

Shakespeare's World



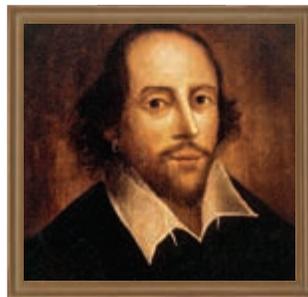
COMMON CORE

RI 10 Read and comprehend literary nonfiction. **SL 2** Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats.

England in Shakespeare's Day

Renaissance Man

William Shakespeare is widely considered to be the greatest writer in the English language and the greatest playwright of all time. His plays have been produced more often and in more countries than those of any other author. Shakespeare lived in England during the flowering of intellectual activity known as the Renaissance. The European Renaissance was marked by a renewed interest in science, commerce, philosophy, and the arts. Basic to Renaissance thinking was a new emphasis on the individual and on freedom of choice. The Renaissance movement began in 14th-century Italy and gradually moved north and west toward England, where it reached its peak during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Shakespeare started his literary career during Elizabeth's reign, a period that lasted from 1558 to 1603 and is often called the Elizabethan Age.



William Shakespeare
1564–1616

All Hail the Queen Elizabeth was the last member of England's royal house of Tudor. Her grandfather, King Henry VII, brought stability and prosperity to his kingdom, and it was during his

reign that Renaissance ideas began taking hold in England. However, political and religious problems surfaced during the reign of Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, and continued into the early years of Elizabeth's own reign. Luckily, Elizabeth proved to be a strong monarch, able to guide England along a more moderate and prosperous course. It was a course that most Elizabethans, including Shakespeare, seem to have appreciated.

Like her grandfather and father before her, Elizabeth I was a strong supporter of English culture. As a result, artists of all types—including playwrights, poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, and architects—were held in high esteem. Taking the cue from their monarch, members of England's upper class often became patrons, or financial sponsors, of the arts. In the early 1590s, Shakespeare began acting in and writing plays for a theater company sponsored by two men who had both held the office of lord chamberlain, a high-ranking position in Elizabeth's court. The company was called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and Elizabeth herself attended some of its productions.



