

On Shakespeare and His Times

A
Resource for
Grades K - 12
About the Life
and Times of
William
Shakespeare

Shakespeare Festival St. Louis' Education Tour offers a fine opportunity for live performance to become a part of the rich fabric of learning within your classroom. Watching a play or becoming an actor helps develop engaged students who enthusiastically take part in a comprehensive learning experience. Spending a little time introducing your class to Shakespeare and the play they will see will increase your student's ability to be an active, thoughtful and entertained audience member.

These study materials offer an entry point for stimulating interest and providing a context through which your students will have a deeper and enjoyable time watching the Shakespeare Festival touring production.

The materials are also helpful as a guide to learning about their role as the audience - and THAT is the key! Without an audience, the theatre does not exist. Shakespeare Festival Education Tour provides the performance, but only you and your students can complete the "Shakespeareance."

Without you, Shakespeare's brilliance is merely words on a page. Together we bring his plays alive, allowing his genius to inspire the audiences of the future!

Christopher Limber
Education Director
Shakespeare Festival St. Louis



Students at City Academy enjoy Education Tour 2007's *A Midsummer Night's Dream...In the Wink of an Eye!* Photo © J. David Levy.

"On Shakespeare and His Times" Table of Contents & "Show Me" Standards

William Shakespeare: A BiographyPage 1
Show Me Standards FA5; CA3 & 6, SS6

Theatre in Shakespeare's DayPage 2
Show Me Standards FA5; SS6; CA6

The Globe TheatrePages 3 & 4
Show Me Standards FA1-5; SS5&6; CA6

Shakespeare's World: Elizabethan EnglandPage 5
Show Me Standards SS 3, 5 & 6, CA6, 7

Shakespeare as Playwright & BusinessmanPage 6
Show Me Standards CA5; SS4&6

National Standards

- Kennedy Center ArtsEdge Theatre Content Standard 2-8:
2. Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and informal or formal productions
 3. Designing and producing by conceptualizing and realizing artistic interpretations for informal or formal productions
 4. Directing by interpreting dramatic texts and organizing and conducting rehearsals for informal or formal productions
 5. Researching by evaluating and synthesizing cultural and historical information to support artistic choices
 6. Comparing and integrating art forms by analyzing traditional theatre, dance, music, visual arts, and new art forms
 7. Analyzing, critiquing, and constructing meanings from informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions
 8. Understanding context by analyzing the role of theatre, film, television, and electronic media in the past and the present

Standards for the English Language Arts Sponsored by NCTE and IRA (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12)

National Standards for History 5-12: Era 6, Standards 3, 4, 6

Contributing Writers

- William Shakespeare
- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Jason Cannon | Louise Edwards |
| Christopher Limber | Andrew Michael Neiman |
| Michael B. Perkins | Janis Valdes |

Special Thanks to The Shakespeare Theatre Company

**Education Tour 2009 is sponsored by
Jeanne and Rex Sinquefield**

William Shakespeare: A Biography

No man's life has been the subject of more speculation than William Shakespeare's. For all his fame and celebration, Shakespeare's personal history remains a mystery.

There are two primary sources for information on the Bard: his works, and various legal and church documents that have survived from Elizabethan times. Unfortunately, there are many gaps in this information and much room for conjecture.

We know a man named William Shakespeare was baptized at Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564, and was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford on April 25, 1616. Tradition holds that he was born three days earlier, and that he died on his birthday—April 23—but this is perhaps more romantic myth than fact. Young William was born of John Shakespeare, a glover and leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a landed heiress. William, according to the church register, was the third of eight children in the Shakespeare household, three of whom died in childhood. We assume that Shakespeare went to grammar school, since his father was first a member of the Stratford Council and later high bailiff (the equivalent of town mayor). A grammar school education would have meant that Shakespeare was exposed to the rudiments of Latin rhetoric, logic and literature.

