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: Bree Murphy (left) as Hostess Quickly and John Ahlin as Sir John Falstaff in the Utah Shakespeare Festival’s 2015 production of King Henry IV Part Two.
Henry IV Part Two

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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 Shakespearean-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 ‘unplausible’ (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 Shakespearean 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 crowdes 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 Shakespearean 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-Shakespearean 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 supurb 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.
Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume
by Diana Major Spencer From Insights, 1994

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 Shakespearean 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 Shakespearean 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 liveries, 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 Life, Work, and Era [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One 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 Vacabondes” (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 Life [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).
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 servantes 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 batings, 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.
Shakespearean Snapshots
From Insights, 2002
By Ace G. Pilkington

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.
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 truss ed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsmen’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

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 Shakespearean 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

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: *Henry IV Part Two*

Despite early rumors that Hotspur has defeated the King’s forces, the true report of the defeat of the rebels and the death of Hotspur is finally brought to the Earl of Northumberland, leader of the insurgents. Northumberland is also informed that the King’s forces are leading an army against him. Enraged, he joins forces with the Archbishop of York.

In London Falstaff is finding it difficult to bid farewell to his associates at the Boar’s Head Tavern and to start north with the King’s forces, enlisting soldiers en-route. This “hasty employment in the King’s affairs” saves him from being arrested for debt at the suit of Mistress Quickly, and the clever rascal concludes the whole matter by borrowing more money for riot and jest with Prince Hal and their other companions.

In the North, Northumberland’s wife and Hotspur’s widow prevail upon the cold-blooded nobleman to desert the Archbishop of York and take refuge in Scotland. The King, in Westminster Palace, is enfeebled by anxieties and ill health as he discusses the rebellion with his counselors, Warwick and Surry. As the monarch beholds the truth of Richard II’s prophecy regarding Northumberland, he realizes that “uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” and wishes the wars were out of the way so that he could make the long-deferred pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

In Yorkshire, the insurgents are chilled by the news of Northumberland’s defection. They are prevailed upon to present a list of their grievances to John of Lancaster (Hal’s brother and leader of the king’s forces) who swears princely redress. Upon this royal word the rebel armies are dispersed, but immediately the prince orders the rebel noblemen executed and their followers slaughtered. The report of this act reaches the king in Westminster together with the news that Northumberland has also been defeated, but the king is too ill to hear even good tidings, putting his crown upon a pillow and falling into a stuporous slumber. Hal, summoned to the palace, thinks the king is dead an sorrowfully removes from the room the golden circlet of his father’s cares. Awakening alone and misunderstanding his son’s action, the king accuses him of desiring his death, but the genuine grief of the young prince is apparent, and the two are reconciled. The dying monarch advises his son to let the rebellion at home slumber.

Upon the death of his father, Prince Hal becomes the ruler as Henry V. The news of these events speeds to Gloucestershire, and Falstaff hurries to London to reap the benefits of his long companionship with the prince. He finds, however, that the young king is not the old riotous prince.
Characters: *Henry IV Part Two*

**King Henry IV**: The father of Prince Hal, King Henry still suffers from a guilty conscience at usurping the throne and is unsure his son will ever be fit to be king.

**Henry, Prince of Wales**: The elder son of King Henry IV, the madcap Prince Hal does eventually change his ways and become King Henry V.

**Prince John of Lancaster**: The younger son of Henry IV and general of his forces, which are fighting a rebellion by the Yorks to take the throne.

**Earl of Westmorland**: Leader of the royal forces against the rebels.

**Earl of Northumberland**: A leader in the rebellion.

**Scroop, Archbishop of York**: A leader in the rebellion.

**Lord Mowbray**: A leader in the rebellion.

**Lord Hastings**: A leader in the rebellion.

**Lord Bardolph**: A leader in the rebellion.

**Lady Northumberland**: Wife of the Earl and mother of the dead Hotspur.

**Sir John Falstaff**: A fool and a jester who “requires two and twenty years of satin” for a suit, Falstaff is the leader of Prince Hal’s “tavern friends.”

