A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

The Shoemaker's Holiday
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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Cover photo: Brian Kurlander (left) and Laurie Birmingham in The Shoemaker’s Holiday, 1994.
The Shoemaker’s Holiday

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Synopsis: *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*

Rose Oatley (daughter of Sir Roger Oatley, the lord mayor of London) and Roland Lacy (nephew of Sir Hugh Lacy, the earl of Lincoln) are deeply in love. However, acutely aware of class differences between the two young people, Sir Hugh vows to stop the wedding. To avoid any possible courtship, the elder Lacy has his nephew given a command in the army of King Henry V, who is preparing to invade France.

But Roland has other ideas. Claiming pressing business in London, he turns his command over to his cousin, takes the disguise of a Dutch shoemaker, Hans Meulter, and signs on as an apprentice with Simon Eyre, a London shoemaker who makes shoes for the king and other notable families. Meanwhile, Rose, confined to her father’s house in a London suburb is pining for her love.

At the same time Simon is trying, to no avail, to convince officials to allow Ralph Damport, his journeyman who has also been drafted into the war, to stay home with his new bride, Jane. Ralph, resigned to going, gives Jane a farewell gift of a pair of shoes he had made for her. Some time later, and complicating the love affairs even further, Hammon and Warner while hunting deer in the lord mayor’s estate meet Rose and her maid, Sybil. Hammon, mistakenly believing Ralph has died in the wars, falls immediately in love with Rose (who also fears her husband is dead), and Warner loses his heart to Sybil. When Hammon confesses his love, Jane dismisses him, declaring that she intends to remain single, but if she ever remarries she will accept his proposal.

Back in town, Roland (disguised as Hans) has speculated in an unclaimed ship’s valuable cargo, making an enormous profit for his employer, Simon the shoemaker. As a result, Simon is made an alderman; then, affluent and popular, soon advances even further in political rank. However, Sir Hugh has learned from a servant that his nephew Roland is not in France with the army, and he sends the servant to discover his whereabouts, forcing Roland to keep his disguise and try to avoid discovery.

Meanwhile, Ralph, wounded but not dead, returns to London. Seeking his wife, he learns that she left the Eyre household soon after he was forced off to war. Crushed, he at first attempts to find her but eventually assumes she is either dead or has left him.

Rose, learning of Roland’s presence in the city, arranges to see him on the pretext of having him fit her for a pair of shoes. They finally meet each other again, although Roland is dressed as a Dutch shoemaker, and they plan their wedding the next day at St. Faith’s Church. Upon hearing this, Sir Hugh gloats, thinking that his nephew will never be able to marry this middle-class girl. However, Sir Roger is furious this time, thinking his daughter is now marrying beneath her class, and now it is he who vows to stop the wedding. Stepping up the confusion and the comedy, Sir Hugh later realizes the Dutch cobbler is his nephew and also vows to stop the wedding, hurrying out to St. Faith’s Church.

At the shoe shop back in town a servant brings in a pair of shoes and requests that a similar pair be made for another upcoming wedding—this one also in St. Faith’s Church and also the next day. The assignment for the wedding shoes falls on Ralph who recognizes the shoes as those he gave Jane when he left for the wars. He also quickly heads for the church, making his own vow to stop this wedding.

At the church, Ralph and his fellow shoemakers, armed with cudgels, confront Hammon and Jane, who had recently accepted her husband’s death and decided to remarry. Hammon resents the intrusion of the base craftsmen, but Jane is confused and excited by the sudden realization that her husband is not dead.
Hammon patronizingly offers Ralph twenty pounds to relinquish his wife, but Ralph, insulted, refuses and takes Jane home. Next, Sir Hugh and Sir Roger arrive, hoping to stop the wedding of Rose and Roland. However, the young couple has outfoxed everybody and been married at another church.

In a grand and hilarious finale, Simon Eyre, now the lord mayor of London, gives a breakfast for all London apprentices, and the king pardons Roland and blesses him and Rose, saying that “love respects no blood, / Cares not for difference of birth or state” (21.104-05).
Characters: The Shoemaker's Holiday

The king of England: Playing only a minor role, he appears only at the end of the action to pardon the faithful lovers, reward those who deserve it, and spread his wisdom and mercy across the kingdom.

