

The Shakespeare
Plays:
Mirrors of an Age

Stadium High School
AP English Literature and Composition
Senior English, Honors



THE SHAKESPEARE PLAYS: Mirrors of an Age

In his entire career, Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England:

- Medieval England (RICHARD II)
- France (AS YOU LIKE IT)
- Vienna (MEASURE FOR MEASURE)
- 15th century Italy (ROMEO AND JULIET)
- ancient Rome and Greece (JULIUS CAESAR)
- Scotland (MACBETH)
- England ruled by Elizabeth's father (HENRY VIII)

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).

Like all art, Shakespeare's plays mirrors the life, the language and the ideas of the age in which they were created. They are extraordinary plays and they reflect an extraordinary world. Certain things about them 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
 - exploration of the far reaches of the English language
 - a sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments: the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare
 - made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language
 - 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
- critic, assassinate, bump, gloomy, suspicious, hurry
catching a cold, the mind's eye, elbow room, pomp and
circumstance

Elizabethan England was a **TIME FOR HEROES**:

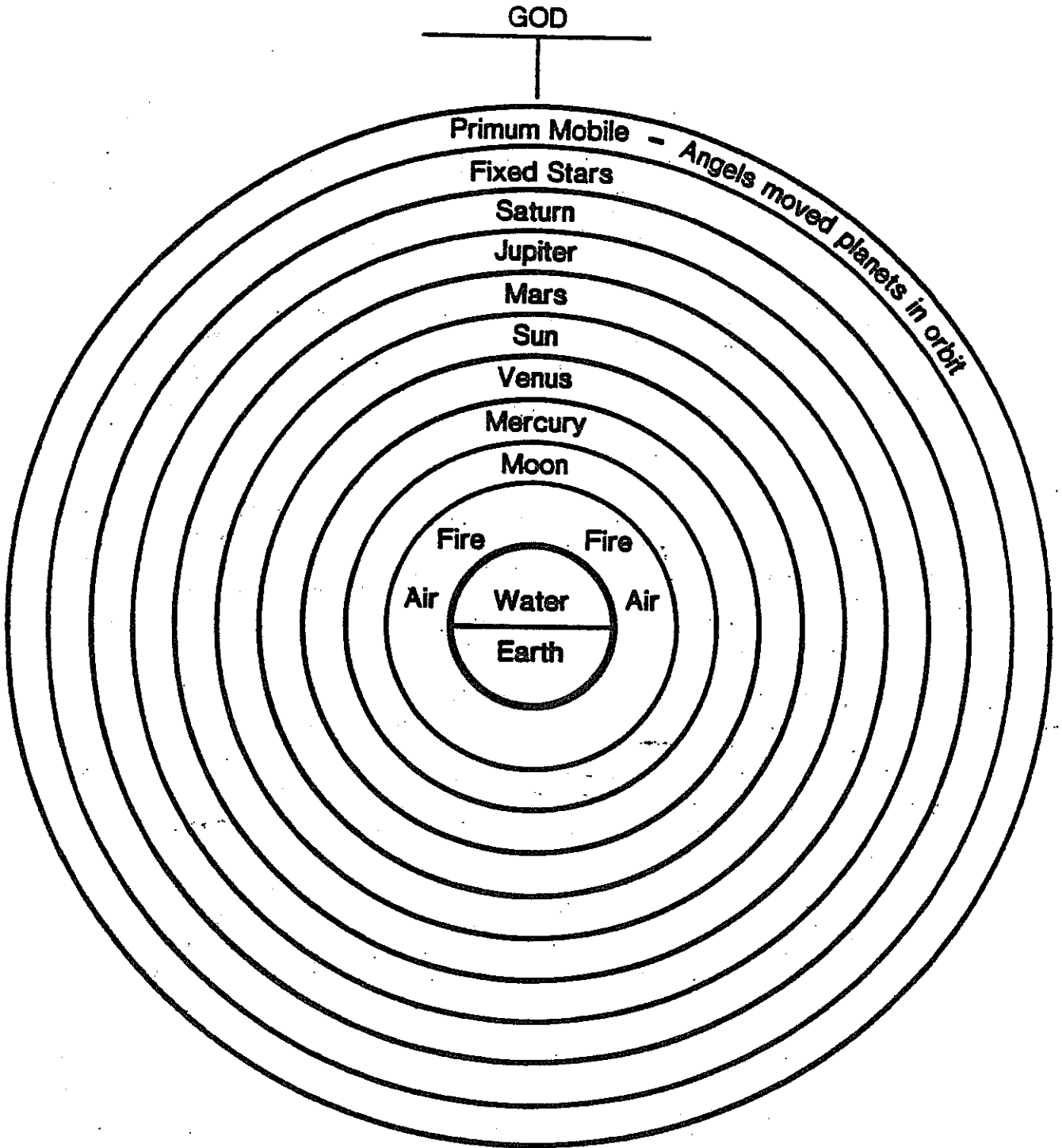
- the ideal man was:
 - a courtier
 - an adventurer
 - a fencer (Tybalt)
 - a poet
 - a witty and eloquent conversationalist
 - a gentleman
- in addition, he was expected to take the time to examine his own nature and the causes of his actions and to make the right choices
- despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified to us:
 - marriage, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride
 - 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:

