



THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE OR GOLDEN AGE POETRY

The poetical production of the period reached a high standard; it was very varied and the most fashionable forms were the song, the sonnet, and the mythological tale in verse. Besides the most remarkable poets such as Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson and John Donne, we may quote others such as Samuel

Daniel (1562-1619), who in his work *The Civil Wars between the two Houses of Lancaster and York* (1595-1609), composed of eight books, recalled the events of the War of the Roses; in his sonnet sequence *Delia* (1592) he followed the example of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*.

Michael Drayton (1563-1631) was another poet who came to prominence in the Elizabethan era; his most important work was the collection of love sonnets, published in 1594, under the title of *Idea's Mirror*. In *Poly-Olbion* he depicts England through its counties, relating their history and legends.

Poets such as Phineas Fletcher (1582-1650) and Giles Fletcher (the Young, 1588-1623), brothers, show in their works the influence of Spenser's prosody. The former wrote *The Purple Island* (1633), a long allegorical poem symbolizing the struggle between virtues and vices, soul and body. The latter in the poem *Christ's Victory and Triumph in Heaven and Earth* (1610) anticipates the religious fervour of Donne and Milton.

Thomas Lodge (1557 or 1558-1625) in his poem *Scilla's Metamorphosis* (1589) followed the tradition of the mythological tale inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The most famous songs, short lyrics set to music, were composed by Thomas Campion (1567-1620): the five *Books of Aires* (1611-1617) are remarkable for their liveliness and originality.

Sir Walter Raleigh (or Raleigh, c. 1552-1618) was one of the most extraordinary figures of the time. He accomplished bold enterprises and founded the first English colony in Virginia, which he named, after Elizabeth, the «Virgin Queen». He was also devoted to literature and composed poems such as *Cynthia* and *The Lady of the Sea*. Under James I, Raleigh's fortune declined: accused of conspiracy, he was committed to the Tower and executed in 1618.

PROSE

The new achievements in poetry deeply influenced prose, which in this period was a sort of poetical prose; the exception was simple and sober prose written to instruct.

The most influential example was set by John Lyly (1554-1606) in his work *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578).

Among the writers who followed the vogue of the new style called Euphuism there were Robert Greene (c. 1558-1592), who wrote «euphuistic» romances such as *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* (1588) and *Menaphon* (1589), and Thomas Lodge, who was the author of *Rosalynde* (1590), which inspired Shakespeare's comedy *As you like it*.

Another group of prose writers followed the tradition of realism. These included authors such as Thomas Deloney (1543-c. 1600), whose work *Jack of Newbury* (1597) tells the story of a young weaver who reaches an unexpected degree of prosperity (a subject that was to become popular in the 18th century fiction), and Thomas Nashe (or Nash, 1567-1601), who wrote *The Unfortunate Traveller, or the Life of Jack Wilton* (1594).

One of the most representative writers of the time was Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Lord Chancellor of King James I, who may be considered as a pioneer of modern philosophy. Bacon rejected the Aristotelian philosophy and proposed the investigation of nature through experimental methods; his most famous works are *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), *Novum Organum* (1620) and *Essays* (1597, 1612, 1625).

In the religious field the most representative writer was Richard Hooker (1554-1600), who in his work *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593) defended the Anglican faith both against the attacks of the Catholics and Puritans; he also wrote sermons and was a famous preacher.





DRAMA

The origin of Elizabethan drama

Drama was the chief glory of the period and it was truly national and popular in character, not subject to foreign fashion. It was also a point of contact between humanistic culture and popular taste.

In the 16th century the Miracles and the Moralities were still acted, and above all the Interludes, whose non-religious subject was the best medium between the medieval liturgical theatre and the new Renaissance theatre.

Around the second half of the 16th century the interest of the Humanists in classical theatre produced new plays inspired by ancient comedies and tragedies. The favourite authors were Plautus, for comedy and Seneca for tragedy, and classical rules, that is the unities of time, place and action, began to be followed by English playwrights. Among the new comedies we may quote Ralph Roister Doister (c. 1553) by a teacher, Nicholas Udall (c. 1505-1556), a play very similar to Plautus' Miles Gloriosus; and Gammer Gurton's Needle (c. 1550-1553) by William Stevenson (c. 1530-1575), classical in form, but representing the way of life of the English peasantry. The first English classical tragedy was Gorboduc (1561) by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton.

Between 1580 and 1642 the English theatre presented a great number of plays, both old and new, and though the majority of them were of slight literary value, they had a great historical significance.

