Name: _____

Hour: _____

from "Shakespeare of London"

Marchette Chute, the author of this selection, was born in Minnesota and attended the Minneapolis School of Art and the University of Minnesota. She is primarily known as a writer of biographies and historical studies. Among her award-winning books about great English authors are *Geoffrey Chaucer of England and Ben Jonson of Westminster.* In these and in *Shakespeare of London*, she shows her ability to recreate the flavor of an era.

Historical inference is the technique of arriving at reasonable conclusions about a person or time in history based on limited evidence. In making their inferences, or educated guesses, historians use such sources as district records, pamphlets, books and written accounts by travelers. They assemble as much information as possible and then draw conclusions from it to paint a more complete picture of the person or time they are studying. In this excerpt from "Shakespeare of London", Chute uses historical inference to portray the greatest poet and playwright in the English language, William Shakespeare.

As you read, **look for** the sources of evidence about Shakespeare and his time that Chute uses. Also be aware of the conclusions she reaches. Ask yourself whether these conclusions make sense.

In this essay, Chute discusses some of the qualities that a successful actor needed about four hundred years ago. **Think** about the skills that an actor or actress must have today.

from "Shakespeare of London"

Acting was not an easy profession on the Elizabethan[1] stage or one to be taken up lightly. An actor went through a strenuous period of training before he could be entrusted with an important part by one of the great city companies. He worked on a raised stage in the glare of the afternoon sun, with none of the softening illusions that can be achieved in the modern theater, and in plays that made strenuous demands upon his skill as a fencer, a dancer and an acrobat.

Many of the men in the London companies had been "trained up from their childhood" in the art, and an actor like Shakespeare, who entered the profession in his twenties, had an initial handicap that could only be overcome by intelligence and rigorous discipline. Since he was a well-known actor by 1592 and Chettle[2] says he was an excellent one, he must have had the initial advantages of a strong body and a good voice and have taught himself in the hard school of the Elizabethan theater how to use them to advantage.

One of the most famous of the London companies, that of Lord Strange, began its career as a company of tumblers, and a standard production like "The Forces of Hercules" was at least half acrobatics. Training of this kind was extremely useful to the actors, for the normal London stage consisted of several different levels. Battles and sieges were very popular with the audiences, with the upper levels of the stage used as the town walls and turrets, and an actor had to know how to take violent falls without damaging either himself or his expensive costume.

Nearly all plays involved some kind of fighting, and in staging hand-to-hand combats the actor's

[1] concerning the period 1558 to 1603, when Elizabeth I ruled England

[2] an English playwright, publisher, & poet

training had to be excellent. The average Londoner was an expert on the subject of fencing, and he did not pay his penny to see two professional actors make ineffectual dabs at each other with rapiers[3] when the script claimed they were fighting to the death. A young actor like Shakespeare must have gone through long, grueling hours of practice to learn the ruthless technique of Elizabethan fencing. He had to learn how to handle a long, heavy rapier in one hand, with a dagger for parrying in the other, and to make a series of savage, calculated thrusts at close quarters from the wrist and forearm, aiming at either his opponents eyes or below the ribs. The actor had to achieve the brutal reality of an actual Elizabethan duel without injuring himself or his opponent, a problem that required a high degree of training and of physical coordination. The theaters and the inn-yards were frequently rented by the fencing societies to put on exhibition matches, and on one such occasion at the Swan[4] a fencer was run through the eye and died, an indication of the risks this sort of work involved even with trained, experienced fencers. The actors had to be extremely skilled, since they faced precisely the same audience. Richard Tarleton, a comic actor of the 80's who was the first great popular star of the Elizabethan theater, was made Master of Fence the year before he died and this was the highest degree the fencing schools could award.

