



Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



Richard II

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words

By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespeare-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (Othello, 5.2.7). Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, *Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).

Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as ‘conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplausible’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespeare words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention than any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.

Not of an Age, but for All Mankind

By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare's Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London's south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the "groundlings" may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don't yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience "Stinkards . . . glewed together in crowdes with the Steames of strong breath" (*Shakespeare's Globe: The Guide Book* [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City's own Utah Shakespeare Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare's perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare's lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing *Hamlet*, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, "Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations." She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more "quotations" to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare's character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in *Hamlet*, Lawrence Fishburn in *Othello*, Leonardo de Caprio in *Romeo + Juliet*, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in *Much Ado about Nothing* in her advice to her cousin about

choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” *Coriolanus* presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in *Othello*, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”

Elizabeth's England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (*Richard II*), France (*As You Like It*), Vienna (*Measure for Measure*), fifteenth-century Italy (*Romeo and Juliet*), the England ruled by Elizabeth's father (*Henry VIII*) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare's own time and place. But all Shakespeare's plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth's England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth's reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man's nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” “and hurry,” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespeare expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind's eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet's rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in *Julius Caesar* throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering

Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun's chariot in Greek mythology: "Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phaeton" (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare's plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare's plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from "The Shakespeare Plays," educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)

History Is Written by the Victors

From *Insights*, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (*King John*) to the beginning of England's first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (*Richard II*) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (*Richard III*), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth's father (*Henry VIII*). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare's day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare's plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England's enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare's bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.

Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume

by Diana Major Spencer From *Insights*, 1994

Could the plays known as Shakespeare's have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled his name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Henry V*? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create *King Lear* and *Macbeth*?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is "The Shakespeare Controversy."

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the "real author" have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford--among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name "Shakespeare"—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton's? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name "Shakespeare" could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the "facts" of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn't Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one's own life. "The Controversy" was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon. Hooray for our side!

A Nest of Singing Birds

From *Insights*, 1992

Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespeare Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul's Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, "I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures."

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one's part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in *The Compleat Gentleman* in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to "sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol."

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors' cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six

voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespeare Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and learning.

Actors in Shakespeare's Day

By Stephanie Chidester From *Insights*, 1994

The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare's age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as "vagabonds and sturdy beggars," as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians' social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade "the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liveries, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)" in order to "curb the power of local grandees" (Dennis Kay, *Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era* [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the "Acte for the punishment of Vagabondes" (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared "vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment" (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, *A Short View of Elizabethan Drama* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly *The Comedy of Errors*) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: "On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d 'to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.' Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?" (S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).

But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country” (G. B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage seruantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611. It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.149-50).

Shakespeare's Audience: A Very Motley Crowd

From *Insights*, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords' box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In *Hamlet*, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were "for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise." His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in *Julius Caesar*.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o'clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baitings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no

magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare's theatre filling an educational need is probably that of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed, and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others, the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers, historians, humanists, and playwrights.

The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality, and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.

Shakespeare Snapshots

From *Insights*, 2002

By Ace G. Pilkington

It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare's life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582–83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare's twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare's career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It's hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare's life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare's youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare's birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—"upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes" (Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, "The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs's house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (*The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare's "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford's elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. "We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare's road to London" (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare's road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth's words, "Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns" (*Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre* [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.

In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh’, according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, *William Shakespeare: A Popular Life* [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (*Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Raleigh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.

Ghosts, Witches, and Shakespeare

By Howard Waters

From *Insights*, 2006

Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake’s neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman’s axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon’s entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare’s plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” *Social Backgrounds of English Literature*, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person’s entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was supposedly cursed due to the playwright’s having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace’s

subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, *The Mind of Man* [New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954], 54).

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespeare play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, or *Hamlet*, or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In *Richard III* there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In *Macbeth* the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In *Hamlet*, the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in *Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply had no need of it.

Shakespeare's Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare's time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, "off the rack" and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn't want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren't allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like *Romeo and Juliet*, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for *Hamlet*, or ancient Rome for *Julius Caesar*, or Oberon and Titania's forest for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today's audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, *Romeo and Juliet* was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, *West Side Story*, an updated musical version of the *Romeo and Juliet* tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing "special" clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.

