Fun and Games in Elizabethan Society

The Elizabethans sure knew how to party. In fact, amusements and entertainment arise in just about every society on earth, and England during Queen Elizabeth I’s rule (1558-1603) proved no different. Despite the huge gap between the poor and the nobility, everyone in Elizabethan society had their ways of escaping from the everyday work routine. Just like how today’s entertainment plays a huge role in society, entertainment played a similarly huge role in Elizabethan society as well.

Entertainments and amusements enjoyed in the Elizabethan Era evolved out of similar pastimes in the years leading up to Elizabeth’s reign. Many know that the rise of the playhouse played a key role in Elizabethan entertainment. However, the playhouse did not arise in London until Elizabeth I ruled. Historian Mandy Barrow describes how acting evolved before the first playhouse: “before theatres were built actors travelled from town to town and performed in the streets or outside inns” (Barrow). The first playhouse came to London around 1576. Long before the first playhouse in London, actors travelled around to different performance venues. Only during Elizabeth’s reign did the theatre take hold and actors become stationed in one theatre. Actors did not play as respectable a role in pre-Elizabethan society, mainly due to this lack of interest that stemmed from having no theatres in London yet. Moving on, another form of entertainment in Elizabethan society that has roots planted in pre-Elizabethan times are the festivals. Irving Ribner describes how the festivals celebrated in the Elizabethan Era came
about: “… springtime was still a season with which the end of winter had been celebrated since time immemorial, and the Christmas season was still marked by many of the Yuletide customs descended from pre-Christian times” (Ribner 87). As Ribner describes, the end of winter housed a celebration that traces back so long that historians cannot find when it began with certainty. Expanding on what Ribner wrote, the Romans introduced Christianity to England in the third and fourth centuries, so during this time, the celebration of Christmas began. However, as Ribner writes, many of the old Yuletide customs and traditions still remained during that time of year, and they eventually became integrated with the Christmas customs introduced by the Romans. Much of Elizabethan entertainment evolved out of previous forms of entertainment, either from decades before or centuries before.

To begin with a form of entertainment, it is well known that, along with the theatre, music played an integral part in Elizabethan entertainment. Interestingly, the styles of music played during the English Renaissance sound archaic to many of today’s listeners due to the fact that this music falls outside the “Common Practice Period (1600-1900).” The Common Practice Period houses what many would refer to as classical music, so listening to music from before that era sounds, to many, very ancient and traditional. However, the Elizabethans loved every note of their music. Instruments used then would evolve into today’s instruments, as Kavitha Kareti explains: “the lute, virginal, viola, recorder, bagpipe and the fiddle were favored instruments of that time. A popular form of entertainment in the countryside was the ringing of church bells” (Kareti 1). Products of very fine craftsmanship, some of these instruments survive into today’s orchestra, such as the viola. Also, the bagpipe still finds its way into today’s traditional drum and fife bands. In Elizabethan society, the ability to play one of these instruments proved important for members of the upper class. Ribner describes this aspect of
Elizabethan society in detail: “the playing of a musical instrument was regarded as a necessary accomplishment of a Renaissance gentleman, and in many middle class homes dinner was usually followed by a session of singing and the playing of instruments” (Ribner 91). Wealthier families often had several instruments in which different family members received training on. This resulted in the family members all playing a different instrument at once to make a small ensemble. Enthusiastic and proud, the Elizabethans held great interest in adding a musical soundtrack to their lives, whether it consisted of the daily musical performances as described by Ribner, or more elaborate ceremonial musical interlude. Next, the more elaborate celebrations held on holidays contained another very important Elizabethan pastime: dance. Dancing was an art form enjoyed by all classes in Elizabethan society, as written about by Steve Loew and Andrea Vincent: “the preferred type of dancing varied according to social class, with those of higher social position favoring the courtly dances imported from Italy and other European countries, and the ordinary people preferring ‘country’ dances” (Loew and Vincent). European courtly dances involved harder footwork to perform than the country dances, which used round or square sets. Even Queen Elizabeth I herself practiced dance every morning and encouraged it among the aristocracy. Two very closely related forms of entertainment, music and dance, thrived during the Elizabethan Era, and each offered entertainment to all classes of people.

