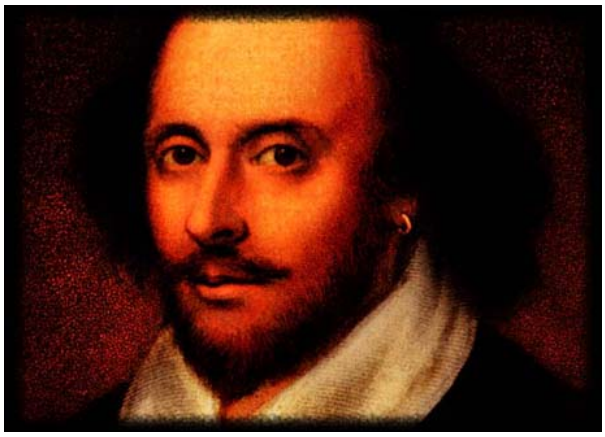
Shakespeare 101



"for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey."
- perhaps the most famous literary snarl ever was penned in 1592 by Robert Greene

The passage is famous because it clearly refers to William Shakespeare ("Shake-scene") and is the first documentary evidence we have of his rise to prominence in the London theatre world, indeed the first direct documentary evidence regarding him at all since the baptism of the twins in 1585.

Greene was a minor Elizabethan playwright and pamphleteer, six years Shakespeare's senior, a university educated man (MA from both Oxford and Cambridge) and proud of it, yet known to be a wastrel. He wrote the Groats-worth of Witte as a bitter, dying man, and in it attacked his younger rivals Marlowe, Nashe, and Peele as well as Shakespeare. Much has been written about this passage. Its importance is that it verifies several facts about Shakespeare's career as it had developed by 1592:

- He had become successful enough to rankle Greene's jealousy.
- He had become well known among in the London professional theatre world.
- He was known as a man of various abilities ("Johannes fac totem" or Jack-of-all-trades, as we would say), actor, playwright, play mender ("beautified with our feathers").
- He was well known as a poet ("bombast out a blanke verse").
- His Henry VI Part 3 had become famous enough to be recognize by one of its famous lines ("O, tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide").

Getting Acquainted With Shakespeare

If you could take the ultimate field trip and visit Stratford-on-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace, you could still find buildings and scenes that were familiar to him. Still standing are the house where he was born; the grammar school he attended; the nearby farmhouse home of Anne Hathaway, his wife; and the fine house and garden of Dr. John Hall, his son-in-law. Perhaps, like other visitors, you'd eat your bag lunch in Dr. Hall's garden, surrounded by flowers that Shakespeare knew and loved. Of course, not all of Stratford is old and quaint: much of it is geared to the thousands of tourists who come each year to see William Shakespeare's birthplace.

But let's try to imagine it as it was in Shakespeare's boyhood, a sixteenth-century English village surrounded by forests where deer wandered freely. Its meadows were dotted with wild flowers, and stately swans sailed along the River Avon. (They still do!) Like the other village lads, Shakespeare wandered through the woods and fields, acquiring early his love and knowledge of nature. That the beauty of the English countryside made a lasting impression on him is shown by his references in the plays to animals, birds, and flowers.

He was born in Stratford, probably on April 23, 1564, and christened on April 26. His father, John Shakespeare, was a prosperous glovemaker. He was respected by his neighbours and held various town offices. His mother, Mary Arden, was from a good family and some fortune, having inherited considerable farm property.

As a young boy, William attended grammar school, where emphasis was on Latin grammar and not much else. Later, in London, he would learn French. For his plays, his reference books would be Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (for mythology), Plutarch's *Lives* (for his Roman history plays), and Holinshed's *Chronicles* (for his English history plays); But in Stratford he learned Latin grammar! In his boyhood, traveling players came to Stratford (as they did to Elsinore in *Hamlet*), and his introduction to drama came that way.

By the time he was eighteen, his formal education was long past. He had already assumed a man's responsibilities, marrying in November 1582 Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior. In May 1583, the first child, Susanna, was born. Two years later, Anne gave birth to twins, Hamnet and Judith, christened in February, 1585.