The Elizabethan play-house

All public performances were given in inn-yards, on rough stages erected on trestles. The first theatre was built within the boundaries of London in 1576, and by the end of the century, there were in the city some eight theatres (the Curtain, the Rose, the Swan, the Globe...). They were circular or hexagonal in form, within them there was a courtyard open to the sky, surrounded by two or three tiers of covered galleries. At one side there was a great platform which formed the stage; on either side of the platform two pillars supported the ceiling. At the back, between two doors which served for the entrance and the exit of the actors, was another stage overlooked by a gallery with a balcony. The rear stage was used when it was necessary to represent some particular interior. Artificial light and elaborate scenery were unknown, and the accessories were very elementary. The bare stage required that all the attention of the public was concentrated on the actor's gestures and the success or the failure of a play depended much on the actor's ability.

The companies of the actors of the epoch were confronted with the hostility of the Puritans and sometimes of the authorities, so they were compelled to assure the protection of powerful noblemen. In these first companies there were no actresses, as no woman dared to appear in front of a crowd, and female roles were played by boys.

The University Wits

During the last years of the 16th century a number of authors who had a university education, called the «University Wits», began to write for the popular stage. They regarded themselves as poets and men of learning rather than as dramatists. The most representative of them are John Lyly, Robert Greene, George Peele (1556-1596), Thomas Nashe and Thomas Lodge.

John Lyly, already mentioned as the creator of the euphuistic romance, wrote a series of witty comedies such as Alexander and Campaspe (1584), Endimion (1588) and The Woman in the Moon (1597); except the last one which is in verse, Lyly's comedies were the first to be written in a refined and elaborate kind of prose called «euphuistic».

An important contribution to the development of a more refined taste was given by Robert Greene and George Peele. The former wrote Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay (1589), the latter wrote The Old Wives' Tale (1595). But the most successful playwrights of the time were Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe and, obviously, the «genius» William Shakespeare.





Other playwrights of the time

George Chapman (c. 1560-1634) was an excellent classical scholar and wrote important tragedies: the best are *Bussy d'Ambois* (1607) and *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois* (1613).

John Marston (1576-1634) wrote two tragedies, *The History of Antonio and Mellida* (1602) and its sequel *Antonio's Revenge* (c. 1602), and the bitter comedy *The Malcontent* (1604).

Thomas Middleton (c. 1580-1627) in his work reflected the evils of contemporary society. He was a very prolific writer, but he is mostly remembered for his two famous tragedies: *Women Beware Women* (c. 1621), which deals with the crimes of the Italian Bianca Capello, and *The Changeling* (1622).

Another dramatist was John Webster (c. 1580-c. 1625) who followed the tradition of the tragedy of horrors. He produced two great tragedies: *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). The former relates the scandalous life of the Italian beauty Vittoria Accoramboni, the latter is the story of a young widow Duchess persecuted by her brothers.

The atmosphere of the dramas of Cyril Tourneur (c. 1580-1626) was one of violence and corruption. His best works are *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1605) and *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1606).

Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625) formed an effective valuable partnership in producing together excellent plays such as *Philaster*, or *Love Lies a-Bleeding* (1610), *The Maid's Tragedy* (1611) and *A King and No King* (1611).

GREAT WRITERS

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) Life

Shakespeare was born in 1564 at Stratford-on-Avon (Warwickshire) of John, a prosperous merchant, and Mary Arden. Of his boyhood very little is known. He attended the Stratford Grammar School, whose teachers were eminent scholars from Oxford and Cambridge, but it seems that his education was cut short by the decline of his father's fortune. In 1582 William married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior, and in 1583 his first child Susanna was born, followed, about two years later, by the twins Hamnet and Judith. There is no certain report on how the poet spent the years till 1592. A traditional legend reports that he was obliged to leave Stratford for having killed a deer in the park of the local magnate Sir Thomas Lucy. According to other biographers, he was a school master in the country. We have certain references of his presence in London in 1592, where he was well established as a successful actor and playwright (he was in contact with the University Wits), and enjoyed the protection of the Earl of Southampton. In April 1616 Shakespeare died in the house he had bought in Stratford-on-Avon, known as «The New Palace» and which had become his chief residence. The great dramatist was buried in the Old Town Church of Stratford; a monument in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey commemorates him.

Works

Shakespeare is renowned as the English playwright and poet whose body of works is considered the greatest in the history of English literature. Not only did he create some of the most admired plays in Western literature, but he also transformed English theatre by expanding expectations about what could be accomplished through characterization, plot, action, language, and genre. His poetic artistry helped raise the status of popular theatre, permitting it to be admired by intellectuals as well as by those seeking pure entertainment.

Poems. Before acquiring his fame as a dramatist, he began as a poet. His first poetical composition, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), is a narrative poem dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, modelled on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It deals with Venus' love for Adonis, a youth of rare beauty, fond of hunting, who, one day, is killed by a wild animal.

The Rape of Lucrece (1594) relates a famous episode in the history of Rome: Lucrece, wife of Tarquinius Collatinus, takes her own life to save her honour. The elaborate form and the richness of mythological imagery reflect the typical product of the English Renaissance.

