The Elizabethan Theater

English drama came of age during the reign of Elizabeth I, developing into a sophisticated and very popular art form. Although playwrights like Shakespeare were mainly responsible for the great theatrical achievements of the time, the importance of actors, audiences, and theater buildings should not be underestimated.

Before the reign of Elizabeth I, theater companies traveled about the country putting on plays wherever they could find an audience, often performing in the open courtyards of inns. Spectators watched either from the ground or from balconies or galleries above.

England’s First Playhouse

When Shakespeare was twelve years old, an actor named James Burbage built London’s first theater, called simply The Theater, just beyond the city walls in Shoreditch. Actors—even prominent and well-to-do actors like James Burbage—occupied a strange place in London society: They were frowned upon by the city fathers but were wildly popular with the common people, who clamored to see them perform in plays. Though actors were considered rogues and vagabonds by some, they were held in sufficient repute to be called on frequently to perform at court. A man like Burbage enjoyed a reputation somewhat like a rock star’s today.

The Globe In 1597, the city fathers closed down The Theater. In late 1598, Richard Burbage (James Burbage’s son) and his men dismantled it and hauled it in pieces across the Thames to Southwark. It took them six months to rebuild it, and when they did, they renamed it the Globe.

Scholars disagree about what the Globe actually looked like because there are no surviving drawings from the time or detailed written descriptions. Shakespeare refers to the building in Henry V as “this wooden O,” so we have a sense that it was round or octagonal. It is presumed that an important influence on the design of the theater was the bear-baiting and bull-baiting rings built in Southwark. These “sports” arenas were circular, open to the sky, and had galleries all around.

The building had to have been small enough to ensure that the actors would be heard, but we know that performances could draw audiences as large as 2,500 to 3,000 people. These truly packed houses must have been quite uncomfortable at times—especially when you consider that people of the era didn’t bathe or change their clothes very often! Those who paid an admission price of a penny (not an inconsiderable sum of money then) stood throughout the performance. Some of the audience even sat in a gallery behind the performers. Their seats were the second-most expensive in the house, and though they saw
only the actors' backs and probably could not hear very well, they were content to be seen by the other members of the audience.

Actors of the period had none of the elaborate technology that helps modern actors. There were no sets or lighting at the Globe. Plays were performed in the bright afternoon sunlight, and a playwright's words alone had to create moods like the one in the eerie first scene of Macbeth. Holding an audience spellbound was made even more difficult by the fact that most people in the audience were eating and drinking throughout the performance.

The first Globe met its demise in 1613, when a cannon fired as part of a performance of Henry VIII ignited the theater's thatched roof. Everyone escaped unharmed, but the Globe burned to the ground. Although the theater was rebuilt, the Puritans had it permanently closed in 1642.

The New Globe

Almost four centuries after the original Globe opened, an actor stood onstage in the replica of the Globe and recited these lines from Shakespeare's Henry V: “Can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram / Within this wooden O the very casques / That did affright the air at Agincourt?”

Building a replica of Shakespeare's Globe was the American actor Sam Wanamaker's dream. After long years of fund-raising and construction, the theater opened to its first full season on June 8, 1997, with a production of Henry V. Like the earlier Globe, this one is made of wood, with a thatched roof and lime plaster covering the walls. The stage and the galleries are covered, but the “bear pit,” where the modern-day groundlings stand, is open to the skies, exposing the spectators to the weather.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of seeing Shakespeare's plays performed at the Globe is the immediacy of the action. The performers, as Benedict Nightingale noted in the London Times, “are talking to you, asking you questions, involving you in their fears.” At the Globe, the audience is part of the debate. Is that not what theater is all about?
A play on the page is only half a play. The script is a recipe for a performance—incomplete until it is staged in a theater, in a reader's mind, or on screen. When a play is staged, actors and directors bring the words to life through their interpretations. Decisions about scenery, costumes, props, timing, and casting, as well as ideas about a character's gestures, walk, expressions, and motivations, can call forth contrasting meanings from even the most familiar play.

Shakespeare's plays have been produced for more than four hundred years and call forth brilliant performances and daring reinterpretations. The best interpretations of his plays shed new light by asking imaginative questions that the texts themselves answer. The following is a tiny sampling of the questions posed by Shakespearean productions in the last century.