**Falstaff’s Page**

**Bardolph**: Falstaff’s drinking companion.

**Peto**: Another of Falstaff’s companions.

**Pistol**: Falstaff’s “ancient” or ensign, a ranting swaggerer.

**Poins**: Prince Hal’s companion at the Boar’s Head Tavern.

**Silence**: A country justice.

**Shallow**: A poor esquire.

**Fang**: A sheriff’s officer.

**Snare**: A sheriff’s officer.
The Price Greatness Pays for Power

Henry IV Part Two forms the second segment of a series of three history plays by William Shakespeare. The trilogy traces the development of Prince Hal/King Henry V, the leader who was to become proto-type of the hero-king and model of all English sovereigns.

Henry IV Part One and Henry IV Part Two dramatize events that follow the murder of England’s King Richard II. In Part One, the guilt-ridden Henry IV wants to go to the Holy Land in repentance, but political unrest in England prevents him. At the same time Prince Hal, his son, leads an apparently irresponsible life with his brawling friends, led by the fat jolly knight, Sir John Falstaff, who provides most of the play’s humor. At the end of Part One, Hal has revealed himself to be a brave and princely warrior.

In Henry IV Part Two, Falstaff’s clowning is set against the background of continuing Percy rebellion and the approaching death of the ill Henry IV. Hal’s brother finally defeats the rebels through trickery, and with the King’s death, Hal takes the throne as Henry V. He immediately reveals his royal qualities and rejects Falstaff and his cronies, telling them to avoid him until they have abandoned their wild living.

Henry IV Part Two was obviously composed closely after the first part; in fact the last lines of Part One clearly indicate the author’s intent to continue the story. Part One was written in 1596–7; Part Two in 1598. For the transformation of the madcap prince into the wise and splendid king, Shakespeare tapped the very old tradition first narrated in Holingshed’s Chronicles. 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 which opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in the Civil War was wrong also.

Early critics maintained that the plays were separated “only because they were too long to be one,” and most critics agree that the two plays were indeed conceived and written as a unit, so intimately related in action, characters, and theme that neither can be fully understood without the other.

In terms of plot, the Battle of Shrewsbury, which ends Part One, does not tidy up the action. Henry IV has checked, but not destroyed his adversaries; Hal has won his spurs, but with Northumberland and Archbishop Scroop still at large, there remains the danger of rebellion; and the prince despite his show of valor has not resolved his father’s doubts about him.

Part Two picks up with no break in time or action; the scattered rebels gather for a new assault, Prince Hal continues to concern his ailing father, and Falstaff, laden with the “honors” he gathered at Shrewsbury, looks forward to the day of Hal’s accession when the laws of England will be at his “commandment.”

These various motifs begin to fall into alignment and approach their final resolution. The destruction of the rebels secures the long-sought peace. Hal’s estrangement from his father is ended as the old king nears the grave, and Hal himself, rejecting Falstaff and everything he represents, at last breaks through the “foul and ugly mists” to become the warrior king.

The serial presentation of early fifteenth century history traces the slow and ultimately successful efforts of the Lancastrian usurper to secure his hold on the throne and the preparation of his son for the duties he must bear. The two plot lines converge to underscore the massive central theme of the whole trilogy: the sources, uses, and responsibilities of power.

As in his other history plays, Shakespeare has taken the so-called facts and artfully or ruthlessly deployed them to tighten up the action and reinforce the theme. These telescopings and distortions give shape and speed and moral meaning to the narration, and, just as they lead us to view Henry’s reign as one of urgent and successive perils and as a drawn-out penance for
usurpation, so Shakespeare’s juggling with the ages and motives of his characters serves the other theme of Prince Hal’s preparation for the awful burdens of the crown.

Shakespeare’s introduction of knockabout farce into a theme of this type was a stunning innovation, for by the introduction of a low-life comic element he achieved a counterpoint in action, style, and theme that is the glory of these plays. We move back and forth from court to tavern, from the cares of state to bawds and leaping houses, from the urgency of great events to the sloth and heedless self indulgences of Falstaff and his sleazy crew: Poins, Bardolph of the flaming nose, Peto and the swaggering Pistol, Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet, whose startling vocabulary rivals that of Pistol, if in a different way. We move from bold exploit and valor to chicanery and crime, from honor to disgrace. This continual oscillation is the most conspicuous feature of these plays.