His *Sonnets* (probably written over a period of several years and published in 1609), a collection of 154 poems, are by far superior. They deal with subjects such as love, beauty, politics, power, mortality. Part of the sonnets is devoted to a young nobleman, defined as «Fair Friend», «Fair Youth» or «Lovely Boy», identified by many scholars as the mysterious Mr. W.H. mentioned in the dedication to the poems; some others express the poet's love for an unidentified «Dark Lady».

Plays. Shakespeare's dramatic production is traditionally divided into four main periods: the first period, from 1590 to 1596; the second period, from 1596 to 1600; the third period, from 1600 to 1608; the fourth period, from 1608 to 1612.





The first period. This period may be considered as a phase of apprenticeship, in which the poet improved the instruments of his craft, exploring in various directions and experimenting new genres. Though Shakespeare's early plays reveal his creative genius, he endowed conventional themes with a deeper insight and a fresh vigour, and even if he did not yet possess a style of his own, he gave a wide human content and significance to characters and situations.

Shakespeare did not invent the plots of his plays, but he took them over from chronicles, existing plays and popular legends. In the first successful comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*, he followed the model of Plautus' comedy (*Menaechmi*). In *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare followed the Senecan convention of the tragedy of horrors, made popular by Kyd, and he even surpassed in it the atrocities of the Spanish Tragedy. In *Romeo and Juliet* he abandoned the Senecan model and related the ill-fated love story in a romantic way. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* Shakespeare followed the tradition of courtly love, imitating Robert Greene's romantic comedies. In *Love's Labour's Lost* and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he addressed a more sophisticated audience. In the former he imitated John Lyly's elaborate style and sparkling dialogues; in the latter he fused mythological and fantastic elements with realism.

Shakespeare's «history plays» relate the events of The Hundred Years' War and The War of the Roses, celebrating the glories and the woes of English history, as the «miracle plays» had represented the scenes from the Bible, in order to instruct and to stir the patriotism of his audience.

The second period. The delineation of characters in this period reveals a subtle investigation into the mysteries of the human soul and life's complexities.

The Merchant of Venice derives from a collection of Italian «novelle» called *Il Pecorone*. It is a very complex comedy about love, friendship and a subtle contrast between idealism and reality. In creating the unforgettable character of Shylock, Shakespeare modifies the conventional portrayal of the Jew as a villain, making him a more complex character and raising at the same time a sense of suspicion about injustice and racial prejudices. *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It* are romantic comedies, in which the comic elements are intermingled with poetical passages. The former was inspired by a Greek tale, and the latter by *Rosalynde* by Thomas Lodge.

The subject-matter of the «history plays» is not exclusively concerned with the English past, but extends to the great figures of Roman history too.

The third period. This period reflects a particularly critical moment in the poet's life, but it is also the phase in which he reaches his full artistic maturity. Shakespeare created unforgettable characters, life-like situations, and tackled the greatest problems confronting man; he also went beyond the representation of his age, attaining issues of universal significance.

Shakespeare's great tragedies are based on legends either Danish as *Hamlet*, or British as *King Lear*, or Scottish as *Macbeth*; *Othello* was taken from an Italian «novella» written by Giraldi Cinzio. *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy, but Shakespeare endowed a conventional theme with greater coherence and substance. *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark, hesitates in vindicating his father's murder: his high meditative spirit cannot cope with a too brutal reality, and his reflections on life invest the greatest problems of mankind. In *Hamlet* there is a shift from a world view where everyone knows their place in a scheme of things to a world view where people are not defined in advance in this kind of way. And with this shift there comes a new emphasis on the interiority of human beings, on their unknown qualities as opposed to their known social position. *Hamlet* himself pretends to be mad, but the force of his acting is to throw into doubt any fixed conceptions about the differences between reason and madness. In particular in *Hamlet's* soliloquies, a new interior world is opened up, a world which questions the old certainties of understanding.

In *Othello*, the valiant Moor in the service of Venice is brought to ruin by his own good qualities. He judges other people according to his high moral standard, never suspecting falsity and deception. *King Lear* is a study on the perversion of will, caused by the incapacity of discerning. The king is a victim of his own blindness: the pomp and the respect due to his high rank prevent him from a clear vision of reality. *Macbeth* is the tragedy of ambition; but unlike Marlowian heroes, who in misfortune lose their pride and boldness, *Macbeth*, quite aware of his destiny, preserves his own dignity by fighting to the last. In *Antony and Cleopatra* and in *Coriolanus*, both inspired by Roman history, Shakespeare used Plutarch's *Lives* as a model. In these plays and in *Timon of Athens* the study of characters predominates over the events related. The pessimism of the tragedies extends to the comedies *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, the so called «bitter comedies», whose traditional happy-endings cannot conceal a cruel and sordid representation of reality.





