

Elizabethan Times

The following is a collection of common beliefs and practices in Shakespeare's England. Any one of these could be the start of a research project. It is important to remember when reading or seeing a Shakespeare play that the Bard himself in all probability also believed many of these things.

Beliefs About the Universe

Elizabethans believed the earth was the center of the universe and fixed firmly in place. All matter on earth was drawn to its center. Seven planets—the moon, Mercury, Venus, Sol (the sun), Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—rotated around the earth, moving in concentric circles. The stars rotated in an eighth circle outside the planets. The planets in their motion around the earth made musical notes, and all of these sounds together formed a perfect harmony. Certain conjunctions of the planets were lucky, while others were unlucky. Planets gave out an ethereal fluid, or influence, which affected humans. Since the moon was the closest planet to earth, it affected the ebb and flow of tides and was very powerful. All the planets affected the affairs of earth. Because of these beliefs, astrologers thought they could predict future events by knowing the conjunction of stars, and the future course of a person's life could be known ahead of time by knowing the placement of the stars at that person's birth. This set of beliefs we call *astrology*.

The Almanac

Almanacs were small books which gave miscellaneous information. They were printed in two colors—black for the text and red for titles, special days, and other notable items. Church feast days and a calendar were included along with instructions for the best time for bleeding, purging, bathing, etc. An example would be "Draw the melancholike blood when the Moone is in Libra or Aquarius," referring to the then popular practice of drawing "bad" blood from a person as a medical treatment. An almanac also contained notes on convenient times for planting, the beginning and end of law terms, the dates when marriages could not be solemnized, dates of the eclipses of the sun and the moon, a vague prediction of what would happen during the year, a table showing how long the moon would shine each night, and a day-by-day forecast for the weather of the whole year. When astrologers and the makers of almanacs failed in their attempts to predict the future, they excused themselves by saying they could not foresee the will of God.

The Humors

Everything in the universe was thought to consist of four things: earth, air, fire, and water. Each of these elements was hostile to the others but could coexist when they were in the proper proportions. Since the human body was of this earth, it also consisted of these four elements, and medical practices and anatomy emphasized the need to understand how they worked together. Therefore, earth was identified as *black bile*, air was identified as *blood*, fire was *bile*, and water was *phlegm*.

Elizabethan Times *(cont.)*

Humors *(cont.)*

Each of the elements produced a certain temperament, which you could ascertain by looking at a person's complexion. Too much of the earth element produced a *melancholic* humor; too much air, a *sanguine* humor; too much fire a *choleric* humor; and too much water produced a *phlegmatic* humor. Good health meant that a person's humors were well-balanced against each other, but if one of them became too strong in relation to the others, the person became mentally and physically unbalanced. In Shakespeare's plays the word *humor* can be used to mean moisture, or any one of the four humors, but usually it means whim, obsession, temperament, mood, temper, or inclination. The melancholic humor was the humor talked about the most. Melancholic characters are often seen in the plays, and it was sometimes considered the mark of an intellectual. Hamlet was a man with a melancholic humor.

Bearbaiting and Bullbaiting

Two sports now considered inhumane were engaged in twice a week in London. In bearbaiting a bear was tied to a stake by a long rope. Four or five huge, fierce dogs called mastiffs were let into the pit with the bear, and they attacked the poor creature. When the dogs attacked, the bear fought back, although it was on a leash. Any dogs which survived the bear's retaliation were pulled off just before the bear was killed. In bullbaiting a bull was let into the pit and "worried" to death—teased and hurt until he died. Another "sport" was even worse than these. A pony was led into the pit with an ape fastened onto its back. Dogs were sent in after them, jumping and trying to get the ape while the terrified pony lashed out at the dogs. Other amusements included whipping a blind bear until blood was drawn.

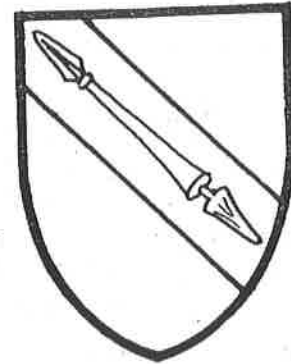
Letters and Seals

When a legal document was drawn up between two people, the different copies were written by hand on a piece of parchment. The copies were then cut apart with a wavy or indented cut. This is where we get the word "indentures." The purpose was to prevent forgeries, and if there was a question whether one copy was genuine, it could be compared with the other copy. The copies were then folded and slits made through which a ribbon was passed. The impressing of a person's seal on the attached label completed the process. Today in the plays, letters are usually represented as having been rolled into a scroll, but they actually were written on a large sheet which was folded over with the writing inside. The writer's seal was impressed at the closure to ensure that the letter was not read in transit.

Elizabethan Times *(cont.)*

Heralds and Heraldry

Although heralds were more prominent during the Middle Ages than in Shakespeare's time, they still held an important place in the lives of the nobility. These men were concerned with the dignity and honor of the king, noblemen, and gentlemen. They organized all important ceremonies, particularly royal weddings, coronations, funerals, and certain ceremonial rites. They were official messengers of the king during war and peace, and they read royal proclamations to the general public. Their most important function, however, was to preserve the records of noble families and to grant coats of arms to men considered worthy to be called gentlemen. They were a kind of "social register" and "Who's Who" of their time.



Signs

In Shakespeare's England, houses were not numbered. Instead, each house displayed a sign which jutting out. Usually it was simple and may have been in the shape of a bell, dragon, or swan. Many homes in England are still named this way, and the public houses display signs which have been passed down for many years. Some signs contained recognizable symbols; for example, there were the red and white striped pole for a barber shop and the red lattice windows of a tavern.

