



SHAKESPEARE'S THEATRE

WORKSHEET 2: SHAKESPEARE IN HIS CONTEXTS

I. Cultural, Socio-political, Economic Contexts

Please read Helen Hackett's introduction to *A Short History of English Renaissance Drama* (2013) and then answer the following questions:

1. What is the Renaissance and when did it take place? What are its main values?
2. In recent years, some scholars have preferred to use the term 'early modern period' instead of Renaissance. What are some of the developments (cultural, economic, political, social, technological) associated with 'early modernity'? What different conceptions of identity does each term imply?
3. What is the Reformation and when did it take place? What are some of its main assumptions?

II. Women in Early Modern England

Please read pp. 195-201 of Maggie O'Farrell's chapter from *Hamnet* (2020) and then answer the following questions:

1. Write down some aspects which you think characterized the life of an Early Modern woman and/or mother. Are they depicted as having any agency or power? (see also Belsey's "Gender and Family" (2013) and McDonald's "Men and Women: Gender, Family, Society" (2001) on the Virtual Campus). What was their life like, and why, do you think, does O'Farrell convey the experiences of infant mortality from the simultaneous perspective of different women?
2. Stephen O'Neil claims that *Hamnet* invites us to take seriously the idea that *Hamlet* was inspired by the death of Shakespeare's son, and that "by narrativizing the Hamnet story and focusing on the maternal the novel asserts an imaginative right to interrogate *Hamlet* and the kind of traditional, patriarchal modes of recollection the play values" (2021, p. 221). To what extent would you claim that this passage invites the reader to fill in the gaps and silences of Shakespeare's earlier play, *Hamlet*, or questions the facts considered of value in traditional Shakespearean biographies?

Reference List

Belsey, C. (2013). Gender and Family. In C. McEachern (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy* (2nd ed., pp. 132-151). Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

- Hackett, H. (2013). Introduction: Renaissance and Reformation. In *A Short History of English Renaissance Drama* (pp. 1-19). London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- McDonald, R. (2001). Men and Women: Gender, Family, Society. In *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* (pp. 253-277). Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- O'Farrell, M. (2020). *Hamnet*. London: Tinder P.
- O'Neil, S. (2021). Maternalizing Networks of Remembrance in Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*. *Shakespeare* 17 (2), 210-229.