Within a year or two, Shakespeare had departed for London to earn fame and fortune, leaving Anne and the family behind. It was not unusual for an actor to have his family with him, even on tours. The fact that Anne did not join her husband in London seems to indicate that she was a Puritan. Puritans believed that the stage and its actors did much to corrupt people's morals. Actually, a few years later, Puritanism became so strong in London that the theatres were ordered closed. But when Shakespeare arrived there, playgoing was still a popular entertainment, enjoyed and sponsored by Queen Elizabeth herself.

By 1592, Shakespeare was an established actor in London, and he remained an actor throughout his career. His financial success came from his share of the gate (admissions), not from the sale of his plays which probably netted him only a few pounds each.

His early literary successes were with his narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both dedicated to his wealthy patron, the young Earl of Southampton. In 1594, the theatres reopened after a temporary closing during a plague epidemic. From that time, Shakespeare concentrated his literary efforts on plays, producing thirty-seven by the time of his retirement in 1610.

Throughout his career, he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later, the King's Men), whose leading actor was Richard Burbage. Shakespeare lived quietly and gained a reputation as a polite, good-natured man and loyal friend. Investing his money wisely, he acquired much property in Stratford, including New Place, to which he eventually retired.

He died there on April 23, 1616. His only son having predeceased him, Shakespeare tried to leave his property intact for a male heir. However, neither daughter produced one. His greatest legacy, the plays, came down to us through the effort of two actor friends who collected and published them after his death.

A Look at Shakespeare's London

You should realize that William Shakespeare was a literary genius, probably the greatest that England has produced. It in no way diminishes his greatness to say that he was also lucky enough to be in "the right place at the right time."

Consider his arrival in London, some time between 1585 and 1592. His timing couldn't have been better. In 1588, England routed her long time enemy, Spain, with the defeat of the Spanish Armada. English people took nationalistic pride in that victory, and pride made them eager to know more about their country's history. What pleasanter way to learn history than by watching a drama? As could be expected, Shakespeare's *King Henry VI*, *Tragedy of King Richard III*, and *Life and Death of King John* played to enthusiastic audiences.

The English were proud, too, of the exploits of such intrepid explorers as Sir Walter Raleigh and ***Sir Francis Drake***, who traveled to the New World and brought back to London reports of riches and savages that sparked everyone's imagination. The city itself had become a leading center of trade. Foreigners of every description thronged its streets. Enterprising teachers offered quick courses in French, Dutch, Italian, and Arabic so Londoners could carry on business with the strangers in their midst. London's diversity enabled a young person with intelligence and a receptive mind to learn much about foreign lands and foreign ways without ever leaving England. Of course, William Shakespeare did just that and became confident enough of his knowledge of the continent to set a number of plays in Italy.

To Shakespeare's advantage, too, was the intellectual climate of his day, for England had now entered the Renaissance which had begun earlier on the continent. People believed now, that they had some freedom of choice, some part in shaping their own destiny. Echoing that belief, Shakespeare wrote in Julius Caesar,

> *The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,*
> *But in ourselves, that we are underlings.*

In contrast to the Medieval World, with its emphasis on the afterlife, the Renaissance offered some rewards here on earth. Science and learning became the pursuits of those fortunate enough to have leisure for them. Eloquence in speech was a sought-after skill: people believed that man's use of speech to express thoughts and emotions set himself apart from the animals. Shakespeare gives the Renaissance view in Hamlet's famous lines.

> *What a piece of work is man!*
> *how noble in reason!*
> *how infinite in faculty!*
> *In action how like an angel!*
> *In apprehension...how like a god!*
> *the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!*

Of course, Shakespeare himself with his "apprehension" of human nature, his awareness of the ideas of his era, and his eloquence of expression was bound to find favour with Elizabethan audiences.

