THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, 1485-1603

- The crowning of King Henry VII in 1485 marks the start of the Tudor dynasty and this literary period.
- During this period, English evolved from a language that did not enjoy international prestige into a language enriched by writers including Shakespeare, Marlowe, and translators of the Bible.

THE COURT AND THE CITY

- The Wars of the Roses, fought during the fifteenth century between the royal houses of York (whose emblem was the white rose) and Lancaster (the red rose) ended with the death of Yorkist King Richard III at the battle of Bosworth Field. Henry Tudor was crowned King Henry VII and married Elizabeth of York, uniting the rival houses.
- The wars had impoverished many aristocratic landholders; Henry VII seized this chance to consolidate and centralize power in his court.
- The court was a place steeped in intrigue and ambition where elegance, ease, and the ability to decipher words with multiple meanings (in poetry no less than in politics) were prized abilities. Court tastes in music, dance, poetry, theater, and masque shaped the taste of the nation.
- London was Europe’s fastest growing city: it grew from 60,000 people in 1520 to 375,000 in 1650.
- The sixteenth century saw a gradual transition from manuscripts to books printed with moveable metal type. Manuscripts and texts that were medieval in tone retained prestige; printing made books cheaper and more readily available.
- Literacy increased throughout the period, reinforced by the Protestant practice of ordinary lay persons (not just church clerics) reading the Bible themselves.

RENAISSANCE HUMANISM

- English travellers to Italy had glimpsed the Renaissance (meaning literally, rebirth), an artistic and literary movement based on recently discovered classical texts and artifacts from ancient Greece and Rome.
- For Renaissance thinkers, man was the measure of all things; yet man was also capable of changing and fashioning himself.
- Humanists like Erasmus changed outmoded school curricula to reflect the kind of learning they felt best prepared young men for public service.
- Young aristocratic and genteel men were educated by private tutors or in grammar schools. Education included the medieval trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and quadrivium (subjects (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music), but devoted an increased attention to Latin—the language of diplomacy,
the professions, and higher learning—as much for its moral, philosophical, and political truths as for its elegance and rhetorical force.

- Young aristocratic women were educated in modern languages, religion, music, and needlework, at home or in other noble houses. Women were increasingly taught to read; however, they were not necessarily taught to write.

- Humanist admiration of classical authors and increasing national pride in the expressive power of vernacular English led to many English translations of classical texts during this period.

THE REFORMATION

- In the early sixteenth century, England’s single official religion was Catholicism, and the head of the Church was the pope in Rome. Catholic liturgy and the Bible were in Latin, which few lay people understood.

- In Germany in November 1517, Martin Luther protested against corruption in the Catholic Church and began the Protestant movement that became known as the Reformation.

- The European Reformation promoted two central ideas: 1) *sola scriptura*: only the Scriptures have religious authority and not Church clerics or traditions; and 2) *sola fide*: only the faith of the individual (not good works or rituals) can effect his or her salvation.

- England’s Reformation was motivated principally by King Henry VIII’s greed and his succession difficulties: Henry had failed to produce a legitimate son and heir with his queen, Catherine of Aragon.

- The pope refused to grant Henry VIII his desired divorce from Catherine, which would have allowed him to marry Anne Boleyn. Henry had his marriage to Catherine declared null and void under English canon law, married and crowned Anne Boleyn, and was excommunicated from the Catholic Church. The king then enacted a parliamentary Act of Succession requiring all male subjects to confirm the new dynastic succession under oath, and in the Act of Supremacy, declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England.

- Between 1536 and 1539, Henry VIII seized the lands and wealth of England’s Catholic religious houses and redistributed them amongst his followers.

- Protestant rule in England continued after Henry VIII’s death as his son Edward (a boy of ten) took the throne for six years (1547–1553). *The Book of Common Prayer* and the 42 articles of religion which form the basis of Anglicanism (the Protestant Church of England) were written by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, during Edward’s reign.

- From 1553 to 1558, England returned to Roman Catholicism under Henry VIII’s daughter by Catherine of Aragon Mary I, who gained the nickname “Bloody” Mary from her persecution of Protestants.

- In 1558, when the childless Mary died, Henry VIII’s daughter by Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth, was crowned queen. Elizabeth brought back Protestantism and strengthened it by fining Recusants (people who
didn’t attend Anglican services) and making university degrees and positions in the state or in the Church of England all contingent on swearing an oath confirming the royal supremacy.

- More radical Protestant groups, such as the Puritans, who wanted to dismantle the Church of England’s hierarchy, sprang up during Elizabeth I’s reign.
- England’s official faith underwent rapid, radical shifts during this period: from Roman Catholicism under the pope, to Catholicism under the English king, to Protestantism, to Roman Catholicism, and back to Protestantism.

**A Female Monarch in a Male World**

- Because she was Anne Boleyn’s daughter (Boleyn was never recognized as legitimate by Catholics and was beheaded by Henry VIII) Elizabeth’s claim to the throne was precarious.
- Queen Elizabeth I’s reign was the more remarkable when one considers that contemporary social expectations equated rational thought with masculinity, and irrational passions with femininity.
- Elizabeth, who had received a rigorous humanist education, positioned herself as ruler by appealing to historical precedent (other female rulers, such as the biblical Deborah), to legal theory (dividing her person into a mortal “body natural” and an immortal “body politic”), and to the love of her courtiers and people.
- Opposition to her absolute rule was regarded as treasonous and impious. The queen and her spymaster Walsingham controlled a massive spy network to enforce her authority.
- Poets and painters represented the “Virgin Queen” Elizabeth as comparable to the mythological goddesses Diana, Astraea, and Cynthia, and the biblical heroine Deborah.
- Elizabeth cannily exploited her unmarried state to pit various political factions against one another.