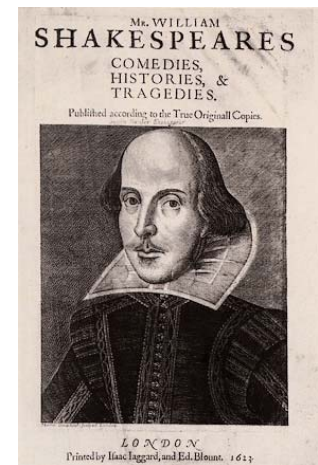
In 1575, John Shakespeare suddenly disappears from Stratford's political records. Some believe that his removal from office necessitated his son's quitting school and taking a position as a butcher's apprentice. Church records tell us that banns (announcements) were published for the marriage of a William Shakespeare to an Ann Whatley in 1582 (there are no records indicating that this arrangement was solemnized, however). On November 27 of the same year a marriage license was granted to 18-year-old William and 26-year-old Anne Hathaway. A daughter, Susanna, was born to the couple six months later. We know that twins, Hamnet and Judith, were born soon after, that the twins were baptized, and that Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11, on August 11, 1596. We don't know how the young Shakespeare came to travel to London or how he first came to the stage. One theory holds that young Will was arrested as a poacher (one who hunts illegally on someone else's property) and escaped to London to avoid prosecution in Stratford; another holds that he left

home to work in the city as a school teacher. Neither is corroborated by contemporary testimony or public record.

Whatever the truth may be, it is clear that between 1582 and 1592, Shakespeare became involved in the London theatre scene as a principal actor and playwright with one of several repertory companies. By 1594, Shakespeare was listed as a shareholder in one of the most popular acting companies in London, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. He was a member of this company for the rest of his career, which lasted until about 1611. When James I came to the throne in 1603, he issued a royal license to Shakespeare and his fellow players, inviting them to call themselves the King's Men. In 1608, the King's Men leased the Blackfriars Theatre in London. This theatre, which had artificial lighting and was probably heated, served as their winter playhouse. The famous Globe Theatre was their summer performance space.

In 1616 Shakespeare's daughter Judith married Thomas Quiney, the son of a neighbor in Stratford. Shakespeare revised his will six weeks later; within a month he died. The revised version of his will bequeathed his house and all the goods therein to his daughter Susanna and her husband Dr. John Hall, leaving Judith and Thomas only a small sum of money; his wife, who survived him, received the couple's second best bed.

In the years since Shakespeare's death, he has risen to the position of "patron saint" of English literature and drama. In the 1800s especially, his plays were so popular that many refused to believe that an actor from Stratford had written them. To this day some believe that Sir Francis Bacon was the real author of the plays; others choose to believe Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford, was the author. Still others would prefer to believe Walter Raleigh or Christopher Marlowe penned the lines attributed to Shakespeare. While most people are content to believe that genius can spring up in any social class or rural setting, the gap between the known facts and the myths that surround Shakespeare's life leaves ample room for speculation.



Portrait of Shakespeare engraved by Martin Droeshout, on the title page of the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's works, 1623.

Theatre in Shakespeare's Day



Shakespeare's Globe (The Globe 1614). Reproduced from a stamp designed by C Walter Hodges, issued by Royal Mail on 8 August 1995.

Shakespeare's company was the most successful of its day, and his plays filled the theatres. Though most of the audience at a public performance lacked formal education and could not read, the audience of Shakespeare's day loved to listen to great words. Shakespeare's audiences used to say "we're going to go hear a play." When we read Shakespeare today we study the editors' notes which help us appreciate some of the knowledge and expectations the Elizabethan audience brought into the theatre. Such notes may explain images and highlight patterns of rhythm or verbal structures which we might not otherwise "hear" or appreciate like an Elizabethan. They may explain semantic change (changes of meaning) in words or phrases used by Shakespeare to convey important ideas to his audience, to make them laugh and to surprise them with a new word, pun or verbal motif.