Sir Hugh Lacy: The earl of Lincoln, a member of the aristocracy, and uncle of Roland Lacy, he objects to the marriage between Roland and Rose, on the grounds that Roland shouldn't marry beneath himself into the middle class. To stop the marriage he has his nephew given a command in the army which is leaving for a war in France.

Roland Lacy: Sir Hugh Lacy's nephew, he is in love with Rose and leaves the army to disguise himself as Hans Meulter, a Dutch shoemaker, so he can court her. Eventually Roland and Rose triumph over all the obstacles placed in front of them to marry and unite the two classes.

Askew: Roland Lacy's cousin, he is also inducted into the army. When Roland decides to leave the army and stay in England, he turns his command over to Askew.

Cornwall

Dodger: A servant of Sir Hugh Lacy.

Sir Roger Oatley: For most of the play the lord mayor of London, he loses his position to Simon Eyre when he becomes rich and powerful. He is Rose's father and at first only mildly objects to her marriage to Roland, secretly hoping for the marriage into a higher level of society will happen. However, when Rose proposes to marry Roland disguised as Hans, Sir Roger vehemently objects, for the same reason that Sir Hugh Lacy earlier objected: the difference in class. Yet, like Sir Hugh, Sir Roger also cannot stop the marriage in the end.

Rose Oatley: The daughter of Sir Roger Oatley, she is very much in love with Roland. Eventually she and Roland are married, to the joy of the working class, and with the blessing of the king.

Sybil: Rose's maid.

Hammon: A London gentleman, he accidentally meets Jane while hunting and immediately falls in love with her. He and Jane both believe her husband, Ralph, has died in the war, and eventually plan to wed. However, Ralph (still very much alive) returns from France just in time to stop the nuptials.

Warner: Hammon's brother-in-law, he parallels Hammon in most things, including his love. Upon meeting Rose's maid, Sybil, he also falls head-over-heels in love.

Scott: A friend of Sir Roger Oatley.

Simon Eyre: A happy and very middle-class shoemaker, he eventually, mostly through exceptional luck, rises to the position of lord mayor of London.

Margery Eyre: Simon Eyre's wife, she is the butt of many lower-class jokes, many of which she deserves because of her pretentiousness when she rises from the wife of a lowly shoemaker to the wife of the lord mayor.

Roger: Nicknamed Hodge, he is the foreman in Eyre's cobbler shop.

Ralph Damport: A journeyman in Eyre's cobbler shop, he is sent off to war, even though he only recently married Jane. He is wounded and returns to London just in time to learn his wife (who thinks him dead) is ready to marry Hammon. Rallying his fellow workers around him, he stops the marriage and shows the spirit and strength of the tradesmen.

Jane: Ralph's wife, she is very much middle-class, as well as a loving wife, who turns to Hammon only after she is sure her husband is dead.

Firk: A journeyman in Simon Eyre's cobbler shop.
About the Playwright: Thomas Dekker

By Diana Majoy Spencer

From Insights, 1994

Of all the times to be a playwright, Thomas Dekker picked the worst. If you can’t be the greatest—Shakespeare, for example—or even second best—Jonson?—better to find some other generation in some other place than Elizabethan/Jacobean England. Charles Lamb claimed Dekker “had poetry enough for anything” (Hardin Craig, ed., The Complete Works of Shakespeare [Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1961], 801); but it wasn’t enough to keep him out of debt or to provide a clear picture of who he was.

“So obscure, so disorganized, so wretched was his life,” proclaimed Hardin Craig, “that we know neither the date of his birth nor of his death. We know only that his life was largely wasted” (The Complete Works of Shakespeare, 801). Elsewhere, Craig wrote: “Almost no records of his life—parentage, birth, marriage, education, or death—have been found” (The Literature of the English Renaissance, vol. 2 of A History of English Literature, 5 vols. [New York: Collier, 1962], 170).

