Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Timon of Athens
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words
By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespeare-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (Othello, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, *Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).
Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplusive’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespeare words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention that any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind
By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare’s Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London’s south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the “groundlings” may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don’t yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience “Stinkards . . . glewed together in crowds with the Steames of strong breath” (Shakespeare’s Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City’s own Utah Shakespeare Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare’s birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare’s perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare’s lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, “Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations.” She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more “quotations” to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare’s character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo + Juliet, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in Much Ado about Nothing in her advice to her cousin about
choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” Coriolanus presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in Othello, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”
Elizabeth’s England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (Richard II), France (As You Like It), Vienna (Measure for Measure), fifteenth-century Italy (Romeo and Juliet), the England ruled by Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare’s own time and place. But all Shakespeare’s plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth's England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth’s reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man’s nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” “and hurry;” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespeare expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind’s eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet’s rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering
Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun’s chariot in Greek mythology: “Down, down I come, like glist’ring Phaeton” (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare’s plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare’s plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)
History Is Written by the Victors
From Insights, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (King John) to the beginning of England's first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (Richard II) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (Richard III), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth's father (Henry VIII). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare's day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare's plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England's enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare's bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.
Could the plays known as Shakespeare’s have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled him name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create Antony and Cleopatra, The Comedy of Errors, and Henry V? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create King Lear and Macbeth?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is “The Shakespeare Controversy.”

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the “real author” have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford—among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name “Shakespeare”—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton’s? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name “Shakespeare” could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the “facts” of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn’s The Mysterious William Shakespeare. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn’t Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one’s own life. “The Controversy” was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon.

Hooray for our side!
A Nest of Singing Birds
From Insights, 1992

Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespeare Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul’s Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, “I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures.”

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one’s part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in The Compleat Gentleman in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to “sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol.”

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors’ cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six
voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespeare Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and learning.
Actors in Shakespeare’s Day
By Stephanie Chidester From Insights, 1994

The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from
the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors
as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors,
often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval
Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost
non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery
plays. The actors of Shakespeare’s age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were
alternately classified as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” as an act of Parliament in 1572
defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the
earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other
than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability
because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort
and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In
1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians’ social status. In the first one,
the Queen forbade “the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liversies,
badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of
this realm)” in order to “curb the power of local grandees” (Dennis Kay, Shakespeare: His
result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the “Acte for
the punishment of Vagabonds” (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared “vagabonds
and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment” (Thomas Marc
Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Charles
Scribner’s Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who
endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to
perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors
were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that
Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre.
He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and
eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he
began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly The Comedy of Errors) and then decided to
take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with
or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated
in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: “On one occasion the Stratford
corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d
‘to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.’ Davi Jones had been
married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as
his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves
for the Whitsun pastime?” (S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary
But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “‘There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country’” (G. B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage seruantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611. It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.149-50).
Shakespeare’s Audience: 
A Very Motley Crowd

From Insights, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords’ box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In Hamlet, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were “for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise.” His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in Julius Caesar.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o’clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baities, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no
magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story
discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare’s theatre filling an educational need is probably that
of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the
Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years
from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events
of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London
crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed,
and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the
sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others,
the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever
opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest
in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers,
historians, humanists, and playwrights.
The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting
in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public
was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the
spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited
it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality,
and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his
contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for
the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to
be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.
It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare's life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582 83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare's twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare's career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It's hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare's life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare's youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare's birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—"upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes" (Peter Thomson, Shakespeare's Professional Career [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, "The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs's house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare's "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford's elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. "We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare's road to London" (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare's road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth's words, "Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns" (Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.
In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh’, according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, *William Shakespeare: A Popular Life* [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (*Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Ralegh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.
Ghosts, Witches, and Shakespeare

By Howard Waters

From Insights, 2006

Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, "la plus fine femme du monde," as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake's neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors' heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman's axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon's entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare's plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, "The Age of Shakespeare," Social Backgrounds of English Literature, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person's entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare's Macbeth was supposedly cursed due to the playwright's having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: "It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace's
subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft.” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, The Mind of Man [New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954], 54).

