

Thomas Dekker

[1]Woodcut from title page of published play (Dekker his Dreame) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Very little is known of Dekker's early life, though it is likely he was born in London around 1572. While he probably did not attend university, his capable Latin translations suggest he did attend grammar school. Dekker married a woman named Mary and had three daughters in 1594, 1598, and 1602.

From around 1598 he worked as a playwright for The Admiral's Men, and engaged in the War of the Theatres with Ben Jonson and John Marston. Dekker wrote more than forty plays for The Admiral's Men, many of which are lost. His works include collaborating on Shakespeare's *Sir Thomas More*, *Old Fortunatas* and *Satiromastix*. He collaborated with Thomas Middleton on *The Honest Whore* [2] and *The Roaring Girl* [3], and with John Webster [4] wrote *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho*.

Dekker was seriously impoverished for most of his career, in and out of debtor's prison for much of his life (including in 1598 and 1599, the year *The Shoemaker's Holiday* [5] was performed). From 1612 to 1619 Dekker was imprisoned for seven years because of a debt to the father of fellow playwright John Webster.

In addition to plays, Dekker wrote a series of pamphlets in the early seventeenth century, including popular cony-catching pamphlets describing tricks of conmen and thieves. Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday* is often credited as being one of the first city comedy plays. City comedies are identifiable by taking place in an existing city (often London) and including recognisable landmarks of that city. Dr. Smith explains that city comedies "stress the energy and drive of the merchant classes", as opposed to the plays of say, Shakespeare, whose comedies deal primarily with aristocrats. Unlike Shakespeare's plays, city comedies encourage audience members to laugh with rather than at the working classes.

About *The Shoemaker's Holiday*

Shoemaker is a hilarious and festive comedy, and Dekker insists in his dedicatory epistle that in the play "nothing is proposed but mirth". In fact, as Dr. Smith highlights, the play touches on a great number of serious contemporary issues.

Lacy uses his wealth to don a disguise and dodge the draft for the war in France, but Ralph is not so lucky, and loses his leg: certainly a problem for a shoemaker, to whose profession his lost foot is particularly relevant. In 1599 the war in Ireland also raged, a bitter battle against committed and popular guerrilla fighters.

Food shortages at home meant the price of basic commodities such as wheat soared, and many could not

afford to feed themselves. The city had exploded outward, and could not sustain its new population.

Queen Elizabeth was four years away from her eventual death, and still no heir had been named and fears about succession were widespread. Londoners were paranoid about Dutch immigrants (like the one Lacy impersonates) replacing English artisans, causing unemployment for natives.

Though the play is a holiday comedy, depicting the carnival of Shrove Tuesday, Dr. Smith points out that "Carnival is powerful because it's very limited in time, and after it's over you go back to a pretty grim world [...] without much sense of celebration." So Dekker's play, while funny, is much more than simple escapism. How much more? [Listen to the podcast and find out](#) [6].

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- [2] <http://writersinspire.org/content/plays-thomas-dekker>
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