THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

Shakespeare lived during a remarkable period of English history, a time of relative political stability that followed and preceded eras of extensive upheaval. Elizabeth I became the Queen of England in 1558, six years before Shakespeare's birth. During her 45-year reign, London became a cultural and commercial center where learning and literature thrived.

When Queen Elizabeth ascended to the throne, there were violent clashes throughout Europe between Protestant and Catholic leaders and their followers. Though Elizabeth honored many of the Protestant edicts of her late father, King Henry VIII, she made significant concessions to Catholic sympathizers, which kept them from attempting rebellion. But when compromise was not possible, she was an exacting and determined leader who did not shy away from conflict. With the naval defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, England was firmly established as a leading military and commercial power in the Western world. Elizabeth supported and later knighted Sir Francis Drake, the first sailor to circumnavigate the globe. She also funded Sir Walter Raleigh's exploration of the New World, which brought new wealth to her country in the form of tobacco and gold from Latin America.

Queen Elizabeth also recognized the importance of the arts to the life and legacy of her nation. She was fond of the theater, and many of England's greatest playwrights were active during her reign, including Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare. With her permission, professional theaters were built in England for the first time, attracting 15,000 theater-

British Peerage and Nobility

The system of British Peerage in Shakespeare's time (which still exists — although altered — in modern-day Great Britain) determined one's position in society. Many of Shakespeare's characters carried titles that — in the Bard's time — would have immediately told audience members a lot about that person's rank, importance, and authority over his peers. Today's audiences will be less familiar with the British Peerage and Nobility, so here's a quick primer:

Duke: The highest rank in British Peerage; from the Latin *dux,* meaning leader. The female counterpart to a Duke is a Duchess.

Marquess: Second-highest rank, from the French marquis, meaning march. The female counterpart is the Marchioness.

Earl: This title comes from an old English term that referred to a military leader, and the rank corresponds to a Count in continental Europe. The female counterpart of an Earl is the Countess.

Viscount: A Latin-derived word that translates to vice-count.

Baron: The lowest rank of British Peer; someone who holds land directly from the King or Queen.

Queen Elizabeth I

goers per week in London, a city of 150,000 to 250,000. In addition to Shakespeare's masterpieces of the stage, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus,* Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen,* and Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* were all written during this golden age in the literary arts. The Shakespearean sonnet, Spenserian stanza, and dramatic blank verse also came into practice during the period.

Upon the death of Elizabeth, King James I rose to power in England. A writer himself, he displayed a great love of learning, particularly theater. At the king's invitation, Shakespeare's theater company, Lord Chamberlain's Men, became known as the King's Men, and they produced new works under his patronage. King James also commissioned the translation of the Bible from Latin into English so that it might be more readily available to those who had not studied the language of the educated class. Completed in 1611 by a team of scholars and monks, the King James Version of the Bible has become the best-selling and arguably the most-influential book in the world.

King James I and the King James Bible, right.

Unfortunately, King James surrounded himself with untrustworthy advisors, and

Religion in the Elizabethan Age

Religion was central to the society for which Shakespeare wrote. Queen Elizabeth made attendance at Church of England services mandatory, even though many church-goers had to travel long distances. People who did not attend — for any reason except illness — were punished with fines. (Shakespeare's father and sister were reported as absent, though his father's debts probably were the cause of his inability to attend church.)

While it was not a crime to be Catholic in Elizabethan England, there was no legal way for Catholics to practice their faith. It was illegal to hold or to attend a Mass. Powerful people, however, were less likely to be punished than others. Many of the upper classes were exempt from the new oaths of allegiance to the Church of England, and often wealthy Catholic families secretly maintained private chaplains. Elizabethan policy allowed freedom of belief as long as English subjects did not openly flout the law or encourage sedition.

his extravagant lifestyle strained the royal finances and the patience of the Puritan-controlled Parliament. When James died in 1628, his son Charles I ascended to the throne, and tensions between Parliament and the Crown increased. King Charles I eventually lost a bloody civil war to the Puritans, who executed the King (his son Charles II fled to France). For a dozen years, the Puritans enacted many reforms which included closing the theaters. The Commonwealth lasted until Charles II returned from France, claimed the throne, and installed the Restoration. King Charles II also reopened the theaters, but England's theatrical highpoint had passed.

Education in the Elizabethan Age

Boys were educated to be literate members of society. Teaching techniques relied heavily on memorization and recitation. The language of literacy throughout Europe was Latin, and students were expected to be proficient in it. Boys started grammar school at the age of six or seven. Their typical school day ran from 6:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Classroom discipline was strict, and often involved corporeal punishment. In the lower grades, boys studied Latin grammar and vocabulary. In the upper grades, they read the poetry and prose of writers such as Ovid, Martial, and Catullus. Most boys began an apprenticeship in a trade following grammar school. Sons of the nobility attended the university or the Inns of Court (professional associations for barristers).

Formal schooling was not encouraged for girls unless they were the children of nobility. For those who were educated, schooling focused primarily on chastity and the skills of housewifery. Young girls from wealthy families were often placed in the households of acquaintances where they would learn to read, write, keep accounts, and manage a household and estate. They were also trained in leisure skills such as music and dancing.

