Parliament, influenced by the Puritans, issued an ordinance suppressing all stage plays in the theatres, and in 1644 the Puritans demolished the Globe Theatre.

### **How long did Shakespeare's company exist?**

The company continued working until the closing of the theatres in 1642.





## **Section VI: Shakespeare's Language**

- 1.** Everybody knows these Phrases
- 2.** Shakespeare's Vocabulary
- 3.** Word Games
- 4.** Does Shakespeare Write in Old English?
- 5.** Shakespeare as Poet

## Section VI: Shakespeare's Language

Shakespeare is both a dramatist and a poet: he writes plays in poetry.

His stories and his wonderful characters are known universally. He combines a playwright's sweep and flair and love of action with a poet's keen eye and sensitivity - the perspective of a dramatist with the close-up vision of a poet.

Shakespeare is frequently quoted, because *his words and ideas stick in our minds*. The English poet **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772–1834) defined poetry as "the best words in the best order", and that is why we remember Shakespeare's words. His art lets him choose, craft and coin the finest words and images.

### Everybody knows these Phrases

Bernard Levin, the famous English journalist, tells us:

"If you cannot understand my argument, and declare **'It's Greek to me'**, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be **more sinned against than sinning**, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your **salad days**, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you **act more in sorrow than in anger**, if your **wish is father to the thought**, if your lost property has **vanished into thin air**, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to **budge an inch** or suffered from **green-eyed jealousy**, if you have **played fast and loose**, if you have been **tongue-tied**, a **tower of strength**, **hoodwinked** or **in a pickle**, if you have **knitted your brows**, **made a virtue of necessity**, **insisted on fair play**, **slept not one wink**, **stood on ceremony**, **danced attendance (on your lord and master)**, **laughed yourself into stitches**, **had short shrift**, **cold comfort** or **too much of a good thing**, if you have **seen better days** or **lived in a fool's paradise**—why, **be that as it may**, the more fool you, for **it is a foregone conclusion** that you are (**as good luck would have it**) quoting Shakespeare."

From *The Story of English*. Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil, eds. Viking: 1986, pp. 99-100.

### Shakespeare's Vocabulary

The average educated English-speaking person today has a vocabulary of 5,000 to 15,000 words.

Shakespeare's vocabulary is almost 30,000 words.

- We are told that he used 29,066 different words in his works and 884,647 words altogether.

- Shakespeare **invented** many new words (over 1,700 in all). He did this by combining words, adding beginnings or endings, changing words into different parts of speech, and minting brand new words. Here are some examples:

**Accommodation, assassination, dexterously, dislocate, indistinguishable, pedant, premeditated, reliance, submerged, lonely, fixture, madcap, torture, Olympian, bump, caked, discontent, bet, aroused, bloodstain, moonbeam, torture, skim milk, blanket, laughable.**

Click this link to find more words coined by Shakespeare, and to see where they are first used in his works: <http://shakespeare.about.com/library/weekly/aa042400a.htm>

## Word Games:

### The use of Bawdy, Puns, and Malapropisms

Shakespeare loved language. The language in his plays is exuberant and lively. It is said that Shakespeare brought new life, discoveries and beauties to the English language, just as the great Elizabethan explorers who discovered the New World brought new riches, knowledge and wonders to England.

#### Bawdy

Shakespeare was very much a man of the people, and he wrote for mass audiences, 3,000 people at a time; for noblemen and street sellers, princes and queens, hangmen and pub owners. Everyone enjoys humour, and Shakespeare often used **bawdy**—that is, he made “naughty jokes”, particularly in *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*:

- The hand is on the very prick of noon
- Do you speak of country matters?

#### Puns

Shakespeare also frequently used **puns** (plays on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word and sometimes on the similar sense or sound of different words) for comic effect. Like bawdy, Shakespeare’s puns are sometimes difficult for us to understand, as our vocabulary has changed. Also, words were pronounced differently 400 years ago. Shakespeare seemed to think that were are appropriate at any time, and he used them liberally, both in comic scenes and at what we would consider most un-funny moments.

