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Opening extract from  
**What's So Special About  
Shakespeare?**

Written by  
**Michael Rosen**

Illustrated by  
**Sarah Nayler**

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Please print off and read at your leisure.

For Harold and Connie  
who introduced me to Shaks.

M.R.

“Alas, poor Tim, he knows me well!”

S.N.

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# What's so special about *Shakespeare?*



**MICHAEL ROSEN**

illustrated by  
**SARAH NAYLER**



**WALKER  
BOOKS**

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*Liberty! Freedom!*

*Tyranny is dead!*

*Run hence, proclaim,*

*cry it about the streets.*

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## *A plot! 1598*

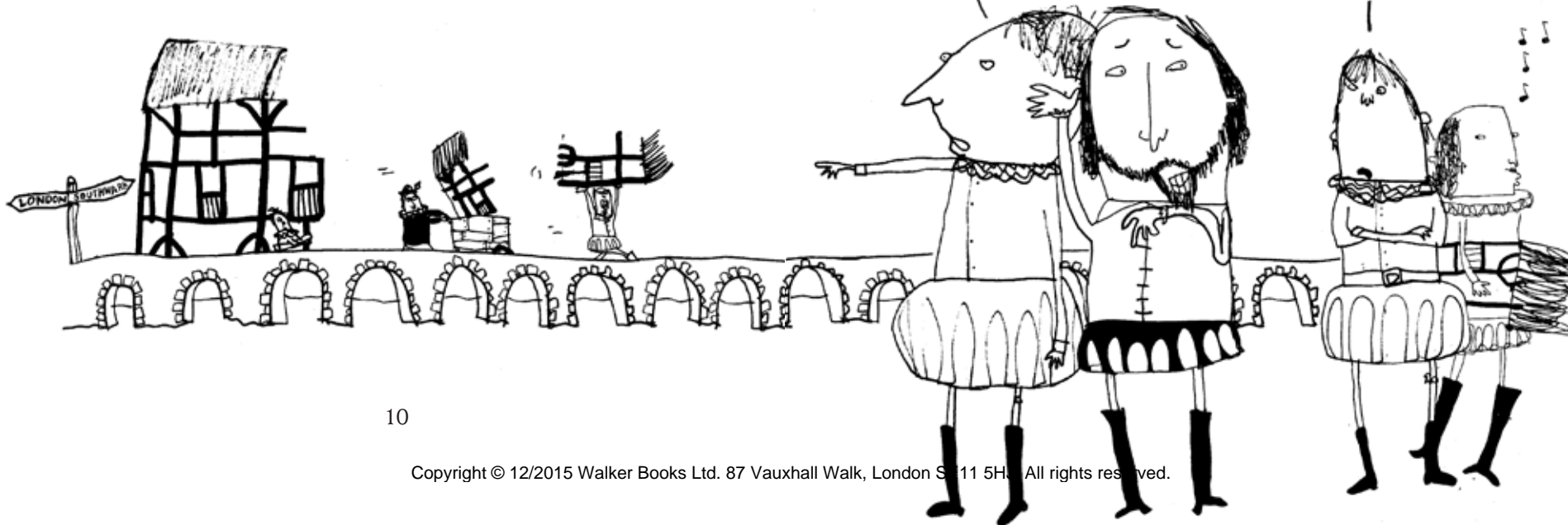
**I**t's the middle of the night on the edge of London, a few days after Christmas day, 1598. The River Thames is frozen over, snow is falling. The roofs of the timbered houses and the nearby fields are white with it. Four buildings stand higher than the nearby houses, shops, bowling-alleys, gambling houses and taverns – a windmill, a church and two theatres. One of the theatres is called the Curtain, and the other simply the Theatre. They are tall wooden buildings that have only been there for ten years or so but in that time their walls have shaken to the sound of swords clashing in fencing matches, actors crying of murder or lost love, and audiences roaring with laughter.



But tonight sixteen men are pulling down the Theatre. Two of them are brothers. They run a company of actors who put on plays, and with them there's a builder and his workmen.

As the men hurry about their work, it's clear that what's going on is secret and must be done as quickly as possible. Through the night the workmen load timbers onto wagons.