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespeare play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard III, or Hamlet, or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In Richard III there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In Macbeth the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In Hamlet, the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply had no need of it.
Shakespeare’s Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare’s time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, “off the rack” and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn’t want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren’t allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like Romeo and Juliet, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for Hamlet, or ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, or Oberon and Titania’s forest for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today’s audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, Romeo and Juliet was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, West Side Story, an updated musical version of the Romeo and Juliet tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing “special” clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.
Synopsis: Timon of Athens

Surrounded by fair-weather flatterers and beneficiaries of his largesse, Timon of Athens, a wealthy nobleman, is a generous friend, a considerate master, a lavish patron of the arts, and an extravagant entertainer. On the other hand, Apemantus, a churlish philosopher hated by everyone for his chiding, ridicules Timon's blindness and warns him against his friends. Flavius, Timon's steward, also tries to warn his master of his impending ruin being caused by his unbridled extravagance. But the joy of giving, as well as his susceptibility to flattery by his "friends," is too great for Timon to listen.

Alarmed at the possibility that Timon will bankrupt himself, several of Timon's wealthy creditors send their agents to collect their loans. The importunities of these men at length force Timon to listen to the faithful Flavius, who proves to him that he owes more than twice what he possesses. Knowing that he has given unwisely but not ignobly, Timon refuses to believe that friends who are "feast-won" are "fast-lost." Accordingly, he dispatches servants with requests for small loans to Lucullus, Lucius, and Sempronius, whom he has showered with gifts, and to Ventidius, whom he once relieved from debtors' prison.

The first premonition to Timon of the ingratitude he may expect comes when Flavius reports his ill success in borrowing from the Athenian senate. Then, one by one, Timon's friends deny him, all finding feeble excuses for evading his request. Timon begins to realize how little he may expect from others now that his own fortunes are fallen into disarray, and he resolves to invite them to one more banquet. When they all appear with faint excuses for denying his messengers, Timon serves them covered dishes of warm water, which he throws in their faces, and drives them out of his house with curses.

Meanwhile Alcibiades, a famous military hero and poor but true friend of Timon, encounters another manifestation of Athenian ingratitude: he is banished by the senate for too eloquently pleading the cause of an Athenian soldier sentenced to death despite his bravery and service to the state. Alcibiades swears to revenge himself upon Athens by rallying his discontented troops and attacking the city.

With bitter curses against all mankind, the now misanthropic Timon shakes the dust of Athens from his feet and goes into voluntary exile in a cave near the sea. There, while grubbing for roots to gnaw on, he finds buried treasure. Soon after, Alcibiades, with his army of discontented and his two mistresses, Timandra and Phrynia, happens to pass that way and speaks the first sincere words Timon has heard. Though his soldiers are deserting because he lacks money to pay them, Alcibiades offers Timon gold. However, when Timon hears that the expedition is marching against Athens, he shares his treasure with the general and his mistresses.

Word of Timon's new-found treasure soon brings other visitors. To two thieves, Timon gives some of his gold and such bitter praise of thievery that they are almost converted from their profession. Here, too, he is found by his steward, Flavius, who has sought him for love and not for gain. At first Timon curses him for being like the rest, but, at last touched by his devotion, acknowledges him as the one honest man who redeems mankind. To him he gives a huge sum on condition that he never visit him again nor show charity to any one.

Believing that Timon's wretchedness is but a pose adopted to test his friends, a self-seeking poet and a painter also visit him, professing old friendship, but Timon gives them nothing but curses. Even the Athenian senate sends a delegation soliciting his aid against Alcibiades and promising him even greater dignities than those he has renounced; but Timon expresses his utter indifference as to what fate befalls the city.