- HAMLET: Whose grave’s this, sirrah  
FIRST CLOWN: Mine, sir.  
...  
HAMLET: I think it be thine, indeed; for thou liest in’t.  
...  
Thou dost lie in’t, to be in’t and say it is thine:  
‘tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.  
Hamlet to the gravedigger (Act V, sc. i, l. 118–127)

- KING: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET: Not so, my lord; I am too much i’ the sun.

Hamlet responds to the King’s question, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” (Why are you still depressed?). Hamlet means that he is far too close to the hated Claudius (the King), as a stepson. (Act I, sc. ii, l. 66–67)

- Juliet, desperate to learn whether Romeo is dead, puns on “I / ay / eye” as she interrogates the Nurse:  
Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but “ay,”  
And that bare vowel “I” shall poison more  
Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice:  
I am not I, if there be such an “ay,”  
Or those eyes shut, that make thee answer “ay.”  
If he be slain, say “ay”; or if not, “no”;  
Brief sounds determine of my weal or woe.  
(*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, sc. ii, l. 45–51)
- After Mercutio is fatally stabbed by Tybalt, he says,  
“Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man.”  
(*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, sc. i)

### Malapropisms

One of Shakespeare’s favourite ways of getting a laugh is to have his comic characters use words incorrectly.

Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example, often uses the wrong word: “Thisby, the flowers of odious savours sweet” (III.i.81). Audiences in Shakespeare’s day would have known that Bottom meant “odorous savours sweet,” as in sweet-smelling, rather than “odious,” which means hateful.

Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* says, “Comparisons are *odorous*” (i.e., *odious*; III, v); and Launcelot in *The Merchant of Venice* says, “Certainly [Shylock] is the very devil *incarnal*...” (i.e., *incarnate*; II, ii).

### Does Shakespeare Write in Old English?

No. Shakespeare’s work is written in **early Modern English**.

Here is an example of **Old English**, from the epic poem *Beowulf* (composed around the eighth century AD):

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,  
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,  
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Translation:

Lo, praise of the prowess of people-kings,  
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,  
we have heard, and what honour the athelings won!

You can really recognize nothing of today’s language in Old English, a mixture of West Germanic, old Norse, and Latin languages.

Shakespeare's English is also later than **Middle English** (Chaucer):

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and ende  
The ender croppes...  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.

When April, with its sweet showers,  
Has pierced the drought of March to the root  
And bathed every vein in liquor that has power  
To generate there and sire the flower;  
When Zephyr has with his sweet breath  
Filled again in every holt and heath  
The tender crops...  
Then people long to go on pilgrimages.

In **Middle English**, you can recognize English words, and you notice that many words end with "e" and that "has" is always "hath."

Shakespeare's **early Modern English**:

It worries me... you say it worries you... (*The Merchant of Venice*)

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. (*Romeo and Juliet*)

But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue. (*Hamlet*)

The quality of mercy is not strained;  
It droppeth as the gentle rain of Heaven  
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blessed;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that receives.

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest. (*The Merchant of Venice*)

Shakespeare did away with the final "e" at the end of many words; he eliminated "th" and replaced it with "s" *almost* all the time; and he started using "you" in the singular, instead of the gentler "thee" or "thou."

## Shakespeare as Poet

Most of Shakespeare's work is poetry.

Three aspects of language that make Shakespeare a poet are **rhythm**, **imagery**, and **rhyme**.

### Rhythm

Shakespeare writes his plays in **blank verse**. His preferred rhythm is **iambic pentameter**.

**Blank verse** is unrhymed **iambic pentameter**, and is the most common dramatic form of the Renaissance.

### Iambs

- Iambs (pronounced "I-ams") are the natural rhythm of the English language. We speak in iambs naturally, all the time.
- An iamb has the rhythm of a heartbeat—the first syllable unstressed, the second stressed: da **DA**.  
"But **soft** / what **light** / through **yon** / der **win** / dow **breaks**?"  
(This is a line of iambic pentameter from *Romeo and Juliet*, FIVE feet long.)

### Iambic Pentameter

Lines consisting of five (penta) **iamb**s. Like bars of music, the “feet” all have the same number of beats.

