

Study Guide: *William Shakespeare's Land of the Dead*

John Heimbuch has taken advantage of the recent interest in zombies in creating this hilarious mixture of fact and fiction, *William Shakespeare's Land of the Dead: A True and Accurate Account of the 1599 Zombie Plague*, written in 2012. Every named character in the play except for Kate is based, with some degree of accuracy, on a real historical person.

Here is a bit of information on the historical figures that the characters in the play are based on:



Francis Bacon: Statesman, philosopher, and scientist, Bacon published essays on many topics and is known as the developer of the modern scientific method. While a member of parliament in 1593, Bacon opposed an anti-Catholic bill that Queen Elizabeth favored. He was never in her good graces again, though he became very powerful in the court of King James after Elizabeth's death. More information here: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/bacon_franzis.shtml

Richard Burbage: The leading actor in Shakespeare's company, he would have originated the roles of Richard III, Romeo, Benedick, Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth, not to mention Henry the Fifth. (They did things differently in that day.) Besides being an actor, Burbage, along with Shakespeare, John Heminges, Henry Condell, and a few others, were **sharers** (or **shareholders**) in the company, who had put up capitol to split the profits in a fairly modern business arrangement. Burbage was considered a phenomenal actor and a very handsome man.

More information here:

<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/richardburbage.html>



Sir Robert Cecil (pronounced "Sess-ul"): Like his father William Cecil, Robert Cecil was an advisor to Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth called him her "little Pygmy" because he was very short. He also had a humped back. Perhaps Cecil's most important work was managing a secret correspondence between Elizabeth and James in order to negotiate the succession of James VI of Scotland, Elizabeth's first cousin twice removed, to the throne after Elizabeth's death, when he became James I of England.

Sometimes more in Elizabeth's favor and sometimes less, he never rose to a very important office until the reign of James. More information here:

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/robert-cecil.htm>

Doctor John Dee: Born in 1527, the old Dr. Dee kept alive some of the less scientific theories about the universe that thinkers like Bacon sought to replace with a more rational approach to humanity and nature. In the play, you will hear Dr. Dee speak much about the medical theory of the **humors**. Humoral physiology held that human physical health, mental health, and basic temperament all depended on the balance or imbalance of the four basic "humors" or bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Besides being a staunch believer in humoral physiology, Dr. Dee published works both on magic and on mathematics. He also conducted regular séances to attempt to talk with the dead. Though Dee at one time was the Queen's personal astrologer, he was not around court much (despite what the play suggests) after being banished in 1586, returning in 1589 to Manchester—not to London.

More information here:

http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/d/dee_john.html



Queen Elizabeth I: Perhaps the most glorious and successful of British monarchs, Elizabeth is credited with bringing peace and prosperity to England following the chaos attending the latter part of the reign of her father (Henry VIII), the troubled reign of her juvenile half brother (Edward IV), and the violent reign of her half sister (Mary I, "Bloody Mary"). She survived many assassination attempts, mostly by those who wanted to put a Catholic back on the throne. However, after the English navy that she assembled finally defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, England lived for a time free from fear that Spain would succeed in taking over all of Europe with a view toward restoring Catholicism to the entire continent.

Still, by **1599** (see note below), a variety of factors had made the English nervous once again. Besides her achievements in foreign affairs, domestic economy, and personal power, Elizabeth was also a dedicated patron of the arts. She appointed her counselor the Lord Chamberlain as the patron and protector of Shakespeare's company—and thus, they were called the **Lord Chamberlain's Men**. Contrary to what you may have seen in *Shakespeare in Love*,

Elizabeth would never have attended a play at the Globe; it would have exposed her too much to the crowd, not to mention to further assassination attempts. (In this play, Elizabeth makes it clear that she takes no pleasure in being in a playhouse.) When she wanted a play, she would have called her favorite company to one of the royal residences to perform.

