

Shakespeare and the Queen's Men

Player Handbook

The original Queen's Men had an advantage over our company because they shared the culture of their playwrights and would have understood their plays in the context of that culture. This part of your handbook is designed to help build a sense of that cultural context. We have explored many of these areas in rehearsal already, but at this stage in the process I thought it would be useful to put something down in writing for you to use as a resource. The information below should be helpful to you as we begin to explore the significance of scenes, strengthen character objectives, build a sense of their obstacles and raise the stakes, etc.

Religion

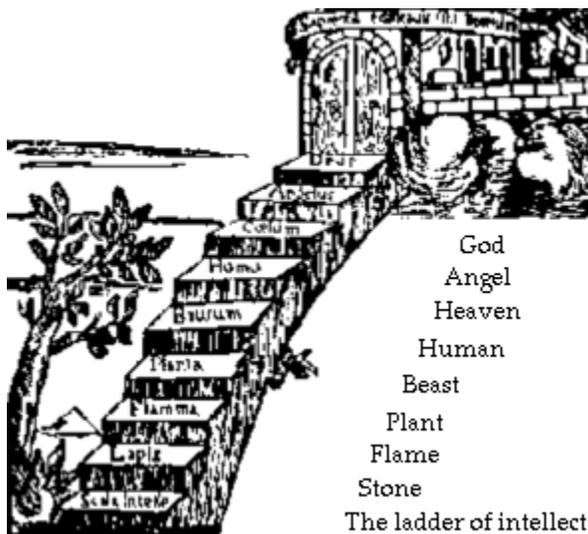
God was real for Elizabethans. Real people were willing to be burnt alive rather than recant their beliefs. Heaven was real; hell was real. You all need to embrace this idea. A life lived well and in accordance with God's laws will lead to an eternal life of joy in paradise. A life lived badly will lead to eternal torment in the fires of hell. The notion of consequences in the after-life for actions taken on earth directly affects the choices of characters in our plays. Rather than trying to come to grips with the notion of God, an omnipresent and omnipotent being, the simplest approach for a non-believing actor, I feel, is to accept that immoral actions will lead to you being put into a fire and burning for all eternity. It may be easier to imagine burning alive than to imagine God. Once that principle is established, you can explore grey areas, because certain sins could be forgiven, and no-one really knew how much you could get away with – God was vengeful but also merciful and there was always hope - the only unforgivable sin was despair and suicide. The other issue characters weigh is whether pleasure and reward in this life might counterbalance suffering in the next.

Elizabeth was a protestant Queen. Her sister Mary was a Catholic and had burnt many protestants at the stake and won herself the title of Bloody Mary. Elizabeth, with Walsingham, ran a police state and rooted out potential traitors and vocal Catholics, but her version of Protestantism was relatively tolerant and as long as everyone turned up to Protestant service on Sunday she would not prosecute on grounds of their beliefs alone, if kept private.

Not sure if this next part is necessary, but in terms of belief systems the line between Catholicism and Elizabeth's Anglicanism was often a little vague. Basic principles were that Catholics accepted the Pope as God's authority on earth and Anglicans accepted Elizabeth as head of the church. Catholics believed that God's grace was only accessible through sacraments administered by priests and Protestants believed that you could receive God's grace through individual faith alone. A protestant felt they could have direct access to God and that all people had the right to read and interpret the Bible, the Catholic Church argued that priests were necessary intermediaries and interpreters of God's will and word. The Catholic Church was seen as superstitious as opposed to the more practical Protestantism. Catholicism stresses the free will of man, while Protestants

are more inclined to stress Divine Providence. In the extreme form, Protestants believed that all human action was predestined by God and it was only necessary to submit to his will – essentially you were damned or saved from birth (not a particularly theatrical idea, but one I thought I should share).

Social Hierarchy



The conservative ideology of the day was that society was part of God’s Great Chain of Being. In the picture the left the step named “Human” can be further divided:

King
Nobles
Commoners

Here too, nobles could be further divided, with those most closely related to the king or with the longest family history taking the highest status. Commoners can also be further divided into Knights, Land-owning Gentlemen, Yeomen, and

Citizens, who in turn could also be subdivided into the Mayor, Aldermen, Master Craftsmen, Journeymen, Apprentices.