Synopsis: *Richard II*

It is England of 1398, during the reign of King Richard II; and one of Richard's powerful uncles, Thomas, the duke of Gloucester, has been mysteriously murdered. Henry Bolingbroke, a nephew of Gloucester and cousin to King Richard, appears before the king and accuses the king's supporter, Thomas Mowbray, of treason, including the murder of Gloucester. Mowbray claims innocence and demands a trial by combat. Despite Richard's appeals, seconded by Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt, the two noble-men insist on fighting; Richard gives in and appoints a trial by combat at Coventry. In the meantime, Gloucester's widow begs Gaunt to avenge her husband's death. Gaunt, while suspecting Richard's complicity, insists that God alone can avenge any wrong committed by his earthly representative, the king, thus setting up many of the conflicts of the play.

At Coventry, Richard unexpectedly stops the combat and banishes Mowbray for life and Bolingbroke for six years, thus ridding himself of two dangerous rivals. Not long after, while condemning Richard's serious mismanagement of England, Gaunt dies. Richard immediately confiscates Gaunt's wealth, partly to finance his fighting of a rebellion in Ireland. The Duke of York, also a brother to Gloucester and uncle to Richard and Bolingbroke, is horrified and chastises the king for this illegal seizure, comparing it ominously with the usurpation of a crown. The king, ignoring this outburst, departs for Ireland and leaves York to be governor of England in his absence.

In his absence, Bolingbroke returns from exile, ostensibly to claim his inheritance. Many nobles, headed by the earl of Northumberland, flock to him. York arrives, bewailing his present dilemma: both king and invader are his kinsmen, and he feels he owes loyalty to each of them. Uncertain what to do, he leaves with the queen. Bushy, Bagot, and Greene, three of the king's favorites, flee, realizing that trouble lies ahead. Meanwhile Richard is succeeding on the battlefield, and the king's men are flocking to him.

Bolingbroke and Northumberland, on the march, meet Northumberland's son, Harry Percy, who brings news that York and a small force are stationed nearby at Berkeley Castle. Soon Lord Berkeley enters, bearing York's demand that Bolingbroke explain his presence in England. York himself follows, and he castigates his nephew for disloyalty to the king. Bolingbroke insists that he has returned only to claim what is rightfully his--the estate of his father, Gaunt. Bolingbroke's supporters back him up. York continues to insist on the treasonous nature of their opposition to the king, but he declares that he will remain neutral, lacking power enough to oppose them.

Richard, having returned from Ireland, responds to the news with wild emotional swings, veering between confidence in divine support and dark despair. Finally, informed that York has joined Bolingbroke and that Bolingbroke is after more than just his inheritance, he subsides into resignation and concedes defeat.

Bolingbroke ascends the throne; but in order to confirm his power, he summons Richard to resign the crown formally. The bishop of Carlisle warns that the deposing of a lawful king promises great danger for England; nevertheless, Richard performs the unholy reversal of his coronation, parting with his crown, his kingdom, even his name. Then after parting forever from his queen, Richard is imprisoned in Pomfret Castle.

Bolingbroke's power is not completely secure, however. York's son, Aumerle, joins a conspiracy against the new king. York, fearing the wrath of the king, reveals his son's treachery, but the duchess of York pleads for mercy, moving Bolingbroke to pardon Aumerle, though he condemns the other conspirators.

Alone in prison, Richard contemplates his failures and sorrows. A still-loyal groom visits him with news of King Henry IV's coronation. Suddenly, Exton, acting on a vague hint from the new king, enters with armed men and murders Richard. Just as Gloucester was killed to strengthen Richard's power, so now Richard is killed to confirm Bolingbroke's rule. The new reign, begun in sacrilege, continues in guilt.

Characters: *Richard II*

KING RICHARD II: grandson of King Edward and son of Edward the Black Prince, is king of England when the play opens but is deposed by Bolingbroke and murdered by his men.

QUEEN: Richard's wife

JOHN OF GAUNT: duke of Lancaster, Richard's uncle and Henry Bolingbroke's father, is an elder statesman and the epitome of honor and patriotism. Early in the play he urges obedience to the king; yet, on his deathbed, he delivers a scathing denunciation of the way England's honor has vanished under Richard.

HENRY BOLINGBROKE: John of Gaunt's son, duke of Hereford, claimant to his father's dukedom of Lancaster, and later King Henry IV, begins the play loyal to his king, although suspicious of his role in the death of his uncle, the duke of Gloucester. However, as the events progress, he matures and changes, eventually seizing the throne from Richard.

EDMUND OF LANGLEY: Duke of York, King Richard and Bolingbroke's uncle.

DUCHESS OF YORK: York's wife.

DUKE OF AUMERLE: York's son and the Earl of Rutland, cousin to Richard and Bolingbroke, remains loyal to Richard and plans an unsuccessful rebellion against Bolingbroke.

