

## Patronage of the Arts

With the rise of a wealthier, more sophisticated class of people, playwrights focused on writing plays that would appeal to audiences willing to pay for entertainment. Many acting troupes sought the patronage (sponsorship) of noblemen and looked for playwrights who would appeal to these aristocrats and kindle in them the literary appreciation that was fast growing in London. With her interest in the arts, Queen Elizabeth celebrated and catered to playwrights, and her royal court became the center of the budding theater world.

Queen Elizabeth was a brilliant and cultured enthusiast of the arts. Although actors had always been looked down upon by the upper classes, she invited an acting company, The Leicester's Men, to become members of her household in 1574. At the same time, university students, inspired by the Renaissance revival of the classics, began to read and perform the plays of the ancient world and create modern versions of them. Businessmen like Burbage and others hired dramatists to produce sophisticated plays that would appeal to wealthy, aristocratic patrons. Thus, Elizabethan theater was born.

## TUNING UP

Part of Shakespeare's genius was his ability to tap the temperament of the times — to appeal to the interests, fears, and eccentricities of his Elizabethan audience.

What were people interested in the Elizabethan era?

## Religion and Destiny

First of all, Elizabethan people were religious. In fact, almost everyone in Renaissance Europe was religious in some form or another. Everybody was familiar with the Bible, and believed that God had created the world and all creatures, from the lowest insect to the highest nobleman. Hamlet makes reference to this inextricably connected chain of creation when he cynically and unflatteringly refers to Polonius' body in Act 4:

Hamlet: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of  
A king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

King Claudius: What dost thou mean by this?

Hamlet: ... to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar ...

(4.3.27-31)

In other words, a man uses a worm for fishing; this worm may have eaten a dead king's body; then the fish eats the worm, and man eats the fish, thereby eat-

# The World of Shakespeare

## FOCUS: BROADENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

To the first-time student of Shakespeare:

You are about to embark on an unforgettable journey that will enable you to broaden your comprehension skills. You are about to be introduced to the world of William Shakespeare.



## TUNING UP

Whenever a high-school English class prepares to learn Shakespeare for the first time, inevitable questions arise:

- Who was William Shakespeare?
- Why do we read his plays?
- Why is his language so DIFFERENT?



## OVERTURE

In answer, generations of patient teachers have explained that Shakespeare was and is the most famous playwright in the English language; that his plays have universal, timeless appeal; and that after a while, one becomes accustomed to the language: after all, Shakespeare wrote over 400 years ago. If you think about it, even the English we speak today is different from the way it was spoken in our grandparents' day. Not so long ago, a MOUSE was only a rodent, ON LINE was where you stood to buy bread or groceries, and a PRINTER was a person who prepared documents for publication. See the point? Considering the rate at which our ever-expanding

language continuously evolves, adding words and phrases all the time, it is only reasonable that after four centuries, Shakespeare's language should sound foreign to our ears!

How, then, can we learn enough about Shakespeare to feel comfortable with his language and develop an appreciation of the ways it affects our own language today? In answer, we present you with this Shakespeare handbook — an overview of Shakespeare's life and times, with explanations for and samples of his best work.

So sit back, open your playbills to the first page, and prepare to learn what went into the creation of a Shakespearean play, as we set the stage with the props and scenery of historical and technical information. Then the curtain will open on the performance — *The World of Shakespeare* in five acts. You'll experience some of Shakespeare's most famous speeches on some of his favorite themes: the abuse of power; life and death; honor; parents and children; the challenges of life. By the time the final curtain falls, not only will you have honed your ability to read and understand Shakespeare, but you will have learned to appreciate what a wizard with words he was.

Now let's begin by turning back the clock to find out what the world was like when William Shakespeare came on the scene.



## CREDITS:

### THE WORLD THAT PRODUCED SHAKESPEARE

#### EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE

The French word *renaissance* means rebirth, and it has come to represent the era of renewed cultural and intellectual interest and growth after the stagnant Dark Ages.

#### ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

In England the Renaissance began in the late 1400s and continued until the Restoration period began in 1625. Its most important patron and enthusiast was Elizabeth, who became queen of England in 1558, just before Shakespeare was born. Elizabeth was a brilliant and cultured woman; during her reign, the first great bulk of English literary masterpieces was produced. So important was her influence in encouraging and inspiring literature and the arts that this period was named the Elizabethan Age, and the drama produced then was called Elizabethan drama (we'll learn more about that later).

#### FROM WHERE DID SHAKESPEARE COME? WHAT IS HIS BACKGROUND?

William Shakespeare was born during the English Renaissance period; his beginnings were fairly humble. Although not much is known about the lives of ordinary citizens of that period, most scholars agree that he was born in the typical market town of Stratford-upon-Avon in April 1564, the son of a prosperous merchant who was

ing a part of the king.

Religious references were understood and approved, and, as a result, common in all Renaissance writings.

#### Superstition and the Supernatural

Another favorite of Elizabethan audiences was anything to do with the supernatural, including omens, witches, and particularly ghosts. In fact, many of Shakespeare's plays feature ghosts, and their appearance almost always foretells impending doom, the occurrence of something terrible. For instance, in *Julius Caesar*, the appearance of the ghost of Caesar foreshadows Brutus' defeat and death; and in *Hamlet*, the appearance of the ghost of King Hamlet foreshadows the tragic events of the whole plot.

What's more, Elizabethan people were very superstitious; they believed that natural events such as thunderclaps, lightning strikes, eclipses, owls hooting, etc., all foretold terrible happenings.

Finally, Elizabethans believed in fate: Everything that happened was predestined or "in the stars"; they believed that man did not have free will; tampering with fate was a sin that elicited retribution. *Julius Caesar* contains elements of the supernatural in abundance. Caesar is warned by a soothsayer to "Beware the ides of March" (1.2.25). On the night before March 15, all of Rome is amazed by a blazing comet, howling specters, and other portents. Caesar's wife, Calpurnia, dreams that Caesar's statue is running with blood from many wounds, and she begs him to stay at home. He refuses, saying,

What can be avoided  
Whose end is purposed by the  
mighty gods?  
Yet Caesar shall go forth.  
(2.2.26-28)

Caesar receives yet another warning, but he ignores that as well, saying death "will come when it will come" (2.2.37). He seems to submit

to fate, but in his heart he thinks that, as Caesar, he is exempt. When he meets the soothsayer on the steps of the Senate, the following dialogue occurs, foreshadowing Caesar's death and chilling the audience:

Caesar: The ides of March are come.

Soothsayer: Ay, Caesar, but not gone.

(3.1.1-2)

The scene culminates in Caesar's assassination, fulfilling the prophecy and the audience's expectations. True to their belief that everything is ordained by "fate," the Elizabethan people would not have wanted it any other way.