Queen Elizabeth I
1533–1603

Theater in Shakespeare's Day

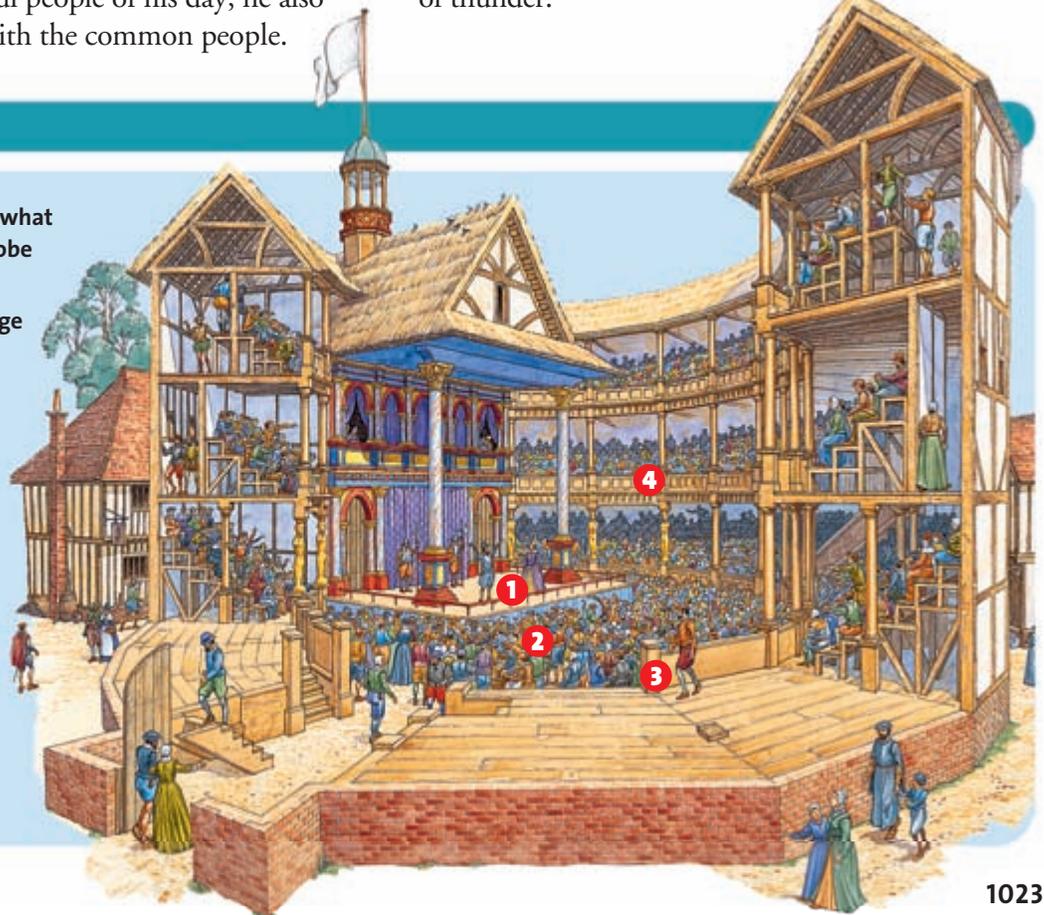
A Writer for All Time Though acting companies toured throughout England, London was the center of the Elizabethan stage. In 1576, well before Shakespeare became affiliated with the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company built England's first theater in the suburbs of London; by the end of the 1590s, London boasted more theaters than any other European capital. One reason the London theaters did so well was that they attracted an audience of rich and poor alike. In fact, the Elizabethan theater was one of the few forms of entertainment available to working-class people of the day, and one of the few places where the working class and the educated upper class could mix. Shakespeare appealed to English audience members of all classes by including a great deal of variety in his plays: poetic speeches, exciting action, fast-paced humor, vivid character portrayals, and wise observations about human nature. Thus, while he was respected by the rich and powerful people of his day, he also became very popular with the common people.

Around the Globe In 1599, Shakespeare and the other shareholders of the Lord Chamberlain's Men became joint owners of the company's new home, the Globe Theatre. The Globe was a three-story wooden structure with an open-air courtyard in the center. Actors performed on a raised platform stage. The theater could hold 3,000 spectators, many of whom stood in the part of the courtyard near the stage, known as the pit. These customers paid the lowest admission charge, usually just a penny. Richer theatergoers paid more and sat in the inner balconies, which surrounded most of the courtyard. The illustration below shows the different sections of the theater. Audiences became emotionally involved in performances, openly showing their pleasure or their disappointment. They cheered, booed, hissed, and even threw rotten vegetables. They applauded agile sword fighting and dramatic sound effects, such as blares of trumpets, drum rolls, and claps of thunder.

THE GLOBE

This illustration shows what scholars believe the Globe Theatre looked like.

- 1 raised platform stage
- 2 pit
- 3 courtyard
- 4 inner balconies



Impact on Language

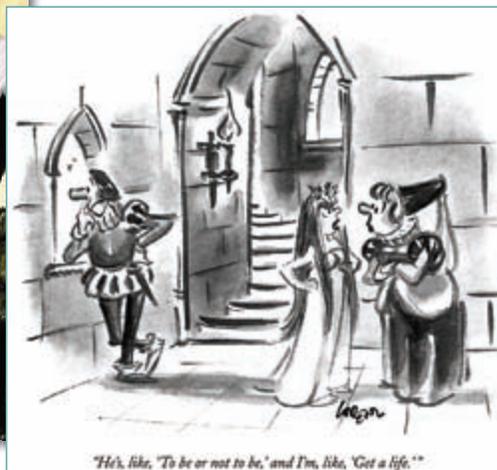
Elizabethan theater relied heavily on the audience's imagination. Most theaters had no curtains, no artificial lighting, and very little scenery. Instead, props, sound effects, and sometimes lines of dialogue let the audience know when and where a scene took place. However, while the staging was simple, it was hardly dull. Swords, shields, brightly colored banners, and elegant costumes often added to the spectacle. The costumes also helped audiences imagine that women were playing the female roles, which in fact were played by young male actors. In Shakespeare's day, no women belonged to English acting companies—it was considered improper for women to appear on stage. The boys who played female roles underwent rigorous training in acting, singing, and dancing. Before one could play a role such as Juliet in a first-rate company, he had to learn to move gracefully and speak convincingly.