He was fortunate, too, that his plays were enjoyed, not only by the "groundlings" who paid a penny apiece to watch them, but also by the *Queen* herself. ***Elizabeth*** loved the theatre. She held firm ideas about both the plays' subjects and presentations, but she was willing to pay for her theatregoing, providing money for costumes and props.

When plays were not presented at court for Elizabeth or her successor, James I, another theatre enthusiast, they might be presented in innyards or - a little later - in theatres such as the famous Globe, The Theatre, or the Swan. Presentations took place in mid-afternoon. Boy actors took the female parts. Props were few, although costumes were elaborate. Obviously, the audience needed a good imagination and Shakespeare's magnificent word pictures to make up for staging deficiencies.

Social and Historical CONTEXT

The London in which Shakespeare lived and worked for much of his adult life was a small city by modern standards, with a population of between 150,000 and 200,000. It was a crowded city, increasingly polluted by open sewers which often ran down the middle of the streets, and by the beginnings of the ‘smog’ (caused by burning coal), which was to bedevil Londoners until the passing of the first Clean Air Acts of 1956. Most of the buildings were of wooden construction, which created a constant fire risk, and the Great Fire of 1666 was only one of many such conflagrations. These unsanitary conditions were the cause of many epidemics, including smallpox, spotted fever (probably typhus), and the dreaded bubonic plague. In addition to these primitive living conditions, Elizabethans were not noted for their personal hygiene. Taking a bath was considered an unnecessary health risk, and rotten teeth with the consequent foul breath were an accepted part of life. Clothes were of wool, which made laundering difficult, and therefore to be avoided as much as possible.

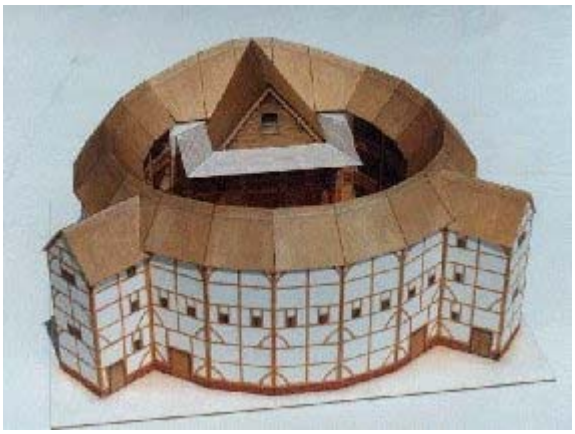
Violent death was a constant accompaniment to Elizabethan life. Epidemics saw thousands of corpses carted off to mass graves, criminals were publicly executed, often by the barbarous method of hanging, drawing and quartering. The heads of executed traitors were exhibited on poles at the gates of the city while the mangled bodies of common criminals were often left to rot for weeks on gibbets. For entertainment, there were the equally violent sports of bear baiting, bull baiting and cock fighting. To see a simulated death on the stage was hardly likely to shock an audience accustomed to such horrors in reality and on a daily basis. It was more likely that such violence would either entertain them or give the play a sense of authenticity.

Despite all this, Elizabethan London was a hive of bustling commercial activity. It was the banking centre of England and a trade centre for much of the known world. It was also the capital city and the seat of government, where the Queen and her dazzling court spent much of their time. As a result, it attracted a wealth of creative talent, all eager to impress 'Gloriana' and become rich and famous.

At the time when Shakespeare was writing *Romeo and Juliet*, a spirit of optimism suffused the country. The threat of invasion by Spain had finally been lifted with the rout of the Armada in 1588. The English felt themselves to be invulnerable and flung themselves into an outpouring of cultural development, much of it directed at and glorifying the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth. The reality was not quite so pleasant. There was, it is true, a greater religious tolerance than had previously been the case, but by modern standards Catholics were still horrifically persecuted. The secret agents of Sir Francis Walsingham (1530-1590), Elizabeth's Secretary of State, ensured that there was little criticism of the monarchy.

The optimism of the earlier years of the reign faded, however, and by the end of the century, a series of petty wars, economic problems and social unrest signalled the end of the Golden Age. These changes were reflected in Shakespeare's plays: the exuberance of the early dramas is replaced by a gloomy pessimism reflected in the plots and language of the great tragedies.