DUCHESS OF GLOUCESTER: widow of Thomas of Woodstock and aunt of Richard and Bolingbroke.

THOMAS MOWBRAY: duke of Norfolk and supporter of King Richard.

EARL OF SALISBURY: supporter of King Richard.

LORD BERKELEY: supporter of King Richard.

DUKE OF SURREY: supporter of King Richard.

BISHOP OF CARLISLE: supporter of King Richard.

SIR STEPHEN SCROOP: supporter of King Richard.

ABBOT OF WESTMINSTER: supporter of King Richard.

BUSHY: a supporter and favorite of King Richard.

BAGOT: a supporter and favorite of King Richard.

GREEN: a supporter and favorite of King Richard.

EARL OF NORTHUMBERLAND: supporter of Bolingbroke.

HARRY PERCY: Northumberland's son and supporter of Bolingbroke.

LORD ROSS: supporter of Bolingbroke.

LORD WILLOUGHBY: supporter of Bolingbroke.

LORD FITZWATER: supporter of Bolingbroke.

SIR PIERCE OF EXTON: supporter of Bolingbroke.

Richard II: Essentially Accurate History

By Ace G. Pilkington

From *Souvenir Program*, 1993

As the perfecter of the English history play, William Shakespeare has shaped the version of history that many English speakers today believe. In historian J. L. Kirby's words, "From Shakespeare, of course, we can never escape whether we wish to or not" (*Henry IV of England*, London: Constable, 1970, 2). There is, then, a distinct irony when critics misinterpret Shakespeare's essentially accurate *Richard II* because they don't know enough history to understand it, because, in fact, they do not have the background which Shakespeare's original audience possessed and which he could safely take for granted. The irony deepens when these same critics, having distorted history through ignorance, accuse Shakespeare of distorting it by design.

The worst offender here is E. M. W. Tillyard, who has unfortunately been influential as well as wrongheaded. Tillyard says, "Shakespeare knows that Richard's crimes never amounted to tyranny and hence that outright rebellion against him was a crime" (*Shakespeare's History Plays*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1951, 261). By this interpretation, Henry Bolingbroke becomes a usurper and the Wars of the Roses a divine punishment for Henry's flouting of God's will. However, Shakespeare knew perfectly well (and showed for those who pay attention) that Richard was a tyrant who deserved to be deposed for his own evil and needed to be deposed for England's good.

The clashes between Richard and his nobles steadily escalated throughout his reign. The first—in 1386—involved Arundel and Thomas, duke of Gloucester, and left Richard fuming under the rule of an executive commission for one year. Compelled to accept by the threat of deposition, Richard thought of asking the opposing lords to dinner and murdering them, but gave up the idea as unworkable.

The second clash came in November of 1387, when Richard challenged the commission with a royal army in Cheshire. Gloucester and Arundel joined with Warwick, swiftly bringing their own troops to London and "appealing" five of Richard's closest advisors of treason. Caught without an army of his own, Richard agreed to put the matter to Parliament.

However, when the three "appellant" lords withdrew their army, Richard let his favorites escape and summoned his Cheshire archers. Then, in December 1387, Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray joined the appellants. The king's men were defeated at Radcot Bridge, and again Richard found himself pressured to agree to demands by the threat of deposition.

It took Richard ten years to prepare his revenge, building up his power to the point of tyranny. He now had a formidable force of Cheshire archers, and Parliament had, at his request, redefined interference in the royal household as treason. In July of 1397, the three original appellants were themselves appealed of treason. Warwick confessed and was banished, Arundel was executed, and Gloucester, imprisoned in Calais, died mysteriously, almost certainly on Richard's orders.

Parliament was forced to agree to what Richard wanted by the presence of 4,000 archers with bent bows and drawn arrows. The repeal of the general pardons put most of the people of southeast England into a position where Richard could exploit them. He sold pardons, neglected to record the sales, and sold pardons to the same men (and whole counties) again; and, finally, he had blank charters (which gave complete power over the lives and fortunes of the men forced to sign them) drawn, signed, and stored for later use.

With Richard censoring all foreign mail and ordering his sheriffs to jail anyone who criticized him, Mowbray told Bolingbroke of Richard's intention to punish them for their part in Radcot Bridge. Remembering Mowbray's hand in the destruction of the three elder appellants, Bolingbroke

reported his words to John of Gaunt, who, in turn, reported to the king. Then, it was simple for Richard to force a quarrel and banish both men.

This is the Richard and the situation with which Shakespeare begins, and when John of Gaunt condemns his nephew while praising his country, he is separating Richard from that sacred Englishness which, alone, made the king an object of veneration. He is also following history more closely than many of Shakespeare's critics have done.

