

# Popular Culture: Elizabethan England Topic 4 Knowledge Organiser

## The Elizabethan Theatre

### Development

- Groups of actors travelled around and performed secular plays in market-places and inn-yards.
- In London, actors staged afternoon plays at inns.
- In 1576 John Brayne and James Burbage paid for a new building in Shoreditch, outside the city walls, which would be used just for performing plays. It was the only one of its kind so they simply called it 'The Theatre'.
- A 2nd theatre was opened in London in 1577; The Curtain. In the 1580s/90s, more new theatres opened outside the city on the south bank of the River Thames. In 1587, the Rose Theatre opened near existing bear-baiting and bull-baiting arenas. The Swan theatre opened eight years later.
- From the 1580s, afternoon plays at the new theatres on London's Bankside attracted thousands of Londoners and visitors.
- Elizabethans of all social groups loved the comedies, tragedies and histories written by Shakespeare and other playwrights.
- 'Groundlings' (those in the audience who stood at the very lowest level of the theatre), paid only a penny to attend. Two pennies bought a seat in the covered galleries.
- One historian described Elizabethan theatre as 'an innovation in mass entertainment as radical as television in the 1960s'.

### Arguments Against

#### The Puritans:

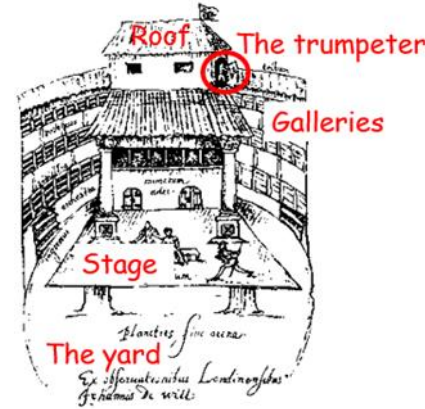
- Theatres originated in ancient times so the Puritans associated them with paganism.
- Theatre also reminded them of the old miracle plays, which represented scenes from the Bible, and were considered a Catholic tradition.
- They were concerned that theatres and other attractions on Bankside led young people into sinful behaviour, especially sex outside marriage.
- Several Puritan preachers wrote pamphlets attacking the theatres.

#### The London Authorities:

- City authorities often tried to restrict plays at inns because they were too rowdy.
- The authorities of London wrote many letters to the Privy Council asking for the closure of the theatres.
- The mayor and alderman of London argued that the theatres drew servants and apprentices away from their work.
- They were concerned that large theatre crowds created disorder in the suburbs of Bankside and Shoreditch.
- They argued that theatres attracted the wrong sort of people including rogues, thieves and prostitutes.

#### Other Problems and Restrictions:

- At times of plague, the large crowds of people at the theatres contributed to the spread of disease.
- Only acting companies with noble patrons were able to operate freely:
- Some Elizabethans complained that 'jigs' after performances were too vulgar.
- Casual sex encounters were common after a play
- Cut-purses and pick-pockets mingled among the crowds. Fights sometimes broke out in the yard. Audiences were noisy.
- Groups of travelling actors faced an increasing threat of being arrested as vagabonds.
- Miracle plays which reconstructed scenes from the Bible were banned by Elizabeth's Privy Council during the 1560s and 70s because they saw them as a Catholic tradition.



'Young Man Among Roses' Painted by Nicholas Hilliard

## A golden age of culture?

### ART

- Wonderful artwork produced in England between 1580 and 1603.
- Most painted by foreign artists.
- The Queen and her courtiers paid for portraits of themselves, but generally showed little interest in painting.
- Few ordinary people had any connection with the elite art
- Most English artists were mediocre painters.
- One genius, Nicholas Hilliard, learned techniques at French court and his miniatures are exquisite

### MUSIC

- Music was important to the Queen and to many Elizabethans.
- Thomas Tallis and William Byrd composed beautiful church music for the Queen's chapel.
- From the 1580s, there were important developments in secular music.
- Madrigals became popular and the musician John Dowland wrote some wonderful 'ayres' – songs accompanied by a lute.
- Tallis, Byrd and Dowland took English music to new heights.
- Few ordinary people had any connection with the elite music

### LITERATURE

- After 1580, education grew, the printing press developed and some talented writers emerged.
- This led to some remarkable developments in English literature.
- Poets such as Philip Sydney and Edmund Spenser transformed English poetry.
- Prose writers such as Richard Hackluyt and William Camden produced fascinating travel books and biographies.
- Few ordinary people had any connection with the elite literature
- The dramatists, especially William Shakespeare, contributed most to the flowering of culture in Elizabethan England.
- It was Shakespeare's plays which gave the period a golden glow.
- Shakespeare's plays were not only enjoyed by the gentry, but also by many of the middling sort and labouring people of Elizabethan London.

## Popular pastimes and festivities

### Alehouse

- Most common part of popular culture for the middling sort and labouring poor.
- At the centre of village life
- Number of alehouses in towns was increasing after 1580.
- For beer, good company and a sing-song with neighbours.
- Sometimes a place of drunkenness, gambling and prostitution.