- "The Great Chain of Being"



Medieval Cosmos



A LOOK AT THE ELIZABETHAN WORLD

E.M.W. Tillyard's *THE ELIZABETHAN WORLD PICTURE* is the standard study of the ideas of cosmic order held by the Elizabethans. His small volume provides details of the evolution and practice of this concept; he quotes writers from all over Europe, including those of ancient times. This article is a synopsis of the ideas presented in that book. All the quotations are from Tillyard unless attributed to another author.

In his book *THE ELIZABETHAN WORLD PICTURE*, E.M.W. Tillyard writes that in the England of Shakespeare, "the conception of order is so taken for granted, so much a part of the collective mind of the people, that it is hardly mentioned except in explicitly didactic passages." The Elizabethan mind set is unknown to many twentieth century theatergoers, and because we do not know it, we lose some of the immensity of Elizabethan tragedy, the irony of its comedy, and the insult of its railery.

The Elizabethan belief in order was unshakeable; the universe had been created from chaos, and if the laws of nature (the system of order) were relaxed or damaged, wholesale dissolution would follow. To us, chaos means hardly more than confusion on a large scale; but Othello says "chaos is come again" or Ulysses, "this chaos, when degree is suffocate," their universe is in peril.

THE CHAIN OF BEING

To the person of Shakespeare's time, this cosmic order was expressed in the Great Chain of Being. The chain consisted of every single thing in the universe, animate or inanimate, each with a specific to occupy in the chain, which stretched from "the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects." Every speck in creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at either end was bigger than the one below and smaller than the one above; there could be no gap.

The beings were divided into four major classes. At the lowest end were the inanimate classes of liquids and metals. These led upward through the vegetative class, to the sensitive class (of which man is a member) and the purely spiritual class, consisting of the angels and the stars. These were the largest groupings; within each of these links was a near infinite division, of hierarchy. For example, among the inanimates, the ruby was above the topaz, gold over brass, water over earth, etc. Similar breakdowns occur in all the classes.

Within each class there was a primate, the thing nearest the next link up. Man is at the top of his class, for he not only has existence, life and feeling (as does everything below him), but he also has understanding: he contains within himself the total faculties of earthly phenomena. (For this reason he was called the little world, or microcosm.)

Other primacies were God among the angels, the sun among the stars, the emperor among men, the lion among the beasts, the oak tree among the vegetables, the eagle among birds, the dolphin among fishes, and the head among the body's members. "References to these primacies abound in literature, but they lose greatly if it is not known that they are all part of a greater whole, and that a reference to two or three implies both the rest of them and the ordered universe."

In THE TAMING OF THE SHREW, Katherina will not accept the domination of her father or a husband. She is an unhappy woman, intelligent, but wanting love and unable to accept it when offered. She struggles against the universal order throughout the play, until her capitulation at the end, when she accepts Petruchio's domination and embraces the proper order of the world:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy lite, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign...

Granting her husband primacy in their home, she compares him to the other primates: the lord (among the divine), the head (among the body's members), and the sovereign (in the state):

Such duty as the subject owes the prince
Even such a woman oweth to her husband.

Katherina accuses the women who do not observe this deference in their marriages of being "unable worms," one of the lowest of the beasts.