Character and Motivation

Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth conspires with her husband to murder their king, leading generations of actresses to ask about the source of Lady Macbeth's evil.

Inhuman Monster? Sarah Siddons, who played the role of Lady Macbeth about two hundred years ago, portrayed Lady Macbeth as a driven woman, in whom "the passion of ambition has almost obliterated all the characteristics of human nature. . . ."
Evil Beauty? Vivien Leigh found in Lady Macbeth an evil beauty who gives a goodnight kiss to the man she is plotting to murder that same evening.

Weak Woman? At the other end of the spectrum, nineteenth-century actress Ellen Terry played Lady Macbeth as “essentially feminine,” noting that she faints after the murder of the king.

Setting and Action

Realism? Some directors attempt to keep faith with a playwright’s vision by staging the action in as realistic a manner as possible. To bring new realism to the woodland setting of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the director of a 1905 production brought live rabbits onstage! The famous actor Laurence Olivier brought unintentional realism to the part of Macbeth. Following his director’s instructions, he played the part so enthusiastically that one night, he injured the actor playing Macduff in their staged sword fight. On another occasion, with a substitute Macduff, Olivier fought the sword battle so vigorously that his sword broke and flew into the audience.

Relevance? Orson Welles also struck a note of realism in his 1936 version of Macbeth, but he did so by radically departing from Shakespeare’s text: He set the play in Haiti instead of Scotland! By using an all-black cast and modeling Macbeth after a famous Haitian dictator, Welles found a new application for Shakespeare’s message about power. The 1986 Stratford-on-Avon version of Romeo and Juliet also attempted to emphasize Shakespeare’s contemporary significance: A live rock band set the musical mood for the production.

Critical Viewing
What does the fact that Shakespeare’s Macbeth can be staged in such different ways as these suggest about its power?
[Draw Conclusions]
William Shakespeare wrote for the same audience that moviemakers write for today. Rich and poor, smart and not-so-smart, sentimentalists, and action-lovers, fans of heartbreak, and fans of comedy—all crowded into the Globe theater to watch Shakespeare’s plays. Hundreds of years later, a similarly diverse audience pours into multiplexes and video stores for movies. Not surprisingly, film versions of many Shakespearean plays are readily available.

Filmmakers have taken varied approaches to Shakespeare’s plays, approaches that reflect changing popular tastes and interests. The variety of styles in which the plays have been filmed also reflects their richness. The timeless themes, powerful characters, and resonant language of the plays form a treasure house of the imagination, from which a creative filmmaker can borrow materials of his or her own work.

**Romeo and Juliet** Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has been filmed more often than any other play in history.

- In 1908, the first movie version, a ten-minute silent short, was created. Lines from the play were displayed on title cards while the actors mimed the action.
- In 1936, Hollywood director George Cukor produced a full-length feature film of the play. Cukor needed three months to construct the set, a four-acre re-creation of Verona. The shooting itself lasted six months, running the budget up to $2 million—at the time, the most MGM had ever paid for a film.
- In 1996, Australian filmmaker Baz Luhrmann created an “updated” version of *Romeo and Juliet* starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Characters cruise around in sharp-looking cars, wear designer clothes, and carry automatic weapons—not swords—while a television newscast provides narration.
- The 1999 film *Shakespeare in Love*, cowritten by playwright Tom Stoppard, hypothesizes about the events that led Shakespeare to write *Romeo and Juliet*. In the movie, lines from the play weave together Shakespeare’s life with the play he is writing.
Hamlet  Like *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare’s tragedy *Hamlet* also had its film debut during the silent film era.

- The most famous cinematic translation of *Hamlet* to film is the 1948 version starring Laurence Olivier as Hamlet. Olivier’s performance as the melancholic prince, who broods over his father’s murder but is unable to act, is considered a high point of dramatic art.
- In 1990, director Franco Zeffirelli filmed *Hamlet* with Mel Gibson in the title role. Zeffirelli followed modern tastes in film, shooting the play on location and encouraging actors to deliver lines as prose rather than as poetry.
- Six years later, Kenneth Branagh directed another version of the brooding tragedy. He presented the play nearly whole, editing out few lines, a project never before attempted. The result runs 242 minutes long.

