

## Shakespeare's Times

In the late 16th and early 17th century, by the time you reached marriageable age, it was likely that one of your parents and one of your siblings would be dead, you would have attended a bear baiting (where men would tie a bear to a stake, torture, and attack it until the bear was dead), and you would have witnessed public torture or a beheading as punishment for a crime; even if you hadn't, you surely would have walked underneath the bodies and heads strung up on London bridge as a warning against transgression. Plague commonly ravaged the streets, killing thousands in as little as a couple of days, and medicine usually involved the application of leeches or the letting of pints of blood. It was a brutal time. This brutality did not make grief any more bearable, or any less surprising and letters and other documents from the time often relate touching accounts of people's mourning.



The way in which people thought about the ever presence of death was with literal Christianity in which heaven and hell were material, corporeal places. While the period often fluctuated in whether they determined themselves Protestant or Catholic, there was no division in the idea that a Christian God had created the Earth and oversaw their daily lives. God's influence on Earth was quite literal.

The Devil held equal sway over the world and people blamed him and his influence for the evils in their lives. Women were thought to sometimes confer with the Devil in order to become witches. This belief was so common, most communities believed that they had at least one witch. Richard Napier, a physician in Buckinghamshire said that 500 of his patients blamed their illnesses on witchcraft. When identified, these women would be prosecuted and, sometimes, put to death.

This hyper-religious attitude affected every element of daily life. The political structures were thought to be God intended; the monarch was King or Queen by divine right, the man was head of the household because of biblical instruction, and every layer of the social hierarchy was modeled off of the religious and biblical order. The monarch's divine right could be brought to proof, it was thought, because the King's touch was believed to heal a common skin disease called scrofula. Once a year, the King would descend among his people and wash their feet as a sign of his appreciation for them. It was well known that Kings dreaded and detested this practice.



For all the prevalence of this old order Christianity, new ideas were on the rise. The printing press, while invented slightly earlier, was becoming more common. As such, ideas were more easily distributed. A scientific and philosophical methodology was becoming commonplace, and its findings more public knowledge. There was also an educational revolution on the rise. Books were easier and less expensive to get your hands on, and this ease of reading resulted in a literacy boom.

Shakespeare lived in a time where horror was commonplace and explained by radical and radically enforced religious fervor. However, he was also on the cusp of a revolution. His unique position at the end of an old world and the beginning of a new one allowed him a rare perspective on his life and times reflected in his insightful works. Living in the late 16th to early 17th century is near impossible to imagine. The differences between our culture and theirs is humungous but it is, in equal measure, the same. We speak a common language and the foundations of our religious, scientific and social culture are shared. As a result, a lot of the way we think and what we think about is similar. While people who lived in those times had completely foreign lives, the accessibility, understandability, and relatability of Shakespeare's work proves that, were we able to speak with people of that time, there's more that we could understand about each other than we couldn't understand.