

# Shakespeare: Social and Historical Context

## Religion and Beliefs

Religion was something of a hot topic in Shakespeare's time. In order to grasp its relevance, it is important to understand that religion played an important part in people's lives: attendance at church was demanded, and marriages, baptisms and funerals all took place in church. The church was ingrained in people's lives and a focal point for communities.



Up until the reign of Henry VIII, England had been a Roman Catholic country, recognising the religious authority of the Pope in Rome. But when Henry VIII wanted to get divorced from his wife, Catherine of Aragon, the Pope refused to allow it. As a result, Henry broke away from Rome in 1534. The Church of England was considered supreme, and Henry started to do away with some Catholic practices, such as worshipping saints.

When Henry died, his son, Edward VI, moved England even further away from Catholicism and towards Protestantism (a Christian belief which is against the Catholic Church). However, Edward died after five years and his half-sister, Mary, tried to reintroduce Catholicism. She, too, had a short reign. By the time Henry VIII's daughter, Elizabeth I, took the throne in 1558, religion was in a state of flux in England. This was the climate into which William Shakespeare was born in

1564. Because of the religious turmoil of the time, it could be dangerous to comment openly on religion. It was not until the late 1500s that England was firmly Protestant.

Shakespeare would have attended church regularly and services would have been in English – this was a relatively new concept, as under the Catholic Church, all services had been in Latin. The church was still an essential part of life – indeed, the law said that everyone had to go to church every week. The church taught that everyone has a soul, which could be damned eternally if you did something terrible, such as commit murder. Heaven and hell were considered to be real. Sex outside of wedlock was considered a grave sin.

As well as their Christian beliefs, people also held a number of superstitions and alternative beliefs. Astrology, for example, was considered a science; Dr John Dee was a famous astrologer who advised Queen

Elizabeth based on his readings of the movements of the stars. He was also a noted astronomer and mathematician, and was considered to be a magician.

Magic was believed in by many people. Witches were considered to be real – indeed, in 1563, witchcraft was made a criminal offence punishable by death. Witches and evil magic were blamed for a variety of misfortunes, and people were often wary of old or ugly women who they believed could be witches. James I himself was obsessed with witchcraft, which was why Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, a play prominently featuring witches, to appeal to the king who succeeded Elizabeth I in 1603.

Because many people were educated in classical myths and legends, these were also popular points of reference, too. Making a reference to Diana, the goddess of the moon, or Cupid, the god of desire, would be recognised and understood by most people.