However, Alcibiades is placated by being given permission to present his grievances and to enter the city peaceably in order to wreak vengeance on his enemies and Timon's. The news of this belated vindication reaches Timon too late; he has died friendless and alone, leaving behind only an epitaph expressing the hatred which he has taken with him beyond the grave.
Characters: *Timon of Athens*

TIMON OF ATHENS, a noble who is excessive and immoderate in everything, passes from his lavish liberality and belief in the virtue of all mankind to excessive distrust and hatred when his supposed friends abandon him in his time of need. He dies at the end of the play, friendless and a complete misanthrope.

LUCIUS, a flattering lord, who feeds on Timon’s bounty but denies him in his need.
LUCULLUS, another flattering lord.
SEMPRONIUS, another flattering lord.
VENTIDIIUS, another of Timon’s false friends.
ALCIBIADES, an Athenian captain, also suffers from the ingratitude of mankind, and thus swears vengeance on Athens. However, he is able to eventually make his peace with the state and with mankind, something Timon never accomplishes, or desires.
APEMANTUS, a churlish philosopher, is at first a foil to Timon and later the shallow, cynical parallel to his deeper anger and hatred.
FLAVIUS, the true and honest steward of Timon, remained faithful after Timon’s false friends had deserted him. He visits Timon in his exile, and Timon rewards his faithfulness with gold, even though Flavius had not come seeking it.
POET, a beneficiary of Timon’s largesse
PAINTER, another beneficiary of Timon’s largesse
JEWELER, another beneficiary of Timon’s largesse
MERCHANT, another beneficiary of Timon’s largesse
FLAMINIUS, a servant to Timon
LUCILIUS, another servant to Timon
SERVILIUS, another servant to Timon
CAPHIS, a servant to one of Timon’s thankless creditors
PHILOTUS, another servant to one of Timon’s thankless creditors
TITUS, another servant to one of Timon’s thankless creditors
HORTENSIUS, another servant to one of Timon’s thankless creditors
PHRYNIA, a mistress of Alcibiades, is a prostitute who comes with Alcibiades to visit Timon in his cave.
TIMANDRA, a mistress of Alcibiades, is a prostitute who comes with Alcibiades to visit Timon in his cave.
Quick, what interest rates are you paying on your house loan and your credit card purchases? How much money are you earning on your savings account balance? Like it or not, coping with such questions is an inescapable burden of living in our modern, credit-oriented society. Most of us are continuously treading water in an economic whirlpool of plastic cards, Visa bills, car payments, and immense home mortgages. For an audience so sophisticated in the uses and abuses of money, Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens initially appears to be a rather simple parable about the destructive consequences of borrowing money you are unable to repay. As recent scholarly research (especially articles by Michael Chorost, John Ruszkiewicz, and Coppelia Kahn) illustrates, however, the thematic concerns of the play are much deeper and more complex. At the heart of the matter is the intriguing concept of biological finance.

Timon, like tribal chieftains in many primitive societies, is an archetypal “gift-giver” who bestows lavish presents upon the members of his clan in order to dramatize and reinforce his superior social status. His gifts are, therefore, a constant proof of his dominant position among his friends. Such ostentatious generosity helps satisfy his emotional need to be loved and revered, while at the same time creating an indebtedness among the recipients that can never be repaid. Since he is essentially manipulating people into expressing exaggerated affection for him, no true camaraderie exists in this court that seems rich in love, but is rich only in money. Unlike circular gift economies, in which presents are reciprocally given and received, Timon perpetuates a linear form of gift-giving in which his largess flows solely in one direction: from him to his beneficiaries. Such a one-sided economy creates power, but only the illusion of friendship.

Finance merges with biology when Timon finally realizes that his habit of borrowing huge sums of money to support such extravagance has placed him deeply in debt. Unlike the precious jewels, paintings, statues, and other rich gifts he has given, the money he owes his various creditors has reproduced through the accumulation of interest. He now is in debt not only for the sums he has borrowed, but also for the exorbitant fees charged on the original loans.