Since there were no radios, CDs or televisions, the experience of hearing a new play was the major form of entertainment along with live music and sporting events like bear-baiting. Since there were no microphones, audiences had to be very attentive, listening to patterns of verse and rhyme. The audience was keenly aware of spoken imagery and listened closely to gather references to time, place and character in the play's words. All levels of society came to see Shakespeare's plays, as there weren't many other forms of entertainment. People could go to a bear-baiting, bull-baiting, public execution or two and the theatre.

The text was not written to be read as literature but as a blueprint for performance. The breaks between Shakespeare's "scenes" represent changes in time or place, but not of scenery, which was minimal or non-existent. Basic stage furniture served a variety of purposes; stage properties and costumes were more elaborate and suggestive.

Elizabethan playwrights wrote as quickly as possible, selling their plays to a company of actors for a fee and then immediately beginning work on a new piece. Shakespeare's plays were the equivalent of a modern-day television script or movie of the week. Many of Shakespeare's plays were not published until several years after his death.

Shakespeare's audiences used to say "we're going to go hear a play."

Once written, a play belonged to the commissioning theatre. Back then, if a writer was popular and sought by a theatre owner to write, playwrights might negotiate to receive a bonus when and if their play was successful and extended. As eventual co-

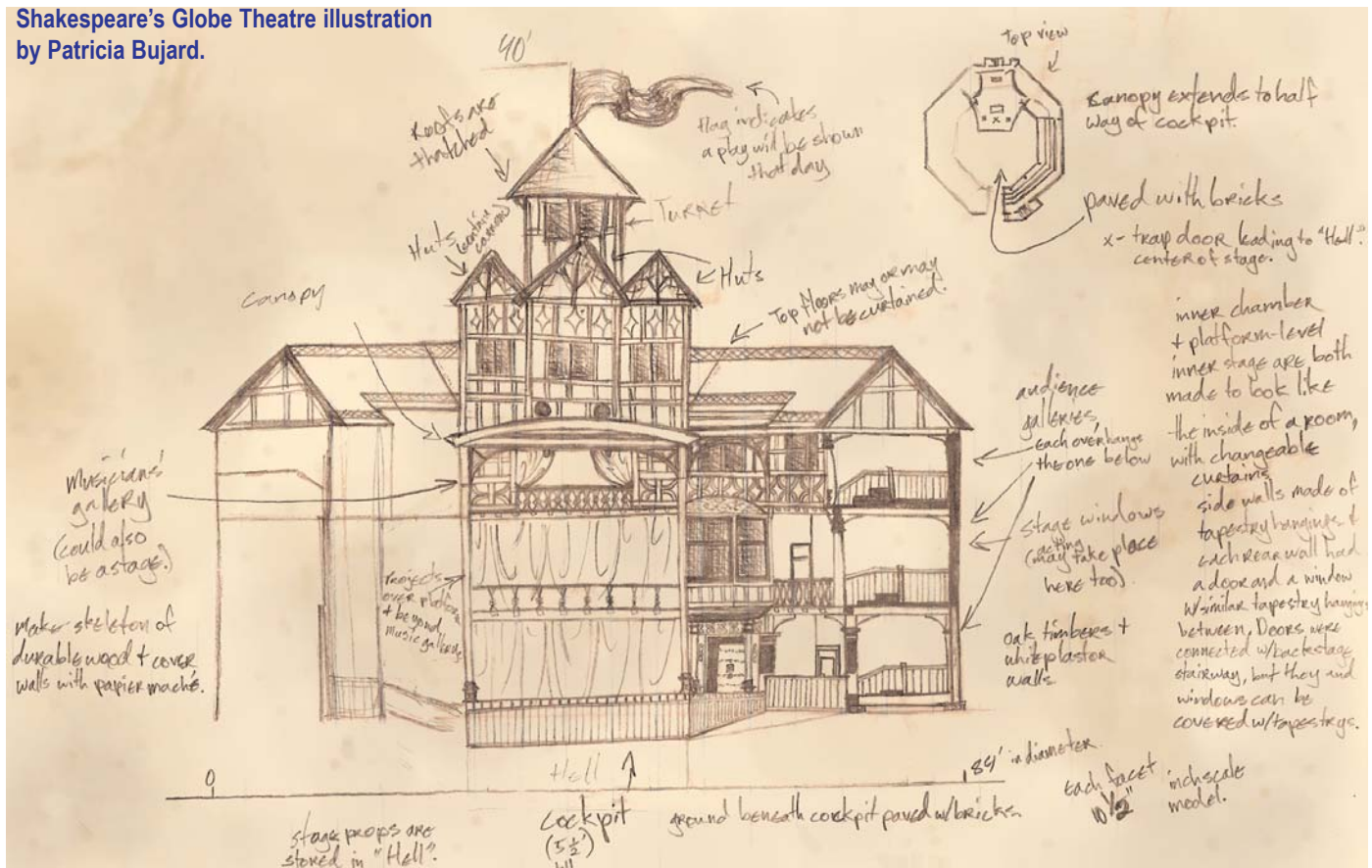
owner of his company, Shakespeare retained some decision making power about the distribution of his own work. There was a time when Shakespeare's theatre had to sell the rights to a few of his plays so as not to go bankrupt.

