Historical Context

Elizabethan England

**A Golden Age** Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne following a tumultuous period in English history. During the reign of her father, King Henry VIII, thousands of people had been executed. Warfare had been frequent, and the royal treasury was drained. The brief reigns of Elizabeth’s half-brother Edward and half-sister Mary were equally stormy. Elizabeth, by contrast, proved to be a strong and successful ruler, frugal with money and popular with her people. Her long reign (1558–1603) is often seen as a golden age in English history. The relative stability that Elizabeth created allowed commerce and culture to thrive.

**The Renaissance** Elizabeth ruled toward the end of a flowering of European learning known as the Renaissance (REHN uh sahns). The Renaissance began in Florence and other Italian city-states around 1350, and then spread throughout Europe. The word *renaissance* means “rebirth,” and the era saw renewed interest in the arts and sciences that hearkened back to ancient Greece and Rome. The cultural pursuit of art and learning had diminished in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. Influenced by the achievements of the ancients, Renaissance writers and architects created new forms and designs that emphasized individual human expression. Painters and sculptors studied ancient Greek and Roman art to explore a new focus on the human form. Philosophers and religious reformers challenged old ideas, as did scientists who strove to unlock the hidden secrets of the natural world. With new knowledge of the skies, navigators sailed the globe, expanding trade and exploring distant lands.
The English Renaissance  Elizabeth I encouraged commercial enterprise and the efforts of English navigators, such as Sir Walter Raleigh, who tried to establish a colony in Virginia, and Sir Francis Drake, who sailed around the globe. Profiting particularly from the wool trade, a strong merchant class developed in England, narrowing the gap between rich and poor. London, with nearly 200,000 people, became Europe’s largest city. It was a bustling if dirty cultural and political capital that attracted newcomers from overseas as well as from the English countryside. In 1588, the English army defeated the Spanish Armada, a fleet of warships sent by King Philip II of Spain to invade England. The victory contributed both to Elizabeth’s legend and to the country’s sense of national pride. It also set England firmly on the path to becoming ruler of the seas.

Elizabeth’s reign was not only remarkable for its commercial and military successes. On the contrary, her court was a center for musicians and artists, both European and native born. The philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, who pioneered the informal essay as a literary form, became an unofficial member of the queen’s group of advisors. Sir Philip Sidney, a popular courtier and diplomat, wrote a series of love sonnets that were much imitated. The poet Edmund Spenser wrote an adventure-packed epic called The Faerie Queene that he dedicated to Queen Elizabeth. The greatest Elizabethan literature, however, was written for the stage. The greatest of these voices were the playwrights Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and—greatest of them all—William Shakespeare.

The Concern for Stability  Elizabeth’s father, King Henry VIII, had married six times. He divorced three of his wives and executed two others, including Elizabeth’s mother, Anne Boleyn. Queen Mary, Elizabeth’s half-sister, infuriated the nation by wedding Phillip II of Spain, who abandoned her soon afterward. Perhaps because of these examples, or perhaps because she worried about sharing power, Elizabeth I never married.
Theater in Elizabethan England

London theaters drew crowds that are large even by today’s standards.

During the Elizabethan era, the religious plays of the Middle Ages gave way to English tragedies and comedies modeled on those of ancient Greece and Rome. Scholars at Oxford and Cambridge universities studied and translated the ancient plays into English. The first great Elizabethan playwrights attended those universities, which is why they are sometimes called the University Wits. The most prominent of the Wits, Christopher Marlowe, pioneered the use of blank verse in drama.

For a time, Elizabethan acting companies still traveled the countryside as their medieval counterparts had done. They performed at festivals, inns, and castles. Gradually, however, the better acting companies acquired noble patrons, or sponsors, and began staging private performances in their patrons’ homes. They also gave performances at court, where elaborate masques—productions featuring singing and dancing—were especially popular.

From the Theatre to the Globe  England’s first public theater opened in 1576. Known simply as the Theatre, it was built by the actor James Burbage, whose company would later attract the young William Shakespeare. Since the performance of plays was banned in London proper, Burbage built the Theatre just outside the city walls. When its lease expired, Richard Burbage, who took charge of the company after his father’s death, decided to move operations to Southwark (SUHTH uhrk), just south across the River Thames (tehmz) from London. He built a new theater, called the Globe, which opened in 1599. Shakespeare’s first play to be performed there was probably The Tragedy of Julius Caesar.

