

Some historical background on Shakespearean England

Elizabethan Society and Class Structure

Elizabethan society was based on a system of precedence (one's ranking in society) and one's preferment status (the king or queen's view of one's standing). While the nobility remained powerful, the real growth in society developed within the merchant class, and upward class mobility became possible for many people.

In Elizabethan England, there were "new" nobles and "old" nobles. Most of the new nobles were Protestant. Most of the old nobles were Roman Catholic. It may be tempting to view the nobility as the idle rich, but this was certainly not the case. The high offices granted by the Queen brought great financial burdens. The honorific titles were unpaid, and when foreign dignitaries visited England, they were housed and entertained at the expense of the nobility. The highest and most expensive "honor" was that of housing the Queen and her household as she went on public tours and visits throughout the country. Many families simply could not afford this "honor" and, at the risk of their preferment status, had to turn it down.

Education in the Elizabethan Age

Boys were educated to be useful members of society. Teaching techniques relied heavily on memorization and recitation. The language of literacy throughout Europe was Latin, and students were expected to be proficient in it. Boys started grammar school at the age of six or seven. Their typical school day ran from 6:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Classroom discipline was strict, and often involved corporeal punishment. In the lower grades, boys studied Latin grammar and vocabulary. In the upper grades, they read the poetry and prose of writers such as Ovid, Martial, and Catullus. Most boys began an apprenticeship in a trade following grammar school. Sons of the nobility attended the university or the Inns of Court.

Formal schooling was not encouraged for girls unless they were the children of nobility. For those who were educated, schooling focused primarily on chastity and the skills of housewifery. Young girls from wealthy families were often placed in the households of acquaintances where they would learn to read, write, keep accounts, manage a household and estate, and make salves. They were also trained in leisure skills such as singing and dancing.

While no one would argue that Elizabethan England presented the greatest of opportunities for universal education, literacy significantly increased throughout the sixteenth century. By 1600, at least one-third of the male population could read, and Puritans pushed for significantly increased funding of grammar schools.