In Elizabethan theatres, there were no curtains to fall at the end of the scenes, so the action was continuous. Designation for the acts and scenes were added much later by editors. Since there were no electric lights and it was considered dangerous to walk the streets at night, plays were performed during the day.



People could go to a bear-baiting, bull-baiting, public execution or two and the theatre.

Shakespeare's Globe Theatre illustration by Patricia Bujard.



The Globe Theatre was originally constructed in 1599, with *Julius Caesar* the first recorded performance on September 21. The theatre was located in Bankside on the south side of the Thames, not far from other sites of popular entertainment, such as the Bear-Baiting Gardens.

Historically speaking, actors and other theatre professionals were thought by some to be only slightly better than vagabonds or criminals, while the theatre itself was criticized for the potentially seditious message it could send to an audience. As a result, the majority of theatres and less "seemly" entertainments were located outside of the city limits. Performances could be held daily and were indicated by a flag flown outside of the building. The information that has survived from eyewitness accounts, architectural foundations, maps, and other sources suggests that the building was roughly round in shape. The plays themselves sometimes reference the space in which they were performed:

On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
 So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
 The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affront the air at Agincourt?
The Life of King Henry the Fifth, Prologue

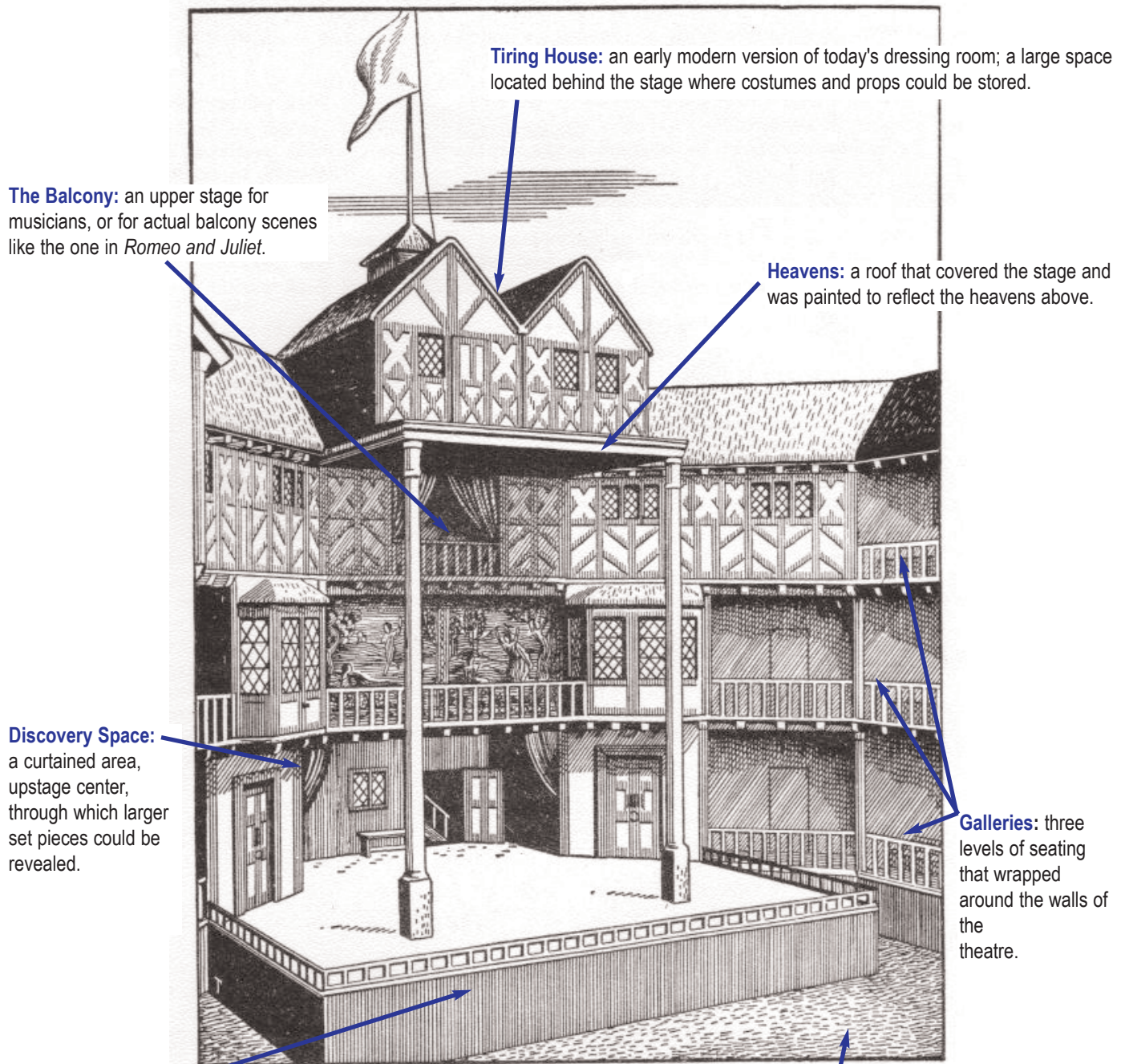