Shakespeare sometimes uses run-on lines, where the sense continues into the next line of the speech; he also often uses several speakers to make up the rhythm of a line.

e.g., *Hamlet*, Act I, scene iv:

MARCELLUS: You shall not go, my lord.

HAMLET: Hold off your hands.

HORATIO: Be ruled; you shall not go.

HAMLET: My fate cries out,  
And makes each petty artery in this body  
As hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve.

### Does Shakespeare write in other rhythms and line lengths?

Occasionally Shakespeare uses heptameter (six feet) or tetrameter (four feet).

The witches’ incantations in *Macbeth* (IV.i.12–21) are in tetrameter:

SECOND WITCH: Fillet of a fenny snake,  
In the cauldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder’s fork and blind-worm’s sting,  
Lizard’s leg and howlet’s wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

ALL: Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

### Does Shakespeare always write in poetry?

No. Shakespeare also writes in prose.

Prose is simply ordinary speech and sentences, with no definite rhythmic pattern.

- Shakespeare often has characters of lower social status speak in prose.
- He also uses it for joking, and often for bawdiness, with any character.
- Occasionally major characters speak serious, moving speeches in prose, as if the speeches need to be set apart from the verse everyone else is speaking, to create a particular response in the audience. We might call these speeches **poetic prose**:

HAMLET (to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern):

I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.

or

SHYLOCK: What's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?

We can *understand* Hamlet's despair, expressed in polysyllabic, elegant words, and *feel* Shylock's human agony, expressed in monosyllables. One speech reaches our minds, one our hearts. Both are poetic prose.

### When does Shakespeare use rhyme?

- Rhyme is not used often in Shakespeare's plays. Yet **rhyming couplets** often end a scene or an act with great emphasis.
 

The bell invites me.  
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell  
That summons thee to heaven or to hell. (*Macbeth*)
- Rhyme is sometimes used just for the fun of it, or to emphasize events:
  - Each of the three scrolls contained in Portia's boxes (*The Merchant of Venice*) includes a message written completely in rhyme. The rhyme strengthens the importance of the scrolls and the action surrounding their use.
  - After Bassanio opens the box made of lead and is shown to be the right suitor for Portia, his acceptance is delivered entirely in rhyming prose, stressing the significance of that event.
- Of course, Shakespeare uses rhymes in his lovely songs within the plays.
 

O mistress mine! where are you roaming?  
O! stay and hear; your true love's coming,  
That can sing both high and low:  
Trip no further, pretty sweetening;  
Journeys end in lovers meeting,  
Every wise man's son doth know. (*Twelfth Night*, II.iii.20)

  - Sometimes Shakespeare writes poems within a play. In these lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo and Juliet share a sonnet at the dance:
 

ROMEO [To JULIET]  
If I profane with my unworthiest hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET  
Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,  
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO  
Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET  
Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO  
O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;  
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET  
Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO  
Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.

### Shakespearean Sonnets

- Shakespeare invented a new form of sonnet.
- The **Petrarchan** or **Italian sonnet** was invented by Petrarch in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It consists of 14 lines, divided into an octave (8 lines) and a sestet (6 lines), and each part has its own definite rhyme scheme: abbaabba, cdecde.
- A **Shakespearean sonnet** also has 14 lines, but the pattern is different: three quatrains (4 lines each) rhyming abab, cdcd, efef, followed by a rhyming couplet, gg.

### Imagery

- Imagery is the use of words to create pictures in the mind. Metaphors, or indirect comparisons, in particular can help us understand the similarities between two seemingly unlike things. Imagery adds rich layers of meaning, because it adds associations (otherwise unexpressed) to deepen our understanding.
- Shakespeare's favourite **sources of imagery** are common objects from his everyday life: gardening, nature, sports, birds, occupations.
- Read Caroline Spurgeon's ***Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us***.

### Classical and Biblical Allusions

Shakespeare uses **allusions** (references) to add imagery and meaning to his work. He often alludes to Greek mythology and to the Bible.

### Shakespeare's Patterns of Images

Shakespeare uses **patterns** of images. Many plays contain several images from the same source. Like background music in a movie, the consistent images create mood and add meaning.