Falstaff is so various, so equivocal and so overwhelming that he would seem to baffle judgment, and since the eighteenth century he has probably prompted more discussion than any character other than Hamlet. Although he is a sluggard, liar, glutton, lecher, knave, and cheat, he is also superbly funny, “not only witty in myself, but the cause of the wit in other men” that as he lumbers through the plays with his tatterdemalion crew of ruffians, whores and sycophants he seems to shed a flood of light. A virtuoso in the arts of language, he can hardly speak a line that does not, like all great literature, sharpen our responses and jolt us into new perceptions.

Even so, Hal senses the danger in Falstaff. Hal goes through a “reformation” and his participation in the comic subplot diminishes toward the end as we are prepared for his rejection of Falstaff. Even through we know that Falstaff, “the tutor and feeder of my riots” is just one aspect of the Prince’s test and preparation for the crown, his rejection of Falstaff wrings our heart. It is the price greatness pays for power.
The Decline and Fall of Sir John Falstaff
By Diana Major Spencer

Start with *Henry IV Part Two*’s Epilogue: “If you be not too much cloyed with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it . . . where . . . [he] shall die of a sweat, unless already [he] be killed with your hard opinions” (Epilogue 24–29, emphasis added; all line references from Bevington’s Complete Works of Shakespeare, 5th ed. [New York: Pearson Longman, 2003]).

The subsequent play, *Henry V*, does kill Falstaff with a sweat (brought on, of course, by a broken heart), and he never appears onstage—suggesting, perhaps, that someone’s hard opinions have indeed killed him off.

We’ve known since act 1, scene 2 of *Henry IV Part One* that Hal will one day break off his association with Falstaff to reveal his stunning goodness and competence as sunshine long hidden behind “foul and ugly mists / Of vapors that did seem to strangle him” (1.2.196–97). During the deposition of the wayward prince by his father the king, Falstaff, portraying Prince Hal, responds after charges of being “a villainous, abominable misleader of youth . . . [and] old white-bearded Satan” (2.4.457–58), “Banish Peto, banish Bardolph, banish Poins; but for sweet Jack Falstaff . . . banish not him thy Harry’s company . . . banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.” Hal, as king, answers simply, “I do, I will” (2.4.469–76).

We’ve seen Prince Hal perform his tasks as warrior prince against the triple-threat of Wales, Scotland, and rebellious English earls, while Falstaff proves himself a leech, a thief, a coward, and a liar by act 2, scene 4, when the Gadshill scheme is revealed and Hal pays off Falstaff’s tavern bills. So far, Falstaff is fat and funny, guilty only of good humor and a little fudging here and there. How can we condemn him for thievery when he’s so incompetent? How can we fault him for lying when he’s only trying to save face?

But when Hal “procures [for Falstaff] a charge of foot” as well as “money to equip them” (3.3.186, 202), the old fat man rapidly declines to more serious lapses. In 4.2, Falstaff reveals that his “charge of foot” is puny, weak, and few in number because “I pressed me none but such toast-and-butter, with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins’ heads, and they have bought out their services” (4.2.20–22). He has extorted, in other words, from able-bodied potential soldiers, funds to line his own pockets while procuring only meager support for his king and prince. Still, since he’s merely telling his tale with habitual exaggeration, his braggadocio provides humor; but when in Part Two we actually witness his chicanery, meet a handful of unsavory conscripts with names like Moldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble, and Bullcalf, and cringe that Falstaff uses Bardolph and Justices Shallow and Silence as aiders and abettors, it’s not so funny anymore.

Part One ends with the battle scenes. In act 5, scene 4, Falstaff “counterfeit[s]” death, since “the better part of valor is discretion” (119), prompting Prince Hal’s interesting eulogy: “What, old acquaintance, could not all this flesh / Keep in a little life? Poor Jack farewell! / I could have better spared a better man. / Oh, I should have a heavy miss of thee / If I were much in love with vanity. / Death hath not struck so fat a deer today / Though many dearer” (102–8). The added italics suggest that the prince values his association with Falstaff (for instructional purposes, perhaps), though he by no means honors him. Most ingloriously, moreover, Falstaff “recovers,” stabs the body of Hotspur, and claims the kill as he dumps the corpse at Hal’s feet—and it’s downhill from here.