Bowls

Bowls does not refer to a container (called *basins* in England) in which to mix up a cake. It refers to a favorite game in which a small "bowl," or ball (called a jack) was used as a mark at the end of a green lawn. The players roll their bowls toward the jack, and the one coming closest to it wins. When a bowl touches the jack, it was said to "kiss" it. Rather than being a perfect sphere, the bowl bulges somewhat to one side and is thus said to be biased, curving in an indirect course when it rolls.

The Great Household

In the large houses of the noblemen of Shakespeare's plays, it was fashionable to employ as many servants as possible. The nobleman's house was almost a small palace, and each department had its own set of servants. The head of these people, a man from a good family, was called the "gentleman servingman." Promising young scholars often took such a position. Likewise, a young lady from a good family might be employed to serve a family in this way, thereby learning polite behavior and how to run a household, serving until she married and had her own home. Such servants were not looked down upon and usually were equal in social status to the family for whom they worked.

Elizabethan Times *(cont.)*

Marriage Customs

Marriage, particularly for the good families and the wealthy, involved a rather complicated process. First there was the formal betrothal, which was a private affair. Then the banns were published. This meant that on three successive Sundays the minister publicly announced in church that the parties intended to be married and called on anyone having reason to think the couple should not be married to come and say why. If the couple wanted to hurry up the process, it was necessary to obtain a special license from the bishop. The wedding was usually an all-day occasion with a full ceremony and great celebration afterwards. Early on the morning of the wedding, the bridesmaids showed up at the bride's house. Shortly after that, the groom showed up at the bride's house with his attendants, musicians, and friends. The whole party then set out for the church, the bride in white with her hair down. After the ceremony, there was much feasting, dancing, drinking, and game-playing. After the bride and groom departed, the guests continued to celebrate.

Funeral Customs

For the noblemen, funeral services could be very elaborate with much pomp and circumstance. Enclosed in a covered coffin, the deceased was carried to the grave by pallbearers in black. Following the coffin was a long procession of mourners wearing hooded cloaks which completely covered them. The coat of arms of the deceased was painted on flags carried along in the procession, arranged and orchestrated by one of the family heralds, much as a holiday parade would now be conducted. After the funeral the mourners feasted, and money was given to the poor. The body was buried inside the church.

The funeral of Queen Elizabeth I on April 28, 1603, was by far the most elaborate of all. First the Knight Marshalls cleared the way, and then 240 poor women followed in groups of four. The servants, esquires, and knights came next, followed by the many servants from all of the royal household. Hundreds of additional mourners came in procession, including the queen's equerries, grooms, Privy Council members, chaplains, mayors, government officials, and then the chariot containing the queen's body in a lead coffin on which was a recumbent effigy, crowned and in Parliament robes. A canopy was carried over the coffin by four noblemen. The procession was completed by all the lords and ladies of the realm. Last of all were Sir Walter Raleigh, the Captain of the Guard, and all of the guard walking five-by-five and carrying their halberds turned downward. The streets of Westminster were filled with thousands of people sighing, groaning, and weeping as the procession passed and the queen was buried inside the church.

The Mail

There was no postal service for the general public, but there was a regular system of messengers on horseback used for official business. If an emergency existed, a postmaster at any of the stations along the route could conscript a horse belonging to anyone in order to get the message through. Messengers are frequently used in many of Shakespeare's plays.

Elizabethan Times *(cont.)*

Bells

Church bells rang for many occasions. They called the faithful to services on Sundays and holy days, announced good news, gave an alarm for fire or war and celebrated various occasions, including weddings and funerals. During fearful times such as an epidemic or the plague, the bells sounded constantly. When someone died, only a ominous single bell sounded.

Alchemy

Alchemists were the predecessors of today's chemists. Their work was based on the belief that all matter was composed of the four humors. Pure gold was thought to be a perfect metal in which all these qualities were perfectly combined, and the alchemist's primary quest was to find the "philosopher's stone" which could change other metals into gold. They also thought gold contained the "elixir of life" which could remedy the discord of the bodily humors and be a cure for all diseases. While the alchemists were basing their work on faulty premises, they did conduct original experiments and did not base their work entirely on tradition.

Dances

Elizabethans loved to dance, horrifying the Puritans, who thought dancing was of the devil. Some of the most popular dances included the *measure* (slow and solemn), the *pavan* (a dignified processional) the *galliard* (quick and lively), the *capriol* (one step was a jump into the air, clicking one's feet together), the *brawl*, and the *jig*.

Sports and Hunting

In addition to the gory spectator sports enjoyed by the Elizabethans, fencing was also a favorite. Betting often accompanied a fencing match, and one of the contestants would bet that he could hit his opponent a certain number of times. This happens in *Hamlet* when Laertes bets the king he will hit Hamlet 12 times before Hamlet can hit him nine times.

Hawking was very popular with gentlemen. Much time was spent on training a hawk or falcon and keeping it in good condition. The birds were captured wild and then tamed. The first step in training a hawk was to seal its eyes by passing a needle and thread through the lower eyelid of each eye, then tying the thread back over the bird's head. The eye could be opened at will by the falconer, but the temporary blinding made the bird easier to tame. A hood was placed over the bird's head and straps tied to his legs when he was taken outside. Then the hawk or falcon was ready to train to hunt other birds. Bells on the bird's legs allowed the falconer to keep track of it.

Activity

Choose 3 of these Elizabethan customs and write a 5 P essay comparing and contrasting the Elizabethan custom with a related modern custom. You could, for example, compare Elizabethan sports with sports of today or Elizabethans' treatment of animals with today's.

