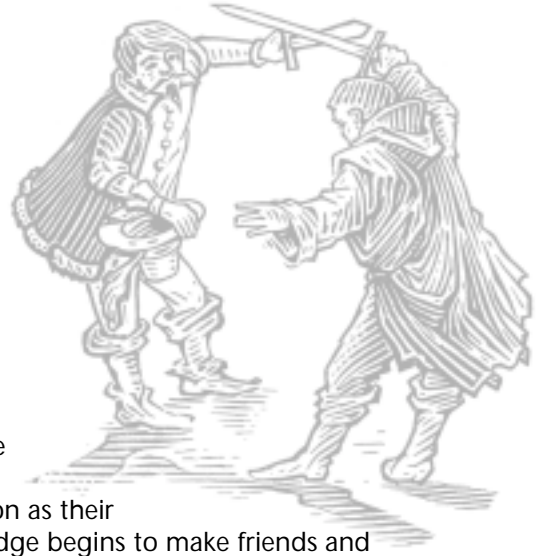


# The SHAKESPEARE STEALER

By Gary L. Blackwood



## Synopsis

Recommended for  
everyone age 8  
and older

Widge, an orphan living in rural England in 1601, is taught “charactery,” a type of stenography, by his master. Word of this skill gets out and a menacing stranger, Falconer, comes to purchase Widge on behalf of Simon Bass. Bass is a clever but devious man who wants the boy to go to London and use his charactery skill to steal the script of *Hamlet* from

William Shakespeare’s troupe of players.

Skulking backstage at The Globe Theatre, Widge is caught and drops his notebook with its mysterious but telling markings. To explain his presence Widge makes up a story, telling the actors that he has always dreamt of being on stage. Understanding the call of the theatre, they take the boy on as their apprentice. Living with the troupe and learning the life of the theatre, Widge begins to make friends and starts to truly enjoy life as a player. Ever worried that Falconer will find him and punish him for not completing his task, Widge is torn between his duty to Simon Bass and his growing affection for his new life and friends.

Unbeknownst to Widge, Falconer has already set his sights on another member of the troupe to do his dirty work for him. Widge catches Nick, a player whose love for ale outstrips his love of the theatre, as he tries to steal the book. Widge is forced to reveal the truth about himself in order to get the help he needs. Despite his fear that his new friends won’t understand that he has changed, Widge learns that everyone may not be as they seem, but true friendship always shows itself in the end.

## RESOURCE LIST

Prepared by Kim Kopetz-Buttleman, Seattle Public Library

### FOR CHILDREN

***William Shakespeare and the Globe***

Aliki

***Shakespeare’s Scribe***

Gary Blackwood

***Shakespeare Without the Boring Bits (sound recording)***

Humphrey Carpenter

***Matilda Bone***

Karen Cushman

***Oliver Twist***

Charles Dickens

***Shakespeare’s London: A Guide to Elizabethan London***

Julie Ferris

***The Whipping Boy***

Sid Fleischman

***The Young Person’s Guide to Shakespeare: With Performances on CD by the Royal Shakespeare Company***

Anita Ganeri

***Bravo, Mr. William Shakespeare!***

Marcia Williams

### SPOTLIGHT

***Jack Black and the Ship of Thieves***

Carol Hughes

Young Jack Black joins the maiden voyage of the world’s largest airship, the Bellerophon, captained by his father. Once aloft, Jack overhears plans to sabotage the ship, but just before he’s able to alert his father, Jack plummets overboard and falls (literally) onto a ship of thieves. A page-turner of an adventure—complete with a sea monster, a volcano and a host of unforgettable characters.

### FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

***William Shakespeare***

Carol Dommermuth-Costa

***Shakespeare: His Work and His World***

Michael Rosen

***Life in the Elizabethan Theater***

Diane Yancey

### SPOTLIGHT

***William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Genius: A Biography***

Anthony Holden

William Shakespeare overcame unlikely beginnings, as a priest in training and a lowly actor, to become a preeminent poet and playwright. A spunky rags-to-riches biography that debunks the myths and pulls a few skeletons out of Shakespeare’s closet.

# Shakespeare's World

As evidenced by the stark contrast between *The Shakespeare Stealer's* prosperous Simon Bass and penniless Julian, the Elizabethan Age was one of burgeoning prosperity for the wealthy citizens of England and harsh privation for the poor, with the social classes stridently divided. During her reign from 1558 to 1603, Queen Elizabeth I withstood threats of invasion by foreign powers and deposal by enemies at home. This was a period of great excitement in England, and London was its heart and soul, becoming a leading center of culture as well as commerce. From the years 1500 to 1600 the population grew 400%, swelling to nearly 200,000 people in the city and outlying region.



