Shakespeare for Elizabethan England

During the reign of Elizabeth I, England enjoyed a time of prosperity and stability that led to a resurgence of learning and a new outlook of life. The Renaissance that had started in Italy some 200 years earlier had made its way to England, and brought with it new ideas and forms of expression through art (Western Civilization, 413). The works of William Shakespeare epitomize arts of the Elizabethan Epoch. No where else do we find such a concentrated view of the ideas of the time as we do in the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare and other playwrights. “Of all the forms of Elizabethan literature, none express the energy and intellectual versatility of the era better than drama.”, and Shakespeare was the master of drama in his time (Western Civilization, 523). Through his use of prose, conventions, and scholarship Shakespeare wrote stories that not only appealed to the people of Elizabethan England, but are also timeless and provide a reference for life in his time for us to view today.

During the Renaissance in Europe there was a great return to science and learning, with a particular interest in the Classics (Western Civilization, 416). The Church had lost some of the great power it had once held over Europe, and people were again free to look back upon the pagan scholars and writers of Greece and Rome. Plays by playwrights such as Euripides, Plautus, and Seneca which were once banned by the Church were once again being read and performed (Living Theatre, 174). Likewise, the cultural stories of the people were once again being told in public, and playwrights, including Shakespeare, made good use of them. A Midsummer Night’s Dream is a good example of this. Shakespeare used ancient Celtic and Greek mythological figures such as Puck, Oberon, Theseus, and Hermione and placed them in a different time and place than their original stories, but with their ancient characteristics. Other plays, such as Romeo and Juliet make references to popular mythological figures like Queen Mab to make the story fit better into their world. Since people of all classes attended plays, playwrights needed to use stories, characters and words that would appeal to everybody. The best way to do this was to use mythology and folklore that was sometimes, but not always, of Christian origin (Western Civilization, 523).

England in the time before the reign of Elizabeth I was in a state of religious turmoil. When Elizabeth I ascended to the throne she banned the performances all religious plays and stories (except in Church) to help stop the violence over religion. Medieval cycle and mystery plays, which were quite popular, could not longer be performed, and playwrights were now free to concentrate on secular stories (Living Theatre, 171). They still contained some elements of religion, as did everyday life in Elizabethan England, but it was not the primary focus, nor did it play a particularly important part other than perhaps to serve as plot device or a place for the story to advance. Conventions from Medieval religious theatre found its way into Elizabethan Theatre, however, and Shakespeare made good use of them during their performances, such as using the trap door for the gravediggers’ scene in Hamlet (Living Theatre, 188) . The Hellmouth, and trapdoor, which had been a staple of Medieval Theatres continued to be used, and were built into the permanent theatre structures used in the performances of Elizabethan plays. Shakespeare’s histories, such as Henry V, were a tribute to the British Monarchy and to Britain herself. Many playwrights and other artists paid homage to their patrons, and Shakespeare was no exception. By writing about the glories of England and her former rulers he is paying homage to Elizabeth and England (Living Theatre, 185). By showing the glorious past Shakespeare is not only attempting to legitimize Elizabeth’s position on the throne, but also his position as a “favored” playwright. Since the arts were kept alive by patrons, it was best not to anger one and lose your support. Shakespeare sometimes, like in Hamlet, criticized the Monarchy, but in a way that would not be obvious or outwardly treasonous. In this way he spoke his mind, but also paid lip service to keep money coming from his patron.

Shakespeare was a very prolific writer, which seems quite uncommon to us today, but was not so at that time. His writings are not totally original, nor are they wholly different. He had help with many of his plays, collaborating with other writers and actors, and recycled the plots and stories from his contemporaries as well as extant earlier plays and mythologies (Living Theatre, 175). King Lear is based...
very heavily upon a Celtic myth, down to the names of the characters and places that the story occurs in, and Hamlet is a retelling of earlier versions of the same story (Living Theatre, 180). Elizabethan plays use stock-type characters like those found in Comedia Del’Arte and Roman plays, and actors would specialize in specific types of roles. Many of the lines in Shakespeare’s plays parallel lines in other plays by him, with only a word or two different. The stories are very much different, but the dialog and characters are not, which made writing 37 plays seem like not such a difficult task after all.

People in Elizabethan England were very concerned with the humours, a very time-specific form of medicine and psychology. Shakespeare makes references to them all over in his plays. Hamlet is portrayed as being to Melancholic, with his humours out of balance, and one was dominant over the others. This, not psychology as we know it today, is why the Elizabethans believed people were the way they were: their humours were out of balance (Western Civilization, 524). Shakespeare used this belief to make his characters not only believable, but also accessible and understandable to his audience. Shakespeare’s works are the greatest representation of art from Elizabethan England. The encompass the economic, social, and educational aspects of life in a nice, neat package. No other art form, including painting, could provide so much information about life in Elizabethan England. Not only can we see and observe what goes on, but we can view the ideas, language, and thoughts as well through words and actions. The works of William Shakespeare are not the only view of life in Elizabethan England that still exist today, but they are the most complete and inclusive.

Bibliography: