

## A STUDY ON ELIZABETH PLAY WRIGHT AND THE OTHER WRITERS

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### Introduction

In a tradition of literature remarkable for its exacting and brilliant achievements, the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods have been said to represent the most brilliant century of all. (The reign of Elizabeth I began in 1558 and ended with her death in 1603; she was succeeded by the Stuart king James VI of Scotland, who took the title James I of England as well. English literature of his reign as James I, from 1603 to 1625, is properly called Jacobean.) These years produced a gallery of authors of genius, some of whom have never been surpassed, and conferred on scores of lesser talents the enviable ability to write with fluency, imagination, and verve. From one point of view, this sudden renaissance looks radiant, confident, heroic and belated, but all the more dazzling for its belatedness. Yet, from another point of view, this was a time of unusually traumatic strain, in which English society underwent massive disruptions that transformed it on every front and decisively affected the life of every individual. In the brief, intense moment in which England assimilated the European Renaissance, the circumstances that made the assimilation possible were already disintegrating and calling into question the newly won certainties, as well as the older truths that they were dislodging. This doubleness, of new possibilities and new doubts simultaneously apprehended, gives the literature its unrivaled intensity.

### Social Conditions

In this period England's population doubled; prices rocketed, rents followed, old social loyalties dissolved, and new industrial, agricultural, and commercial veins were first tapped. Real wages hit an all-time low in the 1620s, and social relations were plunged into a state of fluidity from which the merchant and the ambitious lesser gentleman profited at the expense of the aristocrat and the labourer, as satires and comedies current from the 1590s complain. Behind the Elizabethan vogue for pastoral poetry lies the fact of the prosperity of the enclosing sheep farmer, who sought to increase pasture at the expense of the peasantry. Tudor platitudes about order and degree could neither combat nor survive the challenge posed to rank by these arrivistes. The position of the crown, politically dominant yet financially insecure, had always been potentially unstable, and, when Charles I lost the confidence of his greater subjects in the 1640s, his authority crumbled. Meanwhile, the huge body of

poor fell ever further behind the rich; the pamphlets of Thomas Harman (1566) and Robert Greene (1591–92), as well as Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605–06), provide glimpses of a horrific world of vagabondage and crime, the Elizabethans' biggest, unsolvable social problem.

The Elizabethan era saw a great flourishing of literature, especially in the field of drama. The Italian Renaissance had rediscovered the ancient Greek and Roman theatre, and this was instrumental in the development of the new drama, which was then beginning to evolve apart from the old mystery and miracle plays of the Middle Ages. The Italians were particularly inspired by Seneca (a major tragic playwright and philosopher, the tutor of Nero) and Plautus (its comic clichés, especially that of the boasting soldier had a powerful influence on the Renaissance and after). However, the Italian tragedies embraced a principle contrary to Seneca's ethics: showing blood and violence on the stage. In Seneca's plays such scenes were only acted by the characters. But the English playwrights were intrigued by Italian model: a conspicuous community of Italian actors had settled in London and Giovanni Florio had brought much of the Italian language and culture to England.

Following earlier Elizabethan plays such as *Gorboduc* by Sackville & Norton and *The Spanish Tragedy* by Kyd that was to provide much material for *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare stands out in this period as a poet and playwright as yet unsurpassed. Shakespeare was very gifted and incredibly versatile, and he surpassed "professionals" as Robert Greene who mocked this "shake-scene" of low origins. Though most dramas met with great success, it is in his later years (marked by the early reign of James I) that he wrote what have been considered his greatest plays: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, a tragicomedy that inscribes within the main drama a brilliant pageant to the new king.

Shakespeare also popularized the English sonnet which made significant changes to Petrarch's model. The sonnet was introduced into English by Thomas Wyatt in the early 16th century. Poems intended to be set to music as songs, such as by Thomas Campion, became popular as printed literature was disseminated more

widely in households. See English Madrigal School. Other important figures in Elizabethan theatre include Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont. Had Marlowe (1564-1593) not been stabbed at twenty-nine in a tavern brawl, says Anthony Burgess, he might have rivalled, if not equalled Shakespeare himself for his poetic gifts. Marlowe's subject matter focuses more on the moral drama of the Renaissance man than any other thing. Marlowe was fascinated and terrified by the new frontiers opened by modern science. Drawing on German lore, he introduced Dr. Faustus to England, a scientist and magician who is obsessed by the thirst of knowledge and the desire to push man's technological power to its limits. His dark heroes may have something of Marlowe himself, whose untimely death remains a mystery. He was known for being an atheist, leading a lawless life, keeping many mistresses, consorting with ruffians: living the 'high life' of London's underworld.

Beaumont and Fletcher are less-known, but it is almost sure that they helped Shakespeare write some of his best dramas, and were quite popular at the time. It is also at this time that the city comedy genre develops. In the later 16th century English poetry was characterised by elaboration of language and extensive allusion to classical myths. The most important poets of this era include Edmund Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney. Elizabeth herself, a product of Renaissance humanism, produced occasional poems such as *On Monsieur's Departure*. The most famous themes of the Elizabethan Drama are: Revenge, Sensationalism, Melodrama and Vengeance.

### **The Main Playwrights in Elizabethan Era Were**

Christopher Marlowe  
Francis Beaumont  
John Fletcher  
Thomas Middleton  
Thomas Kyd