More information here: <http://www.biography.com/people/queen-elizabeth-i-9286133#early-life&awesm=~oHGjuSWSkA8vsj>

Will Kemp: The principal comic actor in the Lord Chamberlain's Men from 1595 to his departure in 1599. He had previously acted in the Admiral's Men with the great actor of the 1580s and early 1590s, **Edward "Ned" Alleyn**.

He was immensely popular in roles such as Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is less certain that he originated the role of Falstaff, but he is definitely presented as the original Falstaff in *Land of the Dead*. It is uncertain why Kemp left the most successful theater company in London in 1599, but there



is some evidence that he and Shakespeare disagreed on certain matters. These lines from *Hamlet*, written around 1599—and in this play paraphrased by Francis Bacon—are often understood as Shakespeare's criticism of Kemp:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus . . . And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though, in the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.

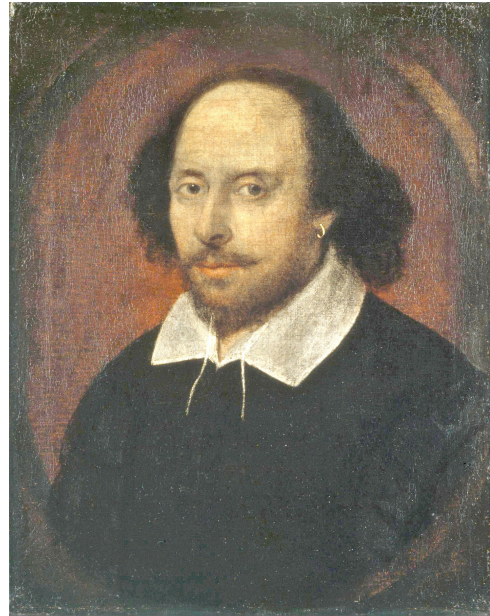
After leaving the company, Kemp earned much fame and less money by dancing all the way from London to Norwich in nine days, a feat known as the Nine Days' Wonder.

More information here: <http://www.bardstage.org/william-kempe-actor.htm>

John Rice: A boy actor in Shakespeare's company. All women's parts were played by boys in those days; they were assigned an experienced actor to guide them. The first record we have of Rice is in 1607 as an apprentice of John Heminges, a sharer who played older roles like Polonius and Julius Caesar. *Land of the Dead* almost certainly indulges in an anachronism by placing John Rice in the company in 1599, eight years before we know he had an association with the company. He stayed with the company until 1625.

John Sinklo (aka “Sincler”): A hired man, not a member of the permanent acting company. However, the company did hire him for quite a few roles between 1594 and 1606. He was very thin, playing parts like Dr. Pinch in *A Comedy of Errors* and Justice Slender in *Henry IV, Part 2*. By the way, the spelling of many words, including names, was not standardized in the sixteenth century. This man is sometimes called “Sinklo” and sometimes “Sincler” in the play; there would have been little difference in the pronunciation.

William Shakespeare: Probably the greatest playwright the world has ever known, Shakespeare’s histories celebrated the patriotism that followed the defeat of the Spanish Armada; his comedies showed rare insight into the human brain under the influence of love; and his tragedies faced head on the universal problem of humanity—mortality and death. Shakespeare wrote many of the most successful plays of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, though they also performed plays written by others. He was an actor as well as a sharer or shareholder (along with Burbage, Heminges, Condell, and a few others) in the company, sharing the profits. Between the publication of some of his poems and plays and his investment in the most successful theater company of his time, Shakespeare was able to buy the second largest house in his hometown, Stratford-upon-Avon, by the time of his retirement in 1611.