Not being content with savage, realistic fights in its theater productions, the London audience also expected to see bloody deaths and mutilations; and it was necessary to find some way to run a sword through an actor's head or tear out his entrails without impairing his usefulness for the next afternoon's performance. This involved not only agility but a thorough knowledge of sleight of hand, since the players were working close to the audience and in broad daylight. Elizabethan stage management was not slavishly interested in realism but it was always concerned with good stage effects and when bloodshed was involved it gave the audience real blood. It had been found by experience that ox blood was too thick to run well, so sheep's blood was generally used. To stage a realistic stabbing one actor would use a knife with a hollow handle into which the blade would slip back when it was pressed home, and his fellow actor would be equipped with a bladder of blood inside his white leather jerkin[5], which could be painted to look like skin. When the bladder was pricked and the actor arched himself at the moment of contact, the blood spurted out in a most satisfactory manner.

Another test of an actor's physical control was in dancing. Apart from the dances that were written into the actual texts of the plays, it was usual to end the performance with a dance performed by some of the members of the company. A traveler from abroad who saw Shakespeare's company act *Julius Caesar* said that "when the play was over they danced very marvelously and gracefully together," and when the English actors traveled abroad special mention was always made for their ability as dancers. The fashion for the time was for violent, spectacular dances and the schools in London taught intricate steps like those of the galliard[6], the exaggerated leap called the "capriole" and the violent lifting of one's partner high into the air was the "volte." A visitor to one of these dancing schools of London watched a performer do a galliard and noticed how "wonderfully he leaped, flung and took on"; and if amateurs were talented at this kind if work, professionals on the stage were expected to be very much better.

In addition to all this, subordinate or beginning actors were expected to handle several roles in an afternoon instead of only one. A major company seldom had more than twelve actors in it and could not afford to hire an indefinite number of extra ones for a single production. This meant that the men who had

[3] slender, two-edged swords with cuplike handles
[4] a London theater of the time
[5] short, closefitting jacket
[6] Lively French dance

short speaking parts or none were constantly racing about and leaping into different characterization as soon as they heard their cues. In one of Alleyn's[7] productions a single actor played a Tartar[8] nobleman, a spirit, an attendant, a hostage, a ghost, a child, a captain and a Persian (8 different parts!); and while none of the parts made any special demands on his acting ability he must have had very little time to catch his breath. The London theater was no place for physical weaklings; and, in the same way it is safe to assume that John Shakespeare must have had a strong , well-made body or he would not have been appointed a constable in Stratford, it is safe to assume that he must have passed the inheritance on to his eldest son.

There was one more physical qualification an Elizabethan actor had to possess, and this was perhaps more important than any of the others. He had to have a good voice. An Elizabethan play was full of action, but in the final analysis it was not the physical activity that caught and held the emotions of the audience: it was the words. An audience was an assembly of listeners and it was through the ear, not the eye, that the audience learned the location of each of the scenes, the emotions of each of the characters and poetry and excitement of the play as a whole. More especially, since the actors were men and boys and close physical contact could not carry the illusion of love-making, words had to be depended upon in the parts that were written for women.

An Elizabethan audience had become highly susceptible to the use of words, trained and alert to catch their exact meaning and fell joy if they were used well. But this meant as the basis of any successful stage production, that all the words had to be heard clearly. The actors used a fairly rapid delivery of their lines and this meant that breath control, emphasis and enunciation had to be perfect if the link that was being forged between the emotions of the audience and the action on the stage was not to be broken. When Shakespeare first came to London, the problem of effective stage delivery was made somewhat easier by the use of a heavily end-stopped line[9], where the actor could draw his breath at regular intervals and proceeded at a kind of jog-trot. But during the following decade this kind of writing became increasingly old-fashioned, giving way to an intricate and supple blank verse[10] that was much more difficult to handle intelligently; and no one was more instrumental in bringing the new way of writing into general use than Shakespeare himself.