Unlike most of today's theatres, the Globe was an open-air structure. Performances were held during the day to make the most of natural light (Elizabethans did not have the luxury of electric lighting) and could be cancelled as a result of inclement weather. The actors wore contemporary Elizabethan clothing as their costumes.

The stage itself was a raised, square platform. Due to its size, it is generally assumed that scenery was limited. Philip Henslowe, the manager of the Globe's rival theatre, the Rose, kept a detailed account of his financial transactions and inventories. His diary has proved a useful resource for scholars interested in Elizabethan production practice. There are much fewer references to large set pieces than to costumes and small properties. However, larger items (like the

The Globe Theatre

bed in *Othello*) could be wheeled out from behind an upstage, curtained discovery space. There were two doors on the lower level for the actors' entrances and exits. The stage was surrounded on three sides by the audience, those who were standing on the ground below the actors and those who were seated on multiple levels under the thatched roof. Where you sat depended on your social status and how much you were willing to pay.

The image below depicts the parts of the theatre and how they were used.



Tiring House: an early modern version of today's dressing room; a large space located behind the stage where costumes and props could be stored.

The Balcony: an upper stage for musicians, or for actual balcony scenes like the one in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Heavens: a roof that covered the stage and was painted to reflect the heavens above.

Discovery Space: a curtained area, upstage center, through which larger set pieces could be revealed.