The Renaissance was an age, unlike our own, uneasy with this concept of usury: Many capitalists, like the character Antonio in The Merchant of Venice, desperately needed financial credit for business ventures, yet scorned the moneylenders for demanding interest on their loans. By setting his play in ancient Athens, Shakespeare invokes all the well-known Greek injunctions against what Aristotle called the “unnatural” practice of usury. Money was “barren”: God did not intend it to “increase” as living creatures did; it was a method of buying goods, not a commodity in itself. Despite such warnings, rising commercialism and human avarice ensured that usury was a hotly debated ethical topic well into the seventeenth century. The constant tension between the old world and the new was further reflected in the fact that the Greek word for “interest” was “tokos,” which meant “offspring” or “child.” Even as Greece’s philosophers were condemning currency as sterile, its language brought life and breath to the country’s financial dealings and helped create the impression that money was organically and biologically “alive” since it could grow through the compounding of interest.

This same concept of the reproductive nature of money not only helps explain Timon’s actions in the first half of the play, when the biology of finance and the ingratitude of false friends turn him from philanthrope to misanthrope, but also in the second half, when he digs for roots in the
wilderness and ironically discovers gold instead. Through the dark and brooding progress of the play, Timon has finally uncovered the “root” of all evil, the radix malorum—greed—which destroys everything from human relationships to entire civilizations.

Shakespeare’s dramatic lesson is instructive, whether his audience is the newly crowned king of England, James I, who was rapidly running up a £1,000,000 debt through the corrupt Jacobean patronage system, or a poor slob in twentieth-century America trying to stay one step ahead of the credit crunch. The play speaks to us through the centuries about a world in which money breeds easily while love and friendship are sterile virtues. Unfortunately, Shakespeare’s Athens looks very much like home.

_Timon of Athens:_

An Imperfect and Magnificent World

By Ace G. Pilkington

From Midsummer Magazine, 1993

Perhaps no other Shakespeare play has such large areas of uncertainty as Timon of Athens. Some critics regard it as a collaboration and suggest a variety of co-authors, including Thomas Middleton and George Chapman. Others believe the play is unfinished or at least unrevised, and it is difficult to see how two authors (one of whom, in most cases, would have been brought in to polish, complete, or re-work the other’s manuscript) could have combined to leave Timon of Athens in its present state.

Further uncertainties are the result of the text itself, printed only in the First Folio and possibly even then only because there were problems with the quarto publisher of _Troilus and Cressida_, which was originally meant to appear between _Romeo and Juliet_ and _Julius Caesar_. The text of _Timon of Athens_ suffers additionally because it was printed from the author’s “foul papers,” a version that would have usually been cleaned up and clarified by a copyist, and because it was set in type by the man H. J. Oliver calls “the more inaccurate of the two main compositors of the First Folio, . . . ‘Compositor B’” (The Arden Shakespeare: Timon of Athens, ed. H. J. Oliver [London: Methuen, 1982], xvii). It is likely, because the play was not performed during Shakespeare’s lifetime, that there was no “prompt copy,” or stage version of the text (which would have made the compositor’s work substantially more accurate, no matter what his personal inadequacies).

Nor do the uncertainties stop there. _Timon of Athens_ is (like _Troilus and Cressida_) a work that does not fit easily into the standard genres. It seems to be a tragedy, but it also has strong elements of satire that push it in the direction of comedy; schematic, almost allegorical, situations that make it resemble a morality; and a reconciliation at the end, when Alcibiades refuses to seek vengeance, that foreshadows the romances. It has even been called an extended dramatic lyric and compared to _The Phoenix and the Turtle_.