Such obscurity spawns the temptation to manufacture biographies. Writers, especially, leave rich resources for the speculator, given that literary creations are often interpreted as autobiography. Dekker’s family tree is completely unknown, but the name is Dutch. Perhaps Thomas was born to Dutch immigrants, speculates R. C. Bald, editor of the 1963 Riverside anthology, Six Elizabethan Plays; and perhaps that is why he used a Dutch disguise for Lacy in The Shoemaker’s Holiday (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 69). Then again, perhaps not.

Scholars agree, though, that Dekker was born about 1572, probably in London, and died about 1632, also in London. Slightly younger than Shakespeare, he is known only through theatrical works and debtors’ prison. Philip Henslowe, who built the Rose (1587), the Swan (1596), the Fortune (1600), and the Hope (1613), maintained a famous Diary, the most important source of theatrical history of the time, with accounts, receipts, payments to playwrights, and other expenditures. In 1598, Henslowe recorded a loan to Dekker, then hired him to write plays for the Admiral’s Men (Hardin Craig calls Dekker “Henslowe’s hack” [The Complete Works of Shakespeare, 801]). Henslowe’s Admiral’s Men were the chief competition for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Thus, Dekker, through his association with Henslowe, competed directly with Shakespeare in the early years of his career.

Also in 1598, Frances Meres lists Dekker as a tragedian in his Palladis Tamia. Though Meres gives no hint that order indicates rank, he lists Dekker twelfth behind Shakespeare’s ninth position: “. . . Shakespeare, Drayton, Chapman, Decker, and Benjamin Johnson.”

A July 1599 Diary entry reveals that Henslowe gave three pounds to the Admiral’s Men “to bye a boocke called the gentle Craft of Thomas Dickers,” referring to The Shoemaker’s Holiday, based on a prose work by Thomas Deloney, the title of which, The Gentle Craft, Dekker uses throughout the play as an epithet for shoemaking. Deloney, as obscure as Dekker, though of lesser reputation, is thought to have written “Crabbed age and youth cannot live together,” Number XII in The Passionate Pilgrim, a poem which, when ascribed to Shakespeare is considered youthful and immature, but when ascribed to Deloney is considered one of his finest.

In 1612, fellow playwright and collaborator John Webster, in a preface to The White Devil, relegates Dekker, along with Shakespeare, to the second tier of those with whom he would wish his works to be judged: first choices are Chapman, Jonson, Beaumont, and Fletcher; “and lastly (without wrong last to be named) the right happy and copious industry of Master Shakespeare, Master Dekker, and Master Heywood” (quoted in Craig, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, 1149). Dekker’s romantic style of drama, like Shakespeare’s was apparently out of fashion by 1612.
Dekker is associated with a prolific twenty-eight (or more) plays between 1598 and 1600, as sole or conjoint author, but only fourteen more by 1628. He left Henslowe by 1604, which may have been to his disadvantage, given that his productivity waned and his insolvency waxed. He was imprisoned for debt from 1613 to 1619, and probably other times as well.

Plague swept London in 1603. Whereas “the mellifluous & hony-tongued Shakespeare” wrote narrative poetry and “sugar’d sonnets” during the plague of 1592-93, Dekker turned to prose pamphlets. London and the plague inspired The Wonderfull yeare, and Robert Greene (of “upstart crowe” fame) posthumously furnished crime and low-life material for The Belman of London. The Guls Horne-booke remains an important account of behaviour in London theatres. Dekker also performed such prestigious assignments as providing street entertainment for King James’s entry into London and a pageant for the lord mayor of London in 1612, the year before his six-year imprisonment.

Dekker usually appears as a collaborator, and most of his plays are lost. About a dozen plays bear his name yoked with Thomas Middleton, John Webster, Philip Massinger, John Ford, or William Rowley. He participated in the Poetomachia, his own coinage for “the combat of the poets,” or “the war of the theatres,” which involved seven plays and three acting companies over a period of five years. Johnson and Marston were the primary combatants; Dekker appeared late. Marston, writing for the Children of St. Pauls, satirized Jonson, writing for the Children of Blackfriars, in Hystriomastix (1599), provoking Every Man Out of His Humour (1599), wherein Jonson ridiculed Marston’s style as “fustian.” Marston retaliated by presenting Jonson as “puffed up with arrogant conceit” in Jack Drum’s Entertainment (1599). Jonson’s counter-attack in Cynthia’s Revels (1600), not only slandered Marston, but also included Dekker. Marston re-counter-attacked in What You Will (1601); and Jonson composed Poetaster (1601), casting Marston as Crispinus, a poetaster and plagiarist, and Dekker as Demetrius Fannius, “a very simple fellow . . . a dresser of plays . . . a plagiarist.”