Galleries: three levels of seating that wrapped around the walls of the theatre.

The Stage of the Globe (drawn from the model made by Dr. J. C. Adams)

Hell: a trapdoor below the stage, used for special effects, staging, and entrances/exits, perhaps for characters like the gravedigger in *Hamlet* or the weird sisters in *Macbeth*.

The Pit: a standing-room-only area in the middle of the building that surrounded the stage; those who stood there during the performance were called "groundlings."

Shakespeare's World: Elizabethan England

The age of Shakespeare was a great time in English history. During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558—1603), England emerged as the leading naval and commercial power of the Western world, consolidating this position with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Elizabeth I firmly established the Church of England (begun by her father Henry VIII after a dispute with the Pope) during this time. London in the 16th century underwent a dramatic transformation; the population grew 400% between 1500 and 1600, swelling to nearly 200,000 people in the city proper and outlying region by the time an emerging artist from Stratford came to town. A rising merchant middle class was carving out a productive livelihood, and the economy was booming.

In Shakespeare's lifetime, England also experienced a tremendous cultural revival. This so called English Renaissance found expression in architecture, music, literature and drama. Shakespeare drew inspiration from and enhanced high and popular culture of the English Renaissance.

Popular entertainment during the 16th century tended to be boisterous and often violent. Many men, women and children attended public executions of criminals that took place on a regular basis, and persons of all social classes and genders attended theatre performances. The trade of bookmaking flourished during the period as public education fueled the appetite for great works in print.

From 1590—1593, England suffered from an outbreak of terrible proportions; the bubonic plague or "Black Death" claimed so many lives that English society stood on the verge of collapse. Many businesses, including theatres, closed, in part to keep people from spreading the disease and in part because of the labor shortage that resulted from such widespread illness and death.

Once the epidemic subsided, the theatres reopened and quickly regained their former popularity.

This explosion of commerce and culture lasted throughout Elizabeth's reign and into that of her successor, James I. James' rule brought many changes to English life; the two most pivotal were a bankrupt economy and an intense dissatisfaction from a minority religious group: the Puritans. In September 1642, the Puritan Parliament issued an edict that forbade all stage plays and closed the theatres, an act that effectively brought to a close the Elizabethan Renaissance. Theatres rapidly fell into disrepair and neglect until the Restoration in 1660.

In writing his plays and sonnets, William Shakespeare drew ideas from many different sources. His keen eye for

detail and his sharp understanding of human nature enabled him to create some of the most enduring works of drama and poetry ever produced. But his work also provides an insightful commentary on 16th century English values, life, history and thought.



"Engraving of Elizabeth I, Queen of England. Engraved by William Rogers after Isaac Oliver. This popular portrait print of Elizabeth, published by Sudbury & Humble during the early years of the 17th century, shows the Virgin Queen in full royal regalia—holding sceptre and orb, bejeweled in a triple chain of pearls—all recognizable icons of Elizabethan power and rule." Image courtesy of www.she-philosopher.com.

Shakespeare as Playwright and Businessman

Some town records of Stratford exist that give us important clues about how Shakespeare learned about the stage. During his youth Shakespeare would see traveling players (actors) perform in Stratford from time to time in addition to village pageants and parades to mark holidays. In school he and his fellow students studied public speaking and then performed school plays—in Latin and Greek! In this way, he became familiar with the great playwrights of long ago. As a playwright he borrowed a few ideas and plots from his early school days.

We know that sometime between 1585 and 1592, William Shakespeare left Stratford-upon-Avon and traveled to London to pursue a career in the theatre as an actor and playwright. He left his wife and children behind, living in the house on Henley Street with his parents and siblings. London was a rough and unhealthy city at that time, and it would have been dangerous to bring his family with him.

How often he returned to visit his family in Stratford is unknown. Today parents may commute by plane across the country. It is nearly 100 miles between London and Stratford and it would have taken Shakespeare five days to travel home on horseback.

