

HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE- ELIZABETHAN PERIOD

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Introduction

Elizabethan literature refers to the literature produced during the reign of Elizabeth I of England (1558-1603). This period saw a remarkable growth of the arts in England, and the literature of the time is characterized by a new energy, originality, and confidence.

The earlier half of Elizabeth's reign, though not lacking in literary effort, produced no work of permanent importance. After the religious convulsions of half a century time was required for the development of the internal quiet and confidence from which a great literature could spring. At length, however, the hour grew ripe and there came the greatest outburst of creative energy in the whole history of English literature. Under Elizabeth's wise guidance the prosperity and enthusiasm of the nation had risen to the highest pitch, and London in particular was overflowing with vigorous life.

A special stimulus of the most intense kind came from the struggle with Spain and the destruction of the Great Armada. In 1588 the Armada had sailed and was utterly overwhelmed in one of the most complete disasters of the world's history. Thereupon the released energy of England broke out exultantly into still more impetuous achievement in almost every line of activity. The great literary period is taken by common consent to begin with the publication of Spenser's 'Shepherd's Calendar' in 1579, and to end in some sense at the death of Elizabeth in 1603, though in the drama, at least, it really continues many years longer.

Renaissance humanism, Protestant zeal, and geographical and scientific discovery all contributed to the upsurge of creative power in the British. Drama was the dominant form of the age, and the plays of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe were popular with all levels of society. prominent writers in literature in the Elizabethan Age in England were William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Christopher Marlowe (1564-93), Edmund Spenser (1552-99), Ben Jonson (1572-1637), Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), Roger Ascham (1515-68), and Richard Hooker (1554-1600). Poetry was very popular in the Elizabethan Age, including the sonnet, the Spenserian stanza, and dramatic blank verse. Drama also became a mainstay in this period, especially with Shakespeare's plays.

Elizabethan drama broke away from religious domination, which was the major focus of the medieval mystery play and morality play. Elizabethan drama often used poetical metre (rhythm) for its dialogue, especially the five-foot iambic pentameter (pairs of syllables: unstressed followed by stressed). Both Shakespeare and Marlowe often used controversial subjects for their drama, including the question of political power (in Marlowe's

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Tamberlaine the Great (two parts; 1587–88) and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), for example). Other, lesser playwrights wrote in a similar style to Shakespeare and Marlowe; *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1590) by Thomas Kyd is sometimes said to have been an influence upon Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601–02).

Several general characteristics of Elizabethan literature and writers should be indicated at the outset.

1. The period has the great variety of almost unlimited creative force; it includes works of many kinds in both verse and prose, and ranges in spirit from the loftiest Platonic idealism or the most delightful romance to the level of very repulsive realism.
2. It was mainly dominated, however, by the spirit of romance.
3. It was full also of the spirit of dramatic action, as befitted to an age whose restless enterprise was eagerly extending itself to every quarter of the globe.
4. In style it often exhibits romantic luxuriance, which sometimes takes the form of elaborate affectations of which the favorite 'conceit' is only the most apparent.
5. It was in part a period of experimentation, when the proper material and limits of literary forms were being determined, oftentimes by means of false starts and grandiose failures. In particular, many efforts were made to give prolonged poetical treatment to many subjects essentially prosaic, for example to systems of theological or scientific thought, or to the geography of all England.
6. It continued to be largely influenced by the literature of Italy, and to a less degree by those of France and Spain.
7. The literary spirit was all-pervasive, and the authors were men (not yet women) of almost every class, from distinguished courtiers, like Raleigh and Sidney, to the company of hack writers, who starved in garrets and hung about the outskirts of the bustling taverns.

The period saw the beginning, among other things, of English prose fiction of something like the later modern type. First appeared a series of collections of short tales chiefly translated from Italian authors, to which tales the Italian name 'novella' (novel) was applied. Most of the separate tales are crude or

amateurish and have only historical interest, though as a class they furnished the plots for many Elizabethan dramas, including several of Shakespeare's. The most important collection was Painter's 'Palace of Pleasure,' in 1566.