### Parish Feasts

- Sometimes known as 'parish ales'.
- Celebrated the saint of the local parish church
- Often lasted several days.
- Often a procession followed by eating, drinking and dancing in the churchyard.
- Sometimes plays performed by travelling players or morris dancers and hobby-horses.
- Rough sports, bull-baiting and cock-fighting.
- Villagers brewed large quantities of ale.

### Calendar Customs

- Several calendar events through the year including Christmas, May Day and Harvest Home.
- Involved sports and Parish Feasts.
- Often lots of drinking, feasting and merriment.
- Sometimes plays were
- May Day involved dancing round maypoles
- The main opportunities for middling and labouring people to have fun.

**Sports:** bear-baiting, badger-baiting, wrestling, boxing, 'cudgelling', football (played by large numbers of young men who kicked a ball around the countryside or streets, with few rules and many injuries).

### Opinions on Popular Culture

Queen Elizabeth – enjoyed traditional festivities and especially Christmas. Had music and dancing at court, as well as plays, jester and hobby-horses.  
 The Privy Council – support traditional festivities that didn't get too unruly. In 1589, supported the people in Oxfordshire when they wanted to keep the tradition of maypoles going.  
 The Church – generally no problem with festivities. Some bishops didn't approve of some of the traditional festivities, and some banned morris dancing and maypoles, but most did not attack calendar customs.  
 Puritan Ministers – thought the festivities were impure and that everyone should be more careful to obey the bible. Campaigned to improve the people's behaviour including producing pamphlets explaining 'the wicked nature of popular culture'. Gained support of some of the local gentry who were Justices of the Peace, as well as constables and churchwardens from the middling sort

## Witchcraft in Elizabethan England

### Witchcraft Trials

- Law was passed in 1563 introduced death by hanging for using witchcraft to kill someone.
- Witches who harmed people or property were imprisoned.
- Relatively few prosecutions in the years immediately after this law was passed.
- Only surviving legal records of witchcraft trials from south east England and Cheshire.
- In the 1970s historians examined the records and discovered the number of witchcraft trials shot up dramatically in the later years of Elizabeth's reign.
- 109 cases in the 1570s, 166 in the 1580s and 128 in the 1590s. T
- Same decades saw a huge rise in the population and big increases in poverty for many labouring people, and poor harvests created tensions in many communities.
- Few witch-hunts led by the Government or the Church in England.
- Prosecutions for witchcraft often started with complaints from neighbours.
- A quarrel followed by a misfortune led to suspicions of witchcraft
- Neighbours might have similar suspicions and they would make a complaint to the local magistrate.
- Some of the accused women may have practised magic and could have believed that they had the power to harm.

### CASTE STUDY: Ursula Kemp

- Ursula Kemp's skeleton was found buried outside the boundaries of a churchyard with iron rivets hammered into her knees and elbows to stop her from using witchcraft to rise from the grave.
- Ursula was an Elizabethan 'cunning woman' - a healer and a midwife who treated illnesses in St Osyth, Essex.
- She was accused of witchcraft by people in the village when a baby died after Ursula had an argument with its mother.
- The mother reported Ursula as a witch to the Justice of the Peace after her own lameness also returned and her older son fell ill. They had previously fought over late payment of fees for treatments.
- Ursula Kemp was tried for witchcraft, found guilty, and hanged.

### Elizabethan Beliefs about Magic and Witchcraft

- Magic was an important part of Elizabethan culture, and had existed since the Middle Ages.
- Most Elizabethans believed in magic, and people known as 'cunning folk' or 'wise women' were thought to have special magical powers which they had inherited.
- Elizabethans would often use these people for medical reasons.
- Ursula Kemp, for example, was known to be particularly good at curing arthritis.
- Magic was also used to find out the sex of an unborn child, or recover stolen goods.
- It was not seen as an alternative religion, and was tolerated by the Church at the beginning of Elizabeth's reign.
- Witchcraft, however, involved a special kind of magic used to harm people or their property.
- In Elizabethan England, it was a popular belief that witches used small animals known as 'imps' or 'familiars' to commit evil acts.
- Ursula Kemp was alleged to have had 4 familiars: 2 cats, a toad called Pygin, and a lamb called Tiffin.
- In Europe, witches were often accused of getting their power from the devil.
- They thought they met at 'sabbats' (gatherings of witches) to feast, dance and have sex with the devil.
- However, English witches were rarely accused of making pacts with the devil.

### Historians' Interpretations

- Historians have produced several theories regarding the increase in trials
- Some think it was sexism and repression of women which led to accusations and note that magistrates trying the witches were all men
- Critics say this doesn't make sense as accusers were often women and some of the accused were men
- Some think it was because of the suffering and hardship caused by poverty, high population and poor harvests which meant people were less willing to help out neighbours and tensions led to suspicions
- Some think the rise in Protestantism caused the rise since counties like Essex which had many Puritan ministers also had high rates of witchcraft trials
- Puritans strove for godly communities and caused suspicion among people