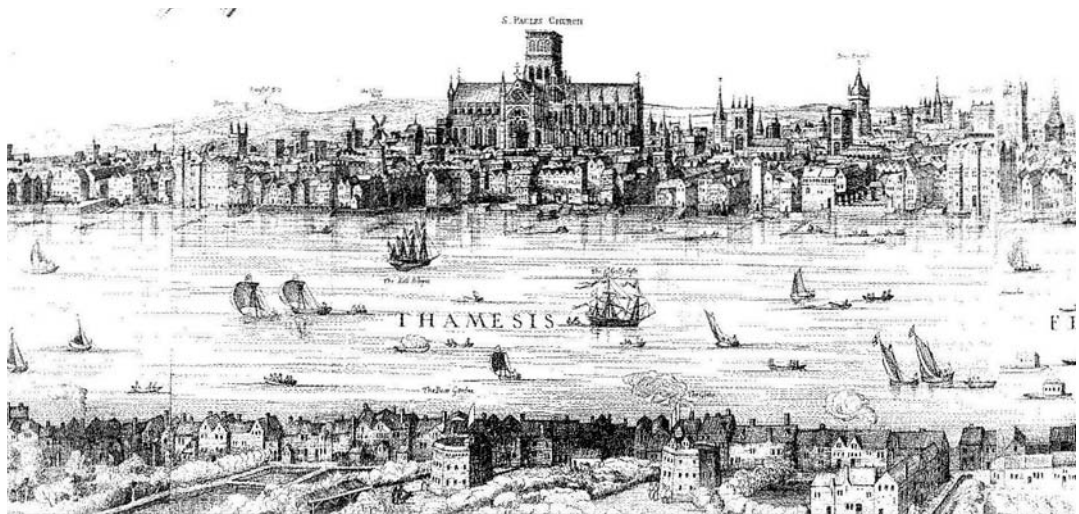
When Shakespeare arrived in London, he spent several years acting and playing small supporting roles. Perhaps he felt underutilized and since he was creative and ambitious he started writing plays as well. A longtime member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare eventually became a shareholder (part owner) and the main playwright for the troupe.

Shakespeare wanted his plays to relate to everyone so everyone would pay admission and attend. A successful play would run an average of 10 performances. Shakespeare wrote for all people and his plays were enjoyed by the rich, the poor and everyone in between. This is one reason William Shakespeare quickly became one of the most famous London playwrights and a co-producer of one of the greatest and well-known

theatre companies in London at the time. Entertaining his patrons was of primary importance to Shakespeare because it meant more commissions, continued employment for himself and his theatre company and more chances to experience the fun and fame of being a leading theatre person of his time. Nobody knows how much money Shakespeare made. Every guess is merely conjecture. No records of the Globe or Rose theatres have ever been discovered. His records perhaps went up in smoke, along with prompt books and scripts, when the Globe burnt down in 1613.

That being said, Shakespeare did make a lot of money. As a 'sharer' in the Globe profits he would have benefited financially from the work of other playwrights. He also bought a building at Blackfriars which he rented out and there are records of him suing several deadbeats for back rent. Once he gathered a steady income, Shakespeare paid off his father's debts, restoring his honor back in Stratford. Will's generosity must have meant a great deal to his father.

For his immediate family, Shakespeare bought a fine Stratford house called "New Place." It was the second largest and one of the nicest houses in Stratford, and he also owned large parcels of farmland. (Considering that, Shakespeare was in all probability the richest man in Stratford-upon-Avon next to Sir Hugh Clopton, Lord of the Manor of Stratford.) For the first time, Shakespeare's family had a home of its own. He retired from the theatre some years later at the young age of 52. He went back to Stratford to join his family. New Place does not exist today, but a garden has been planted in Shakespeare's honor on the grounds where it once stood.



Woodcut illustration of the Thames River from *Shakespeare's England: Life in Elizabethan & Jacobean Times* by R. E. Pritchard.