



The World of SHAKESPEARE

Queen Elizabeth reigned over England for forty-five years, from 1558 – 1603. Only twenty-five when she ascended the throne, Elizabeth had already survived a great deal of scandal and danger. England was bankrupt and in a constant state of religious upheaval, as the Protestants and Catholics battled for religious control. Under her, England became Protestant again, but she granted concessions to the Catholics, in the hopes of preventing rebellion. It was not illegal to be a Catholic, but it was illegal to attend mass. Therefore, Catholics had freedom of belief, but were restricted in their practice.

England enjoyed a period of prosperity under Elizabeth's reign. It became a commercial center while sailors, like Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh, explored the new world, bringing great wealth to the country. The middle class was on the rise, as was capitalism. It was now possible for someone who was not born into the nobility to improve his station.

Elizabeth's England also experienced a revolution in education and literacy. With the invention of the printing press the previous century, books became less expensive and more plentiful. Schools were better funded, and more children from the less wealthy families went to school. Still, it was mostly the middle and upper classes who became literate. Only the girls of the nobility were educated.

Elizabeth was a great patron of the arts and a particular fan of the theatre. In fact, during her reign, professional theatres were built for the first time.



Life was hard and often short. Outbreaks of the plague, or the Black Death, were common. The city of London was teeming with life and change – and filth. There was no sewage system and waste was dumped out windows and into the Thames River. People lived in close contact with each other – and with the fleas and rodents that spread this cruel and fatal disease. Shakespeare was said to be terrified of the plague – and for good reason. Outbreaks would shut down the playhouses and kill thousands.

The Elizabethans entertained themselves nonetheless. The theatre was very popular, but so too were dances and feasts, cock fights and public executions. The upper classes participated in fencing tournaments and hunting, and all classes enjoyed bear baiting. For this "sport," a bear was chained to a post and fighting dogs were set upon it to fight to the death. Spectators would bet on the outcome. Queen Elizabeth loved the sport so much that she forbid the performance of plays on Thursdays, a day that was popular for bear baiting.

King James, the reigning monarch of Scotland, took over the throne of England upon Elizabeth's death in 1603. A lover of theatre as well, he became a patron of Shakespeare's company, which changed its name to *The King's Men*. Like many people of the time, James was very superstitious, and took a particular interest in the study of witchcraft. He wrote a book on the subject called *Daemonologie*. Shakespeare's first play under James's reign, *Macbeth*, includes witches and other references designed to impress his new king.