The chain was also a ladder of ascent toward God, illustrating man's desire to move toward godliness. In TROILUS AND CRESSIDA Ulysses refers to "degree" as the "ladder to all high designs." Movement on the ladder, however, was not controlled. Man, for all his striving toward the angels, could never rid himself of the beast inside. He could not detach from the division below and move to the one above, or a gap would be created. A certain amount of overlapping existed in the ladder, or chain, with qualities of one link often found in both links above and below; but no link possessed the same qualities of any other. A vivid picture was created of a related universe in which no part was superfluous.

The Elements

Now come the variations, the explanations of inconsistencies and contradictions, the embellishments of the theme. For example, the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire): these, as inanimate, should ideally be lower than the lowest animate creation, and they are. But the Elizabethans also believed that everything on the chain was compounded of the elements, so the elements could not only be links in a simple chain; there had to be a supplementary chain, interconnected with the main one.

Since the elements contained certain qualities "attributable to all matter," they were thought to have powerful effects on that matter. These effects, with help from the stars and an occasional assist from God, determined the goings-on of the world. The hierarchy and qualities of the elements were (lowest to highest):

Earth -- Cold and Dry
Water -- Cold and Moist
Air -- Hot and Moist
Fire -- Hot and Dry

Even though the elements were arranged in this hierarchy (their own chain), they were also combined in an infinite variety of ways. The Elizabethans found order even in this mix. Just as the chain of being had living things had links that overlapped, so did the elements. For instance, fire and water were opposed, but God put air between them as a transition, as air had one quality of both of the others; mutual destruction was avoided.

The finest results in creation came from a proper balance. "For durability a

thorough compound was necessary. The reason why the beasts have shorter lives than man is that the elements are less well mixed in them. They contain more water and less air, and are thus more open to corruption." The idea was used in placing value on objects in the universe and also metaphorically.

Gold was the primate of all metals, an illustration of the elements in perfect proportions. The same perfect proportion on the human body caused health. So while the "golden lads" of CYMBELINE may have been called that for more than one reason, one is that they had the vitality of perfect health, the elements being in them, as in gold, compounded in perfect proportion.

THE HEAVENLY HIERARCHY

The spheres, which corresponded to the hierarchy of the angels on the chain and were controlled by them, yet were separate from them, are another embellishment in the system of order.

This series of crystal-like spheres rotated above the earth in perfect harmony (the earth, according to the Elizabethans, was at the center of the universe) and created heavenly music.

Lowest of the spheres was the moon, controlled by the angels. As the closest to earth, and lowest in their class, the angels were nearest man and formed the medium between the whole angelic hierarchy and man. The next sphere was Mercury, controlled by the Archangels; Venus, with the Principalities; the Sun, controlled by the Powers; Mars, controlled by the Virtues; Jupiter, with the Dominations; Saturn and the Throne Angels; the fixed stars (the zodiac and the stars we see at night) and the Cherubs; and the primum mobile, controlled by the Seraphs. The primum mobile was a sphere outside that of the fixed stars which controlled the motions of all the rest. God was located somewhere beyond the primum mobile, in a place the Elizabethans did not try to identify.

Even the angels could suffer from a disturbance of order, however. Their "fall from grace," the only way for angels to sin, was caused by pride; occasionally they forgot that there were beings superior to them. An understanding of the position of angels is important because an Elizabethan was conscious of their continual presence; above man in virtue, and yet not unlike him.

Within the heavenly hierarchy there was a sharp division between everything beneath the sphere of the moon and all the rest of the system. Though the four elements were the material for the whole universe, they were differently mixed in these two regions. Above the moon they were mixed perfectly, so the heavens were eternal. Below, the mixture was imperfect, and these regions, the sublunary, were subject to decay.

Fate

The Elizabethans also believed in the pervasive operation of fate in their world. While the area above the moon's sphere was unchangeable, below the moon, where man was an ill mix of the elements, there was possibility for change. The stars, though obeying God's order, were responsible for the vagaries of fortune in the realms below the moon. The stars had absolute control over plants and beasts; man's reason, however, may help him. If he is strong, he may be able to defy the stars when they are hostile or use them when they are kind. When Leontes wrongly sends his wife Hermione to prison in THE WINTER'S TALE, she accepts her fate not with meekness, but with the resolve that

"I must be patient till the heavens look
With an aspect more favorable."