Macbeth

- One of the best-known film versions of *Macbeth* was created by David Bradley for a mere $5 thousand. Costumes were bought at rummage sales, props were purchased at junk stores, helmets were fashioned from papier-mâché, swords were cut from wood, and Bradley’s mother made sandwiches for the cast and crew.
- In 1971, director Roman Polanski chose to film his version of the play during the winter. The weather, he felt, set a bleak tone suited to the grim atmosphere of *Macbeth*. To keep his cast from falling ill, Polanski insisted that they take daily dosages of vitamin C.
- Perhaps the most successful adaptation of *Macbeth* is, paradoxically, one that retains none of the original language: Japanese director Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*. The dialogue and setting of the film is Japanese, but Kurosawa carefully builds his drama directly from Shakespeare’s story. Critics have hailed the film as a masterpiece for its dramatic visual effects and editing.
William Shakespeare (1564–1616)
Because of his deep understanding of human nature, his compassion for all types of people, and the power and beauty of his language, William Shakespeare is regarded as the greatest writer in English. Nearly four hundred years after his death, Shakespeare’s plays continue to be read widely and produced throughout the world. They have the same powerful impact on today’s audiences as they had when they were first staged.

Timeline of Praise No other writer in English has won such universal and enthusiastic praise from critics and fellow writers. Here are just a few samples of that praise, shown on a timeline from Shakespeare’s day to our own:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Praise</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>Ben Jonson (1572–1673) “He was not of an age, but for all time!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1700</td>
<td>Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) “Shakespeare is, above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature: the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and life.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>A.C. Bradley (1851–1935) “Where his power of art is fully exerted, it really does resemble that of nature.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) “About any one so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right . . .”</td>
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The Playwright in His Own Time It is a myth that we know absolutely nothing about Shakespeare’s life. As critic Irving Ribner attests, “we know more about him than we do about virtually any other of his contemporary dramatists, with the exception of Ben Jonson.” Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-on-Avon, which is northwest of London. (The date is based on a record of his baptism on April 26.) Stratford, with a population of about two thousand in Shakespeare’s day, was the market town for a fertile agricultural region.

Shakespeare’s father, John, was a successful glove maker and businessman who held a number of positions in the town’s government. His mother, whose maiden name was Mary Arden, was the daughter of John’s landlord. Their marriage, therefore, boosted the Shakespeare family’s holdings. Nevertheless, there is evidence that in the late 1570s, John Shakespeare began to suffer financial reverses.

Shakespeare’s Education No written evidence of Shakespeare’s boyhood exists—not even a name on a school attendance list. However, given his
father's status, it is highly probable that he attended the Stratford Grammar School, where he acquired a knowledge of Latin.

Although Shakespeare did not go on to study at a university, his attendance at the grammar school from ages seven to sixteen would have provided him with a good education. Discipline at such a school was strict, and the school day lasted from 6:00 A.M. in the summer (7:00 in the winter) until 5:00 P.M. From 11:00 to 1:00, students were dismissed to eat lunch with their families. At 3:00, they were allowed to play for a quarter of an hour!

**Shakespeare's Marriage and Family** Shakespeare's name enters the official records again in November 1582, when he received a license to marry Anne Hathaway. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, in 1583, and twins, Judith and Hamnet, in 1585. Beyond names and years in which his children were born, we know little about his family life. Some writers have made much of the fact that Shakespeare left his wife and children behind when he went to London not long after his twins were born. However, he visited his family in Stratford regularly during his years as a playwright, and they may have lived with him for a time in London.

**His Career as Actor and Playwright** It is uncertain how Shakespeare became connected with the theater in the late 1580s and early 1590s. By 1594, however, he had become a part owner and the principal playwright of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, one of the most successful theater companies in London.

In 1599, the company built the famous Globe theater on the south bank of the Thames River, in Southwark. This is where most of Shakespeare's plays were performed. When James I became king in 1603, after the death of Elizabeth I, James took control of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and renamed the company the King's Men.

**Retirement** In about 1610, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, where he continued to write plays. He was a prosperous middle-class man, who profited from his share in a successful theater company. Six years later, on April 23, 1616, he died and was buried in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. Because it was a common practice to move bodies after burial to make room for others, Shakespeare wrote the following as his epitaph:

_Blest be the man that spares these stones,  
And curst be he that moves my bones._

**His Literary Record** Shakespeare did not think of himself as a man of letters. He wrote his plays to be performed and did not bring out editions of them for the reading public. The first published edition of his work, called the First Folio, was issued in 1623 by two members of his theater company, John Heminges and Henry Condell. It contained thirty-six of the thirty-seven plays now attributed to him.