The play jokingly presents the idea that Francis Bacon wrote one of Shakespeare’s plays, and the play’s characters Shakespeare and Bacon have a good laugh over the idea that the Earl of Oxford would have written some of Shakespeare’s plays. Though the movie *Anonymous* and various conspiracy sites on the internet have tried to present the idea that Shakespeare didn’t write Shakespeare, there is in fact a wealth of evidence that Shakespeare wrote the plays that bear his name, and no evidence that any other person wrote them. There are a few exceptions: many plays in the Elizabethan era were written by two or more authors. Research has recently indicated that certain scenes of *Henry VI, Part 1*, *Titus Andronicus* and a few others were written by collaborators. Likewise, research shows that Shakespeare wrote parts of the otherwise unremarkable plays *Edward III* and *Sir Thomas More*. One more caveat: the ideas for the plots of most of Shakespeare’s plays were taken from various historical and literary sources—as was preferred in that day, and as still happens today. But Shakespeare’s contributions to the plots he found in his sources is markedly original and identifiably unique. In sum, it is universally believed by serious scholars that Shakespeare’s thoughts are expressed by Shakespeare’s words in the plays that bear his name. For more on the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays, see <http://shakespeareauthorship.com/>.

Other Historical References in the Play

The Globe: The home of Lord Chamberlain's Men (later renamed the King's Men when King James took over the patronage of the company when he came to the throne in 1603) from 1599 until 1642, when all theaters were closed at the start of the Puritan Commonwealth. (It burned down in 1613 when flaming wadding from the cannons in *Henry VIII* landed in the thatch roof, but was immediately rebuilt.) Before the Globe, the Lord Chamberlain's Men played at **The Theatre**, right outside the city walls in a district called Shoreditch. The Theatre was built in 1576 on rented land, by Richard Burbage's father, James Burbage, and other members of the Burbage clan. The lease on the land was up after twenty years, and, after two additional years of lawsuits, the Burbages, other members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and carpenter Peter Street dismantled The Theatre during the night of December 28/29, 1598, ferrying the timbers from the old building—which the Burbages had built with their own money—across the Thames to **Southwark**, a suburb where other theaters like The Rose were located, as well as bear-bating rings—where dogs and bears fought to the death for spectators' enjoyment—and brothels. There they constructed The Globe on somewhat marshy ground. A banner would fly from the roof of the Globe if a play was playing on that day. As an unroofed outdoor theater, it was really only used during nice weather. About ten years later, they were able to use a separate theater, **The Blackfriars**, during the cooler months. The images show the reconstructed Globe, built very near the site of the original.



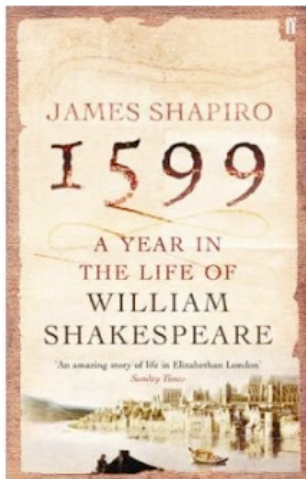
Christopher Marlowe: a very successful playwright in the early 1590s, as well as a spy for Queen Elizabeth in the Low Countries—she aided them in their continuing fight against Spanish occupation. He died in 1593 under somewhat mysterious circumstances. It has been theorized that he was assassinated under orders from the court, either because he had failed to follow orders or because he knew too much.

Shakespeare's epitaph: The play shows Shakespeare reciting his own epitaph. Many believe he might have written it; in any case, the epitaph was important for scaring off many who had wanted, in the early years after Shakespeare's death, to move his bones to Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. Here is a picture of the

epitaph, set into the floor of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, where it has remained these past 400 years:



A Note on the Year 1599



The opening of the Globe alone would have been a notable event in Shakespeare's London, but there was much more going on that year. James Shapiro's excellent book *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* discusses in detail the many political and social forces at work during that pivotal year.

