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Part One

*Shakespeare: An
Overview*



Chapter 1



Elizabethan Theatre



✦ Elizabethan Theatre

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) lived in a transitional period when the English medieval feudal order was being destroyed and a new capitalist society was born. For the most part of his career, Shakespeare enjoyed the patronage of the court of Elizabeth I (1533-1603, Queen of England: 1558-1603) and then that of King James I (1566-1625; King of England: 1603-1625; King of Scotland as James VI: 1567-1625).

When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, England was a mercantile nation with a powerful navy, a thriving middle class, and widespread literacy. The English Church had broken with Rome under previous monarchs, and was now headed by Elizabeth I. The Elizabethan court was largely responsible for the flourishing of the arts: art, music, architecture and literature. Elizabeth's long reign (1558-1603) produced the "Elizabethan Age", which was at the centre of the English Renaissance (Hebron 6). Her love of theatrical performances at court and her patronage of the theatre produced a theatrical explosion, known as Elizabethan drama, with prominent dramatists represented by John Lyly (1553-1606), Thomas Kyd (1558-1594), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), John Fletcher (1579-1625), Ben Jonson (1572-1637), and of course, William Shakespeare.

The population of London grew rapidly over the early modern period, from an estimated 50,000 in 1530 to 120,000 in 1550, 200,000 in 1600 and nearly 300,000 in 1660 (Hebron 25). A flux of people came to London seeking their fortunes, including ambitious young men who intended to become actors and playwrights. Provincial audiences, as well as Londoners, had a thirst for pageantry and performances.

Since the Reformation had done away with the Mystery and Miracle plays on biblical themes, playwrights turned to the English historical chronicles, myths, legends, folktales and contemporary life for the source material. Theatre began to spring up all over London to cater to the hunger for entertainment. All of this paved the way for the development of Elizabethan theatre.

✦ Theatres and Actors

In big cities like London, people watched plays mainly in playhouses (outdoor theatres) and indoor theatres.

rest of the audience stood in the open yard around the stage and they were known as “the Groundlings”. This kind of stage makes it possible for the actors to address the audience directly, which generates a close actor-spectator relationship. In Shakespeare’s plays, when an actor delivers a soliloquy, he would often walk to the edge of the stage speaking directly to the audience.

(2) Indoor theatres

Simultaneously with the growth of the outdoor theatres, a number of indoor ones were built for the companies such as Boy Actors. These theatres were smaller than the outdoor ones and rectangular, roofed and lighted by candles. They were attended by a more select class of audience; admission was more expensive and they housed something like 600 to 700 spectators.

(3) Actors

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the actor was not a recognised craftsman or professional. Thus, his activities were not regulated by a guild, and his livelihood had no protection. In 1572, an Act was passed declaring that only groups of players with a document proving the personal patronage of a nobleman were allowed to tour. This practice led to the professionalisation of acting, which brought with it more secure financial arrangements and the passing on of skills from masters to apprentices (Hebron 131-132).

In Renaissance theatre, all the female roles were played by boy actors, though characters like Lady Macbeth may well have been performed by adult male actors. The boys were apprenticed, probably for two or three years, to an actor who held shares in the company. Playwrights like Shakespeare would often make use of the cross-gender acting style and construct plots focusing on disguise and cross-dressing, thus creating a fluid event constantly moving between the real and the pretended, the actual and the symbolic (Hebron 133).