#### A Pattern of Images in *Romeo and Juliet*: Light

Whereas ***Hamlet*** is dominated by images of disease and ***Macbeth*** has a dominant pattern of blood, the dominant image in ***Romeo and Juliet*** is light and its contrast with darkness, emphasizing the bright innocence of young love in a hostile adult world. Moreover, the frequent references to celestial bodies remind us that Fate is always lurking around the corner ("I am Fortune's fool!" howls Romeo), and will determine events; and that this young love is doomed.

- When Romeo first sees Juliet, he compares her beauty to the light of the torches in Capulet's great hall: O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! (I.v.46)



- In the famous balcony scene, when Romeo sees a light glowing in Juliet's window, he again compares her to bright light:  
It is the east and Juliet is the sun! (II.ii.3)  
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars/As daylight doth a lamp. (II.ii.20-21)  
O speak again bright angel! (II.ii.26)
- In turn, Juliet compares their new-found love to lightning (II.ii.120.). When the Nurse does not arrive fast enough with news about Romeo, Juliet laments that love's heralds should be thought "Which ten times faster glides than the sun's beams/Driving back shadows over lowering hills. (II.v.4-5)  
Juliet proclaims that if Romeo is cut out into little stars... all the world will be in love with night and pay no worship to the garish sun." (III.ii.23-26)
- However, light is not always glorious: dawn brings danger to Romeo:  
Look, love, what envious streaks/Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east./Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day/Stands tiptoe on the misty mountaintops./I must be gone and live, or stay and die. (III.v.6-11)
- From this point on, darkness begins to triumph: Romeo exclaims, "More light and light: more dark and dark our woes!" (III.v.36).  
When he returns to Verona to visit Juliet in the dark tomb, he still associates Juliet with light: A grave? O no! a lantern... For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes/This vault a feasting presence full of light.  
At the end of the play, the Prince, in full authority, pronounces: A glooming peace this morning with it brings/The sun for sorrow will not show his head. (V.iii.304-305)



## **Section VII: The Great Chain of Being**

- 1.** What is the Great Chain of Being?
  - 2.** Main Idea
  - 3.** The Great Chain of Being
- 4.** What determines the order of the Chain?
- 5.** How are the links of the Chain connected?
- 6.** How do the links reflect each other?
  - 7.** Disorder
  - 8.** Politics and the Chain
- 9.** How does the Chain work?
- 10.** Shakespeare and the Great Chain of Being

## Section VII: The Great Chain of Being



This image of the Great Chain of Being is from 1579. It shows a divinely inspired universal hierarchy, or ladder. All forms of life are ranked between heaven and hell.

### What is the Great Chain of Being?

It is a way of understanding the world that was current in Europe from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and the Restoration and into the early 1700s.

### Main Idea

The central concept of the chain of being is that everything imaginable fits into the chain somewhere, giving order and meaning to the universe. The Great Chain of Being extends from God down to the lowest forms of life, and even to the trees and stones of the earth. This Great Chain, first described by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is what holds the world together.

## The Great Chain of Being

### God

### Angels

### Humans

Kings/Queens  
Archbishops  
Dukes/Duchesses  
Bishops  
Marquises/Marchionesses  
Earls/Countesses  
Viscounts/Viscountesses  
Barons/Baronesses  
Abbots/Deacons  
Knights/Local Officials  
Ladies-in-Waiting  
Priests/Monks  
Squires  
Pages  
Messengers  
Merchants/Shopkeepers  
Tradesmen  
Yeomen Farmers  
Soldiers/Town Watch  
Household Servants  
Tenant Farmers  
Shepherds/Herders  
Beggars  
Actors  
Thieves/Pirates  
Gypsies

### Animals

Beasts  
Birds  
Worms

### Plants

### Rocks and Minerals



<http://jackytappet.tripod.com/chain.html>

The following information about the Great Chain of Being is adapted from the book *The Elizabethan World Picture* (published in 1942) by E.M.W. Tillyard (1889–1962), a British classical scholar and literary scholar:

### What determines the order of the Chain?

- The place of an object or animal or human depends on the proportion of “spirit” and “matter” it contains— the less “spirit” and the more “matter,” the lower down it is.
- Within each of the main groups, there are other hierarchies. For example, among metals, gold is the noblest and at the top; lead has less “spirit” and more matter, and so is lower.