Perhaps it is this spectrum of genres that makes many scholars hesitate to identify the play’s sources with certainty. There is Plutarch, of course; and on the basis of the material shared with _Coriolanus_ and _Anthony and Cleopatra_, _Timon of Athens_ is usually dated between 1607 and 1608. But beyond Plutarch there may be Lucian’s dialogue _Timon the Misanthrope_, either directly or filtered through derivative versions (Shakespeare might have encountered Erasmus’s Latin translation in school.); _William Painter’s Palace of Pleasure_; the anonymous morality play _Everyman_; and a play called “old Timon,” which may be earlier than Shakespeare’s version. Peter Levi suggests other possibilities—Marston’s plays about corrupt courts, Jonson’s _Volpone_, and even (from a Greek text that Shakespeare’s scholarly friends may have shown him during his visits to Oxford) _The Birds of Aristophanes_ (Peter Levi, _The Life and Times of William Shakespeare_ [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988], 288-89).
Part of the fun of watching a production of Timon of Athens comes from these very uncertainties, from being able to see a play that Shakespeare's contemporaries did not, and from looking over Shakespeare's shoulder as he works, the very roughnesses showing the way to the polish of other plays. Another part of the fun comes from immersing oneself in the classical culture of Elizabeth's England, a time when a middle-class boy like Shakespeare could emerge from the local grammar school fluent in Latin, "soused in the classics," as A. L. Rowse says Shakespeare and his contemporaries were (What Shakespeare Read and Thought [New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1981], 14).

Ben Jonson's much quoted line, "And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek," from the First Folio, gives modern readers an entirely false impression of what Shakespeare knew. An Elizabethan boy arrived at school at six on summer mornings and seven in winter, working until five in the afternoon with breaks for breakfast, lunch, and a fifteen-minute interval for decorous play at three. He had Sundays plus Thursday and Saturday afternoons off, with about six weeks of additional vacation time during the year. This rigorous regime began at the age of seven (petty school students learned the basics, starting at the age of four or five) and continued until about the age of fifteen, by which time, in Robert Payne's words, he "could not be anything but learned. He would know whole books of Virgil by heart, and he would be able to argue a case in court as vehemently as Cicero" (By Me, William Shakespeare [New York: Everest House, 1980], 31).

Payne declares that Shakespeare "could, if necessary, have written his plays in Latin" (31) and cites the example of Richard Quiney, one of Shakespeare's friends, who, at the age of eleven, wrote a letter to his father: "The letter, which survives, was written in fluent Latin of remarkable delicacy and refinement" (32). Equally interesting with the schoolboy's proficiency is the fact that his father was expected to read and understand the letter. "To be educated was to know Latin; to know Latin was to be a gentleman" (Rowse 14), hence, Shakespeare's frequent Latin jokes, his multitude of classical allusions, and his eleven plays with Greek or Roman settings.

Indeed, in this context Timon of Athens makes considerably more sense. If one imagines many members of Shakespeare's audience as Elizabethans (or Jacobians) who had been educated almost as though they were Romans (with some Greek from the New Testament toward the end of their school careers), then Timon as the type of the misanthrope becomes a familiar character, the Latin names and the senators in what is ostensibly a Greek play entirely understandable, and Alcibiades, whose story is only briefly sketched, a well-known figure from history. In fact, Shakespeare gives us Greek culture as it came to the Romans, modified by, but an essential part of, their own vision of the world.

There is no better example of what Shakespeare's audience would automatically have brought to Timon of Athens (if they had had a chance to see it) that modern audiences may not than the story of Alcibiades. For them, Alcibiades, even in his brief appearances, would have been a delicate counterpoint, a parallel and contrast to Timon: active where he is passive, powerful where he is helpless, and repeatedly forgiving where Timon is perpetually bitter. Alcibiades was a student of Socrates, outstandingly brilliant even in that company.

During the long war between Athens and Sparta, Alcibiades advocated the daring strategy of rebuilding his city's war-depleted fortunes by seizing Syracuse, a rich Spartan ally. He was appointed with two others to command the expedition, and all might have gone well if his political enemies had not accused him of impious actions and had him recalled to stand trial. On the way back, Alcibiades, who had no desire to be a martyr, jumped ship and deserted to the Spartans, where he provided such treasonably good advice that the Athenians were soon in deep trouble.

