

Question 30

What was the relationship between the aristocracy and the theatre in Shakespeare's time?

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The aristocracy was very important to Elizabethan theatre, not least because the theatre companies needed influential members of the court and government to advocate for them against the city authorities, who were opposed to the commercial repertory companies. For example, the Shakespeare company patron, Henry Carey, wrote to the Lord Mayor of London in October 1594 to ask if the theatre company could perform within the city walls (which was prohibited at the time).

Acting was not a highly respected trade when the theatres first opened in the 1570s, so the patronage system was crucial for the theatrical profession as a whole. To have the financial and ideological support of influential members of the Elizabethan aristocracy would ensure that the profession of theatre would thrive. Many playwrights and poets would formally recognise their patrons in print through dedications.

Shakespeare was supported not only by the Lord Chamberlain, patron of his theatre company, and later in 1603 King James I, but his gifts as a poet were recognised early in his career by the Earl of Southampton, whose name as dedicatee is on Shakespeare's first publications, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594).