Shakespeare's varied output includes romantic comedies, like _A Midsummer Night's Dream_ and _As You Like It_; history plays, like _Henry IV_, Parts 1 and 2; tragedies, like _Romeo and Juliet_, _Hamlet_, _Othello_, _King Lear_, and _Macbeth_; and later romances, like _The Tempest_. In addition to his plays, he wrote 154 sonnets and three longer poems.

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**Speaking Shakespeare**

You may not realize the extent to which you already "speak" Shakespeare. For example, have you ever used or heard any of these common phrases?

He's full of the milk of human kindness. (I, v, 17)  
Don't worry about it, what's done is done! (III, ii, 12)  
That will last until the crack of doom. (IV, i, 117)  
She finished the jobs in one fell swoop. (IV, iii, 219)

Shakespeare invented each of these now common phrases, which were unknown in English before their appearance in _Macbeth_. Look for them as you read and discover if their meanings have changed since Shakespeare's time.
Shakespeare’s Sources

Fact and Legend By Shakespeare’s time, the story of the eleventh-century Scottish king Macbeth was a mixture of fact and legend. Shakespeare and his contemporaries, however, probably regarded the account of Macbeth in Raphel Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* as completely factual. The playwright drew on the *Chronicles* as a source for the play, yet, as you will see, he freely adapted the material for his own purposes.

Holinshed’s *Chronicles* Holinshed’s account contains a description of a meeting between Macbeth and the witches. His account also tells how Macbeth and his friends, angry at the naming of King Duncan’s son Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, ambush and slay Duncan. However, the historical Macbeth’s claim to the throne has some basis. (See page 382 for an explanation of the ancient Scottish custom of choosing kings.) Finally, Holinshed indicates that Banquo is Macbeth’s accomplice in the assassination. Lady Macbeth, prominent in Shakespeare’s play, does not play a significant role in Holinshed.

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* Shakespeare took what he needed from the *Chronicles* and shaped it into a tragic plot. Seeing the theatrical possibilities of the meeting with the witches, Shakespeare staged such an encounter in Act I, Scene iii. However, he changed Holinshed’s account in order to make King Duncan an innocent victim: Shakespeare’s Macbeth does not have a legitimate claim to the throne. Further, Shakespeare used another story in the *Chronicles*—one in which a wife urges her husband to kill a friend and guest—as the basis for the character Lady Macbeth. She becomes Macbeth’s co-conspirator, replacing Banquo. Read on to discover Shakespeare’s political motives for holding Banquo innocent.

A Tribute to the King

A Dangerous Plot *Macbeth* is set in eleventh-century Scotland. However, Shakespeare wrote the play with an eye on seventeenth-century events in England. In November 1605, a group of Catholics seeking revenge for the increasing oppression of Catholics plotted to blow up the king and Parliament. With the help of Guy Fawkes, a soldier of fortune, they rented a cellar directly below the House of Lords, in which to stockpile barrels of gunpowder. Incredibly, the conspirators succeeded in storing thirty-six barrels of gunpowder there. To appreciate the magnitude of the threat, imagine modern terrorists smuggling tons of explosives into the Capitol building in Washington, D.C.

The Plot Revealed The plot was revealed when a lord, who happened to be a brother-in-law of one of the conspirators, was anonymously warned by letter not to attend the opening of Parliament. This warning helped the authorities break the case, and they arrested Guy Fawkes as he entered the cellar. Fawkes and some of the other chief conspirators were executed. Although their numbers were few, their plan was so frightening that it led, for a time, to increased persecution of all English Catholics. In England, Guy Fawkes Day is still commemorated on November 5 each year with fireworks, bonfires, and the burning of effigies representing Guy Fawkes.

Sympathy for the King In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare capitalized on the sympathy generated for the king by this incident. He chose the Scottish setting for his play, knowing that James’s family, the Stuarts, first came to the Scottish throne in the eleventh century. One of the most virtuous characters in the play, Banquo, was thought to be the father of the first of the Stuart kings. Knowing that James I had written a book on witches, Shakespeare included the three hags in the play.