



Elizabethan literature - Important writers and works of the period

Queen Elizabeth reigned England from the year 1558 A.D to 1603 A.D and this period is considered as the golden age for English literature. This is the period when the influence of Renaissance was slowly spreading to England. Amidst victories over Spain, colonization missions, moderating the religious fervour, improvement in science and technology - the theatre along with other poetry and prose flourished during the period. There were many writers and poets who made this era as the golden age with their contributions to English literature.

George Gascoigne [1535 – 1577] – Elizabethan Literature

Gascoigne was the first ever poet to portray Queen Elizabeth as a deity. She is shown by him as virgin goddess who rules over England. His most notable work is *A Discourse of the Adventures of Master FJ*. Further, George Gascoigne has introduced many writing forms to English literature through his works.

The Supposes is the first English comedy and fiction written in prose.

The Steel Glass is the English satire written in regular verse.

Jocasta is the first ever translation of a Greek work into English.

Notes of Instruction is the first ever critical essay.

Edmund Spenser [1552 – 1599] – Elizabethan Literature

The entry of Edmund Spenser through *The Shepherd's Calendar* marked the beginning of a new era in English poetry. He produced poetry that could touch every aspect of life and interest. The above poem deals with each month of the year in the form of pastoral poems. *The Epithalamion* deals with the wedding of Spenser and is completely subjective. However, it consists of great imagination and rhythm making it appropriate for the reader. He has written eighty nine sonnets under the title *Amoretti* and dedicated an elegy titled *Astrophel* for the death of his dear friend Sir Philip Sidney.

Spenserian stanza is still in use and this is introduced to English literature through his most notable work – *The Faery Queen*. The rhyme scheme of Spenserian stanza is aba bbc bcc. His contributions made him the poet's poet of English poetry.



Sir Philip Sidney [1554- 1586] – Elizabethan Literature

No work of Sidney was published during his lifetime; yet, he has a unique place in Elizabethan literature and world literature as well. He was a free flowing poet who often followed the tradition of Petrarch. *Astrophel and Stella* is a work that shows his poetic abilities through eleven songs of love and hundred and eight sonnets. He wrote other poems for the amusement of his sister under the title *Arcadia*.

Sidney is well known for his critical discussion of nature of poetry, its possibilities, functions and future through his works *Defence of Poesie* and *Apologie for Poetrie*. The many objections posed by the puritans of the Elizabethan age about imaginative poetry were analysed and answered by Sidney through these works.

The University Wits – Elizabethan Literature

Elizabethan literature would have been incomplete without the contributions made by group of writers who belonged to Oxford and Cambridge. They were radical in their approach and had no intentions to follow the norms set by the Church. It resulted in ambitious works that motivated drama and other forms in a great deal.

S. No	Name	Works	Notable Achievements
1	John Lyly [1553 – 1606]	Eupheus	Euphuism, a literary prose style started because of John Lyly's work – Eupheus.
		Endimion	
		Mother Bombie	
		The Woman in the Moon	
2	George Peele [1556 -1596]	The Arraignment of Paris	
		Old Wives' Tale	
		The Battle of Alcazar	
3	Robert Greene [1558-1592]	A Groatsworth of Wit	Robert Greene is said to have written his plays in the form or "Romantic Comedy". The first English writer to do so.
		The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay	
		George a green, or The Pinner of Wakefield	
		Orlando Furioso	
		Looking Glass for London and England	Looking Glass for London and England was written in collaboration with



			Thomas Lodge.
4	Thomas Lodge [1558 - 1625]	Rosalynde	Rosalynde is considered as a source for Shakespeare's <i>As You Like It</i> .
		The Wounds of Civil War	
5	Thomas Nashe [1567 – 1601]	Summer's Last Will and Testament	
		The Isle of Dogs	The Isle of Dogs is written in collaboration with Ben Jonson.
		The Unfortunate Traveller, or the Life of Jack Wilton	Life of Jack Wilton is considered as the first English historical novel.
		The Anatomy of Absurdity	
		Lenten Stuffe	
		Pierce Penniless	
6	Thomas Kyd [1558 – 1594]	The Spanish Tragedy	Founder of the genre Romantic Tragedy.
		Ur Hamlet	
		Cornelia	
		Jeronimo	
7	Christopher Marlowe [1564 – 1593]	Tamburlaine the Great	Father of English Drama
		The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus	The Morning Star of the English Drama
		The Jew of Malta	
		Edward the Second	
		Hero and Leander [poetry]	The poem was unfinished because of the sudden death of Marlowe. George Chapman completed the work.

William Shakespeare [1564 – 1616] – Elizabethan Literature

The Bard of Avon, the greatest playwright of English literature, the man who could mirror life with few words, so on and so forth – William Shakespeare needs no introduction anywhere in the world. He has written thirty eight plays and 154 sonnets in his lifetime. Most of his works are published in *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies* commonly referred to as *First Folio* [1623]. It was published by his colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell. The book contained thirty six plays, which are original to the writings of Shakespeare.