Dekker then caricatured Jonson as the laborious poet crowned with nettles in Satiromastix, or the Untrussing of the Humorous Poet (1602). The character Tucca, borrowed from Jonson’s Poetaster, says of Jonson: “His wits are somewhat hard bound; the punk his Muse has sore labor ere the whore be delivered.” Jonson, notoriously slow, had publicly criticized Shakespeare’s speed, and Dekker probably wrote faster. Jonson withdrew from writing drama for a period. In 1604 Marston dedicated The Malcontent to Jonson, and the “war” was over.

Dekker enjoyed Andy Warhol’s proverbial fifteen minutes of fame, but his legacy has proved fragile. Of his solo efforts, only five or six plays survive, depending on who’s counting. The Shoemaker’s Holiday continues as the most popular and the only one produced with any frequency. The Honest Whore, Part I is usually partially attributed to Middleton, but Hardin Craig thinks that “the idea that a fallen woman might ever again be honest was so rare in those times that almost nobody but Dekker could have entertained it” (The Literature of the English Renaissance, 171). The Honest Whore, Part II, continuing the story by tempting the heroine back to a life of shame, is entirely Dekker’s.

Dekker created good-natured, middle-class guildsmen and apprentices triumphing over injustice, misfortune, and the malice of the upper classes. He celebrates the worth of the poor and working classes who struggle with the social and economic mobility that raises their expectations. The decent working people in The Shoemaker’s Holiday have no wish to climb to Lacy’s social level; instead, ironically, the aristocratic Lacy must pose as a working class craftsman to win the favor of his lady love.

Would that Dekker’s life had paralleled one of his plots.
Bridging Joy and Suffering
By Ace G. Pilkington
From Insights, 1994

There are two very different elements in Thomas Dekker's work, which, by all rules of logic and aesthetics, ought to conflict, but, through his peculiar magic, do not. The first of these is a rollicking good humor and an uninhibited enjoyment of the varied pleasures life has to offer; the second is a clear-sighted understanding of the pain that human beings inevitably suffer on their journey to death. The easy way to put such disparate material together in one play is by using the light to contrast with the dark, but Dekker does more--especially in The Shoemaker's Holiday. He bridges the joy and suffering with his own empathy just as he combined comedy with serious issues and brilliant play making with the latest court cases of his day.

His best remembered prose works give some idea of the experiences he drew on; they are Lanthorne and Candle-light and Dekker his Dreame, where he tells of his various sojourns in debtors' prison; The Wonderfull yeare, a chronicle of the plague in London, which became Defoe's source for his Journal of the Plague Year; and The Guls Hornebooke, a satirical assault (in the form of a book of manners) on the fops and gallants who infested London, including those who visited the playhouses.

In spite of the poverty, imprisonment, and other embittering experiences he suffered (or, who knows, perhaps because of them), Dekker's plays are noted for a sweetness of outlook and a sympathy of understanding that is difficult to match outside of Shakespeare's happiest work. As Parrot and Ball say of The Shoemaker's Holiday, "It would be hard to find another Elizabethan play where the background of contemporary life gives so strong a sense of atmosphere, an atmosphere of Old and Merry England at its jolliest" (A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Scribners, 1943], 109).

Even in that later, darker work, The Witch of Edmonton, Dekker's compassion shines. The play was based on a contemporary trial, just as The Shoemaker's Holiday drew material from recent Protestant wars; and Mother Sawyer, its title character, like some convicted witches, emerges as a rebel. As Jeffrey Burton Russel says, "Witchcraft was . . . the strongest possible religious expression of social discontent" (Witchcraft in the Middle Ages [Secaucus, New Jersey: The Citadel Press, 1972], 266).

