

It was for these theatres and for the Burbages' company (who enjoyed the patronage first of the Lord Chamberlain and later of the King himself) that Shakespeare wrote most of his thirty-seven plays. Though we know them as classics, he wrote most of them for general public audiences, and the company depended upon their commercial success. Whether the settings was Denmark, Austria, or Rome, They appealed to London audiences because they were also uniquely English, frequently making pointed references to events of the day.

Although Shakespeare's theatre has long since passed away — the first Globe playhouse burned, and the second, built on the same spot, was destroyed by the Puritans — the popularity of his plays has never flagged. They have been performed in every age and on every continent, even on board a ship in the Arctic; and they have been translated into such language as Spanish, Japanese, and Swahili.

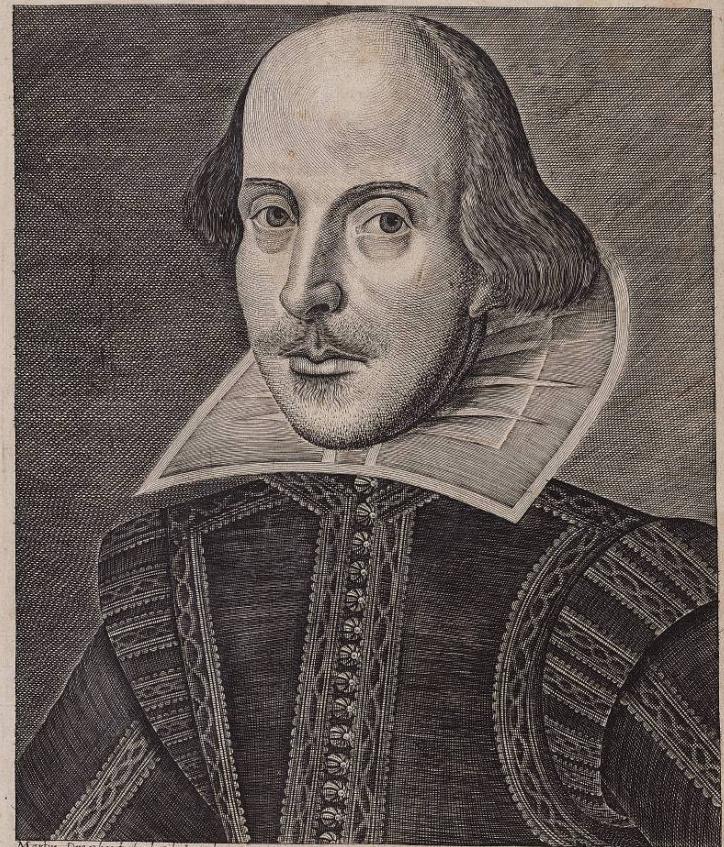
Comedies, tragedies, histories: these plays are our heritage. They have become so thoroughly a part of our speech and our modes of thought that we unconsciously quote Shakespeare's lines or refer to his characters to explain life to ourselves, or ourselves to the world. Their impact is surpassed only by that of the King James version of the Bible, which was produced in Shakespeare's lifetime. As soul of the age which gave rise to the modern world, Shakespeare gave voice to the inmost concerns of humanity.

To be or not to be — that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. (HAMLET)



MR. WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARES
COMEDIES,
HISTORIES, &
TRAGEDIES.

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Shakespeare

THE GLOBE & THE WORLD

He was the soul of the age and yet not of his age but for all time. So wrote English playwright Ben Jonson in 1623 in verses which he contributed to the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. This was high praise from a sometime rival, just as the elaborate publication was a remarkable tribute to a dramatist who had written for the public stage.

The age itself was one of the most glorious periods of English history. Six years before Shakespeare was born, Queen Elizabeth, the last heir to Henry Tudor, had ascended the throne. Intellectually gifted and politically shrewd, she brought peace and economic stability to the strife-torn land and inspired the people with great confidence in their queen, their country, and themselves. She sought to resolve the religious turmoil that had seethed for more than a quarter-century by re-establishing the Anglican Church, though not in an extremely Protestant form. Education flourished, as did music, poetry, drama, and the other arts. In a very real sense, she ruled over the birth of the modern world.

In her days every man shall eat in safety
Under his own vine what he plants, and sing
The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours.
God shall be truly known. . . . (HENRY VIII)

We know relatively little about Shakespeare's early life — that he was born in a house which still stands in Stratford-upon-Avon and that he was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Holy Trinity Church. Like most midlands people of their generation, his parents did not read or write, but William could have learned at the Stratford Grammar School. By the age of nineteen he was married and a father, and, within two years more, the father of twins. Sometime thereafter, he traveled the hundred miles from Stratford to London, where, by 1592, he had established himself in the theatre.

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women are merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man is his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. (AS YOU LIKE IT)

London during the reigns of Elizabeth and King James I, who succeeded her in 1603, was a magnet drawing people from all corners of the land. Its streets were filled with people wearing fanciful modes of dress, and its pulpits with preachers who denounced the fashions and the use of cosmetics. Trade and commerce flourished, as did prostitution, gambling, and drunkenness. Religious services and business transactions were conducted with equal fervor in St. Paul's Cathedral. Just up the river was Westminster Palace, where Elizabeth met with Parliament — infrequently, to tell the truth.

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise. . . .
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm,
This England. . . . (RICHARD II)

Outside the city also were the public theatres, banned by the Puritan officials as tools of the devil himself. James Burbage had built the first playhouse, called simply the Theatre, in 1576 on rented land in Finsbury Field, to the north. When the landowner refused to renew the lease in 1599, the Burbage sons took the structure apart, transported the timbers south of the city to Bankside, and there built the Globe Playhouse, Shakespeare's Wooden O.

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous,
there shall be no more cakes and ale?
(TWELFTH NIGHT)

Despite the Puritan's disapproval, people from all ranks of society crossed the river and paid their pennies to enter the Globe and other theatres, where they could observe two hours traffic of the stage. Because people stood or sat on three sides of the acting platform, scenery was used sparingly, if at all; but the stage consisted of different acting areas on various levels, and the creative playwright could use these to represent an entire world.

. . . can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt? (HENRY V)