

Shakespeare's "Times": The Tensions of Elizabethan and Jacobean England

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I gave you a very brief overview of Shakespeare's life and career in an earlier posting, and now I would like to go back and expand on that through looking at all of the contexts surrounding Shakespeare's play.

A professor I once had always used the acronym PERSIA to help us think about historical contexts: Politics, Economics, Religion, Society, Intellectual Influences, and Artistic Trends. I do not think I am going out on a limb to say that most scholars believe that the "R" was far and away the most significant of these in Shakespeare's time: in the century of the Reformation, religion—one's personal choice in religion, but also the ruler's choice, the country's trends, the theological debates raging—were the crucial factors influencing all the other letters of the PERSIA acronym.

England was, in the years immediately after Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg church door, officially staunchly Catholic. Henry VIII had been awarded the title "Defender of the Faith" by the pope for a tract he had written (almost surely ghost-written by Thomas More) against the Protestant Reformation. You probably know what happened next: it's a complicated story, but nervous about having a male heir, Henry tried to dump his first, Spanish, wife for the saucy six-fingered tart Anne Boleyn, the Pope refused, and Henry broke off from the Roman Catholic Church and named himself Supreme Head of the Church in England. It actually really was quite a mess. You see, Henry had already needed a dispensation from the Pope to marry Catherine of Aragon, his older brother's wife, and going back afterwards to ask to annul their marriage was a bit of a slap in the face to the Pope, who was after all related to Catherine, and so himself had personal and familial feelings involved. Henry might have kept more or less quietly having an affair and carousing with Anne as many kings and princes have done (ask Princess Diana about this!) except that she suddenly was pregnant, and Henry had to move quickly so that, if the baby ended up a boy, he'd have a legitimate male heir.

At any rate, Henry's break with Rome changed little at first except the head of the church: the theology and liturgy remained the same. But things are not that easy, especially in the charged world of sixteenth-century religion and politics. For one, there are all these monasteries around, and their abbots owe allegiance not to the bishops Henry can now control, but to the heads of their orders, and to Rome. So Henry orders the dissolution of the monasteries, robs them of their wealth (he was pinched for cash), and allows a fringe of thuggish types to take out their anti-Catholic feelings by smashing, looting, and plundering the monasteries, an act one quite secular modern historian calls "one of the greatest state-sponsored acts of vandalism in all of history." (As a medievalist, I mourn how Henry allowed so much of the riches of medieval England, from stained glass to manuscripts to frescoes, to be burned, destroyed, looted, and thereby lost to us forever.)

And you can see already the more significant change: England, not because its official theology and liturgy have changed, but just because it is now set against Rome and politically against the Catholic parts of Europe, starts becoming a safe haven for

Protestant reformers, and Henry doesn't mind encouraging that. So, even though he is personally still Catholic (or thinks of himself that way), England is moving more and more to the Protestant side of things—in its political alliances, in its intellectual energy, and even in its liturgy and theology.

His son, brought up in this world, actually increases this trend, making clear he prefers the reformist bent, and the country becomes a more Protestant nation. When he dies fairly young, however, Mary—the daughter of Henry and Catherine who lacked a Y chromosome and got this whole thing going through no fault of her own—tried to drag England back to the Roman Catholic faith (recall that she had been raised by the Spanish Catholic Catherine.) Mary has gone down in history as “Bloody Mary,” not so much because she executed Protestants (lots of people across Europe were executing people of all different faiths) as much as because she clearly and loudly proclaimed how much she enjoyed it. (She once proclaimed publicly that burning Protestants at the stake increased her appetite for breakfast.) With that kind of political savvy—or more accurately, lack of it—you can probably see why and how Mary's campaign to drag the country back to the Catholic Church failed. Before long, she died, leaving the way for her half-sister, Elizabeth, who was, ironically, the daughter Anne Boleyn had given birth to, and for whom Henry dumped Catherine and Rome, even though she turned out *not* to be the son all of that effort required.

Mary had kept Elizabeth carefully locked in a castle for her entire youth; Mary realized what a dangerous force Elizabeth represented. And Elizabeth had learned a thing or two in her youth about power, religion, propaganda, factions, and how to manage all of them. When she came to the throne, she pursued a “via media” between the Protestant and Catholic ways, making the Church of England a kind of midway buffer between the two, neither the one nor the other, but having parts of both. Now, quite frankly, Elizabeth leaned more to the Protestant side in crucial ways: she saw, rightly, that there are many different kinds of Protestantism which she could constantly finesse and play off of, but Roman Catholicism would tie her back to Rome and to particular Catholic countries and stands on issues. And quite frankly, she tortured and burned more Catholics, especially priests, than Mary ever did Protestants—but she had the political sense to do it more quietly, and not to crow about it. (In Elizabeth's reign, it was a treasonous offense to possess a Catholic catechism, and priests training in Rome who left to return to England expected to suffer martyrdom (and often did)). In her politics, too, she constantly played powerful Catholic countries like Spain against the Protestant ones, and, since she was young and single, used the possibility of her marrying herself into powerful political alliances as a kind of bait and diplomatic tool for many years. You can surely imagine that at times rulers and diplomats and others lost patience—Spain, remember, sent an armada to invade England in 1588 (it was wildly unsuccessful), and Catholic Ireland was seen by the English as a constant and terrible threat, both in itself and as a jumping-off point for a Spanish invasion. Elizabeth could be mercurial and autocratic, but she was a born actor and rhetorician, and quite consciously “staged” her appearances and political acts as dramas, something Shakespeare clearly noticed and commented upon. She didn't need a 21st-century political operator, PR man, pollster, and marketing team to tell her how to run her court; she understood the politics of image quite well herself, and used it constantly.

