

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, learning and literature thrived, and England developed into one of the major powers in Europe.

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,

Elizabethan Society and Class Structure

Elizabethan society was based on a system of precedence (one's ranking in society) and one's preferment status (the king or queen's view of one's standing). While the nobility remained powerful, the real growth in society developed within the merchant class, and upward class mobility became possible for many people.

In Elizabethan England, there were "new" nobles and "old" nobles. Most of the new nobles were Protestant. Most of the old nobles were Roman Catholic. It may be tempting to view the nobility as the idle rich, but this was certainly not the case. The high offices granted by the Queen brought great financial burdens. The honorific titles were unpaid, and when foreign dignitaries visited England, they were housed and entertained at the expense of the nobility. The highest and most expensive "honor" was that of housing the Queen and her household as she went on public tours and visits throughout the country. Many families simply could not afford this "honor" and, at the risk of their preferment status, had to turn it down.

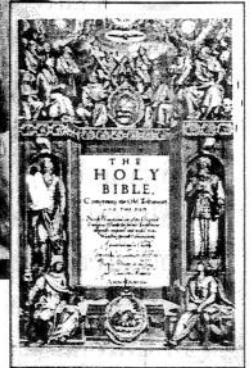
professional theaters were built in England for the first time, attracting 15,000 theatergoers per week in London, a city of 150,000 to 250,000. In addition to Shakespeare's masterpieces of the stage, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, and Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* 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



Bettmann/CORBIS

King James I and the King James Bible, right.



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.

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.

Unfortunately, King James surrounded himself with untrustworthy advisors, and 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 useful 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.

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, manage a household and estate, and make salves. They were also trained in leisure skills such as singing 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 significantly increased funding of grammar schools.