While the main plot of *Henry IV Part Two*, dispenses of the remaining rebels from *Part One* and reconciles King Henry and Prince Hal, the Falstaff plot begins with images of disease and ends with murder and mayhem. “What says the doctor to my water?” are Falstaff’s first words. His page answers, “He said the water itself was a good healthy water, but for the party that owed it, he might have more diseases than he knew for” (1.2.1–5). The scene also ends with images of disease—incurable, consumption, gout, pox. Instead of raillery with Prince Hal, the scene pits Falstaff against the Chief Justice, who reprimands him for “failure to appear,” but acknowledges that his “service at Shrewsbury hath a little gilded over your night’s exploit on Gad’s Hill” (1.2.100, 147–48). Adding, “You have misled the youthful Prince” (1.2.143),
“You follow the young Prince up and down, like his ill angel” (162–63), and “God send the Prince a better companion” (197–97), he announces, “the King hath severed you and Prince Harry” by assigning Falstaff to war with Lord John (1.2.200–3).

At the tavern in 2.1, Hostess Quickly has called officers to arrest Falstaff for “eating me out of house and home . . . putting all my substance into that fat belly of his” (72–73). The ensuing fracas attracts the attention of the Chief Justice, who upbraids him for “brawling here” when he “should have been well on [his] way to York” (63–65). “Pay her the debt you owe her,” the Chief Justice continues, “and unpay the villainy you have done her” (116–18). He again reminds Falstaff that he’s “loitering here too long” instead of gathering soldiers on his way north.

In the next tavern scene, 2.4, Doll Tearsheet feels unwell (it turns out she’s pregnant). Falstaff’s first words are, “Empty the [chamberpot].” The conversation turns to gluttony and diseases: “If the cook help to make the gluttony, you help to make the diseases, Doll. We catch of you, Doll” (45–46). The scene teems with odious puns relating weaponry to sexual activity and venereal disease. The light-hearted name-calling of Part One succumbs to vulgarities that pervade the pages of Shakespeare’s Bawdy, a dictionary of crudity (available, incidentally, online as a free pdf). The scene includes “a goodly tumult!” (202) with Pistol and others; kissing, cuddling, and innuendo from Falstaff and Doll—despite their respective diseases; and for the only time in Part Two, the Prince Hal and Poins appear at the Boar’s Head for a very brief encounter before the prince is summoned to court and Falstaff is arrested for again avoiding his duty.

A curious scene sandwiched between a drinking party and the coronation parade demolishes whatever redeeming social virtue might remain among the Falstaff crowd. Officers drag Hostess Quickly and Doll Tearsheet onstage, obviously resisting arrest. “You lie,” Doll shrieks after the Beadle says, “There hath been a man or two killed about her”; “[If] the child I go with do miscarry, thou wert better thou hadst struck thy mother” (5.4.6–10). The Beadle insists, “Come, I charge you both, go with me, for the man is dead that you and Pistol beat amongst you” (15–17)—the same Pistol who accompanies Falstaff to the parade.

Finally, Falstaff arrives for the coronation parade in dirty, shabby—probably smelly—clothes. “But ‘tis no matter,” he rationalizes; “this poor show doth better. This doth infer the zeal I had to see him . . . my earnestness of affection . . . my devotion . . . [T]o ride day and night, and . . . stand stained with travel and sweating with desire to see him” (5.4.106–26).

As King Henry V pauses for a twenty-five-line reprimand and dismissal, though providing “that lack of means enforce you not to evils” (5.5.67), we concur with Prince John, his younger brother: “I like this fair proceeding of the King’s / He hath intent his wonted followers / Shall all be very well provided for, / But all are banished till their conversations / Appear more wise and modest to the world” (5.5.98–102). Fat chance, Falstaff. He is defunct and cannot be restored—except as humiliated buffoon in Merry Wives.