But by the end of her reign—as Shakespeare is moving into his maturity as a playwright—none of it seemed to work as well anymore. Let’s face it, an 18-year old virgin queen is wonderfully marriageable, but no one bought that when it was a middle-aged woman who had been playing that game for more than twenty years. The constant wars (with Spain, mostly, in Ireland and the Low Countries) had led to inflation and a crumpled economy, and her court, which she had carefully managed, started to break into factions, one led by the brilliant but egotistical and undisciplined Earl of Essex, who ended up leading a rebellion against Elizabeth in the streets of London. Worst of all, she had no heir, she refused to name an heir apparent (and would anyone have listened if she did? And why should they have?) and the entire country was concerned about being plunged into chaos and even civil war if there were several claimants jockeying for the title upon her death.

So let’s pause for a minute and return to Shakespeare. What about his family and upbringing? It is becoming increasingly clear to scholars that the Ardens and Shakespeares had been in previous generations, and maybe still were, Catholic families, especially the Ardens. John Shakespeare owned a “Borromeo”, a Catholic catechism named after the Archbishop of Milan, with his name all over it; it was found hidden in the rafters of his house over a century later. His will appears to be in a form distributed by Jesuits for Catholics in Protestant countries to use. The Master (that is, teacher) in Stratford’s grammar school was probably a Catholic. Would they have practiced their faith openly? Not likely by the time of William’s birth—Catholics spanned a wide spectrum in their practices, from open defiance (and eventual imprisonment and execution) to quiet practice to gradual movement over to the Church of England. The poet John Donne was raised clearly and fully Catholic, but converted to the Church of England, and became Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s theatrical rival (he of the “little Latin and less Greek” quotation) also converted from Catholicism to the Church of England. So it’s hard to say how fully and deeply Shakespeare’s possible Catholic upbringing and education might have been, or how much it informed his adult and professional life. At any rate, such a perceptive playwright would surely have understood the tensions, politics, economics, and social pressures that the crucial religious issue of the time forced upon these families and individuals.

What about his career in London? Well, he began his career in the aftermath of the great defeat of the Spanish Armada, thought of as a divine protection of England from Catholic (and world power) Spain. He watched England gradually growing into a mighty mercantile, trading, and in all ways economic power, with London as its center. His language is peppered with political, legal, and economic terminology. As his career matured, he would have seen the cracks beginning to appear, the tensions barely papered over. His plays are so full of meditations on power, government (including self-government), ruling, leadership, political intrigue, legitimacy, and political rhetoric, that it is clear he and his audience found these issues of Elizabeth’s later reign fascinating. Recall, too, that even the existence of the playhouses is a source of tension: the Puritans who controlled the City of London government did not approve of playhouses, seeing them as dangerous in lots of ways and associated with all sorts of naughty, trashy behavior (don’t actors and “drama types” even today still have these associations?). This

is why when the Shakespeare's company built the Globe, they built it on the south bank of the Thames river, outside of the city council's jurisdiction.

To return to our story: in 1603, Elizabeth died, and the succession problem was quickly solved when James VI of Scotland, who had been the leading candidate for some time, came to England to be James I, uniting England and Scotland, solving the succession problem, and making everything appear stable again. James was a middle-of-the-road Protestant—in fact, he seemed to want to harass Puritans more than Catholics at the beginning of his reign (which is why some of them washed up on Plymouth Rock not long after his succession, getting New England going and leading to turkey and dressing in late November). He commissioned a new translation of the Bible (the “King James version”) into beautiful seventeenth-century language. Recall that he quickly snapped up the Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's company, for his own, renaming them The King's Men and thus giving them more protection against the Puritan censors and city fathers, which might have given Shakespeare more room to be experimental, to explore his questions more fundamentally. But he was also rude and uncouth, had a pretty-darned-open homosexual affair with one of his closest advisers (pretty shocking after the “Virgin Queen”), and had picked up in his years in France this newfangled idea of “the divine right of kings,” by which he thought himself divinely entitled to supreme personal power—an idea that ran directly counter to longstanding English notions (since King John and the Magna Charta) of a parliamentary monarchy. So Shakespeare's central themes are all there, now in different forms: law and justice, power and right, governing and self-governing, truth and propaganda.

We'll leave off our story there, as James is the monarch throughout the rest of Shakespeare's career, and no huge shifts occur in the elements of PERSIA until a short time after Shakespeare's death. (If you want to learn more about *that* time—about how England slides into a civil war; how James' son Charles I botches things, gets executed, the country ends up ruled by the hard man Oliver Cromwell; how he dies and Charles's son, Charles II, comes back; how in the middle of this the Puritans close down the theatres; how Charles reopens them to a party atmosphere and women—shocking! women!—begin to act on the stage—just read and explore and research.) And we've left off a great deal of the rest of PERSIA—we could spend at least this much time talking about the intellectual movement called Humanism, the artistic movements of the Renaissance in Europe and England specifically. I've alluded a bit to economics, and social historians could tell us much more about daily life in Shakespeare's London and Stratford. But I hope I have given you enough for you to enter into the life of England at this time and see its peculiar stresses and triumphs, all matter which Shakespeare turned into his art.