While no one would argue that Elizabethan England presented the greatest of opportunities for universal education, literacy significantly increased throughout the sixteenth century. By 1600, at least one-third of the male population could read, and Puritans pushed for significant increases in funding for grammar schools.

ELIZABETHAN THEATER

Even in an era when popular entertainment included public executions and cock-fighting, theater became central to Elizabethan social life. As drama shifted from a religious to a secular function in society, playwrights and poets were among the leading artists of the day. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the popularity of plays written by scholars such as Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, John Lyly, and Thomas Lodge led to the building of theaters and to the development of companies of actors, both professional and amateur. These companies of players traveled throughout England, generally performing in London in the winter and spring, and navigating notoriously neglected roads throughout the English countryside during the summers when plague ravaged the city. Professional companies were also retained for the private entertainment of English aristocracy.

In spite of its popularity, the Elizabethan theater attracted criticism, censorship, and scorn from some sectors of English society. The plays were often coarse and boisterous, and playwrights and actors belonged to a bohemian class. Puritan leaders and officers of the Church of England considered actors to be of questionable character, and they criticized playwrights for using the stage to disseminate their irreverent opinions. They also feared the overcrowded theater spaces might lead to the spread of disease. At times throughout the sixteenth century, Parliament censored plays for profanity, heresy, or politics. But Queen Elizabeth and later King James offered protections that ultimately allowed the theater to survive. To appease Puritan concerns, the Queen established rules prohibiting the construction of theaters and theatrical performances within the London city limits. The rules were loosely enforced, however, and playhouses such as the Curtain, the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan were constructed just outside of London, within easy reach of the theater-going public. These public playhouses paved the way for the eventual emergence of professional companies as stable business organizations.

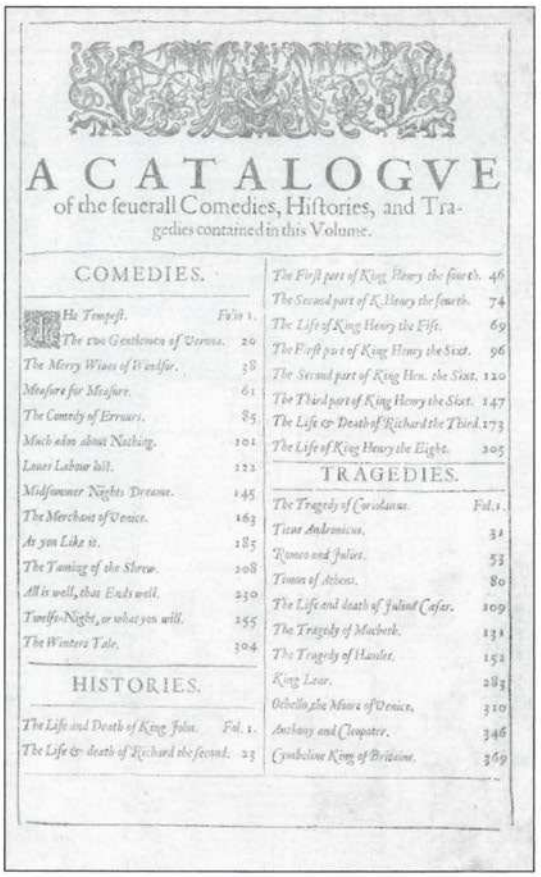
Among the actors who performed in the Elizabethan theater, Richard Burbage is perhaps the best known. Burbage was the leading actor in Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and he is credited with portraying a range of dramatic leads including Richard III, Hamlet, Lear, and Othello. An actor himself, Shakespeare played roles in his own plays, usually as older male characters. Acting was not considered an appropriate profession for women in the Elizabethan era, and even into the seventeenth century acting companies consisted of men with young boys playing the female roles. Instead of clothing reflecting the station of their characters, Elizabethan actors wore lavish

The Globe Theatre, London. Detail from a map of London, 1616.

costumes consistent with upperclass dress. In contrast, stage scenery was minimal, perhaps consisting solely of painted panels placed upstage.

Elizabethan theaters were makeshift, dirty, and loud, but nevertheless they attracted audiences as large as 3,000 from all social classes. Performances were usually given in the afternoons, lasting two to three hours. As in both ancient and contemporary theaters, each section of the theater bore a different price of admission, with the lowest prices in the pit below stage level where patrons stood to watch the play. Most performance spaces were arranged "in-the-round," giving spectators the opportunity to watch both the play and the behavior of other spectators. Etiquette did not prohibit the audiences from freely expressing their distaste or satisfaction for the action on stage.

The rich theatrical flowering begun by Shakespeare and his contemporaries continued into the seventeenth century, well beyond the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In 1642, however, with the country on the verge of a civil war, the Puritan Parliament closed the theaters and forbade stage plays in an edict that argued that theater distracted the fragmented nation from its efforts to "appease and avert the wrath of God." When King Charles II took the English throne in 1660, the theaters were reopened, and the arts were again celebrated. His reign became known as the Restoration, but the greatest period of England theater had already run its course.



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