Moving on, another popular form of entertainment in the Elizabethan Era involved the use of animals. This time period saw many ways in which to use animals to entertain. The article titled “Elizabethan Entertainment” describes different forms of animal use for amusement: “Animal sports – included Bear and Bull Baiting, Dog and Cock Fighting. Hunting – Sport followed by the nobility often using dogs. Hawking – sport followed by the nobility with hawks” (Elizabethan Entertainment 2). Baiting involves tying an animal such as a bull or bear
up and letting dogs attack it to try and kill it, most often unsuccessfully. Today’s modern bulldogs evolved from the dogs used to fight these bulls. Dog fighting involved two dogs fighting each other to the death; the same idea existed for cock fighting. Hawking became popular among rich gentlemen and involved the use of a hawk for hunting. Many of the citizens during the time period had mixed views on bear and bull baiting. Ribner describes this controversy: “… animal baiting was frowned upon only by the Puritans, who drove it out of London as they gained power in the city government” (Ribner 90). Bold and Confident, the Puritans had strong reason to believe that baiting involved too much violence. In baiting, the bull or bear looked on helplessly from a stake it tied to, as four mastiff dogs ran out to attack it. Not surprisingly, this led some to be horrified by it, others pleased. In fact, many theatre owners reported that people held as much interest in animal baiting as in the plays in their playhouses. Summing up, the Elizabethan Era happened long before animal cruelty became mainstream, and as a result, games that involved animals, such as bull baiting, hawking, and hunting, became popular amusements in Elizabethan society.

Of course, other sports existed in the Elizabethan Era that did not make use of animals. A wide variety of sports existed, both indoor and outdoor, as described by Kareti: “some of the indoor games included dice, chess, checkers and a variety of card games… Some of the outdoor games included golf, horse racing, shovel-board, sliding, swimming, fishing, hunting, fencing, dueling and cricket” (Kareti 2). Ironically, a great deal of the time, the indoor sports bored the men too easily, so instead, the men would wrestle. In addition, nearly everyone knew how to play tennis, bowling, archery and hunting. Football has persisted as a popular sport in England today and through the Elizabethan Era. Another interesting difference in Elizabethan society as compared to today’s involved how regulations of sports occurred. Leow and Vincent explain:
“Sports were regulated by the government. Those of rank were expected to take part because sporting events trained men for war…” (Leow and Vincent 2). Notice that this only pertains to the nobility; the working class had to work six days a week and thus did not have time for training. As in any society, sports became important for the Elizabethans as a way of competing against fellow citizens.

Lastly, the final way in which Elizabethans celebrated, entertained, and amused themselves was with the traditional annual festivals. The setting aside of certain days for celebration spans nearly all cultures, including today’s. Kareti lists some of the festivals and feasts: “… Shrove Tuesday … Mayday celebration … In the summer, bonfires were burned and dances were held to celebrate Midsummer’s Eve on June 24… All Hallow’s Eve … Christmas ran through New Year’s Eve and ended on Twelfth Night, January 5” (Kareti 3). Shrove Tuesday occurred during Lent, and its activities included bell ringing, masking, gaming, and eating a feast. Mayday consisted of dancing around a decorated maypole. Bobbing for apples, dancing, and ringing bells all occurred during the All Hallow’s Eve celebration. Just like today, Elizabethans shared gifts among themselves during the Christmas celebration. In addition to these celebrations, and annual summer fair occurred, as described by the article “Elizabethan Entertainment:” “Fairs – the Annual Summer Fair was often a bawdy affair” (Elizabethan Entertainment 1). In this ‘bawdy’ affair, beer ran like a river and the Elizabethans celebrated life, the summer, friendship, family, security, among others. Boldly, the Annual Summer fair lives on today in the form of Renaissance Festivals. Finally, there lived people whose job it was to entertain in the Elizabethan Era. Elizabethan Entertainment, the same article, describes these professions: “Jesters – a fool or buffoon… Mummers – a masked or costumed merrymaker or dancer … at a festival… Acting Troupes – Travelling actors. Jugglers – also used tricks,
deception, or fraud” (Elizabethan Entertainment 2). These entertainers either entertained rich folk, or entertained the common folk by performing in the street. Surviving today, the image of the jester still leaves a humorous mark on the mind. They often performed foolish and ridiculous acts for nobility. In summation, certain times came annually when the Elizabethans came together to celebrate their successes and blessings, even among a time where many struggles existed, such as the black plague.

To conclude, Elizabethans used entertainment and amusement to dodge the monotony of everyday work hassles, as any society does. Among the amusements of the Elizabethan Era included music and dance, each having specific forms for the rich and poor. Also, another form of entertainment was sports. Some sports used animals and others did not. Finally, festivals provided small breaks from work when citizens could mingle and form closer bonds with each other, while strengthening their identity. All of these forms of entertainment have their influence on today’s society. Some of the musical instruments from the Elizabethan Era still find use in today’s ensembles. Hunting has always existed as a sport. Many of the sports played in the Elizabethan Era evolved into today’s sports. Examples include soccer, cricket, cards, golf, horse-racing, fencing, and chess and checkers. Most of the holidays celebrated in the Elizabethan Era no longer find observance in today’s society; however some of them do, such as All Hallow’s Eve (Halloween). A strong and productive society is not one that excels only in work; for in order to gain strength, a society must also strengthen its interpersonal bonds through amusements and entertainment – an aspect of society as necessary as work.


