

## SHAKESPEARE'S WORLD (1588)



William Shakespeare.

A slight change of scene, now – a quick trip to the capital – to London's south bank – where there stands, rather incongruously, a replica of an old Elizabethan theatre: the Globe Theatre.

The original Globe burnt down almost four hundred years ago, when a cannon on stage set fire to the thatched roof. The play being performed at the time was a history play, the story of Henry the Eighth, and it was written by the greatest genius, I think, this country has ever known. His name was

I love this place – it's been so lovingly crafted, using all the original techniques the Elizabethans would have used: the roofs of Norfolk thatch, oak timbers, plaster of sand, lime and goats' hair. And you can just picture how it might have been in Shakespeare's day. The whole melting pot of Elizabethan London, rich and poor, all gathered here. Up in the galleries, the gentry, and city merchants, and lawyers; and down in the pit, for one penny, standing room only, rain or shine, the 'groundlings', as they were called, the 'meaner sort': apprentices, journeymen and tradesmen and women.



And what they'd all gathered here to see, were the plays of Shakespeare – comedies that still make us laugh, love stories that still stir the passions, tragedies that still have the power to shock and amaze. Forget the old fashioned language, these plays still speak to us. There's nothing narrow and medieval about them –you get the sense that Shakespeare had this incredibly modern mind. And that's important, because it suggests that by the 16th century people had changed – maybe not in the way they lived their lives, but in

the way they thought, about life, about the world. And it's that internal transformation, summed up in the genius of Shakespeare, that I want now to try to explain.

This journey 'into the mind of Shakespeare' begins in Stratford on Avon, his birthplace, and home, now, to the Royal Shakespeare Company. This was where Shakespeare spent his formative years – and it's pretty typical of a late medieval market town, growing in size in the 16th century, growing in prosperity



under the influence of the merchant class, the guilds.

Shakespeare's father was a guildsman. He was a glovemaker by trade. This was the house where he worked, and Shakespeare himself was born in one of those upper rooms.

Now we don't know much about his early life, but there's a great scene in one of his plays in which he talks about the Ages of Man – first, “the infant,

mewling and puking in his nurse's arms”, and then the schoolboy, “with his satchel and his shining, morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school”. And that image captures a profound transformation shaking up 16th century society: the way that education – learning – was moving out of the hands of the privileged few... into the hands, now, of the humble son of a Stratford glovemaker.



Once, schooling in this country was controlled by the Church. But all that changed with the Reformation. Shakespeare's school in Stratford - the Edward VI Grammar School – was founded by the towns' guildsmen. It offered scholarships for the town's deserving poor – and charged fees for those better off. Boys only - forty boys in all. This was where the sons of Stratford's merchant class came to learn the skills necessary to inherit the family business.

Later in his career one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Ben Johnson, sneered that Shakespeare had “small Latin, and less Greek”. Which is pretty ironic considering how rigorous the education here would have been. By the time he left school at sixteen, Shakespeare would have known more Latin than any classics graduate at university today. He'd have been saturated in the ancient world; he'd have read Pliny and Aristotle and Socrates and Plato – all the great classical philosophers, historians, natural scientists.



The century before his birth had witnessed a re-discovery of classical knowledge – a rebirth, as it was called, a renaissance of knowledge – fuelled by the printing press.

But what excites me even more about the 16th century (more than the Renaissance of the 15th century) was that by now we were daring to question this ancient knowledge. We were daring



to look for ourselves, making up our own minds as to how the world really works. Rather than just blindly trusting medieval doctors, for instance, (with their frankly ignorant ideas of the human body works), now we had the guts to look, quite literally, beneath the flesh, confronting the reality of the human condition.

And in a strange kind of way this is exactly what Shakespeare did in his plays; he showed us as we really were, as multi-layered human beings with

all of our subtleties and contradictions – and it was this kind of questing self-awareness, self-knowledge, that dragged us out of the medieval, into the modern.

Shakespeare came to London as a travelling player in the year 1588. What he encountered here in London was a world of horizons pushed back. Elizabethan London spilled beyond the boundaries of the old medieval walled city. Houses fronted the river, now, down to Westminster. And on the south bank, in Southwark, beyond the control of the old city guilds, there stood brothels and theatres and taverns – the earthy exuberance of a rich and varied life.



If I had to sum up what was new about Shakespeare's London, I'd say it was 'cosmopolitan'. The word means, literally, moving beyond national boundaries, and London did that too – the Thames was full of shipping – city merchants were trading with Europe, they were backing ventures as far afield as Russia, the Americas, India. You head just up-river from here, there's a replica of the Golden Hinde, the ship in which Sir Francis Drake sailed round the world. We'd never been so connected.

But I'm not talking about 'cosmopolitan' in the sense of geography – I'm talking about a state of mind. People who are cosmopolitan, they're sophisticated, they're subtle, they're witty, they're urban – they've got minds open to every experience – the high life, the low life – and that's what Shakespeare had – and he took all of this rich experience, and he served it up, at the Globe, what he called his 'wooden O' – and his audience, who got his wavelength, they lapped it up – and in this flowering of ideas and intellect, we moved from the old to the new.