Mother Sawyer rebels against the cruel stupidity of her community, and Dekker and his collaborators clearly mean to enlist the audience's sympathy for her, an unusual tactic for many playwrights, but consistent with Dekker's other plays. Nevertheless, the result of her rebellion is the confirmation of her neighbors' suspicions, the intensification of their hatred, and her own physical and moral destruction. Her dog-devil promised her love, comfort, and revenge when her neighbors had cast her out, but his last words to her are: "Out witch! Thy trial is at hand. / Our prey being had, the devil does laughing stand" (5.1.73-4).

This disastrous end to her dream is at once a revelation of Mother Sawyer's character and circumstances and a criticism of the society that is largely responsible for shaping them. For her, there was no more charity, no more love, no more humanity in the humans around her than there was in a fiend from the pit. It is Dekker who is generally given credit for The Witch of Edmonton's uncharacteristically sympathetic (and courageous) stand, Dekker who could see through Mother Sawyer's outer ugliness to the suffering human within. It was Dekker, who, though a partisan Protestant, sympathized with the treatment of soldiers like Ralph (in some editions Rafe) in Protestant wars, and who said in The Seven Deadly Sins that there was "cruelty in England to compare with the Spanish Inquisition" (Julia Gasper, The Dragon and the Dove [Oxford University Press, 1990], 8).
Ironically, with this all said, The Shoemaker's Holiday is still sometimes criticized for being a happy play of London life and no more, a citizen or city comedy designed to please the masses. Such a view is hard to accept in the light of The Witch of Edmonton and Dekker's other work, and in any event, the masses in a London theatre were better educated and more discerning than most. Thomas Deloney, whose The gentle craft served as source of Dekker's play, was a silk weaver by trade who wrote broadside ballads and pamphlets and was well able to translate Latin.

It is easy to spot the elements that have caused some critics to devalue The Shoemaker's Holiday as just another citizen comedy. After all, on one level it is the story of how the aristocratic Rowland Lacy, kinsman of the earl of Lincoln, disguises himself as a shoemaker in order to wed the middle class daughter of the lord mayor of London. But it would be equally easy to dismiss The Merry Wives of Windsor (a play which has a number of similarities with The Shoemaker's Holiday, including the connection to Henry V) as no more than a gratification of middle class tastes because the merry wives humiliate Sir John Falstaff and the aristocratic Fenton comes to love Ann Page for herself and not her money.

The changes and additions that Dekker made to his borrowed plot show plainly what he had in mind. In Deloney's The gentle craft, there is no mention of Wittenberg, but in The Shoemaker's Holiday, Lacy learns shoemaking in that birthplace of the Reformation and Protestant stronghold. "Deloney's hostility toward immigrants was typical of one section of the London public" (Gasper, 18). Protestant refugees flooded into London, competing for jobs, and the Dutch across the channel challenged England's commercial interests even while they fought beside her against Spain. Deloney creates a subplot where a Frenchman and a Dutchman compete with an Englishman for the affection of an Englishwoman. The deceitful foreigners are eventually exposed, and English virtue triumphs. Dekker's version replaces "xenophobia with Protestant fraternity": Simon Eyre's "foreman and journeyman take the stranger's part and threaten to leave if he is not taken on" (Gasper, 19).

In addition to all the brilliant fun in The Shoemaker's Holiday, Dekker argues for the humane treatment of Protestant refugees in England and also for a political goal dear to the heart of the earl of Essex, an effective Protestant alliance against the massed forces of European Catholicism (see Gasper, 21-22). Even so, Dekker does not become a fanatic, believing in one group as the chosen people, entitled to do whatever they wish. In The Seven Deadly Sins, he asks: "Can the father of the world measure out his love so unequally, that one people (like to a man's youngest child) should be more made of than all the rest?" (cited in Gasper, 8).