### How are the links in the Chain connected?

- There is continuity between the segments: shellfish are lowest among animals and can blend into the plants, because, like plants, they cannot move.

### How do the links reflect each other?

- The **sun** governs the planets, a **king** rules his subjects, a **parent** rules a child, and within a person, **reason** rules the emotions. If disorder is present in one realm, it is correspondingly reflected in other realms.
- Man is seen as a microcosm, a “little world,” that reflects the structure of the world as a whole (the macrocosm). Just as the world is composed of four “elements”—earth, water, air, and fire—the human body is composed of four comparable substances called “humours”: blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm.
- Illness occurs when there is an imbalance or “disorder” among the humours. An example is in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: the disorder in family relationships (a child ruling a parent) and in the state (a subject ruling the king) is reflected in the disorder of Lear’s mind (his loss of reason) and in the disorder of nature (the raging storm). Lear even says his loss of reason is “a tempest in my mind.”

### Disorder

- According to the Chain of Being, all existing things have their precise place and function in the universe. To leave your proper place is to betray your nature.
- Human beings are between the beasts and the angels. This makes life difficult for mankind.
- To act against human nature by not allowing reason to rule the emotions is to descend to the level of the beasts. To try to rise to your proper, set place, as Eve did when Satan tempted her, is to court disaster.
- Examples in drama of the consequences of a character going beyond the boundaries of the Chain of Being are found in Marlowe’s play *Doctor Faustus* and in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

## Politics and the Chain

- **Disorder** would occur if a people rose against their king. The belief in the Chain's order helped rulers immensely. Civil rebellion would break the chain, and this would have dire consequences. Rebellion was a sin against God, at least wherever rulers claimed to rule by "divine right" (see page 39).
- In Shakespeare's work, civil disorders are often accompanied by meteoric disturbances in the heavens—for example, in *Julius Caesar*.
- Because the Chain of Being provided a rationale for the authority of monarchs, it also suggested that there was ideal behaviour for these rulers. Much Renaissance literature is concerned with the ideals of kingship and with the character and behaviour of rulers, as in Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

## How does the Chain work?

Every being in Creation has its place in the Chain; this entails authority and a certain degree of responsibility to the rest of the Chain.

**As long as each being knows its place and does its duty, all will be well.**

### God

- is outside the physical limitations of time.
- possesses the spiritual attributes of reason, love, and imagination, like all spiritual beings.
- alone possesses the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.

### Angels

- are outside the physical limitations of time.
- are spiritual beings and can rule over humanity, the rest of the animals and the inanimate world.
- possess reason, love, imagination, sensory awareness, and language.
- lack the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence that God has, and lack the physical passions of humans.

**Note:** The primate, or superior type of angel, is the *seraph* (plural *seraphim*).

### Humans

- occupy a unique position on the Chain of Being. They are both spiritual and physical. They must balance the divine and animal parts of their nature.
- are like Angels in that they possess divine powers such as reason, love, and imagination, and are spiritual beings.
- are like Animals in that they are joined to a physical body. They have passions and physical sensations—pain, hunger, thirst, and desire—just like other animals lower on the Chain of Being. Their sensory attributes are limited by physical organs. They can only know through the five senses.
- possess the powers of reproduction, unlike the minerals and rocks lowest on the Chain of Being.
- can rule over the rest of the natural world, uprooting weeds and planting gardens, digging up metals and shaping them into tools, and so on.

**Notes:**

The human primate is the **King**.

**The Divine Right of Kings** (see page 39) (the idea that a monarch's right to rule over the common people comes directly from God) also teaches that the king is at the top of humanity's social order.

Within the family, the father is head of the household; below him, his wife; below her, their children. Male children are one link above female children.

**Animals**

- have natural authority over both inanimate plants and minerals. For instance, horses can trample the rocks and earth; they can also eat plants.
- are like humans in that they are capable of independent movement and possess physical appetites and sensory attributes. They have limited intelligence and awareness of their surroundings.
- are unlike humans in that they lack spiritual and mental attributes, such as immortal souls, and the ability to use logic and language.

