London shows

HAVING GROWN UP in sleepy Stratford, William Shakespeare must have found London an exciting place to live. It was the largest city in northern Europe, and 10 times the size of any other English town. Even before the playhouses were built, London had many different entertainments to offer its citizens. Londoners enjoyed watching cruel bloodsports, such as fights between bulls, bears, and packs of dogs, and they often gathered to watch executions. Many people passed their time by gambling or playing sports, such as lawn bowling.

ENTERTAINMENT CENTER
This map of London dates from 1572, just before the first playhouses were built. At this time, the only buildings specifically intended for entertainment were cockfighting pits, and bull and bear baiting houses, such as the Bear Garden.

Londoners gather to watch an execution

GORY GALLows
Londoners were used to the sight of blood, and watching executions for entertainment was a long-standing tradition. The executions of traitors were the most gruesome shows. The traitors were dragged to the gallows behind a horse. They were half-hanged, then brought down alive, so that their bellies could be cut open and their inner organs burned in front of them.

FIGHTING CHANCE
Setting a pair of roosters to fight each other was a popular 17th-century sport all over Britain. In London alone, there were several cockpits - small, round buildings - where a crowd could watch the birds fight to the death. Onlookers would bet on the outcome of these cockfights.

Roosters fought with their beaks and spurred feet!

ENTERTAINMENT CENTER

BORN TO BITE
At Bankside, Londoners could see bull baiting with bulldogs that had been specially bred and trained for the sport. The bulldogs, which were much larger than modern bulldogs, were trained to leap at the bull's face. They hung on to its nose or ears, while the angry bull did its best to shake it off.
IN IT FOR THE MONEY
Most of the early playhouses, including the Swan and the Rose, were built by businessmen. They saw them as a way to make money. London's first playhouses were the Theatre, built in 1576, and the Curtain, built in 1577. Their round design was copied from earlier buildings like the Bear Garden.

CONEYCATCHERS
Gambling was a risky pastime because London was full of criminals who made a living by cheating at cards and dice. These cheats were called coneycatchers, and they were always on the lookout for newcomers from the countryside like William Shakespeare. They called their victims conies (rabbits).

TETHERED AND TOOTHLESS
In the Bear Garden, dogs were set against a bear tied to a stake. The bear's teeth were sometimes pulled out to give the dogs a better chance. Shakespeare's Scottish king Macbeth compares himself to a bainted bear: "They have tied me to the stake; I cannot fly, but bearlike I must stay and fight the course."