Even with all the assistance given him by the old way of writing, with mechanical accenting and heavy use of rhyme, an Elizabethan actor had no easy time remembering his part. A repertory system[11] was used and no play was given two days in succession. The actor played a different part in every night and he had no opportunity to settle into a comfortable routine while the lines of the part became a second nature to him. He could expect little help from the prompter, for that overworked individual was chiefly occupied in seeing that the actors came on in proper order, that they had their properties available and that the intricate stage arrangements that controlled the pulleys from the "heavens"[12] and the springs to the trap doors were worked with quick, accurate timing. These stage effects, which naturally had to be changed each afternoon for a new play, were extremely complicated. A single play in which Greene and Lodge[13] collaborated required the descent of a prophet and an angel let down on a throne, a woman blackened by a thunder stroke, sailors coming in wet from the sea, a serpent devouring a vine, a hand with a burning sword

[7] Edward Alleyn (1566-1626), an English actor and theater owner
[8] Turk or Mongol
[9] Line of poetry read with a pause at the end
[10] Unrhymed iambic pentameter
[11] The alternate presentation of several plays by the same theater company
[12] A canopy above the stage
[13] Robert Greene (1557-1625) and Thomas Lodge (1557-1625), English playwrights

emerging from a cloud and "Jonah the prophet cast out of the whale's belly upon the stage." Any production that had to wrestle with as many complications as this had no room for an actor who could not remember his lines.

Moreover, an actor who forgot his lines would not have lasted long in what was a highly competitive profession. There were more actors than there were parts for them, judging by the number of people who were listed as players in the parish registers[14]. Even the actor who had achieved the position of a sharer in one of the large London companies was not secure. Richard Jones, for instance, was the owner of costumes and properties and playbooks worth nearly forty pounds, which was an enormous sum in those days, and yet three years later he was working in the theater at whatever stray acting jobs he could get. "Sometimes I have a shilling a day and sometimes nothing," he told Edward Alleyn, asking for help and getting his suit and cloak out of pawn.

The usual solution for an actor who could not keep his pace in the competitive London theater was to join one of the country companies, where the standards were less exacting, or to go abroad. English actors were extravagantly admired abroad and even a second-string company with poor equipment became the hit of the Frankfort Fair[15], so that "both men and women flocked wonderfully" to see them. An actor like Shakespeare who maintained his position on the London stage for two decade could legitimately be praised, as Chettle praised him, for being "excellent in the quality he professes." If it had been otherwise, he would not have remained for long on the London stage.

Thinking About the Selection

1. What "Initial handicap" as an actor did Shakespeare have?
2. Identify three skills that Elizabethan actor had to learn. Explain why each of these skills is important.
3. What evidence is there that Shakespeare had these skills?
4. Basing your answer on this essay, what can you infer about the tastes of Elizabethan theater-goers?
5. What can you infer about Elizabethan life in general?
6. Would you like to have lived during the Elizabethan age? Explain.

Understanding Historical Inference

Historical inference is the technique of arriving at reasonable conclusions about a person or time in history base on limited evidence. In "Shakespeare of London", for example, Chute infers that, during Elizabethan times, acting "was highly competitive." One piece of evidence for this conclusion is the fact that many people were listed as actors in district records, "more actors than there were parts for them."

1. What conclusion does Cute reach about Shakespeare and other Elizabethan actors in the paragraph beginning, "Nearly all plays…"?
2. What evidence does she give to support her intelligence?

[14] District records
[15] Frankfurt, Germany

ANSWERS: to from "Shakespeare of London"

Thinking About the Selection

1. Shakespeare entered the field much later than most actors.
2. Among the required skills were fencing, acrobatics, dance, and the ability to speak well and memorized many parts. These skills were important because actors had to fence, dance, speak lines quickly, and often take more than one part in a play.
3. Shakespeare probably had these skills because he maintained his position on the London stage for two decades.
4. Answers will differ. Most students will realize that Elizabethan theatergoers liked action, had a taste for "bloody deaths and mutilations," enjoyed song and dance, and also were very "susceptible to the use of words."
5. Answers will differ. Students might infer that Elizabethans were dramatic and active, loved novelty, and were more callous about bloodshed than we are.
6. Answers will differ; however, students should provide reasons to justify their responses.

Understanding Historical Inference

1. Suggested Response: Chute concludes that actors had to be skilled fencers.
2. Suggested Response: Many of the plays involved fighting. Also, the average Londoner knew a great deal about fencing, having witnessed exhibitions. Finally, one comic actor received the highest ranking that fencing school could bestow.