**Notes:**

The primate of all animals, the "King of Beasts," is either the **lion** or the **elephant**.

However, each subgroup of animals also has its own primate.

At the top of the animals are wild beasts, which are superior in that they are not domesticated. Below them are domestic animals, divided so that working animals, such as dogs and horses, are higher than docile animals, such as sheep. Predators are above herbivores in the Chain.

**Birds**

- linked to the element of air, are considered superior to aquatic creatures linked to the element of water.
- are also subdivided. **Birds of Prey** (hawks, owls, etc.) outrank **Carrion Birds** (vultures, crows), which in turn outrank **"Worm-Eating" Birds** (robins, etc.), which are above **"Seed-Eating" Birds** (sparrows, etc.)

**Note:** The avian (bird) primate is the **eagle**.

**Fish**

- come below birds, and are subdivided into actual fish and other sea creatures.
- At the very bottom of the fish section are unmoving creatures like oysters, clams, and barnacles. Like the plants below them, these creatures lack mobility and sensory organs for sight and hearing. However, they are considered superior to plants because they have tactile and gustatory senses (touch and taste).

**Note:** The piscine (fish) primate is the **whale** or **dolphin**.

**Insects**

- Useful insects such as spiders and bees, and attractive insects such as ladybirds and dragonflies, are at the top, and unpleasant insects such as flies and beetles and mosquitoes are at the bottom.

**Snakes**

- are at the very bottom of the animal sector and are relegated to this position as punishment for the serpent's actions (tempting Eve) in the Garden of Eden.

## Plants

- have authority and ability to rule over only minerals. Because they are superior to unmoving rock and soil, the plants can take nourishment from them and grow on them, while the minerals and soil support them.
- like other living creatures, possess the ability to grow and to reproduce.
- lack mental attributes and possess no sensory organs. Instead, they can “eat” soil, air, and “heat.”
- tolerate heat and cold well, and are immune to the pain most animals feel.

### Notes:

The primate of plants is the **oak tree**.

In general, trees rank higher than shrubs, shrubs rank higher than bushes, bushes rank higher than cereal crops, and cereal crops rank higher than herbs, ferns, and weeds.

At the very bottom of the botanical hierarchy, the fungus and moss, without leaves and blossoms, are thought to be scarcely above the level of minerals. However, each plant is also thought to have various edible or medicinal properties.

## Minerals

- lack plants’ basic ability to grow and reproduce.
- lack the mental attributes and sensory organs found in higher beings.
- have unusual solidity and strength. Many minerals, particularly gems, are thought to possess magical powers. The lapidarian primate is the **diamond**, followed by various gems (rubies, sapphires, topaz, chrysolite, etc.).
- Metals are further subdivided: the metallic primate is gold, then various metals (silver, iron, bronze, copper, tin).
- Rocks (with granite and marble at the top), soil (sub-divided between nutrient-rich soil and low-quality types), sand, grit, dust, and, at the very bottom of the entire Great Chain, dirt. A reference to the Great Chain of Being that survives in today’s English language is the insult that one is “lower than dirt,” which refers to dirt’s place at the bottom of the Chain.

**Note:** The geological primate is **marble**, then various stones, granite, sandstone, limestone, etc. At the very bottom of the mineral section are soil, dust, and sand.

**Again: The central concept of the Great Chain of Being is that everything imaginable fits into it somewhere, giving order and meaning to the universe.**

## Shakespeare and the Great Chain of Being

- An overarching theme in Shakespeare’s works is that divine and natural order must be followed or dire consequences will ensue.
- Many of Shakespeare’s plays are based on the principle of the [Divine Right of Kings](#) (see page 39).
- Well-known examples include the many disturbances in nature in *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. After Macbeth murders King Duncan, horses eat each other; and in *Julius Caesar*, after Caesar’s murder, “the sheeted dead do squeak and gibber in the streets”.