MAN AS MICROCOSM

The Elizabethans looked on the chain mainly in relation to themselves. They never doubted that the world and its contents had been made for man. In the chain of being the position of man was of special interest, as he was the bridge between matter and spirit. Man related to the cosmos in a unique way, and that was reflected in the drama of the times.

Tillyard compares man to a major railway junction in which all the tracks converge and cross. He was called a microcosm not only because he was made of all four elements (so are all the beasts) but because he possessed all the faculties of the universe. He had the godlike faculty of reason, as well as the faculties of the elements, nourishment, growth, and reproduction. Yet though he possessed all these faculties, he was deficient in each. He is comparable to a decathlon athlete, having the ability to compete in each part of the decathlon, but inferior to athletes who specialize in one event only. It could thus be difficult for a man to maintain order in his life; for while every other creature was guided by one principle, a man was pulled in different directions by his different faculties.

Man, the microcosm, "contained in himself samples of all the degrees of creation, excelling in this not only the beasts but the angels, who were entirely spiritual beings. But it was not only a matter of including himself in these samples: man's very anatomy corresponded with the physical ordering of the universe."

The Humors and Spirits

Man's physical life begins with food, and food is made of the four elements. The liver converts the food into four liquid humors, which are to the human body what elements are to the earth. Here is a chart of counterparts:

Element	Humor	Common Quality
Earth	Melancholy	Cold and Dry
Water	Phlegm	Cold and Moist
Air	Blood	Hot and Moist
Fire	Choler	Hot and Dry

A proper mixture of the humors was as necessary to bodily growth and functioning as the elements to creation of permanent substances.

The four humors created in the liver were the life-giving moisture of the body. They generate vital heat, which was dispersed through the body in three kinds of spirits. Natural spirits, a vapour formed in the liver, was carried with humors along veins. They corresponded with the lowest part of man under dominion of the liver. When acted upon by the heat and air of the lungs while in the heart, they moved up the chain to become vital spirits. These carried life and heat through arteries under dominion of the heart, primate of the center of the the body -- the seat of passions, corresponding with the sensitive part of man's nature. Some vital spirits were in due course carried to the brain to become animal spirits. The brain ruled the top part of the body, the seat of the rational and immortal part of man and primate of all the members of the body. The animal spirits were agents of the brain and acted with both the body and the soul.

Usually, one humor was, even if only a little, more prominently giving a man his distinctive mark. This rigidly physical theory of character helped the Elizabethan feel close to the rest of nature and very susceptible to the action of the stars. It also helped to explain why a personality could be so changeable. In THE WINTER'S TALE, Leontes' harshness to his wife and old friend are attributed to an "ill

humor." He is out of balance, and one humor has taken exaggerated precedence in his body. As a king, and a primate of his class, his unbalance not only affects him personally, but also everyone in his dominion.

Katherina in THE TAMING OF THE SHREW is ruled completely by the humor cholera, associated with fire, and derives her temper from it. Petruchio, who intends to tame her, knows this, and will use this knowledge to overcome his wife. As his servant Peter notes, "He kills her in her own humor." Petruchio refuses to eat meat he thinks is overcooked, and throws it out. When Katherina objects, saying "the meat was well," Petruchio explains:

I tell thee, Kate, 'twas burnt and dried away
And I expressly am forbid to touch it,
For it engenders cholera, planteth anger,
And better 'twere that both of us did fast,
Since, of ourselves, ourselves are choleric,
Than feed it with such overroasted flesh.

Reason, Understanding, and Will

Man's brain was also divided into a triple hierarchy:

- Lowest -- the five senses
- Middle -- the fancy, common sense, the memory
- Highest -- the supreme human faculty of reason

It is the highest of these three, reason, which separated man from the beast and allied him to God and the angels. Reason had two parts, the understanding and the will. It was on these two highest faculties that Elizabethan ethics were based.

Man's understanding worked differently than that of the angels. While the angels understood intuitively, man understood "by the painful use of the discursive reason." Angels had all the knowledge they were able to hold; man was set apart from the angels and beasts by his capacity for learning. The most important subject for understanding was oneself. It was a peculiarly human task: the angels already knew themselves, and the task was beyond the beasts. Not to know yourself was to resemble the beasts.

The understanding had to sift the evidence of the senses already organized by the common sense. It was for the will to make the just decision on evidence presented by the understanding. Man's will was free. Leontes' treatment of Hermione has much to do with his deficiencies in understanding and will.