*Major courts were also situated in London; each year hundreds of lawyers came to the Inns of Court to learn their profession.*

Compared to the standard of living for the average American today, Elizabethan times were cruel and hard. Most people had scarcely enough food to eat, and a wet summer usually meant a bad harvest and starvation for thousands. Some people owned land and were far wealthier than the other, poorer, villagers who had to answer to the lords. The lords of the manor were both feared and respected. They were responsible for settling petty disputes and enforced many laws. However, as Robert Weimann tells us in his book *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, this was the beginning of a "decline of the feudal system, due to labor shortages caused by the plague and the burgeoning of the market economy."

With the manor system failing, people moved to town in search of opportunity; at the time of Queen Elizabeth I about one-fifth of the population of England and Wales lived in towns. London was the principal city in all of Europe because it was well situated for trade throughout the continent. Merchants grew more powerful as their businesses expanded and they began trading with the Near East, Asia, and eventually the

Americas. The largest profits generally came from luxuries such as fur and silk. London was also considered very important not only because Parliament met there, but also because the royal court spent most of its time in the capital.

The prosperity of the Elizabethan Age gave many people the opportunity to turn their attention toward the arts, and indeed attending the theatre was open to any who could afford a ticket. And since this was a great era of scholarship and exploration, artists were constantly challenged by new ideas and discoveries about the world. Painting, music, architecture, and

literature all flourished. Weimann tells us that "history plays (were) becoming as popular as Biblical dramas," and it was during this time that William Shakespeare wrote most of his plays.

Although, by our standards, life in Shakespeare's world may have been trying, it was also a time of great social, cultural, and economic change.

## ACTIVITY

• You will need one scrap of paper for each of your students. Mark out 2 cards with x's and the rest o's. Randomly distribute the cards to your students. Have the 2 x's sit at the front of the class—they are the royalty. The o's are the peasants. The royalty should establish classroom rules, which the peasants have to follow, such as: all peasants must pick up trash, sharpen the royaltys' pencils, and tie the royaltys' shoes. Afterwards, ask the class how they felt about their places in the classroom society? Can they see the correlation to the class system of Shakespeare's time? Are there times in their own lives when they feel the same way?



HISTORY—analyze; compare and contrast

E A L R S ECONOMICS—recognize economic systems

ARTS—connect

# English Theatre & The Globe

As glimpsed in *The Shakespeare Stealer*, the rise, maturity, and decline of Elizabethan theatre coincided with Shakespeare's dramatic career, which was from 1590–1616. Before the 1550s, English drama was restricted mainly to plays on religious themes, usually performed on religious holidays. In the beginning of Elizabeth's reign (1558–1603), English drama came into its own for two reasons: the influence of the Renaissance (broadly considered to have lasted from about 1400 to 1600) and the establishment of theatres in London.

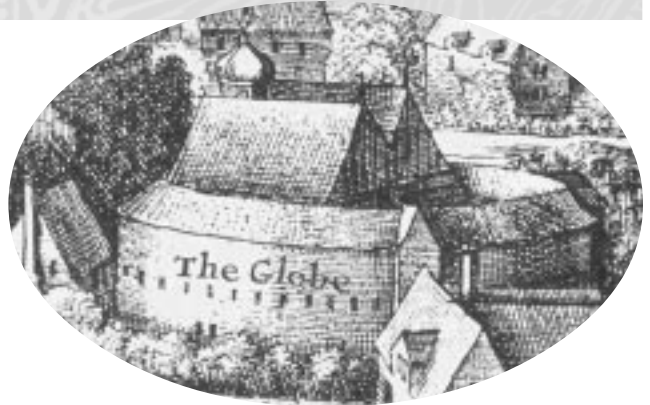
Between 1590 and 1642, there were approximately twenty companies of actors in London and more than one hundred provincial troupes. The usual pattern of the companies was to play in London in the winter and spring and to travel in the summer when plague ravaged the city.

During this time the social status of players rose from that of despised vagabonds to respectable members of society, as they became connected to noble, and eventually even royal, patrons; Elizabeth had the companies play at court four to eight times a year.

## ACTIVITY

- Invite your students to investigate the similarities and differences between theatres in Elizabethan times and now, including:
  - Buildings
  - Ticket prices
  - Production elements (lighting, sound, costumes, scenery)
  - Career opportunities
  - Types of plays (the stories told)

Now, ask the students to assume the role of modern-day architects. They are being commissioned by SCT to build a Globe Theatre in Seattle. The architects will present their models to the SCT representative (you), and provide a list of personnel and production elements needed, the first play of the season, and the price of a ticket.