- Another example of order in family life is seen at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Kate gives a much-discussed speech on the place of wives and husbands. The imagery makes clear the domestic order of the times:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
 Thy head, thy sovereign  
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands  
 But love, fair looks and true obedience;  
 Too little payment for so great a debt.  
 Such duty as the subject owes the prince  
 Even such a woman oweth to her husband;  
 And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,  
 And not obedient to his honest will,  
 What is she but a foul contending rebel  
 And graceless traitor to her loving lord?  
 I am ashamed that women are so simple  
 To offer war where they should kneel for peace;  
 Or seek for rule, supremacy and sway,  
 When they are bound to serve, love and obey. (Act V, sc. ii)

<http://www.online-literature.com/shakespeare/shrew/14/>

## The Divine Right of Kings

### What is it?

- It is the belief that a monarch has been chosen by God and has total power over all his subjects.
- It is part of the Great Chain of Being.

### What is the significance?

- The belief in the Great Chain of Being meant that monarchy was ordained by God, and was part of the very structure of the universe. Rebellion was a sin, not only against the state but against heaven itself, for the king was God's appointed deputy on earth, with semi-divine powers.
- King James I wrote, "The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth: for kings are not only God's Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods."
- It is not all one-sided: the King has a moral responsibility to God and to his people. In return for his absolute power, he is expected to rule his subjects with love, wisdom, and justice. To do otherwise is to abandon those natural qualities that make a noble fit to rule in the first place. Abusing regal authority is a perversion of divine order.



## **Section VIII: Tragedy**

- 1.** Definition of "Tragedy"
- 2.** Classical Tragedy
- 3.** Renaissance Tragedy
- 4.** Modern Tragedy
- 5.** Useful definitions for studying Tragedy

## Section VIII: Tragedy

### Tragedy

"It is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief—optimistic, if you will—in the perfectibility of man."

Arthur Miller

Tragedies are perhaps the most sublime form of drama that we have. Many great scholars analyze tragedy.



### Definition of "Tragedy"

Aristotle of ancient Greece was the first to define tragedy, in his famous *Poetics* (500 BC):

"Tragedy is a form of drama, characterized by seriousness and dignity, and involving a great person who experiences a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*). This reversal of fortune must be caused by the tragic hero's *hamartia*, which is often mistranslated as a character flaw, but is more correctly translated as a mistake."

Two other notable scholars are the English writer [A.C. Bradley](#), whose book *Shakespearean Tragedy* is probably the single most influential work of Shakespearean criticism ever published, and [Northrop Frye](#), a Canadian, one of the most distinguished literary critics and literary theorists of the twentieth century.

### Classical Tragedy

According to [Aristotle's \*Poetics\*](#), tragedy involves a **protagonist of high estate** ("better than we") who **falls from prosperity to misery** through a series of reversals and discoveries as a result of a "**tragic flaw**," generally an error caused by human frailty. Aside from this initial moral weakness or error, the protagonist is basically a good person: for Aristotle, the downfall of an evil protagonist is not tragic. In Aristotelian tragedy, the action generally involves unanticipated reversals of what is expected and the *discovery* of something hidden (think of **Oedipus**). Tragedy evokes pity and fear in the audience, leading finally to **catharsis** (the release of these emotions).

### Renaissance Tragedy

A.C. Bradley believes that Renaissance tragedy comes less from medieval tragedy (which randomly occurs as Fortune spins her wheel) than from the Aristotelian notion of the **tragic flaw**. Unlike classical tragedy, however, Renaissance tragedy tends to include subplots and comic relief. In his greatest tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*), Shakespeare transcends the conventions of Renaissance tragedy, imbuing his plays with a timeless universality.

Bradley's emphasis on the Aristotelian notion of the **tragic flaw** implies that Shakespeare's characters bring their fates upon themselves and thus, in a sense, deserve what they get.