Though citizen comedies were sometimes thought to be all about money, Dekker finds more important values in the humanness of his characters, and in spite of giving us a realistic world where the aristocrat avoids war and the common man suffers from it, Dekker convinces us that life is worth the effort it takes to live it well and that the world is a profoundly joyous place, in part because human sympathy manifests itself in Lacy's love and helps to soothe Ralph's pain.
Thomas Dekker’s comic masterpiece *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* seems at first glance to be a late sixteenth-century version of “The Beverly Hillbillies Make Reeboks in the Renaissance.” Loosely based on part one of Thomas Deloney’s *The Gentle Craft*, a collection of stories celebrating the exploits of famous shoemakers in England, the drama’s main plot chronicles the meteoric rise to fame and fortune by Simon Eyre, an ambitious, mad-cap entrepreneur who through hard work, clever deception, and magnificent luck becomes lord mayor of London. Attended by Margery (his somewhat ditzy wife), Hodge (his industrious and kind-hearted foreman), Firk (a journeyman addicted to bawdy puns and cheap ale), and a gaggle of good-natured but unsophisticated cobbler, Eyre ascends to prominence in a delightful dramatic parable that rewards virtue over social status, industry over aristocracy, and love over law.

Garnishing this central story are two romantic sub-plots--each of which deals with love lost, then found. The first involves one of Eyre’s journeymen, Ralph Damport, who is conscripted into the army and sent off to fight in France. Returning wounded from the wars, he finds that his young wife, Jane, thinking him dead, has left Eyre’s shop and moved to a different section of London, where she is being courted by an unscrupulous gentleman named Hammon. In the other sub-plot a young aristocrat, Roland Lacy, disguises himself as a Dutch shoemaker so he can avoid going to war and instead court the beautiful Rose Oatley, with whom he is in love against his father’s wishes.

Simon Eyre’s Horatio Alger, shoeleather-to-riches story of working class triumph, with its two attendant love-plots, is described by Dekker in a dedicatory epistle as “a merry conceited comedy” wherein “nothing is proposed but mirth,” yet beneath the play’s comic surface lie a number of important themes which provide insight into the economic, social, and political milieu of London during the years 1598 to 1600 when the play was written and produced. Chief among these is the ascent of capitalism, in which Eyre’s dramatic elevation to lord mayor and his accumulation of an immense personal fortune emblemize the upwardly mobile middle class of England during a time of great financial opportunity and expansion.

All the major characters of the play, in fact, are engaged in the buying and selling of goods. Eyre, for instance, makes his fortune principally through purchasing a shipload of foreign merchandise and reselling it for enormous profit; Lacy bribes his way out of the service so he can be with Rose; and Hammon tries to buy Jane from Ralph with an offer of twenty pounds of gold. Even during the play’s denouement, when the king honors the shoemakers with a visit to their banquet on Shrove Tuesday, Eyre manages to raise the specter of commercialism when he talks his sovereign into giving him a special patent to buy and sell leather products two days each week in the newly named Leaden Hall. Eyre’s economic triumphs, set against this swirling background of money won and lost, signal a victory for the bourgeoisie at the expense of indolent and snobbish aristocrats like Hammon and Lacy’s pompous and insufferable father, the earl of Lincoln. True human value, Dekker seems to argue, comes not from riches and social prominence, but from the honest labor, vitality, patriotism, and camaraderie personified so vividly by Eyre’s gallant shoemakers.

Closely allied to this theme of nascent capitalism is the play’s emphasis upon the development of guilds--early trade unions, each with its own particular language, group identity, mythology, and patron saint. Based upon Dekker’s intimate knowledge of contemporary working class conditions in London, the play offers a delicious feast of cordwainer jargon. “Hark
“you, shoemaker,” Firk asks Lacy, who is disguised as a Dutch cobbler, “have you all your tools? A
good rubbing-pin, a good stopper, a good dresser, your four sorts of awls, and your two balls of
wax, your paring knife, your hand and thumb-leathers, and good Saint Hugh’s bones to smooth
your work?” (4.78 82). This is a world in which people take immense pride in their work, and they
are often rewarded for their diligence in mysterious and unexpected ways. Ralph, for example, is
reunited with his wife when he recognizes a pair of sandals he once gave her: “This shoe, I durst be
sworn, / Once covered the instep of my Jane. / This is her size, her breadth. Thus trod my love. /
These true-love knots I pricked. I hold my life, / By this old shoe I shall find out my wife” (14.45
49; all references to line numbers are from Thomas Dekker, The Shoemaker’s Holiday, ed. Anthony

