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## **Introduction**

Renaissance English literature is known primarily for its poetry and its drama, and in the dramatic output of the period, one playwright is usually seen as towering over the rest: William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In the four hundred years since his death the study of Shakespeare's plays and poetry has turned into a full-fledged industry: academics, scholars, general readers, native English speakers, those belonging to the former colonies, people who have little or no English, all these and more are involved in the study of Shakespeare's work. And yet Shakespeare did not produce his work in a vacuum and while it is possible to read his work as self-contained it is also true that to 'study' Shakespeare, as in to read and study his work as part of an academic curriculum, it is better to situate Shakespeare in a historical-social-political context and then to add to that the literary contexts within which he lived and worked.

While the circumstances of Shakespeare's life are not common to other playwrights or poets of the age the circumstances in which he lived and worked are similar to those in which other playwrights of the time worked. Thus in addition to reading this unit, the unit on 'Backgrounds to the Study of Renaissance Drama' will also be instructive.

This unit will deal with ideas of order, hierarchic authority and power in the realm of the court and of the family. It will then give you a capsule view of the changes in religion in England under the Tudor monarchs and a brief description of court and country life. It will conclude with a brief introduction to the life (and after-life) of William Shakespeare. For details about the theatre of the times; travel and exploration; and major playwrights of the time please see 'Backgrounds to the Study of Renaissance Drama'.

## **SECTION I**

### **Order, Authority and Power in the Court - I**

Shakespeare's society believed in an ordered, hierarchic world, one wherein everything and everyone had its, his or her appointed place and, ideally, remained within that appointed place. In addition this was a hierarchy that was not seen as man-made, but as both, divinely ordained and naturally ordered. Thus the human came above the inmates of the plant and animal kingdoms but were below the angels who were themselves subservient to god. Even within the world of the

humans there were hierarchies, which situated the king as the highest earthly power in terms of the socio-political realm and the father/husband as the highest power within the family. In similar fashion for every category, whether of animals or trees, there was one designated overlord. Thus the lion as the supreme animal, the oak as the ruler among the trees, etc. were commonly accepted ideas. By claiming that such a hierarchy existed, the society of the time instituted order and naturalized it, calling upon both God and Nature to endorse their views of order.

Shakespeare lived and worked during the reign of two English monarchs: Elizabeth I and James I (and VI). Elizabeth I reigned from 1558 to 1603 while James I ruled in England from 1603 till 1625. When we read his plays we are constantly brought face to face with images and ideas of kingly power and authority: the plays might be set in Illyria, in Venice, in Rome or Denmark, in England in earlier times or anywhere in the known or imagined worlds but invariably questions arise regarding the use of power by rulers, the norms of succession and inheritance of the throne are asked, the extent of the power of the ruler is questioned and several more questions are raised about the personal and public roles of rulers. While the geographical locales are various the questions are the very same that were constantly echoing in English society. Thus when Lear divides his kingdom between his daughters, or when Macbeth succeeds to Duncan's throne in spite of Malcolm having been pronounced the crown prince, when we hear about brothers overthrowing each other in *The Tempest* or *As You Like It*, we are considering possibilities and events that while safely distanced and displaced onto the stage and ahistorical times and spaces nonetheless resonated with the society of Shakespeare's time.

The two primary realms in which orderly authority and hierarchy were seen as invaluable and essential were the kingdom and the family. The kingdom was seen as instituted by God, a monarch as divinely ordained and placed upon the throne by God, as God's representative. This 'Divine Right' theory of kingship made it possible for kings to claim that they were directly connected to God and as God's representatives here upon earth they could not be questioned by puny mortals. In addition there circulated the idea that if they were placed upon the throne at God's command then they could only be removed by God: humans could not interfere with or try to depose a king. Thus it became possible for kings to claim divine sanction for their doings even when such deeds were detrimental to the national interest or that of the people of the realm. The

divine right theory also claimed that it was impossible to hurt a king: that God would not stand for violence against the consecrated, anointed king and hence the monarch was safe from all attack. If these were the major features of the divine right theory of kingship one can easily see the flaws within those claims: for one if kings were answerable only to God then tyranny was a very real possibility, injustice and arbitrariness only kept at bay by the king's own moral character. Secondly while it was agreed, theoretically that only God could question a king, in practice both the clergy and the nobility often did so. This was especially true of parliament and thus theory and practice were widely different. Finally the belief that the anointed king could not be deposed or killed was proved false time and again: whether in the plays of the time or in historical accounts. While Early Modern England subscribed in theory to the divine right theory of kingship, in practice it was used to validate a king once s/he had ascended to the throne. James I who believed passionately in this theory found himself questioned again and again by parliament, and this can be seen in many of his responses to the proceedings of his parliaments. Further the failure of this theory is seen in the execution of Charles I in 1649, when the Roundheads overthrew the King's forces and beheaded him: the divine rights of kings were largely in name alone.