Northrop Frye distinguishes five stages of action in tragedy:

1. **Encroachment.** The protagonist takes on too much, and makes a mistake that causes his/her "fall". This mistake is often unconscious (an act blindly done, through over-confidence in one's ability to regulate the world or through insensitivity to others), but still violates the norms of human conduct.
2. **Complication.** The building up of events aligning opposing forces that will lead inexorably to the tragic conclusion.
3. **Reversal.** The point at which it becomes clear that the hero's expectations are mistaken and that his fate will be the reverse of what he had hoped. At this moment, the vision of the dramatist and the audience are the same. The classic example is Oedipus, who seeks the knowledge that proves him guilty of murdering his father and marrying his mother; when he accomplishes his objective, he realizes he has destroyed himself in the process.
4. **Catastrophe.** The catastrophe exposes the limits of the hero's power and dramatizes the waste of his life. Piles of dead bodies remind us that the forces unleashed are not easily contained; there are also elaborate subplots (e.g., Gloucester in *King Lear*) which reinforce the impression of a world inundated with evil.
5. **Recognition.** The audience (sometimes the hero as well) recognizes the larger pattern. If the hero does experience recognition, he assumes the vision of his life held by the dramatist and the audience. From this new perspective he can see the irony of his actions, adding to the poignancy of the tragic events.

## Modern Tragedy

The American playwright **Arthur Miller** (author of *Death of a Salesman*) says in his essay ***Tragedy and the Common Man***:

"The tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. The tale always reveals what has been called his "**tragic flaw.**" The flaw, or crack in the character, is really nothing—and need be nothing—but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity. But there are among us today, as there always have been, those who act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action, everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined, and from this total onslaught by an individual against the seemingly stable cosmos surrounding us—from this total examination of the 'unchangeable' environment—comes the terror and the fear that is classically associated with tragedy."

From: Guth, Hans P. and Gabriele L. Rico, *Discovering Literature*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993, pp. 1461-1464.

## Useful definitions for studying Tragedy

**Catastrophe:** The final event of a tragedy in which the protagonist is overthrown and dies.

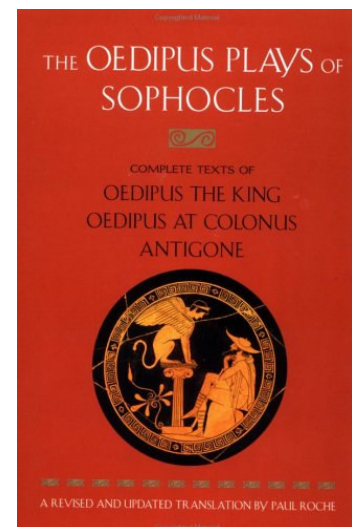
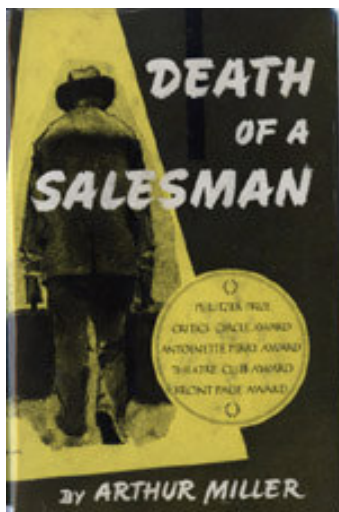
**Catharsis:** A purging in the audience of the emotions of pity and fear. The purpose of tragedy, as believed by Aristotle.

**Hamartia (tragic flaw):** The capacity of the tragic hero to make a disastrous error of judgment, which leads to his own destruction.

**Hubris:** Arrogance. A person who was too happy would attract the jealousy of the gods who would destroy him for thinking he was as powerful as they were.

**Nemesis:** The righteous indignation of the gods at the arrogance of man; the force which directly or indirectly strikes down the person with hubris. (The principle of "just desserts"—you get what you deserve.)

**Tragic hero:** In classical tragedy, a man in a high position whose actions therefore have widespread consequences. He is of greater than average qualities, usually of surpassing physical attractiveness and personal qualities. However, he possesses a tragic flaw, which combines with circumstances to lead him to make an error in judgment that leads inevitably to his downfall. He becomes possessed of hubris (arrogance) and is struck down by nemesis or the agents of nemesis. He has become gradually isolated and he dies in the catastrophe. The audience, which has undergone a catharsis of pity and fear, feels a deep sense of waste. The hero is somehow redeemed at the end and the audience feels that things have turned out as they were meant to.





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