However, the democratic, pleasure-loving Greek general was not entirely comfortable in Sparta, which, at the best of times, was a rigorously disciplined, intellectually impoverished, and aestheti-
ally barren armed camp. Besides, Alcibiades had been rather too friendly with the wife of Agis II, king of Sparta, and Sparta was now (three years after his arrival) no safer for him than Athens had been. Once again he left in a hurry; this time ending up at the court of the Persian satrap, Tissaphernes.

From there, he plotted the overthrow of democracy in Athens and secured Persian support for the oligarchy that took power in 411 B.C. The oligarchs, who had hoped to negotiate a peace with their fellow autocrats in Sparta, faced a rebellion in the firmly democratic Athenian navy; they had also blundered badly in not recalling Alcibiades as a reward for his support. As a result, when the navy invited him to lead them, he accepted. What followed was a series of splendid victories for Athens and, of course, the rapid collapse of the oligarchy.

Once again, all might have been well if only his city had trusted Alcibiades; he seemed undefeatable, and the Spartans avoided meeting him in battle. But he was forced temporarily to leave his impoverished fleet in order to raise money, and while he was gone, in spite of his stern warnings, his subordinates fought an engagement without him and, inevitably, lost. Success was still possible, but Athens blamed her brilliant general and removed him from command. He went into voluntary exile (before something worse happened to him) in the Thracian Chersonesus.

Alcibiades tried twice more to help the city that he loved but could not trust. In 405 B.C., the Athenian fleet anchored near where he was living, and he rode down to the shore to warn them that their position was extremely dangerous. The fleet refused his advice with insults, and, as any good storyteller would expect, a few days later, the Spartans destroyed most of the Athenian navy and soon won the war. Alcibiades emerged from his retirement and headed for the Persian court, seeking help for Athens, but the Spartans, who had good reason to worry about him, arranged his assassination.

Robert Speaight says that the Alcibiades material in Timon of Athens “was evidently the germ of an important sub-plot, in which the ingratitude of Athens to Alcibiades would run parallel to its ingratitude towards Timon” (Shakespeare: The Man and His Achievement [London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1977], 294). Yet even without expanding the story, Shakespeare could have counted on many members of his audience to supply the details, to use their “imaginary forces” to furbish the imperfect but magnificent world he had sketched for them. Perhaps, if he had looked four centuries into the future, he might have expected modern audiences to do the same.
It would be fairly safe to bet that no ten Shakespearean critics, chosen at random, would name *Timon of Athens* among their ten (or even twenty) favorite Shakespearean plays; the play has never been particularly popular, during Shakespeare’s lifetime or ours. In fact, no evidence exists that *Timon of Athens* was ever performed in Shakespeare’s day, and the play, never published in a quarto edition, might have been lost if the collators of the First Folio had not experienced difficulties with the inclusion of *Troilus and Cressida* and, therefore, looked for another of Shakespeare’s plays to print in its place.

As with *Titus Andronicus*, scholars have debated whether *Timon of Athens* was written entirely by Shakespeare. Because there are occasionally rough (and therefore “un-Shakespearean”) lines and passages in the play, some scholars have come to the hasty conclusion that another inferior playwright had a hand in the writing. As H. D. Sykes puts it, they “give to Shakespeare the great poetry the play contains and all the good blank verse, and to the ‘unknown author’ all the irregular, halting verse, jingling rhyme, and uninspired prose” (H. J. Oliver, Introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare: Timon of Athens* [Methuen: London, 1959], xxiii).

Critics of the play have speculated that Shakespeare abandoned the play before it was finished and, indeed, that its primary value to the audience and the scholar is, as Louis B. Wright and Virginia LaMar explain, that it shows “how Shakespeare worked. . . . It probably is the only example of something in progress from Shakespeare’s workshop” (Introduction to *The Folger Library General Reader’s Shakespeare: The Life of Timon of Athens* [Washington Square Books: New York, 1967], xv). Wright and LaMar further suggest that Shakespeare initially attempted to shape the subject matter of *Timon of Athens* (taken largely from Sir Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s Parallel Lives) into a satirical comedy, then abandoned this genre in favor of tragedy, but ultimately found that his material was workable for neither (xi-xiv).