Two strangers arrive and start quizzing them. The workmen lie and say they are only taking down the parts of the building that are decaying. Really, they are dismantling the whole theatre and taking it somewhere else. It's a risky business because if it can be proved that they are stealing, they will all be hanged and their



severed heads put on show.

But before long the men are taking the timbers across London Bridge to Southwark, where the theatre will be rebuilt and become known as one of the world's most famous theatres: the Globe.

Those two theatres on the edge of London were where the first plays of William Shakespeare were put on. But Shakespeare wasn't the kind of writer who sent off his plays and sat around hoping someone might perform them. He was an actor who worked in the same company as those men who dismantled the Theatre, and what's more, he was one of the new owners of the Globe.

In the four hundred years since then, he has become one of the world's most famous writers.



# What's so special about Shakespeare?

Watching Shakespeare's plays is like being invited into a house full of amazing rooms. Go through a door at the top of the house and you will meet a ghost walking the battlements of a castle at night. You will hear him telling a young man that he is the ghost of his father, the old king. What's more, the ghost reveals that he was murdered by his own brother. And then the ghost says:

If thou didst ever thy dear father love—  
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.  
*Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5*

What will the young man do?



Walk into one of the rooms and you will come across a rich man yelling at his daughter because she won't marry the man he has chosen for her.

He shouts:

An\* you be mine, I'll give you to my friend.  
An you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets...

*Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, Scene 5*



But the girl has secretly married another man.

What's going to happen?

\*An if

Move along into another room and a group of men are whispering amongst themselves. They are dressed in the clothes of Ancient Rome and they are working out how they are going to murder the future king:

And, gentle friends,  
Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully.  
Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,  
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.

*Julius Caesar, Act 2, Scene 1*



Will they do it?

If they do, will they get away with it?



*What's so special about Shakespeare?*

And out in the garden of the house, a bunch of crazy people have come up with a great practical joke. They've tricked a stuffy, mean-minded man into thinking that the sad, beautiful lady of the house has fallen in love with him. He is reading what he thinks is a love letter to him from the lady. He says:

...for every reason excites to this, that my lady  
loves me...

I thank my stars, I am happy.

*Twelfth Night, Act 2, Scene 5*



*What's so special about Shakespeare?*

But the letter's a forgery, written by the bunch of crazy people now watching him while he reads. What will happen next time the stuffy man meets the lady?

There are lots more amazing rooms, and if you go into them you will find trial scenes, battles, love potions, cruel kings, civil wars, assassinations, riots, witches, fairies, jesters, even a statue that comes to life. You will also meet people with deep and powerful emotions – wild jealousy, crazed hunger for power, terrible sadness, great happiness, sneering contempt.

All this may sound extraordinary, but Shakespeare lived in extraordinary times.

# *Extraordinary and dangerous times*

**S**o what was it like in England when Shakespeare was writing? These were dangerous times – even for a writer!

A few years earlier, one of the most famous playwrights of the day, Christopher Marlowe, had been stabbed to death during a fight. Another playwright, Ben Jonson, had killed someone and managed to get off with nothing more than having his left thumb branded, supposedly with a “T” for Tyburn – the place where he’d be executed if he was caught again. And, strange as it may seem, these were especially dangerous times if you were the king or queen.

Shakespeare lived under two monarchs: Elizabeth I and James I. Elizabeth was imprisoned in the Tower of London by her half-sister. Her father, Henry VIII, had her mother beheaded, and Elizabeth herself ordered the execution of her second cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots...



When James was king, Guy Fawkes and his friends tried to blow him up in the Houses of Parliament.

Shakespeare lived at a time when ordinary people didn't choose who ruled over them. Countries were ruled by someone who claimed that he (or, very rarely, she) had a right to rule because they belonged to a particular family. The people in this family would say there was a "royal line" that went back and back which proved that they were the "true" rulers. Many ordinary people looked up to these monarchs as if they were almost gods.

But in Britain several families claimed that they were the "true" rulers, and you have to remember that such families were rich enough to raise armies against each other. This meant that civil war – war between people in the same country – was always possible. Every year there was news

of plots and rebellions.

There was also a big war with Spain, and bloody battles in Ireland and Holland.