Kingship also depended upon other strong supporting mechanisms: primary among these was the right that genealogy and bloodline gave to an individual to claim the throne. That line of succession were seen as linear and passing from father to son, or maybe daughter was the popular idea but it was also possible for brothers, cousins, nephews and so on to also lay claim to the throne: as long as descent could be proved to a King then the person had a claim to the throne. This was seen working out in real life with the ascension of James I to the throne, after the death of Elizabeth I, as he was a direct descendant of Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor line. The fraught matter of succession recurs in the history plays of Shakespeare but also the tragedies, and even the comedies, as brothers and nephews fight for the throne, often overthrowing well-established lines of descent. One factor that is emphasized in Shakespeare's plays is also connected to kingship as it played out in real life: even if bloodlines made it possible for a King's descendant to claim the throne she could only do so if she had, in addition, the support of the nobles or at least substantial numbers of them. A monarch could not hope to rule without the support of the nobility and, ideally, the common people, as well. Thus Claudius in *Hamlet* is able to claim the throne as he has both blood on his side and also the support of the

nobles as he claims in his first speech in the play. It can be claimed that the role of the common people is not seen as clearly as the role of the nobility in elevating a person to kingship but Mary I was able to gain the throne of England after the death of her brother because of the support of the English people who marched with her to take back the throne from Lady Jane Grey who had been placed on the throne by the nobles. Thus to become a king and remain one required a person to have the appropriate genealogy but also the support of the aristocracy and the commoners, even while divine sanction was also an authenticating device and the ability to claim it a support for a monarch.

## **SECTION II**

### **Order, Authority and Power in the Court - II**

To gain the throne was the first step, to retain it an equally fraught exercise which required the king to 'show' himself or herself in a kingly fashion. To demonstrate that one was a king and in command over the realm was possible via various means. Primary among these was the need to reinforce the idea of authority by sermons and religious strictures, via spectacles which laid a strong emphasis on the power and glory of the king and by showcasing the power of the king through punishments and the apparatus of the law. From the time of Edward VI books of sermons and homilies were extant which were used in Sunday church services. Prominent among these sermons and homilies were those that spoke about the need for the subjects to be obedient unto their kings and not indulge in sedition, treason or rebellion and also those that endorsed well-ordered family life, where people lived conscious of their place in the hierarchic structure of the family. Authority was thus reinforced via religion by sermons preached at people requiring them to be quiet and ordered subjects. Kingship was also signaled and reinforced by the spectacle of the king in all his/her glory. Rules regarding clothes and jewellery made it possible for monarchs to be dressed in a manner that was more gorgeous than anybody else. By signaling wealth and their unique position via their clothing and appearance kings also signaled their unique position in the society they commanded. Their royal progresses through towns and the countryside were also useful in indicating their power and wealth, all of which together went to make them appear as people set apart from the ordinary and the everyday.

One of the most powerful methods of demonstrating authority was by writing their power upon the bodies of those who dared to rebel against them: punishments during Shakespeare's times were spectacular and meant for public consumption. Days when public executions were scheduled were almost holiday-like as people went to watch the execution and the performance of punitive, disciplinary action. That the punishment for treason and sedition was long-drawn-out and cruel, involving much torture and cruelty was one of the most potent ways of showing the people what awaited them if they worked against a monarch. Further death did not mean that the spectacle ended: the bodies of traitors were left for public viewing, their heads put up on poles along London Bridge or their bodies strung up so that all those who entered into the city could then see what awaited those who plotted against the monarch.

### **SECTION III**

#### **Order, Authority and Power in the Family:**

Families were founded upon patriarchy and the concept of male primogeniture: thus the males in a family were generally in a more powerful position than the women but even among the men there was a hierarchy. Younger sons and brothers were disadvantaged as the eldest son enjoyed the foremost position, both in terms of inheritance rights and also in terms of power within the family. Shakespeare's interest in families and the ways in which power plays out among family members, specially brothers, is seen in several plays (from the early *Titus Andronicus* to *The Tempest*) some in tragic forms while others end happily even as the potential for tragedy exists.

