

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 neighbors 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 theaters 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 theaters 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 efforts of two actor friends who collected and published them after his death.

LESSON I: OUTLINING "GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH SHAKESPEARE"
FOR READY REFERENCE

1. When and where was Shakespeare born? _____
2. A. What was his father's name and occupation? _____
B. What was his mother's name? _____
3. How much formal education did Shakespeare have? _____
4. What lasting effect did Stratford and the surrounding countryside have on him? _____

5. Whom and when did he marry? _____
6. What were his children's names? _____
7. Approximately when did he leave Stratford for London? _____
8. Why didn't his wife go with him? _____
9. How did Shakespeare become well-to-do? _____
10. What were his earliest literary successes? _____
11. What reference books did he use to write his plays? _____

12. How many plays did he write? _____
13. What was the name of the acting company of which he was a part? _____
14. What was his reputation in London? _____
15. When did Shakespeare retire and where did he go? _____
16. When did he die? _____
17. What was the eventual effect of Puritanism on the theaters? _____

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 longtime 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 leachers 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 apprehen-
sion** how like a god! the beauty of the
world! the paragon of animals!*

*capacity

**understanding

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 favor 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 theater. She held firm ideas about both the plays' subjects and presentations, but she was willing to pay for her theatergoing, providing money for costumes and props.

When plays were not presented at court for Elizabeth or her successor, James I, another theater enthusiast, they might be presented in innyards or—a little later—in theaters such as the famous Globe, The Theater, or the Swan. Presentations took place in midafternoon. 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.

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.

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.

LESSON II:
OUTLINING "SHAKESPEARE'S LONDON" FOR READY REFERENCE

1. What historic event took place at about the same time as Shakespeare's arrival in London? _____

2. What effect did that event have on the English people? _____

3. Why was that effect to Shakespeare's advantage? _____

4. What advantage was it to the young playwright that England had embarked on an age of exploration and that London had become a center of trade? _____

5. How do you suppose Shakespeare gained his knowledge of the French language? _____

6. How did the Renaissance affect people's viewpoint of destiny or fate? _____

7. Why did people put so much emphasis on skillful use of language? _____

8. What role did Queen Elizabeth and her successor, James I, play in the life of Shakespeare and his fellow actors? _____

9. Name three early theaters. _____

10. Name three ways in which the presentation of plays in Elizabethan times differed from presentation today. _____

11. List at least five requirements for Elizabethan actors. _____