Shakespeare wrote plays about the powerful families – the lords and dukes and princes – who wanted to rule England. In these plays, and in others set in Ancient Rome, we watch exciting scenes of civil wars, battles, rebellions, poor people's riots, conspiracies and wars between countries. And while all this is going on, the characters often discuss what makes a good ruler. What if your ruler were no good? Would it be right to get rid of him or her and put someone else in their place? Who should decide that? Should that be an argument left to the great families who had always ruled? Some of the people who thought they should

have a say were people with no royal line but who had money and power. It was only thirty-three years after Shakespeare died that such people had the King's head chopped off and then chose a ruler, Oliver Cromwell, who had no royal line and who didn't even call himself a king!

In Shakespeare's time religion was much more important in people's lives than it is today. Nearly everyone in Britain described themselves as Christian but where there had once been only one Christian Church, there were now many. And wherever one kind of Christian gained power, they nearly always ended up trying to imprison or kill off the other kinds. All over Europe people were fighting huge bloody battles and civil wars against each other.

In England the trouble involved the ruling family, the Tudors. When the Tudor monarch was a Roman Catholic, Protestants were persecuted, arrested and sometimes burnt at the stake.

And when Elizabeth – a Protestant – came to the throne, it was extremely dangerous to be a Roman Catholic. Elizabeth had one hundred and twenty-three Catholic priests executed.

Protestants also fought each other. Some, nicknamed “Puritans” and “Quakers”, were inventing a whole new way of life and preaching an end to high living, fun and games, gambling, sports, drinking, over-eating and street festivals.

Shakespeare came across these people not only as refugees from Holland but also



as the new rulers of the City of London, with the power to close theatres and ban plays. Small wonder we catch a glimpse of one or two unpleasant Puritans in his plays!

In some parts of Europe, Roman Catholics were in power; in others, Protestants. So the discussions over who should be king and what makes a good ruler were intertwined in Shakespeare's lifetime with questions about the right way to be a Christian.

Shakespeare lived amid all this political and religious talk. But it wasn't all talk. There was a lot of plotting and spying and murder going on as well. You often find people in his plays talking about the making and breaking of kings, as well as treachery and treason:

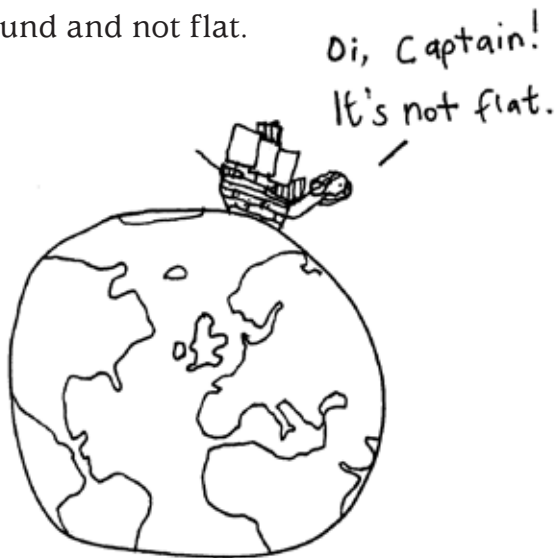
Peace, impudent and shameless Warwick,  
peace!  
Proud setter-up and puller-down of kings!  
*Henry VI Part 3, Act 3, Scene 3*

Shakespeare would have known that if you backed the wrong man, you could end up stabbed to death or executed. What's more, with the streets full of soldiers and ex-soldiers, there was always someone around who knew a lot about killing:

...when the searching eye of heaven is hid  
Behind the globe, that lights the lower world,  
Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen  
In murders and in outrage bloody here...

*Richard II, Act 3, Scene 2*

But these dangerous times were also times of great change. Explorers were heading off all round the globe, discovering, among other things, that the earth was round and not flat.



The people of England and Europe now knew that there were many different countries in the world, and that vast amounts of money could be made if you came back to England with valuable cargoes.

Just after Shakespeare was born, John Hawkins found another way to make money: taking people from West Africa across the Atlantic Ocean and selling them in the Caribbean as slaves. In one of Shakespeare's plays we see a slave arguing for the right to live on his own land:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st  
first,  
Thou strok'st me and made much of me,  
wouldst give me  
Water with berries in't...

*The Tempest, Act 1, Scene 2*