*One of the most memorable stages of Elizabethan time was The Globe Theatre, a 17th century theatre in Southwark, London.  
Image from <http://zeksrab.users.50megs.com/Cummings/Shakespeare/>*

## The Company

In Shakespeare's England, women were not allowed on the professional stage, so young boys whose voices had not yet changed were trained in female impersonation and played the roles of women and children.

Serving as legally bound apprentices and performing in minor parts, they learned the craft of acting. The "hired men" were minor actors, musicians, stage managers, wardrobe keepers, prompters, and stagehands who were paid weekly wages.

## The Globe Theatre

The famous English actor Richard Burbage, in partnership with Shakespeare and others, constructed The Globe in 1599. It was an open-air octagonal amphitheatre that could seat up to 3,000 spectators. The theatre was three stories high, and the staging area probably housed trap doors in its flooring, with primitive rigging overhead for various stage effects. (The physical structure of the theatre, along with the fact that many performances were held in the daylight, influenced Shakespeare's theatrical style. He utilized language to perform many of the tasks we would expect to be undertaken by lighting and sound instruments and scenery today.)

In 1613, the original Globe Theatre burned to the ground due to a cannon shot during a performance of *Henry VIII*, which ignited the thatched roof of the gallery. A new Globe, built on the foundations of the old theatre, was completed before Shakespeare's death in 1616.

- E A L R S**
- HISTORY**—analyze and synthesize; investigate
  - ARTS**—reason and problem solve
  - COMMUNICATION**—listen and observe; communicate clearly; work in a group

# INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

In *The Shakespeare Stealer*, Widge is faced with an ethical dilemma: should he copy, for later use, a play script without the permission or knowledge of the writer? The question is one with which we are often faced in different forms today. Is it okay for us to copy a song or movie without getting the permission of the artist? Art, whether it's theatre, filmmaking, painting, writing, or music, is often taken for granted, either because it has become such a familiar and loved part of our popular culture or because it is so esoteric that the ideas appear to stream from some communal pool of knowledge.

Today's technology makes this pool even murkier. It is easy to reproduce art works without the knowledge of artists or their representatives; it is second nature for many people to download songs, photos, or written works from the Internet. But art, in whatever form it takes, comes from somewhere. An artist gives birth to a unique product just as an inventor does. For the artists who create these products it is critical that society recognizes the importance of and the need to protect their work. Most artists are not millionaires; often when

denied their royalty fees they are being denied their livelihood. This can have lasting detrimental effects on an artist's desire or ability to create freely. Through the understanding that their creations will be protected and compensated, artists can feel free to create uninhibitedly.

During the time of

Shakespeare very few laws existed to protect artists' rights. Scripts could easily be stolen from the originating troupe and performed by a different acting company. Also, once a script was sold, the purchasers could alter the manuscript as they saw fit, with or without the playwright's approval. Today, however, there have been many measures taken to protect artists' rights. The concept of "Intellectual Property," often known as

IP, allows people to own their creativity and innovation in the same way that they can own physical property. Patents, trademarks, and copyrights are all ways of protecting these original creations.

## PATENTS

A patent is a grant of right to the inventor by the government. Usually these are for inventions or improvements to products and processes.

## TRADEMARKS

A trademark is the right to use a specific name, work, phrase, symbol, logo, design, or a combination of any of these elements to identify products and distinguish them from the products of others.

## COPYRIGHT

A copyright is the right to reproduce a work if the work is in fixed form. In order to enforce a copyright the work should be registered with the federal government. Copyrights are usually used for literary and artistic material: music, films, sound recordings, and broadcasts, including software and multimedia.

## Classrooms, Copyright, and the World Wide Web

Although plagiarism is a serious offense in the classroom, most school papers are not published or distributed outside the confines of the school, so students seldom have to worry about legal penalties for violation of copyright law. In addition, for educational projects, certain uses of copyrighted materials are considered fair use, so long as proper credit is given. The World Wide Web has added further complications. Most governments around the world (including our own) have yet to decide on definitive laws regarding copyrights, fair use, and electronic sources.

"Intellectual property" is just that, someone's property, and the moral as well as economic rights of authors, creators, and publishers should always be taken into account. Awareness of these issues and experience with the creative process can give us all a deeper respect for the rights of others.

## ACTIVITY

- Set up a mock trial in your class. Pick one student to be Widge, on trial for allegedly stealing Shakespeare's script, and separate the rest of the class into a jury, lawyers for the defense, and lawyers for the prosecution. After the lawyers have time to argue their cases and the jury has handed down their verdict, you can ask the students if they see the relationship between Widge's crime to contemporary issues such as copying a CD, downloading music, or recording a favorite TV show.



As seen here from the book *The Shakespeare Stealer*, copyright is secured automatically when the work is created and is identified by the symbol: ©.



CIVICS—responsibilities of citizenship

E A L R S ARTS—reason and problem solve; communicate; connect