First, Elizabeth had sent troops to **Ireland**, led by one of her favorites, The **Earl of Essex**. Many have seen echoes of Essex's return to England in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which opened in 1599. Second, **Spain**, that old nemesis of England, seemed to threaten another invasion. Indeed, there were rumors in August of 1599 that another armada was nearing the coast of England, and soldiers were being pressed into service to fight this armada—which never appeared (and is thus sometimes called “the invisible armada”). A non-Shakespearean play that The Lord Chamberlain's Men performed that summer was called *A Larum for London*. The play stages events from 1576, when Spanish soldiers ransacked Antwerp and committed numerous atrocities. This very political play wants to raise “a larum” (i.e., an alarm) in London to prepare Londoners to fight in order to prevent what happened in Antwerp from happening in London.

Another concern that worried the English in 1599 was an issue known as **the succession crisis**. At the age of 66, Elizabeth I had far exceeded the life expectancy

for women. She had never married and thus had produced no heir. Though monarchy was supposed by political philosophers of the day to be the most stable and least problematic form of government because (in theory) one always knew who the next ruler would be, history shows that such is not always the case. Shakespeare addressed this problem in another play that opened in 1599, *Julius Caesar*. In that play, an aging childless ruler dies suddenly—and the state is plunged into civil war by the resulting struggle for power. (Elizabeth and Robert Cecil had already, somewhat secretly, arranged for Elizabeth's first cousin twice removed, King James VI of Scotland, to take the throne upon Elizabeth's death.)

All of these problems—together with the some astrologer's predictions that Doomsday would coincide with the change of date to 1600—had the English very worried indeed. They expected something terrible to happen, something apocalyptic. John Heimbuch has chosen to represent these fears in a way that is simultaneously terrifying and humorous: a zombie apocalypse. People often deal with deep anxiety with a dose of humor: think of depression era vaudeville, World War II cartoons, or the gravedigger's jokes about death in *Hamlet*.

However, the Lord Chamberlain's Men and the Globe did not offer a nonstop diet of war, death, and chaos in the 1599 season. That year also brought London, and eventually the world, one of Shakespeare's lightest, most optimistic comedies: *As You Like It*. In that play, two of Shakespeare's most appealing and intelligent characters, cousins Rosalind and Celia, leave the political problems of the usurping Duke Frederick behind and escape to the Forest of Arden—the name "Arden" perhaps suggested to Shakespeare by the family name of his mother-in-law, Mary Arden, whose family lived in the woodlands north of Shakespeare's home in Stratford. In the green world of the forest, brother reconciles with brother, music fills the air, and love conquers all. *As You Like It* also give us some of Shakespeare's most famous words (also quoted, of course, in *Land of the Dead*). The inspiration for this speech was a Latin text, ascribed ultimately to first-century author Petronius, that was inscribed above the entrance doors to The Globe: *Totus mundus agit histrionem*, loosely translated "All the world's a stage." Here is the complete speech:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,

With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

The speaker of these lines, the cynical but harmless Jaques, does not shrink away from the unpleasant aspects of life—few people, for example, look forward to losing their vision or their teeth in old age—but by treating the entire experience of life as a part that one plays on stage, perspective is gained.

At Shakespeare's Globe in 1599, one could see *Julius Caesar* on Thursday, stoking fears of civil war, *A Larum for London* on Friday, worrying viewers about a potential Spanish invasion, and *As You Like It* on Saturday, a play in which various "men and women . . . play their part[s]" as shepherds, fools, and lovers. At the Abilene Shakespeare Festival in 2014, one can see *Macbeth* on Thursday and *Land of the Dead* on Friday. Both deal with some of the deepest fears we hold about our society, our future, and ourselves as human beings. Both deal with those problems differently. We invite you to come and see what both have to say to the human condition in our time.

References and Further Reading

- de Grazia, Margreta, and Stanley Wells. *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Evans, G. Blakemore, Gen. Ed. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Folger Shakespeare Library*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Web. 2 June 2014.
- Gurr, Andrew. *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- . *The Shakespeare Company 1594-1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- . *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Mabillard, Amanda, ed. *Shakespeare Online*. Shakespeare Online, 2014. Web. 2 June 2014.
- Shapiro, James. *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*. New York: Harper Collins, 2005.