According to conservative feudal ideology, this social structure is natural and reflects the manner in which God ordered the world. Challenging this structure was tantamount to challenging God himself. Everyone is expected to accept their place in the hierarchy willingly and fulfil their appointed role in the social structure. Those below were meant to honour, respect and serve those above; and those above were supposed to protect and love those below them. While this social system is obviously unjust and designed to preserve the power of the king, in theory it was supposed to promote a harmony sustained by mutual love and care passing up and down the chain.

There were two cultural forces whose increasing influence was threatening the stability of this ideological structure: money and education. We should not, however, see these forces exclusively from the perspective of the ideology they challenged. To many members of Elizabethan society money and education were an opportunity to escape the limitations of their appointed role and rise up the great chain of being. Money could buy land, influence, and eventually titles. Since the difference between man and an angel was “knowledge of God”, education, by bringing a person closer to God, could allow a man to rise up the ladder of creation – note that the picture is entitled the “ladder of intellect.”

From the conservative point of view money, or more specifically, money made from trade, was far more threatening than education. Many of the surviving plays of the 1580s,

including the *Three Ladies of London*, address the exploitative practices of merchants and landlords and present them as a threat to the old social order. The old order is depicted as one that values respect of others, hospitality, and charity; and the proto-capitalist system as one that is driven by greed and self-aggrandizement. This attitude needs to be taken seriously by any of you playing characters that represent the old order. Of course, the exciting opportunity that riches presented to ambitious souls that found themselves trapped on a lower rung of the social ladder, should also be embraced when it is appropriate to your character.

Education was less threatening to the conservative system as it produced many serviceable men who were extremely useful in the running of a kingdom. The subversive effects of education arose from the reading of dangerous new ideas that threatened the old social order - such as the political arguments of Machiavelli.

Players in this period were repeatedly attacked for the fact that they imitated people of higher social rank. This too was seen as threatening to God's order, and it also exposed how much privilege was founded on the performance of social class. Self-presentation was a new idea but a powerful one, and players were masters of it.

Class divisions were both clearly delineated and constantly under threat. The legislation that was passed to stop individuals of lower classes wearing clothes made from certain materials is a sign both that class divisions were carefully marked in this period and that social mobility was prevalent and seen as a threat to social order. Elizabethan's were acutely aware of class. Whenever two characters meet it is important for you to understand their status in relation to one another. This establishes a framework within which you can play out your action – it will prompt actions and create obstacles to the characters' wishes and desires. Does your character accept the class division, or resist it? Is the action of the scene centred on an assertion of class authority, or on the inversion of that authority?

Patriarchy

Regardless of the sex of their patron, the Queen's Men lived in a male-dominated society. Women were legally defined as the property of men. Conservative writers described the father as a little God, who should rule the household with an iron will and could expect love, honour and respect in return. Children were expected to be obedient to their father's will, including in matters of marriage. More liberal commentators, however, were arguing for the importance of romance in marriage – i.e. that it might be a good idea for a couple to be in love before they get married. They also debated the limits of a father's power and the line between discipline and tyranny.

Contemporary attitudes to women were largely negative, but not entirely so. They were considered the gentler sex, capable of more kindness, more inclined to be merciful and generally a civilizing influence on violent men; on the other hand, they were the weaker sex, changeable, easily seduced like Eve, and lacking sufficient reason to control their desires and emotions. The orthodox view of the time was that gender was biologically and divinely determined: God made man and woman and certain behaviours were natural

to each sex. However, not all men and women conformed to stereotype - eg. not all women were gentle, not all men were brave. Although it was not articulated in this way, it was apparent to many that gender is a social construct, the result of cultural conditioning. The fact that the women were played by men helped focus attention on gender as a performance.

The actors playing women need to consider the restrictions placed on their character's behaviour and the limitations on their opportunities. The women have so many more obstacles to action than the men; the social definition of their gender makes it less easy for them to pursue their objectives. The men dealing with women should bear in mind the social expectation that they should rule the women in their lives. A woman was subject to her father until they married at which point she became subject to her husband. Love, of course, can do strange things to a man.

Love

Love was the power that bound families and societies together, but love for the Elizabethans was not easily dissociated from ideas of duty and honour. The notion of romantic love was relatively new and its value hotly debated. Conservative thinkers felt that a daughter's and wife's love should be expressed through obedience to the will of the men in her life. More liberal minded individuals thought that women should be allowed a degree of influence in the choice of their life partners. While this seems clear cut to us, it was far from so for the Elizabethans. Love was a complex and highly political idea that tested the limits of obedience and duty on the one hand, and authority and tyranny on the other.

Hope this is all helpful!