

THE SHAKESPEARE PLAYS

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MR. WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARES

COMEDIES,
HISTORIES, &
TRAGEDIES.

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SHAKESPEARE, THE GLOBE, AND THE STAGE

By Frances Leonard



He was the soul of the age and yet not of his age but for all time. So wrote English playwright Ben Jonson in 1623 in verses which he contributed to the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. This was high praise from a sometime rival, just as the elaborate publication was a remarkable tribute to a dramatist who had written for the public stage.

The age itself was one of the most glorious periods of English history. Six years before Shakespeare was born, Queen Elizabeth, the last heir to Henry Tudor, had ascended the throne. Intellectually gifted and politically shrewd, she brought peace and economic stability to the strife-torn land and inspired the people with great confidence in their queen, their country, and themselves. She sought to resolve the religious turmoil that had seethed for more than a quarter-century by re-establishing the Anglican Church, though not in an extremely Protestant form. Education flourished, as did music, poetry, drama, and the other art forms. In a very real sense, she ruled over the birth of the modern world.

We know relatively little about Shakespeare's early life—that he was born in a house which still stands in Stratford-upon-Avon and that he was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Holy Trinity Church. Like most midlands people of their generation, his parents did not read or write, but William could have learned at the Stratford Grammar School. By the age of nineteen he was married and a father, and, within two years more, the father of twins. Sometime thereafter, he traveled the hundred miles from Stratford to London, where, by 1592, he had established himself in the theatre.

London during the reigns of Elizabeth and King James I, who succeeded her in 1603, was a magnet drawing people from all corners of the land. Its streets were filled with people wearing fanciful modes of dress, and its pulpits with preachers who denounced the fashions and the use of cosmetics. Trade and commerce flourished, as did prostitution, gambling, and drunkenness. Religious services and business transactions were conducted with equal fervor in St. Paul's Cathedral. Just up the river was Westminster Palace, where Elizabeth met with Parliament—infrequently, to tell the truth.

Outside the city also were the public theatres,

banned by the Puritan officials as tools of the devil himself. James Burbage had built the first playhouse, called simply the Theatre, in 1576 on rented land in Finsbury Field, to the north. When the landowner refused to renew the lease in 1599, the Burbage sons took the structure apart, transported the timbers south of the city to Bankside, and there built the Globe Playhouse, Shakespeare's Wooden O.

Despite the Puritans' disapproval, people from all ranks of society crossed the river and paid their pennies to enter the Globe and other theatres, where they could observe the two hours traffic of the stage. Because people stood or sat on three sides of the acting platform, scenery was used sparingly, if at all; but the stage consisted of different acting areas on various levels, and the creative playwright could use these to represent an entire world.

It was for these theatres and for the Burbages' company (who enjoyed the patronage first of the Lord Chamberlain and later of the King himself) that Shakespeare wrote most of his thirty-seven plays. Though we know them as classics, he wrote most of them for general public audiences, and the company depended upon their commercial success. Whether the setting was Denmark, Austria, or Rome, they appealed to London audiences because they were also uniquely English, frequently making pointed reference to events of the day.

Although Shakespeare's theatre has long since passed away—the first Globe playhouse burned, and the second, built on the same spot, was destroyed by the Puritans—the popularity of his plays has never flagged. They have been performed in every age and on every continent, even on board a ship in the Arctic; and they have been translated into such languages as Spanish, Japanese, and Swahili.

Comedies, tragedies, histories: these plays are our heritage. They have become so thoroughly a part of our speech and our modes of thought that we unconsciously quote Shakespeare's lines or refer to his characters to explain life to ourselves, or ourselves to the world. The impact of his plays is surpassed only by that of the King James version of the Bible, which was produced in Shakespeare's lifetime. Soul of the age which gave rise to the modern world, Shakespeare gave voice to the inmost concerns of humanity.