"It is not in our power not to be stirred mentally by our appetites, but it is in our power to translate them or not to translate them into action." Leontes' will is ruled by passion, not reason. His errors show a lack of knowledge of himself and of his will, allying him with the beasts.

Date of composition: 1601-1602

Setting: Elsinore, Denmark -- about the 12th century

Source material: Old Norse myths and legends of the 10th Century are the first traces of the story. In the 13th Century, Saxo Grammaticus in Historica Danica tells in Latin the story almost as we have it today. In the 14th and 15th Centuries, the story was known in Europe and put into verse by Hans Sach. Then, at the end of the 16th Century, there was a play called Ur-Hamlet, a Senecan tragedy thought to have been written by Thomas Kyd or perhaps Shakespeare. We think that Shakespeare worked from this earlier play.

Characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy: (A.C. Bradley)

1. Hero has nobility or high rank.
2. Hero arouses our respect and admiration.
3. Hero is responsible for his own downfall through a lack of knowledge or through a "flaw" in his character which causes an error in his judgment.
- Some use is made of fate or circumstance (ROMEO AND JULIET).
4. Unity of action and character: tragic action results from tragic motive.
5. A conflict always takes place -- either of the hero with himself or with some outside force.
6. Our pity (or DREAD) and our fear (or COMPASSION) are aroused by this conflict.
7. Hero goes from prosperity to adversity.
8. The story leads up to and includes the death of the hero. The suffering and calamity extend far and beyond the protagonist so as to make the whole scene one of woe.

Shakespeare introduces an acute analysis of human behavior through Elizabethan psychology. He deals with Christian ideas such as sin as part of his psychology. Sin is psychological, as well as moral, and causes suffering before death, as well as after.

According to many of the world's critics through the ages, Hamlet suffers from "melancholy" -- a nervous condition characterized by moods of depression with seizures of hysterical excitement.

- Now called "manic depression" or "bi-polar disorder"
- This rhythmic vacillation forms the inner structure of Shakespeare's drama, showing the dilemma of Hamlet. He is the ideal Renaissance prince who is to be the next King of Denmark, but he feels emotionally insecure and nervously tense because of the compulsions of his inner life or conscience and the demands made upon him by events in his outer life.

[OVER]

Major themes of the play:

Hamlet overflows with a whirling sense of life's possibilities. Experienced at different stages in one's life, the play yields different surprises and different satisfactions. Whoever we are, Shakespeare seems to know what we are all about. The play, from one angle or another, shows us ourselves as in a hall of mirrors, with our reflections changing as we move. We can consider Shakespeare's chief concerns from varying perspectives, and we will ask different questions, according to where we may be standing on the various stages of life and what roles we ourselves may be playing.

1. The question of appearance vs. reality ("seems" vs. "is")
2. The question of theater vs. life
 - Is a play about acting; virtually all the characters are caught up in a kind of make-believe
 - Wear masks of one sort or another, assume roles, put on acts
3. The question of disease in the body politic and the hidden source of evil
 - Images of disease (rottenness and corruption) throughout the play
 - Use of poison throughout
4. The question of parents and children
 - Is a play about family relationships, especially fathers and sons
5. The question of revenge
6. The question of relationship of thought to action
 - Acting without thinking vs. thinking too much
 - Closely related with relationship of madness to sanity (Hamlet's "antic disposition")

Structure of the play:

- Act I: Exposition
- Act II: Rising Action
- Act III: Turning Point
- Act IV: Falling Action
- Act V: Catastrophe and Climax

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Answer the following questions as completely as possible. Your work may be typed or neatly and conscientiously (☺) hand written.

1. Although Shakespeare never set a play in England, they reflect the age in which they were created. Explain.
2. Queen Elizabeth's reign over England was often known as an "Age of Exploration." State three things that would adequately reflect this title.
3. What two great works of literature were created during this time?
4. How many words or phrases were used by Shakespeare? List three of the new words or phrases coined by Shakespeare.
5. During this age when heroes were idealized, what was customarily considered an ideal man? State three traits.
6. What was the role of women during this age? How and why were marriages arranged?
7. In your own words, briefly describe what was meant by "The Great Chain of Being."
8. What were the four major classes in this chain?
9. What were the "primacies"? Explain.
10. Briefly review your information on "The Medieval Cosmos." What was so unique about this view of the world? State three considerations.