For more about Shakespeare's historical accuracy, see Pilkington's *Screening Shakespeare* from Richard II to Henry V and Marie Louise Bruce's *The Usurper King: Henry of Bolingbroke, 1366-99.*)

Richard II: **Distorting and Redefining to Deepen Understanding**

By Michael Flachmann

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 1993

Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1596) reflects English history in much the same way a modern carnival mirror distorts and redefines the object it represents. The goal of such revision is not to reproduce actual reality, but to create an imaginative theatrical narrative that teaches us more than mere history ever could. As a result, an increased awareness of the manner in which a playwright has altered his historical sources can often point the way toward a deeper understanding of the themes and symbolic correspondences generated by the newly conceived dramatic story.

Shakespeare departed from his principal source, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), by expanding and redefining the characters of John of Gaunt, the duchess of York, and the earl of Northumberland; by creating a largely fictitious role for Queen Isabel (who was a child of eleven at the time of Richard's deposition); by adding the famous garden scene; and, most important of all, by inventing out of whole cloth much of the sympathetic, poetic nature of King Richard. Some of these refinements may have been suggested to the playwright by Samuel Daniel's *The First Four Books of the Civil Wars* (1595), but most of them undoubtedly resulted from Shakespeare's instinctive desire to construct an improved historical reality that entertained and edified its Renaissance audience through intriguing character development, expanded roles for women, and clearly drawn antagonists whose bold and memorable personalities elevated much of the action to symbolic prominence.

The major themes and images that rise from this freshly constructed narrative offer fascinating insights into the most important social and political concerns of late sixteenth-century England. Chief among these is the stark contrast between Richard the king and Bolingbroke the usurper. In the language of William Butler Yeats, Bolingbroke is the vessel of clay, while Richard is the vessel of porcelain. Bolingbroke is durable, utilitarian, unattractive, necessary; he is the pragmatic, de facto ruler, the right man at the right moment in England's inevitable struggle for political stability. Richard, less efficient yet more compelling, seems exquisite, fragile, gorgeous, and impractical; the last of the medieval kings, he must of necessity yield to his rival, the rough and unpolished Henry Bolingbroke, who as the first Renaissance king will consolidate political power by sharing it with his subjects.

Through Shakespeare's brilliant poetry, Richard also becomes an archetype of Christ, divinely

anointed, whose loss of the kingship symbolizes a fall from “this other Eden, demi-paradise.” Bolingbroke’s victory, through necessary historically, is morally repugnant because he has usurped God’s heavenly appointed representative on earth. Not surprisingly, Richard advocates “the divine right of kings,” a widely accepted concept of political sovereignty intended to shield him from rebellion: “Not all the water in the rough rude sea,” he argues, “can wash the balm off from an anointed king.” Bolingbroke has also disrupted Richard’s role as a “scourge of God” meant to punish England for its past sins and social excesses. According to this doctrine, a country was required by moral law to suffer in “passive obedience” the indignities of an inept ruler. If god wished to punish a people, he might send them such a king as Richard to test their true submission to His almighty will.

The paradox is instructive: Richard is a divinely appointed yet incompetent ruler whose very presence on the throne serves as a “mirror for magistrates”--an exemplum provided by God to tutor future monarchs in proper administrative conduct. Through Shakespeare, we study history to avoid the errors of the past. When Bolingbroke seizes all the political power, however, Richard usurps the theatrical power of the play. As audience, we condemn Richard as a king, yet learn to revere him as a complex and fascinating human being whose fall from grace elevates him to tragic stature. Though Bolingbroke will nourish the garden of the kingdom, Richard nourishes our very souls with his clear-eyed self-perception and soaring verse.

This is, of course, the ultimate irony of Shakespeare’s play. We stare into its dramatic mirror, expecting visions of Renaissance politics and history, yet what we see most vividly is our own reflection through the character of Richard: flawed, ambitious, sensitive, betrayed, and--above all else--triumphantly alive. As a result, the play is nothing less than an examination of human destiny presented through a shimmering glass that simultaneously contains reality and falsehood, fact and fiction. And all this is so cleverly blended by our master playwright that, in the final analysis, the truth of history seems much less enduring and meaningful than the truth of art.