The power of the theatre to influence opinion and to question accepted social, religious and political mores has always alarmed the Establishment, whether the church, the aristocracy or the government of the time. Shakespeare was writing in a time of relative stability: the Crown in the person of Queen Elizabeth had established its right to govern; the Church, with the support of the Crown, had finally thrown off the hated yoke of Rome; and the country was full of an enthusiasm and a belief that this was a Golden Age. However, by contrast, Puritan elements strove continuously to close down the new theatres which they regarded as encouraging delinquent behaviour and distracting people from their duty to God. Regular 'visitations' (as Elizabethans learned to call outbreaks of the plague) also meant that the theatres were often closed by the authorities to reduce the spread of infection. Far from curtailing the output of plays, these restrictions seem to have given writers such as Shakespeare breathing space and time to produce better crafted work. To avoid the strict regulation of the city authorities, many acting companies also found premises outside the walls where the law had no jurisdiction.



The Globe Theatre

The Globe Theatre was born out of a legal squabble and the need for a company of English actors to be assured of a permanent home. It became the most important theatre to William Shakespeare. He wrote more than half of his 37 plays specifically for production at the Globe.

A predecessor playhouse - named simply The Theatre - was used for more than 20 years by an acting company that became known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Shakespeare joined that troupe between 1590 and 1592.

The owner of the land on which that earlier theatre was built refused to renew the lease. So the theatre's proprietors dismantled the structure and rebuilt it across the Thames River in a southern London suburb called the Bankside. The relocated theatre was named the Globe, and Shakespeare owned 10 per cent of it. The acting company eventually was named the King's Men.

For 14 years, from 1599 to 1613, the Globe served as the main showcase for Shakespeare's plays, He wrote with the dimensions of the Globe in mind; the building and the playwright complemented each other, Although it could accommodate 2,000 patrons - many of whom stood - the Globe's design made it quite intimate. The main stage projected forward into the audience, and play-goers viewed the action from three sides, Shakespeare capitalized on that sense of intimacy. Hamlet's soliloquies, for example, worked well when the actor spoke while nearly surrounded by the Globe audience. Those soliloquies are harder to stage in many modern theatres.

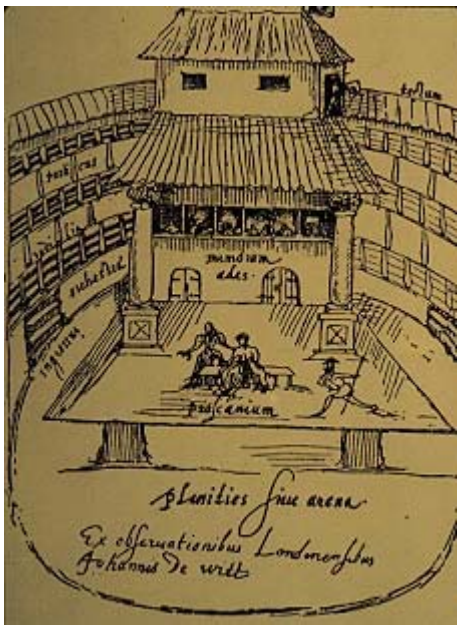
The Globe burned down in 1613, when the thatched roof of the galley was ignited by wadding fired from a cannon as part of a performance of *Henry VIII*. A more elaborate theatre, also called the Globe, was built on the spot the next year. It was torn down in 1644 a victim of the new Puritan government that decided plays were immoral and should be banned.

The Globe stood just 1,500 feet from the old London Bridge and many playgoers crossed the bridge on foot or in horse-drawn carriages. Others arrived at the theatre via ferry boats that piled the Thames.

Each playgoer paid one penny to enter the Globe. That permitted him to watch the performance while standing in "the pit" on the ground floor. By paying additional pennies, a patron could climb to a seat in one of the three galleries. It wasn't a stiff and formal occasion; some playgoers imbibed alcoholic beverages during the performance.