Theater Structure  England’s first theaters were two- to three-story structures with a central space open to the sky. The open space was surrounded by enclosed seating in two or three tiers, or galleries, that faced inward. On the ground floor, a stage projected into an area called the pit. Audience members called
groundlings paid a small fee to stand in the pit and watch the play. Wealthier audience members, including aristocrats, occupied the more expensive sheltered gallery seats. Since artificial light was not used, performances generally took place in the afternoon. Audiences were boisterous, cheering and booing loudly. Most theaters could hold up to 3,000 people and drew the largest crowds on holidays.

**Theater Stagecraft** The portion of the building behind the stage was used to mount the production. This area included dressing rooms, storage rooms, and waiting areas from which actors could enter and exit the stage. The second-level gallery directly above the stage served as a performance space. There was no scenery; instead, settings were communicated through dialogue. Special effects were very simple—smoke might accompany a battle scene, for example. Actors playing members of the nobility or royalty wore elegant clothes. These were not really costumes as we think of them today, but simply the same types of clothing worn by high-ranking Elizabethans. Since acting was not considered proper for women, female roles were played by boys of about eleven or twelve, before their voices changed. Given the constraints of the era’s stagecraft, the productions were unrealistic by modern standards. However, they were also fast paced, colorful, and highly entertaining.

**The Blackfriars** In 1609, Shakespeare’s company, the King’s Men, began staging plays at an indoor theater called the Blackfriars. They still used the Globe during the summer months. The Blackfriars was one of the first English theaters to include artificial lighting, which enabled nighttime performances. Designed to appeal to wealthy patrons only, the Blackfriars did not have inexpensive seats or a space set aside for groundlings. Indoor theaters of this sort, attracting a fashionable crowd, would become the norm in centuries to come.
William Shakespeare

Unlike other famed writers of his time, William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was neither a lofty aristocrat nor a university scholar. Nevertheless, he is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language.

“What’s Past Is Prologue” Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a market town on the Avon River about seventy-five miles northwest of London. His father, John, was a successful glove maker who served for a time as town mayor. His mother, born Mary Arden, was the daughter of a wealthy farmer who owned the land on which John Shakespeare’s father lived. Although the records have been lost, it is believed that Shakespeare attended the Stratford Grammar School, where he would have studied logic, history, Latin grammar, some Greek, and works by the Roman poets Ovid, Horace, and Virgil and Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence. When he left school, he would thus have had a solid foundation in classical literature.

“All the World’s a Stage” In 1582, when he was eighteen, Shakespeare married a woman named Anne Hathaway, who was twenty-six. The couple had a daughter, Susanna, in 1583 and twins, Judith and Hamnet, two years later. No one knows what Shakespeare did for the next several years, but in the early 1590s his name began to appear in the world of the London theater. Working first as an actor, Shakespeare soon began writing plays. By 1594, he was part owner and principal playwright of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the acting company run by the Burbages. As the leading actor in most of Shakespeare’s plays, Richard Burbage was also becoming famous. Soon he decided to move the company to the new theater district in Southwark. There, Burbage oversaw the construction of the Globe theater, which was larger than the company’s old home in London. With bigger audiences, profits increased for Burbage, Shakespeare, and all the other co-owners.

The Lord Chamberlain’s Men was named for its sponsors, first Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, and then his son George. Both men served in the high government post of Lord Chamberlain. After Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, her successor, James I, became the company’s patron. In his honor, the company changed its name to the King’s Men.

“Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow” In 1609, the King’s Men began to perform year-round, using the Globe theater in summer and the Blackfriars during the colder months. Profits increased even more, and about a year later Shakespeare was able to retire. He returned to his childhood home of Stratford, where he bought the second-largest house in town, invested in land, and continued to write. Shakespeare died in 1616, leaving the bulk of his estate to his elder daughter, Susanna, and a smaller sum to Judith. (Hamnet had died in 1596.)