Indeed, there does seem to be a fundamental difference between *Timon of Athens* and great tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. It seems more like a fable or a fairy tale than one of the Bard’s multi-faceted classics, as though it had not entirely completed the transformation from source material to Shakespearean masterpiece. *King Lear*, too, has a fairy tale basis, following a Cinderella-like pattern with the three daughters, but it transcends this model, taking on the complexity of character and circumstance which makes it almost universally relevant.

However, this is not to say that *Timon of Athens* is a failure or that its loss would have been inconsequential. The play can be both entertaining and intriguing, and while it is not as intricate or moving as *King Lear*, it does share some of the same themes.

Both Lear and Timon mistakenly believe that they are beloved of family and fellow citizens respectively; they both make the error of equating praise with love. Lear demands that his three daughters tell which of them loves him best before he will divide the kingdom among them. Timon similarly holds great feasts and extravagantly rewards his flatterers with gifts and money; consequently, he is surrounded by false and greedy “friends,” who will not, contrary to Timon’s beliefs, be equally generous with him when he needs their assistance. Just as Cordelia, who refuses to falsely praise her father in order to ensure her inheritance, loves Lear the most, the philosopher Apemantus, who likewise refuses to stroke Timon’s ego for personal gain, is most concerned for Timon’s welfare.
Apemantus is an intensification of Lear’s fool; he is not simply the conscience of a king, but of the entire society. His life’s work is to let each person know just how foolish and reprehensible he or she is. What Socrates says of himself, one might also say of Apemantus: “The state is like a big thoroughbred horse, so big that he is a bit slow and heavy, and wants a gadfly to wake him up. I think the gods put me on the state something like that, to wake you up and persuade you and reproach you every one, as I keep setting on you everywhere all day long” (The Great Dialogues of Plato, trans. W.H.D. Rouse [New American Library: New York, 1956], 436-47). Apemantus takes his duties as a gadfly very seriously; he performs them constantly and with a sort of fiendish delight. Indeed, he seems to resent the fact that the misanthropic Timon has usurped his role: “Men report / Thou dost affect my manners, and dost use them. . . . / This is in thee a nature but infected, / A poor unmanly melancholy sprung / From change of future” (4.3.198-9, 202-4).

When Lear is betrayed and forcibly realizes his error, he becomes mad and rails against his daughters; on a barren heath, he is transformed from a rash king into a madman and eventually into a relatively sane human being. When Timon is beset by creditors and abandoned by all his supposed friends, he leaves Athens to live in a forest near the seacoast and falls into a madness of misanthropy from his almost equally mad philanthropy. Timon never surfaces from his insanity, and his all-consuming hatred of mankind is never expunged. His final message to mankind is a painfully bitter epitaph: “‘Here lies a wretched corse [corpse], of wretched soul bereft; / Seek not my name: a plague consume you, wicked caitiffs left! / Here lie I, Timon, who, alive, all living men did hate; / Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass and stay not here thy gait’” (5.4.70-3). Timon never returns to a moderate, reasonable range of behavior with which we, as human beings, are entirely willing to identify.

One of Shakespeare’s greatest talents was his ability to create sympathetic, three-dimensional human beings (be they essentially wicked or virtuous) in his plays and then to place them in all-too-human predicaments. This potent combination gives his plays a universal appeal and relevance which is sometimes lacking in his contemporaries. Many critics may maintain that the characters in Timon of Athens are not as well rounded and their dilemmas not quite as heart-rending as some of Shakespeare’s other creations, but, in fact, those characters are often both entertaining and enlightening; although Timon of Athens has not scaled the heights of King Lear, it has certainly reached the foothills of a Volpone, and perhaps even climbed a little further.