**The Kingdom in Danger**

- Elizabeth’s reign was marked by numerous plots against her life by both Protestant and Catholic extremists.
- The most famous of these assassination plots was the one that resulted in the death of Elizabeth’s second cousin, the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, who also had a claim upon the English throne.
- After Elizabeth had Mary Queen of Scots beheaded, King Philip II of Spain sent his huge fleet of ships, the Spanish Armada, to invade England and reclaim it for the Catholic Church. The English successfully fought the Spanish at sea, and the Armada was destroyed in a storm.

**The English and Otherness**

- The religious and political events of the Tudor era made people newly aware and proud of their national identity and led them to define those who lay outside that identity in new ways.
• Elizabethan London had a large population of merchants and artisans from France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Spain, and Germany.
• The English also perceived the Welsh, the Scots, and the Irish as other and distinct from themselves.
• Religious others in London included Protestant radicals such as the Puritans and Jews, who had been expelled from England by King Edward I in 1290 and who were not officially permitted to resettle in England until the mid-seventeenth century.
• Racial discrimination was another kind of otherness; many Elizabethans regarded blackness as a physical defect. There is evidence of black slaves and servants in England at this time, and slavery was generally regarded as a profitable merchant venture—one in which Queen Elizabeth herself invested.

Writers, Printers, and Patrons

• Poetry continued to circulate in manuscript, copied by professional scribes or by readers into personal anthologies (commonplace books).
• There was no author’s copyright, no royalties, and no freedom of the press during the sixteenth century. All presses were owned by members of a guild called the Stationers' Company. Only books approved by six privy councilors or the archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of London were licensed for sale. There was no sense that writing could become a professional career.
• Works of history and religious treatises were particularly subject to censorship, due to their political implications. Devotional works were among the most marketable and popular books.
• The prestige accorded a book’s subject or its author could be gaged by its size and format (folio, quarto, octavo, etc.).
• Writers sought financial reward and preferment from wealthy patrons to whom they dedicated their works; patrons in turn hoped to have their achievements, intellect, and generosity praised.

Tudor Style: Ornament, Plainness, and Wonder

• Renaissance literature is the product of a culture devoted to rhetoric, or the art of verbal persuasion and argument.
• Certain syntactic forms or patterns of words known as "figures" (or "schemes"), usually identified by their Greek or Latin names, were used to heighten the expressive power of English.
• Elizabethans enjoyed pattern and ornament in language, clothing, jewelry, gardens, and furniture. Such ornaments were intricate but perfectly regular in design.
• Despite their preference for regular patterns and ornaments, the looseness of sixteenth-century syntax allowed for language to twist and turn flexibly.
• Renaissance poetry is not interested in representational accuracy or "realism," but in the power of exquisite, ornamented workmanship to draw the reader into its world.
Phillip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy*, the most important piece of literary criticism in the sixteenth century, defines the major literary modes or kinds available to writers: pastoral, heroic, lyric, satiric, elegiac, tragic, and comic. The poetic conventions of these modes helped to shape poetry's subject matter, attitude, tone, and values; in some cases (e.g., the sonnet), they also governed formal structure, meter, style, length, and occasion.

**THE ELIZABETHAN THEATER**

- Permanent, free-standing public theaters date only from Shakespeare's lifetime, although there was a theatrical tradition stretching back to the play cycles and mystery plays of medieval times.
- In addition to the medieval plays linked to religion and the Church calendar (including the morality plays that continued to be performed in the sixteenth century), early plays were also acted in town and guild halls, marketplaces, inn yards, or the streets by companies of players who traveled and performed under the protection of a patron, whose livery they wore.
- Before public theaters were built, playing companies often performed "interludes," or short staged dialogues on religious, moral, and political themes.
- By the late sixteenth century, many church men (especially Puritans) opposed the theater.
- Prominent dramatic modes included the violent revenge tragedy, in which a wronged protagonist plots and executes revenge, usually destroying him- or herself as well; the history play, featuring national stories of rebellion, war, or conspiracy; and comedies based on those by the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence.
- Christopher Marlowe's adoption of unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse, revolutionized theatrical expression.
- Elizabethans also enjoyed masques, jousts, tournaments, processions, pageants, bear-baiting, executions, and other forms of entertainment.
- By the 1590s, four major playhouses just outside London's city limits (and beyond the rule of city authorities hostile to drama) competed for business. Competition and the habitual play-going of their audiences created a market for new plays.
- These theatres were oval-shaped, with an unroofed yard where lower-class "groundlings" could watch the play and roofed seating areas for the gentry. The stage thrust forward into the crowd, which surrounded it on three sides.
- There were no scene breaks or intermissions. Players were shareholders in their acting companies, and play scripts written for the particular members of each repertory company were valuable properties, jealously guarded from rival performers and printers.
- Plays were performed in the afternoon and could draw people away from their work. No women appeared on stage; boy actors played the female roles. These conditions gave rise to objections that the
theater was morally debased—Puritans, for example, charged that the sight of boys dressed as women would excite illicit sexual desire.

**SURPRISED BY TIME**

- Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603; King James VI of Scotland, whose mother was Mary Queen of Scots, was named her successor to the English throne.