HIS WORDS LIVE ON

Shakespeare continues to influence modern culture, as the following images demonstrate.



Actors from a popular 1993 film based on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*



A cartoon from the *New Yorker* magazine does a takeoff on *Hamlet*.

Word Master Shakespeare's plays have influenced literary works for hundreds of years, and modern retellings of his stories are common. Additionally, Shakespeare was a master of dramatic language and a great experimenter with spoken English. He cleverly played with words and their meanings, creating novel metaphors and striking images that, once heard or read, are rarely forgotten.

Shakespeare contributed more words, phrases, and expressions to the English language than any other writer. Some of these words were his own invention, including *assassination*, *bump*, and *lonely*. Other expressions might have been part of the everyday speech of Elizabethan England, but Shakespeare was the first to use them in writing.

Many of these phrases and expressions have become so common that people use them without realizing that they are quoting Shakespeare. In fact, the expressions have become “household words”—a term first used in Shakespeare's historical play *Henry V*. Other expressions that have become part of the language include the now common simile “dead as a doornail” (*Henry VI, Part 2*), “laughingstock” (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and “for goodness' sake” (*Henry VIII*). Shakespeare's fine ear for the English language prompted the British writer George Orwell to call him a “word musician.”

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More About the Man

The Bard of Avon Although Shakespeare is probably the most famous writer who ever lived, it is largely through his plays and poetry that we know him. The known facts about his personal life are surprisingly few. We know that he came from Stratford-on-Avon, a small town on the river Avon about 90 miles northwest of London. His father was a glove maker who later became the town's mayor; his mother was a distant relative of a wealthy family who lived just outside town. Church records indicate that Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564, which suggests that he was born a few days earlier. He probably went to the local grammar school, although school records no longer exist. There he would have studied Latin and read works by ancient Roman writers, such as Virgil and Seneca.

Making His Way At 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a local farmer's daughter. The couple had a daughter named Susanna in 1583 and boy and girl twins named Hamnet and Judith two years later. There are no records of what Shakespeare did in the next seven years, which some scholars call the "lost years" of his life. During that time he apparently left his family back in Stratford, where they could live comfortably, and made his way to London, center of the theater world. He probably joined a theater company and traveled with it as an actor. When next we hear of Shakespeare, it is as a successful playwright and sometime actor in London. His earliest plays include *Richard III* and *The Comedy of Errors*; he also was writing lyric and narrative poetry. In 1593 he published his long poem *Venus and Adonis*, apparently written during the 1592–1593 season, when London's theaters were shut because of an outbreak of the plague.

Fame and Fortune By 1596, the year *Romeo and Juliet* was probably first performed, ten of Shakespeare's plays had already been produced in London, and he was a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Shakespeare's plays helped make the theater company the most successful of

its day. In 1599, he became part owner of London's popular new Globe Theatre. In 1603, when James I succeeded Elizabeth I on the throne of England, the new king himself became the patron of Shakespeare's theater company, which became known as the King's Men. Shakespeare's business interests and revenues from plays brought him a good deal of money, enough to purchase a beautiful home for his family in Stratford. He also may have purchased a coat of arms for his father, an important symbol that allowed his father to move officially into the ranks of gentlemen.

The End In 1609, Shakespeare took advantage of his fame by publishing his sonnets, a series of poems about love and friendship that most scholars feel he wrote in the 1590s. Shakespeare also began spending more time in Stratford, retiring there permanently in 1613. He wrote no plays after that year; his last complete plays are believed to be *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Henry VIII*. While there are no documentary records of the date of his death, the monument that marks his grave indicates that he died on April 23, 1616.



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OTHER PLAYS BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

- *Hamlet*
- *Julius Caesar*
- *King Lear*
- *Macbeth*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Much Ado About Nothing*
- *Othello*
- *Richard II*
- *Twelfth Night*