The theatre's design focused attention not so much on how a single actor interpreted a role, but rather on a steady flow of action and an attempt to develop a sense of participation in the audience.

The famous Globe Theatre was built in 1599, and most of Shakespeare's plays were performed in this building. It was probably octagonal, with an apron stage and three tiers of galleries, so that the building held about 2000 spectators. The stage contained trap-doors, convenient for representing the mouth of hell, or for the entrance and exit of actors. Two doors on either side led onto the stage, an arrangement useful if a battle was being presented.



The stage included three acting levels: the main stage (called apron stage or outer stage), the first balcony (called the tarras) which was convenient to represent the outside of a castle or for balcony scenes, and a second balcony for the musicians. There was also a study (called the inner stage) which was a curtained room directly behind the apron, which could be set up with stage properties; the chamber was a curtained area directly above the study and behind the balcony; and there were also two window stages, balconies on either side of the chamber.

From the actors' viewpoint, the Elizabethan stage was probably the most convenient one ever known. It was roomy, with plenty of space to move around in. There were several areas of performance, so scenes could shift rapidly. A play could open with a scene at the front of the stage, new characters enter in from the back, and then the scene would close. While these players made their exit at the back or the sides of the stage, the new scene would begin in the balcony. After the second scene was finished, the third scene could come on the stage below again.

The design of the theatre aided communication between actors and the audience. The trap door near center stage was hinged and led to the cellar, or "hell", under the stage. Sometimes the trap door became important to the play. In *Hamlet*, the playgoers met grave-diggers singing at their work as they emerged from below stage. And the ghost of Hamlet's father called out from the cellar.

Heavy and bulky props were stored in the cellar. Fragile props wouldn't have lasted long there, because it was quite damp - The Globe was built on drained swampland.

Scenery and stage properties were very simple. A change of place was indicated by a name board. A light blue flag indicated a day scene, a dark blue flag, a night scene. Black draperies around the balcony indicated that a tragedy would be performed.

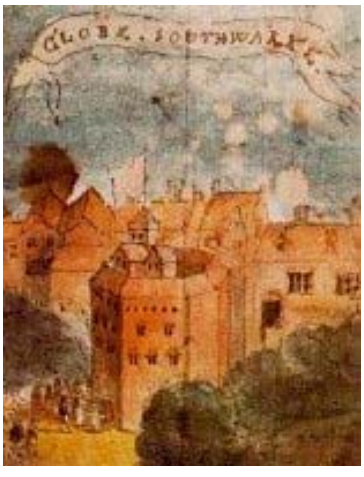
The costumes of the players implied a good deal about the scene as well. If men appeared in armour, it was obvious that war and battles would be part of the action of the play. If the actors wore traveler's cloaks or riding boots, a journey was expected. Chairs or tables showed an indoor scene; a few branches could indicate a forest. The audience was expected to use its imagination, and readers must do the same while reading the play. Female roles were played by young boys whose voices had not changed. The theatre was not considered to be a place for proper females, and actresses did not perform on stage until around the 1660's. Even then, the profession was not considered to be entirely reputable.

Although sets and lighting were minimal, the actors were so skilled in their work that they made each performance convincing. Their greatest assets were a good memory and a strong, clear voice, but they were also expert fencers, dancers, even acrobats, and most had good singing voices. Knowing their audience demanded realism, they often practiced sleight of hand, using retractable knives to simulate stabbings. They wore bladders of sheep's blood under their jackets so that, when stabbed, they would bleed copiously, And. in a scene which required putting out someone's eye, the actors would allow a grape to fall to the floor at the proper moment. All of the actors were men and boys - acting was not considered a reputable profession for a woman! The boys in the company whose voices had not yet changed were highly trained in female impersonation and played the roles of women, children, and old men.

Actors began training early. Shakespeare, by the standards of his time, came to the profession late. He must have worked exceptionally hard to become a successful actor only a few years after he arrived in London. That he was becoming a successful author at the same time is a tribute to his energy and genius.