The relationship of parents and children is another fraught area within Elizabethan and Jacobean life. Even as wives were the property of their husbands, children belonged to their parents and were expected to obey them implicitly. Among merchant families and those from the lower classes children were often apprenticed outside their homes so that they could learn a trade, a way of life. There was little choice on the part of the children regarding these decisions, even though it usually meant that they left their homes and rarely saw their family members. Even among the higher classes boys were often sent away from home to stay with other noble families and learn to be proper gentlemen. Family life, thus, was very different from what it is today. Parents, especially fathers, had complete control over their children's futures, whether it was the

choice of a profession/trade or whether it was the question of marriage. Thus even young men had little control over whom they married: if of the nobility or the landed classes the match was often fixed keeping an eye to the advantages the marriage would bring to the family and its wealth. In practice, people of the lower classes had more agency regarding the choice of marriage partners.

Gendered difference is also apparent in other areas of the everyday in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. From childhood upwards gender differential treatment played itself out in the homes of the time. Girls were taught domestic chores and how to look after a household from childhood. Girls from noble families were taught how to govern a household and how to train and order servants so that their future homes might run smoothly. From an early age they were made familiar with the most basic rule of the times: that the males of the family were the ones who would determine their lives. They were also given no choices or chances to exert agency: all the decisions regarding their lives were taken for them. Thus though noble women would receive education there were no practical uses for that education. Though boys of all classes had more access to education, girls of the upper classes were given private lessons as well. Queen Elizabeth provides one of the best examples of a well-educated young woman but she is the exception, rather than the rule: as Princess of the realm she was entitled to an education and received the best that could be arranged but the same was not possible, or deemed necessary, for other girls. Daughters of the nobility were given some education, but most women did not receive formal schooling, at the most they would have learnt the basic skills of reading and writing English at the petty schools run in people's homes. Education for both boys and girls began at these petty schools where they learnt reading and writing English, the catechism and proper manners, but what the people of the time considered real education was that which was imparted at the grammar schools. Most children attended the petty schools till they were seven or so, after which the sons of the prosperous and the prominent proceeded to the grammar school. Education at the grammar schools was a long drawn out affair, involving days which began at six or seven in the morning and continued till five or even six in the evening, with a midday break of two hours. In addition there were no vacations, no physical exercise or playtime, discipline was harsh and learning was by rote. The main focus was on Latin, grammar, rhetoric and logic. Other subjects included arithmetic, music and astronomy. Around the age of fourteen boys moved on from the grammar schools to the university if their families could afford it. Shakespeare,

stigmatized as having “smalleLatine and lesseGreeke” by Ben Jonson, is often assumed to have been near illiterate, which is misleading. Having studied at the grammar school in Stratford till around the age of fourteen Shakespeare would have had an assured competence in these subjects (though not anywhere near as much as Ben Jonson, who was an erudite scholar).

It is richly ironic that though Elizabeth I exerted agency not just over her personal life but over the entire realm and all her subjects, both male and female, most females were subject to the authority of the men in their families, whether fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. Marriage was thought of as inevitable and essential for women and was usually decided for them by the elder males in the family. Neither consultation nor consent was necessary before a match was arranged. Within marriage the roles of husband and wife played out differently depending upon how the partners configured their roles. This was the period when the idea of companionate marriages was beginning to gain ground, especially among the upper classes but even as it was doing so the older concept wherein a wife was the property of her husband still enjoyed credence. Shakespeare’s romantic comedies wherein couples such as Rosalind and Orlando (*As You Like It*) or Benedick and Beatrice (*Much Ado about Nothing*) learn to know, understand and appreciate each other’s characters even as they fall in love illustrate this incoming trend, which is the notion of marriage as companionship wherein both partners enjoy the friendship of the other. In time this led to the belief that the choice of a marriage partner was mainly dependent on the personal wishes of the concerned couple, not upon the advantages that might accrue to the father/family of either partner.

## **SECTION IV**

### **Religion and Court Life**

Religious affairs in England had been in a state of some confusion since the early 1530s. This was a reflection of the turmoil in religion which was seen across Europe as the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church led to a clamour for reform. However religious reform in England was a long process, complicated and messy, initiated by Henry VIII and finally achieving a partially settled role during the reign of Elizabeth. Henry VIII, Elizabeth’s father, is held responsible for the laying of the foundation of the Protestant Church in England and for its separation from the Roman Catholic Church. Whether due to the corruption of the Catholic church, major theological



