Shakespeare for Elizabethan England

During the reign of Elizabeth I, England enjoyed a time of prosperity and stability.

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.

The works of William Shakespeare show a concentrated view of the ideas of the time. Shakespeare was the master of drama in his time. Through his use of prose, conventions, and scholarship Shakespeare wrote stories that are 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. 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. 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 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 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.

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 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. They still contained some elements of religion but it was not the primary focus.

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. 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. In this way he spoke his mind, but also paid lip service to keep money coming from his patron.

Shakespeare 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. 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.

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