The earliest original, or partly original, English prose fictions to appear were handbooks of morals and manners in story form, and here the beginning was made by John Lyly, who is also of some importance in the history of the Elizabethan drama. In 1578 Lyly, at the age of twenty-five, came from Oxford to London, full of the enthusiasm of Renaissance learning, and evidently determined to fix himself as a new and dazzling star in the literary sky. In this ambition he achieved a remarkable and immediate success, by the publication of a little book entitled 'Euphues and His Anatomie of Wit.' 'Euphues' means 'the well-bred man,' and though there is a slight action, the work is mainly a series of moralizing disquisitions (mostly rearranged from Sir Thomas North's translation of 'The Dial of Princes' of the Spaniard Guevara) on love, religion, and conduct. Most influential, however, for the time-being, was Lyly's style, which is the most conspicuous English example of the later Renaissance craze, then rampant throughout Western Europe, for refining and beautifying the art of prose expression in a mincingly affected fashion. Witty, clever, and sparkling at all costs, Lyly takes especial pains to balance his sentences and clauses antithetically, phrase against phrase and often word against word, sometimes emphasizing the balance also by an exaggerated use of alliteration and assonance.

A representative sentence is this: 'Although there be none so ignorant that doth not know, neither any so impudent that will not confesse, friendship to be the jewell of humaine joye; yet whosoever shall see this amitie grounded upon a little affection, will soone conjecture that it shall be dissolved upon a light occasion.' Others of Lyly's affectations are rhetorical questions, hosts of allusions to classical history, and literature, and an unending succession of similes from all the recondite knowledge that he can command, especially from the fantastic collection of fables which, coming down through the Middle Ages from the Roman writer Pliny, went at that time by the name of natural history. Preposterous by any reasonable standard, Lyly's style, 'Euphuism,' precisely

hit the Court taste of his age and became for a decade its most approved conversational dialect.

In literature the imitations of 'Euphues' which flourished for a while gave way to a series of romances inaugurated by the 'Arcadia' of Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney's brilliant position for a few years as the noblest representative of chivalrous ideals in the intriguing Court of Elizabeth is a matter of common fame, as is his death in 1586 at the age of thirty-two during the siege of Zutphen in Holland. He wrote 'Arcadia' for the amusement of his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, during a period of enforced retirement beginning in 1580, but the book was not published until ten years later. It is a pastoral romance, in the general style of Italian and Spanish romances of the earlier part of the century. The pastoral is the most artificial literary form in modern fiction. It may be said to have begun in the third century B. C. with the perfectly sincere poems of the Greek Theocritus, who gives genuine expression to the life of actual Sicilian shepherds. But with successive Latin, Medieval, and Renaissance writers in verse and prose the country characters and setting had become mere disguises, sometimes allegorical, for the expression of the very far from simple sentiments of the upper classes, and sometimes for their partly genuine longing, the outgrowth of sophisticated weariness and ennui, for rural naturalness.

Sidney's very complicated tale of adventures in love and war, much longer than any of its successors, is by no means free from artificiality, but it finely mirrors his own knightly spirit and remains a permanent English classic. Among his followers were some of the better hack-writers of the time, who were also among the minor dramatists and poets, especially Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge. Lodge's 'Rosalynde,' also much influenced by Lyly, is in itself a pretty story and is noteworthy as the original of Shakespeare's 'As You Like It.'

Lastly, in the concluding decade of the sixteenth century, came a series of realistic stories depicting chiefly, in more or less farcical spirit, the life of the poorer classes. They belonged mostly to that class of realistic fiction which is called picaresque, from the Spanish word 'pícaro,' a rogue, because it began in Spain with the 'Lazarillo de Tormes' of Diego de Mendoza, in 1553, and because its heroes are knavish serving-boys or similar characters whose unprincipled tricks and exploits formed the substance of the stories. In Elizabethan England it produced nothing of individual note.