instability and debate, Henry VIII's desire for a legitimate male heir or his lust for Anne Boleyn the Reformation in England was initiated by Henry VIII when he sought a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, herself an ardent Catholic. Thwarted by the Pope, Henry VIII declared himself to be the Supreme Head of the Church of England in 1534, a move which made it possible for him to divorce Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn. But the English reformation did not end with this break up: this was the initial moment succeeded by several others moves, and the blame for all of them cannot be laid at Henry VIII's doors either. Having married Anne Boleyn, herself a strong believer in the Protestant faith, Henry VIII was influenced to order the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536, an act that continued till 1540, by which time much of the land and wealth of the erstwhile Roman Catholic monasteries, abbeys and nunneries had been redistributed among the newly landed gentry. A substantial amount also swelled the coffers of the King himself as well but it must be kept in mind that Henry himself was never an ardent Protestant. He tried to create a more moderate version of Catholicism in his own country but this changed on the accession of Edward VI, who, brought up by Protestants (and himself only ten years old when he became king), had regents who ruled in his stead. They resolutely changed England into a Protestant country, instituting an order of service, permitting priests to marry and confiscating land and wealth that was still in the hands of the Catholics. The accession of Mary, eldest daughter of Henry VIII, changed the scenario once again: herself an ardent Catholic, Mary put in place a reign wherein Protestantism was actively discouraged and executions and burnings were common.

By the time Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 England was a confused land in terms of religion: successive Protestant and Catholic monarchs had made it impossible for people to be certain which faith enjoyed royal favour and was in the ascendancy. Elizabeth worked to bring about some stability in this unstable state of affairs: a moderate Protestant she put together a version of religion, Anglicanism, which combined elements from both Protestantism and Catholicism. Though some elements of religious persecution continued and comparatively Protestantism was in the ascendant, yet primarily due to the length of Elizabeth's reign religious stability returned to England. The confirmation of England as a Protestant state happened with the coming of James I to the throne of England in 1603.

Religion and matters of faith are incidental to Shakespeare's plays, rarely spoken of by the characters; yet contemporary scholarship has returned to the study of faith as a central influence in the discussion of plays such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, even select history plays such as *Henry V*.

Knowledge of life at the royal court is instructive as the plays of the period were written oftentimes in response to certain situations and events that arose therein. While other playwrights of the period wrote plays that were set in England and even, specifically, London (such as Thomas Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday* or Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*) Shakespeare preferred to locate his plays in foreign cities (thus Denmark is set in *Hamlet*; Venice, a favourite location, is seen in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*) or imaginary lands (Illyria in *Twelfth Night*). This statement, of course, does not take into account the English history plays which have perforce to be located in London and England. But nonetheless many instances in Shakespeare's work reveal his knowledge of court life and its intrigues, as does it show his acquaintance with the life of a great city. In fact London was Shakespeare's home from the early 1590s till his retirement to Stratford in 1612.

The Court was at the centre of the life of London city: the monarch determined much of the spectacle, life and show of the city and this is particularly so in the case of Elizabeth I who enjoyed both wealth and spectacle. The attempt of the courtiers to curry favour with their monarchs by providing them with spectacles such as they desired is seen in the entertainments that were planned for Elizabeth I. Court intrigues and dalliances were common and are seen represented in Shakespeare's work as is also the spectacular aspect of royal appearances: Act I, scene II of *King Lear* is a case in point where the love test by Lear is held in the Court with all the courtiers in attendance. But Shakespeare did not single out either of the two monarchs under whom he lived for satire, though references to both are seen in his plays, usually oblique and complimentary.

London city: large, bustling, the centre of the economy and mercantile trade was a city that was constantly growing. Yet it was also a city of poverty, low-life and violent brawls. The wealth that characterized several quarters of the city was spectacularly set off by the poverty that marked other sections and this awareness of difference is apparent in many plays of the time wherein the lower and working classes are shown as having precarious lives, haunted by the possibility of

sudden death or constant want. Their minimal role in much of Shakespearean drama is itself indicative of their existence on the periphery of the world of the noble rich.

## **SECTION V**

### **William Shakespeare and his career**

Arguably the greatest dramatist the world has produced in the English language William Shakespeare lived from 1564 to 1616, while the major portion of the large body of his work was written and produced between approximately the early 1590s and around 1612-13. Much of what we know of Shakespeare's life is gathered from the slim records that exist of his human existence, fragmentary records such as the church records that tell us of his christening or his marriage, the mentions of his name in other people's diaries and official records, etc. Much of what is claimed as knowledge about the life of William Shakespeare is speculation as also based upon the knowledge that this was what life was like for people of his class during that period.