Richard II: Insecure, Incompetent—and Fascinating

By Robert Franklin Coleman and Patricia Truxler Coleman

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Sentimental, inept, vacillating, insecure, and incompetent, Shakespeare's *Richard II* is easily one of the playwright's most problematic tragic heroes. And yet, historically, this man who reigned over England for more than twenty-two years seems to have exhibited his weaknesses only in the last year or two of his reign. But it is Richard, the fallen king, whom Shakespeare focuses on in *Richard II*, and it is his fundamental character weakness which most fascinates both the author and the audience.

Richard II is neither the "elvish'-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog" that *Richard III* is nor the "false face" which must hide what "false heart doth know" that Macbeth is. Likewise, he is not simply a misguided, childish man who "should not have been old 'til [he] had been wise," like King Lear. Indeed, Richard is a special case.

He is a man who intends, for the most part, to do well, but whose actions are at best foolish and at worst malicious, making him in many ways, as Harold Goddard puts it, "the most subtle piece of psychological analysis" in all the history plays (The Meaning of Shakespeare, vol. 1 [University of Chicago Press, 1965], 148). A man whose imagination controls him, he is enchanted with words. Yet, at the same time, he seems to be a man who has failed to make the connection between symbol and reality.

On the one hand, at a absolutely critical time of action, Richard philosophizes about the job of a king: "Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs, / Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes / Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth. / Let's choose executors and talk of wills; / And yet not so, for what can we bequeath / Save our deposed bodies to the ground? . . . / For God's sake let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings: / How some have been depos'd, some slain in war, / Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed, / Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping kill'd, / All murdered" (3.2.145-50, 155-60). Fond words, indeed, but not very useful when one is in the midst of battle. And it is not that Richard is cowardly, but rather that he is incapable of decisive action when it is most required.

On the other hand, Richard is capable of decisive action at the least appropriate times. When his uncle, John of Gaunt, is dying, Richard's response is to heap insult upon insult on the old man, finally calling him "a lunatic lean-witted fool" (2.1.115). And upon the death of Gaunt, Richard seizes all the man's property and wealth to enrich the coffers of the king. It is precisely this action that forces Gaunt's banished son, Bolingbroke, to return to England. And it is the return of Bolingbroke that precipitates the usurpation of Richard.

So we have in this play, a tragic hero who, while capable of action, is incapable of good judgment. At the very least, a king under attack cannot afford to "sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings" (3.2.155-56). The circumstances require action, not poetic reflection. and likewise a nephew, no matter what his position is in the kingdom nor his feelings about his uncle, ought not to attach a dying man. Human compassion for any individual tells us that.

As Herschel Baker so succinctly puts it, Richard II "records the deposition of a king who shows himself unfit to rule. To regard Richard as sentimentally as he regards himself is to ignore what Shakespeare is at pains to underscore: that whereas rebellion is a crime, kingship is a sacred burden" (The Riverside Shakespeare [Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974], 801). And no kingdom can afford a man who merely plays at the job of king.

But to excuse Bolingbroke completely for usurping the crown from Richard is to miss one of the most complex issues in this play. For here we have in Richard a king who is so clearly incompetent as to be dangerous. But Bolingbroke's usurpation will inevitably lead to equally dangerous consequences for the kingdom. As Henry IV, Bolingbroke is confronted with rebellion after rebellion within the kingdom. What we have here is, quite simply, the problem of doing the wrong thing--usurping the crown--for the wrong reason. And the result is political chaos for the English people from 1399 to 1485. Even the apparently peaceful reign of Henry V, according to Shakespeare, seems to be the result of distracting those responsible for internal unrest in the kingdom by making war on France.

So we return to our original statement: *Richard II* is one of Shakespeare's most problematic tragic heroes. If, as Aristotle has suggested, a tragic hero is a highly renowned man or woman whom we admire and who falls from a position of esteem to a position of disgrace as a result of a flaw in his or her own character, can we call Richard II a tragic figure? Certainly, he is famous; he is the king of England at the outset of the play.

Certainly, he falls from grace, surrendering the crown to Bolingbroke and ultimately being murdered in the Tower of London. Certainly, he is an enormously flawed human being, incapable of distinguishing between symbols and the things for which symbols stand, between word and deed. But the real question is whether or not he is the kind of figure whom we can admire. For over three hundred and fifty years, critics have struggled with that very question. Is Richard II tragic or pathetic? And it is to Shakespeare's credit that no definitive answer has ever been given. It is precisely because Shakespeare's *Richard II*, like most of his plays, raises more questions than it answers that we will find the play intriguing centuries after it was composed. But then, as Chekhov has pointed out, the obligation of the writer is not to propose answers but to pose questions. If, indeed, Chekhov is correct, it is easy to see why this play, like nearly all the Shakespeare's plays, is popular today and will be in the future as well.

