Elizabethan England

This "golden age" represented the apogee of the English Renaissance and saw the flowering of poetry, music and literature. The era is most famous for theatre, as William Shakespeare and many others composed plays that broke free of England's past style of theatre. It was an age of exploration and expansion abroad, while back at home, the Protestant Reformation became more acceptable to the people, most certainly after the Spanish Armada was repelled. It was also the end of the period when England was a separate realm before its royal union with Scotland.

The Elizabethan age contrasts sharply with the previous and following reigns. It was a brief period of internal peace between the English Reformation and the religious battles between Protestants and Catholics and then the political battles between parliament and the monarchy that engulfed the remainder of the seventeenth century. The Protestant/Catholic divide was settled, for a time, by the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, and parliament was not yet strong enough to challenge royal absolutism.

England was also well-off compared to the other nations of Europe. The Italian Renaissance had come to an end under the weight of Spanish domination of the peninsula. France was embroiled in its own religious battles that were (temporarily) settled in 1598 by a policy of tolerating Protestantism with the Edict of Nantes. In part because of this, but also because the English had been expelled from their last outposts on the continent by Spain's tercios, the centuries-long conflict between France and England was largely suspended for most of Elizabeth's reign.

The one great rival was Spain, with whom England clashed both in Europe and the Americas in skirmishes that exploded into the Anglo-Spanish War of 1585–1604. An attempt by Philip II of Spain to invade England with the Spanish Armada in 1588 was famously defeated, but the tide of war turned against England with an unsuccessful expedition to Portugal and the Azores, the Drake–Norris Expedition of 1589. Thereafter, Spain provided some support for Irish Catholics in a debilitating rebellion against English rule, and Spanish naval and land forces inflicted a series of reversals against English offensives. This drained both the English Exchequer and economy that had been so carefully restored under Elizabeth's prudent guidance. English commercial and territorial expansion would be limited until the signing of the Treaty of London the year following Elizabeth's death.

England during this period had a centralised, well-organised, and effective government, largely a result of the reforms of Henry VII and Henry VIII, as well as Elizabeth's harsh punishments for any dissenters. Economically, the country began to benefit greatly from the new era of trans-Atlantic trade and persistent theft of Spanish treasure.

English Renaissance Theatre

The Elizabethan Era is perhaps most famous for its theatre and the works of William Shakespeare. English Renaissance theatre began with the opening of "The Red Lion" theatre in 1567. Many more permanent theatres opened in London over the next several years including the Curtain Theatre in 1577 and the famous Globe Theatre in 1599.

The period produced some of the world's great playwrights including Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare.

Today Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer of the English language. Popular genres of theatre included the history play, the tragedy, and the comedy.

Other Arts

Theatre wasn't the only form of art to flourish during the Elizabethan Era. Other arts such as music and painting were popular during the time. The era produced important composers such as William Byrd and John Dowland. England also began to produce some of its own talented painters such as Nicholas Hilliard and Queen Elizabeth's personal artist George Gower.

Navigation and Exploration

The Elizabethan Era saw the rise of the English navy with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. It also saw many improvements in navigation which were highlighted when Sir Francis Drake successful.

Elizabethan literature

England prospered in the second half of Elizabeth's reign, and many of the great works of English literature were produced during these years: art, poetry, drama, and learning in general flourished as the confidence and nationalism Elizabeth inspired spilled from the economic sector to cultural achievements. Elizabeth's reign saw playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, poets like Edmund Spenser, and men of science and letters like Francis Bacon. The era also saw the beginning of William Shakespeare's work. Many of the writers, thinkers and artists of the day enjoyed the patronage of members of Elizabeth's court, and their works often involved or referred to the great Queen; indeed, she was the symbol of the day. The "Elizabethan Age," generally considered one of golden ages in English literature, was thus appropriately named: these cultural achievements did not just happen to be created while Elizabeth was on the throne; rather, Elizabeth's specific actions, her image, and the court atmosphere she nurtured significantly influenced--even inspired--great works of literature.

Spanish Armada

The Spanish Armada was an enormous 130-ship naval fleet dispatched by Spain in 1588 as part of a planned invasion of England. Following years of hostilities between Spain and England, King Philip II of Spain assembled the flotilla in the hope of removing Protestant Queen Elizabeth I from the throne and restoring the Roman Catholic faith in England. Spain’s “Invincible Armada” set sail that May, but it was outfoxed by the English, then battered by storms while limping back to Spain with at least a third of its ships sunk or damaged. The defeat of the Spanish Armada led to a surge of national pride in England and was one of the most significant chapters of the Anglo-Spanish War.