Shakespeare was born to a fairly prosperous father, John Shakespeare, a glover of some standing in the village of Stratford upon Avon, and Mary Shakespeare, a woman who was related to the Arden family, one that was landed and prosperous. In his youth Shakespeare would have attended the grammar school at Stratford upon Avon and derived the education that enabled him to go on to write some of the greatest plays in the English language. We also know that in November of 1582 Shakespeare was married to Anne Hathaway and they had a child the following year, and a pair of twins in 1585. Then there is no mention of Shakespeare till we find him in London in the early 1590s, a successful playwright who had already stirred the envy of another writer, Robert Greene. This we know because the latter wrote in 1592 in *A Groats-worth of Witte* that "there is an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Iohannes factotum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a country". The 'Shakes-scene' reference and the citation of the 'tyger's hart wrapt in a players hyde' both indicate that the reference was to William Shakespeare, by now known as the author of the three parts of *Henry VI* and maybe other plays as well.

Between 1592 and 1612 Shakespeare was writing at an unprecedented scale: plays in all genres as well as poetry which included the sonnets and longer narrative poems. Not just did he write

plays he was also part of a playing company, one of the two that were sanctioned by the law: Shakespeare belonged to the Lord Chamberlain's Men and was a stakeholder in the company, not just writing plays for them but also active in all their activities including performing on stage. Thus there is a tradition that says that Shakespeare played the part of the old servant Adam in the play *As You Like It*, as well as taking on other minor roles in several plays, and not just those that he wrote for his company. This flurry of activity was also instrumental in helping not just William Shakespeare's finances but also in helping his family, at home in Stratford upon Avon. His father who had encountered financial troubles and consequently, some social ignominy was now once more on a secure footing. Shakespeare's prosperity enabled him to purchase properties in his home town and also to buy himself a coat of arms thus transforming his family from a trader's family to a gentleman's family. Even as these events were underway Shakespeare lost his only son, Hamnet in 1596. If prosperity and a higher social standing were the visible signs of Shakespeare's success in his hometown, the fact that his work as a playwright was appreciated is seen in the mention that is made of him by Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia, Wit's Treasury* (1598). Herein he mentions several of Shakespeare's plays and writes that "As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage...." Court records also speak of the payment made to Shakespeare for work done by him and his company during this period and thus it is possible to see Shakespeare as having made his mark not just on the theatre in London but also on the life of his hometown where his family was recognized as belonging to the prosperous gentry.

It is usually believed that by 1612 Shakespeare had retired to Stratford upon Avon, no longer an active player in London and his playing company, but nonetheless still writing plays and collaborating with other playwrights on plays. The last stage of his career is said to be marked by plays that demonstrate his interest in reconciliation, forgiveness, the possibility of redemption and a new start. Plays that fall within this category include *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*. Church records show that Shakespeare died in April 1616 and was buried on 25<sup>th</sup> April. His tomb at Stratford upon Avon is inscribed with the following verse:

Good friend for Jesus sake forbear

To dig the dust enclosed here!

Blest be the man that spares these stones,  
And curst be he that moves my bones.

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## Storyboard

### Introduction

#### Section I: Order, Authority and Power in the Court - I

- ✓ The hierarchic nature of Shakespearean England
- ✓ The Divine Right of kings: theory and practice
- ✓ Genealogy and bloodlines
- ✓ Noble and popular support for Kings

#### Section II: Order, Authority and Power in the Court – II

- ✓ Reinforcing kingship via religion
- ✓ Demonstrations of kingship via ceremonies and spectacles
- ✓ Punitive actions and kingship

#### Section III: Order, Authority and Power in the Family

- ✓ Patriarchy and male primogeniture
- ✓ Parents and children
- ✓ Education as per gender
- ✓ Marriage and women's roles

#### Section IV: Religion and Court Life

- ✓ Historical account of the Reformation in England
- ✓ Elizabeth I's reign and religious reforms
- ✓ The royal court and London

## Section V: William Shakespeare and his Career

- ✓ Birth and youth
- ✓ Marriage and early career
- ✓ Success in London and financial solidity
- ✓ The final years

### Points to ponder

- While there are not too many documents dealing with Shakespeare's life what we have is far more than what we have for other writers and dramatists of the time. The gaps that are there in his personal story have also given room for later biographers to add romantic details.
- Shakespeare's plays invariably have families and political leaders: can you think of any play in which there is neither of these two elements?
- Earlier it was believed that religion was not central to Shakespeare's plays but in the last fifty years criticism has showed how religious concerns are one way of reading even such celebrated plays as *Hamlet*.

### Do you know

- That Shakespeare's company of players, the Lord Chamberlain's Men frequently performed at the Royal Court?
- That Stephen Greenblatt has a biography of William Shakespeare, *Will in the World*, which helps one to understand the social backgrounds to the age?
- That every critical theory has been used to read Shakespeare's plays: whether it is the early New Criticism or the more recent Posthumanism?