In knowing the “size” and “breadth” of Jane’s feet, Ralph has captured the dimensions of her
very soul. As the Cinderella motif implies, marriages—like comfortable footwear—need a perfect
“fit” in order to be successful. Jane eventually rejects Hammon because he doesn’t “measure up”
to the same moral and ethical standards displayed by Ralph and the rest of the good lads in the
Shoemakers’ Guild who are loyal to their union brothers and mutually supportive in a manner that
the play’s aristocrats could never understand or duplicate.

Focused so tightly upon commercialism and the emergence of industrial guilds, The
Shoemaker’s Holiday also centers, not surprisingly, upon the city of London: the familiar, bustling,
real-life locus of action which serves as scenic background for the fictional characters and events of
the play. Eyre and his imaginary cohorts move through a dramatic landscape which includes such
well-known place names as St. Paul’s Church, Leaden Hall, Watling Street, the Guildhall, Tower
Street, and many other locations—particularly in the East End of London, the heart of trade—which
would have been immediately familiar to Dekker’s audiences. The milieu of the play seemed like
home to viewers in 1600 because it was home to them. In the same manner, the drama’s concentra-
ton on urban events also helps define it as one of the earliest examples of a popular and influential
literary genre we now call “Jacobean city comedy,” which traditionally included sexual intrigue,
class mobility, and the obsessive pursuit of wealth—in short, all the seamy ingredients of today’s
most popular movies and television shows.

Other important themes in The Shoemaker’s Holiday include the rich and exotic uses of lan-
guage—particularly in Eyre’s highly imaginative, rhetorical, and alliterative verbal flourishes; Lacy’s
pseudo-Dutch dialogue; Hammon’s courtly, fashionable discourse; and Firk’s rambling obsceni-
ties concerning the erotic possibilities of the “tongues,” “laces,” and “tightness” of women’s shoes.
Also of interest is the “holiday” aspect of the play, in which the three central plots move from
union to wandering to joyful reunion at the conclusion; the employment of “scapegoat” figures
like Hammon, Oatley, and the Earl of Lincoln, whose mean-spirited antagonism is defeated by the
comic progress of the drama; and the gradual enrichment of clothing worn by Eyre and his wife
as they rise in social and financial prominence. Most intriguing, perhaps, is the odd amorality of
the world of the play: Eyre illegally impersonates a city official in order to purchase the shipload of
valuable merchandise and then ascends to the position of lord mayor following an unlikely scenario
in which “seven of the alderman be dead, or very sick” (13.35 36); Lacy deserts from the army
only to be pardoned later by his strangely unperturbed king; and Jane and Ralph appropriate all of
Hammon’s wedding gifts because, as Hodge argues, “The law’s on our side. He that sows in another
man’s ground forfeits his harvest”(18.63 64).

In the final analysis, however, The Shoemaker’s Holiday may tell us even more about its author
than it does about the world in which he lived. Thomas Dekker was a popular playwright, though
hardly a wealthy one. Unlike Shakespeare, who as a shareholder in his own theatrical company
earned a great deal of money on the plays he composed, Dekker was a “jobbing” dramatist who
moved from one employment to another as his services were needed. Though he wrote several well-known pamphlets—including The Wonderful Year (1603), The Gull’s Hornbook (1606), and The Seven Deadly Sins of London (1606)—and had a hand in at least five other plays, he lived in continual poverty and was frequently cast into debtors’ prison. Incredibly, he earned only three pounds for writing The Shoemaker’s Holiday, his best and most influential play. Viewed in this light, Dekker’s “merry” comedy presents life in early seventeenth-century England as more of a dream than actual reality. Simon Eyre’s London is an idealized dramatic universe in which hard work and perseverance are always fairly rewarded with royal favor, financial security, true love, and good fellowship: Here even unsophisticated cobblers and minor dramatists can enjoy sweet success. Dekker has, therefore, stitched together with his playwright’s awl a compelling, seductive, and very stylish piece of social propaganda. If only his impoverished life could have imitated his art!