Although parts of the theatre were roofed, the plays were performed essentially in the open air. (In winter the actors moved to an indoor theatre). Because of the limitations of artificial lighting, the plays had to be presented in the afternoon, usually at two. As rain, or government regulations might force the cancellation of a performance, a white flag fluttering above the theatre signalled everyone that a play would be given that day. Handbills and town criers were also used.

Is the play the thing? Or is it the playhouse? Obviously the play ranks higher in importance, but a workable, effective theatre is vital too. Shakespeare tailored his dramas to the Globe's design, and the result impressed theatre builders so much that many theatres in London were patterned after the Globe.



The Globe's influence is still felt. Today's newest theatres usually are constructed with an apron, a forestage that extends part way into the audience. Theatre-in-the-round creates a sense of intimacy somewhat like that of the Globe. So although the Globe burned down more than three centuries ago, its impact lingers.

Reading Shakespeare's Plays

Unusual Word Arrangements

People did not really speak the way they do in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare wrote the way he did for poetic and dramatic purposes. There are many reasons why he did this -- to create a specific poetic rhythm, to emphasize a certain word, to give a character a specific speech pattern, etc. Let's take a look at a great example from Robinson's *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language*.

I ate the sandwich.
I the sandwich ate.
Ate the sandwich I.
Ate I the sandwich.
The sandwich I ate.
The sandwich ate I.

Robinson shows us that these four words can create six unique sentences which carry the same meaning. When you are reading Shakespeare's plays, look for this type of unusual word arrangement. Locate the subject, verb, and the object of the sentence. Notice that the object of the sentence is often placed at the beginning (the sandwich) in front of the verb (ate) and subject (I). Rearrange the words in the order that makes the most sense to you (I ate the sandwich). This will be one of your first steps in making sense of Shakespeare's language.

Poetry

We speak in prose (language without metrical structure). Shakespeare wrote both prose and verse (poetry). Much of the language discussion we will have revolves around Shakespeare's poetry. So, it is important that you understand the following terms:

Blank Verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Iambic Pentameter: five beats of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables; ten syllables per line.

So FAIR / and FOUL / a DAY / I HAVE / not SEEN
The COURSE / of TRUE / love NEV/er DID / run SMOOTH

Omissions

Again, for the sake of his poetry, Shakespeare often left out letters, syllables, and whole words. These omissions really aren't that much different from the way we speak today. We say:

"Been to class yet?"
"No. Heard Adolf's givin' a test."
"Sup wi'that?"

We leave out words and parts of words to speed up our speech. If we were speaking in complete sentences, we would say:

"Have you been to class yet?"
"No, I have not been to class. I heard that Mrs. Adolf is giving a test today."
"What is up with that?"

A few examples of Shakespearean omissions/contractions follow:

ope ~ open	o'er ~ over	e'er ~ ever	i' ~ in	oft ~ often
'tis ~ it is	gi' ~ give	ne'er ~ never	a' ~ he	e'en ~ even

Unusual Words

Most of us run into problems when we come across archaic words that are no longer used in Modern English. Or worse, when we run across words that are still used today but have much different meanings than when Shakespeare used (or invented!) the words. This is particularly troublesome, because we think we know what the word means, but the line still doesn't make sense.

Although it is frustrating when we come across these unknown words, it is not surprising. Shakespeare's vocabulary included 30,000 words. Today our vocabularies only run between 6,000 and 15,000 words! Because Shakespeare loved to play with words, he also created new words that we still use today. Shakespearean Glossary: http://www.shakespearehigh.com/classroom/guide/page3.shtml

http://www.shakespearehigh.com/classroom/bio_handout.shtml

http://www.britannia.com/hiddenlondon/shakespeare.html

http://www.studiapublishing.co.uk/romeojuliet/ro_background.htm

http://virtual.clemson.edu/caah/Shakespr/VRGLOBE/tourst.htm

http://www.shakespearehigh.com/classroom/guide/index.shtml

http://www.shakespearehigh.com/classroom/guide/page3.shtml