The fourth period. The dramatic tension and the unsolved problems of the «great tragedies» and the «bitter comedies» disappear in the fourth period, to be replaced by a mood of serenity, reconciliation and forgiveness. This is not the product of an easy optimism, but it derives from a superior wisdom acquired through experience: the poet has experimented all evils, and has come to know the way to oppose them.

Pericles derives from a Greek tale related to John Gower in *Confessio Amantis*; it is based on the theme of purification and resurrection. *Cymbeline*, taken from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, celebrates the triumph of innocence. The source of *The Winter's Tale* is a pastoral romance by Robert Greene (→ Prose) entitled *Pandosto*. *The Tempest* is an original creation.

Shakespeare's art. The poet possessed an extraordinary versatility and the aptitude both for tragedy and comedy. Shakespeare handled various subject-matter and created a vast range of characters. But it was not only this variety that distinguished him from his contemporaries; he endowed his characters with life, in such an admirable way that they appear true and real in every circumstance. In fact, his characters never reflect the strain of a concerted plan, but always appear spontaneous and natural; they may change during the play, but never lose their identity, standing before the audience as a living force.

Moreover, Shakespeare's works show an exceptional depth and substance; they express the whole range of human experience at all levels, and the causes which may alter the natural balance and the harmony of the world. Evil is considered as a perversion of will, making men unable to discern, and the principle of every disorder.

There is no clear limit between Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies: when the right order cannot be restored, the situation precipitates into tragedy. To preserve the balance, every man should act in the most natural way; not only vices and defects spoil human intercourses, but also an excess of virtues and idealism.

Unlike his predecessors, Shakespeare did not have a distinctive manner, which was the sign and the limit of their personalities. But we may say that the great author expressed in his works a very wide range of contents and meanings to be defined according to a system or to a code. He offered no direct teaching, but the miracle lays in the representation of life in all its complexities and contradictions. All his characters justify in themselves their feelings, passions and behaviours. Each temperament and circumstance express a philosophy of its own, without any claim to a superior system of thought. In his representation of life he was essentially empiric, taking account only of reality and refusing to build on abstract systems.

In his earliest works the poet used rhyme, but as he acquired greater mastery, he adopted the «blank verse», used by Kyd and Marlowe. In his late plays Shakespeare used the so called «overflow line» and occasionally used prose too. Though marked by the influence of his immediate predecessors, Shakespeare's style is unique and incomparable. The English language, enriched by classical models, and the high examples of Spenser, Lyly and Marlowe was brought by Shakespeare to its utmost.

Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theatre. All his plays were written for performance and he was not seriously interested in their publication. Unlike Ben Jonson, Shakespeare never attempted to reform theatre, but he conformed to the accepted taste. He succeeded in combining together the two main tendencies of the time: the popular taste and the sophisticated character of humanist theatre. Though his plays satisfied the exigencies of a vast audience, they also possessed the accurate and refined style of the humanist scholars. Shakespeare was particularly gifted in the construction of plots and in the development of actions and he supplied the poverty of sceneries with vivid poetic descriptions.

The edition of his plays. Shakespeare's dramatic production consists of thirty-seven plays. Only eighteen of them appeared «in Quarto Edition» during the poet's lifetime. Quarto Edition does not offer reliable texts, as they were mainly reconstructed from memory by actors. The first authoritative edition included thirty-six plays (except *Pericles*); it was published «in Folio» form in 1623 by two of his fellow actors, Heminge and Condell, and based on stage manuscripts.

Shakespeare and his time. Though concerned with the universal, he also expressed the complex mood of his age. Elizabeth's reign was a turning point in English history as it contained the premises of further developments, but it also reflected a complex series of contradictions. The ideals of the Renaissance had put everything into question, from politics and religion to individual feelings. Shakespeare investigated into the greatest problems of the time: the nature of power, the attitudes of the people who had public roles, honesty and dishonesty, the corruption of ambition. He also examined the proper place of the man in society to preserve the right hierarchical order.

His «great tragedies» and his «bitter comedies» reflect a mood of uncertainty connected with the future of England. Queen Elizabeth had no heir and on her death James VI of Scotland became king of England as James I, whose reign was surely a difficult and disappointing one.





The reputation. Shakespeare's genius was not completely understood by his contemporaries. Though during his lifetime he enjoyed fame and all the advantages of royal protection, he was considered on the same level with the greatest poets of the age. It was only in the 18th century that critics and scholars fully realized the value of his art. He was a supreme poet who possessed a particular gift for the stage and also an admirable mastery of the language. Many other authors, in all ages, have shown some of his qualities, but none of them have possessed them all as Shakespeare.

Rightly Samuel Johnson wrote about him that he «... is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the particularities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon a small number; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply; and observation will always find his person act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species».