William Painter [1540 – 1595] – Elizabethan Literature

Painter is a least known author of the Elizabethan age with little contribution to the theatre or English literature. However, his most important work is translation of tales and novels that belonged to French Italian and other classic writers. He took his sources from Boccaccio, Giovanni Battista Giraldi, Herodotus, Plutarch, Queen Marguerite de Navarre, Matteo Bandello, etc. Through his work – *The Palace of Pleasure*, he compiled one hundred and one tales of great writers. These tales were an inspiration to writers like William Shakespeare, John Webster, James Shirley, Beaumont and Fletcher.

George Chapman [1559-1634] – Elizabethan Literature

A great scholar who is known for his translations of *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and the *Hymns*; he has done many other translations of the classic writers like Petrarch, Hesiod and Juvenal. He is considered as the rival poet of Shakespeare for his remarkable use of words and flow of sentences. Some of his important dramatic works are *All Fools'*, *The Gentleman Usher* and *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*. George Chapman has also written two tragedy plays in French – *The Admiral of France* and *Bussy D' Ambois*.

Sir Francis Bacon [1561 - 1626] – Elizabethan Literature

Bacon is a polymath who worked on philosophy, science, literature, oration, jury, etc. He is considered as the father of empiricism. During his lifetime, he has served in high ranking positions like Lord Chancellor and Attorney General. He always preached the importance of science over religion. His works *The Advancement of Learning*, *The Novum Organum* and *The New Atlantis* speak in one way or the other about the systems in the society and the requirement of change. However, his greatest achievements are his *Essays* that are fifty eight in number. Every essay is a masterpiece reflecting human knowledge and how man fears everything.

Michael Drayton [1563 - 1631] – Elizabethan Literature

Drayton was gifted with versatility and he was able to penetrate into every side of poetry with ease. He started his literary life with a sacred work titled *Harmony of the Church*. It was a bit of a disappointment and he reappears with pastoral verse titled *Shepherd's Garland*. After that he wrote on patriotism through *Polyolbion*. It gained him great attention and applause while his masterpiece was yet to come. His *Ballad of Agincourt* describes about the battle fought at Agincourt during the Hundred Years War. It has wonderful elements unique to the Elizabethan age.

Thomas Heywood [1575 - 1641] – Elizabethan Literature

Thomas Heywood has contributed to both Elizabethan literature and Jacobean literature. He is said to have involvement in over two hundred plays and he has authored more than twenty plays. Heywood is known for his domestic comedy where normal families suffer a tragedy because of high passions and



lust. Charles Lamb describes Thomas Heywood as “prose Shakespeare”. Heywood is well known for his works *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, *The Pleasant Comedy* and *The English Traveller*.

Ben Jonson [1572 – 1637] – Elizabethan Literature

Jonson is a controversial figure of Elizabethan age and English literature in common. He is known to slay an actor, quarrels with other dramatists and rivalry with Shakespeare. However, all of these could not mask the fact that he remains one of the greatest playwrights of all time. Ben Jonson popularized through his plays – comedy of humours. His famous plays include *Every Man in His Humour*, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, *Volpone or The Fox*, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *The Devil is an Ass*, *The Sad Shepherd or A Tale of Robin Hood* and *A Tale of a Tub*.

Other Important figures of Elizabethan literature

S. No	Name	Works	Notable Achievements
1	John Webster [1580 - 1634]	The White Devil	
		The Duchess of Malfi	
		The Devil’s Law Case	
		Appius and Virginia	
2	Cyril Tourneur [1575 – 1626]	The Atheist’s Tragedy	
		The Revenger’s Tragedy	The Revenger’s Tragedy has an ambiguity as some scholars believe it to be written by Thomas Middleton.
3	John Marston [1576 – 1634]	Antonio and Mellida	Marston is known for his violent melodramatic tragedies.
		Antonio’s Revenge	
		The Malcontent	
		The Scourge of Villany	
4	Thomas Middleton [1580 – 1627]	A Game at Chess	He has written mostly during the Jacobean period than the Elizabethan period.
		Women Beware Women	
		The Changeling	
		A mad world, my Masters	
5	Thomas Dekker	The Honest Whore	



	[1572 – 1632]		
		The Shoe-Maker's Holiday	
6	John Day [1574 - 1638]	The Parliament of Bees	
		The Isle of Gulls	
		Humour out of Breath	
		Law Tricks	
7	Beaumont and Fletcher [1584 -1616] [1579 – 1625]	Maid's Tragedy	They are called as twin souls of the drama.
		The Knight of the Burning Pestle	

During the Elizabethan era, English literature has metamorphosed from a shell into a wonderful being with creativity, imagination and limitless stories. It was not about miracle plays or mystery plays and the poetry was not about religion and the principles preached in the Church. Subjectivity increased and scrutinizing different aspects of life increased with the flourish of numerous authors. As a result, Elizabethan literature laid a great foundation for English literature and influenced hundreds and thousands of writers of the following literary periods. It is for this reason, Elizabethan era is considered as the golden age of English literature.