

## The sixteenth century

(Year 2)

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### Terminology

The sixteenth century is notable for its engagement with a phenomenon that emerged in Italy two centuries earlier: the 'Renaissance', meaning 'rebirth'. This refers to a revival of art and literature under the influence of classical models which began in Italy in the fourteenth century and which occurred between roughly 1500 and 1650 in England. Renaissance humanists were keen to emphasize cultural links with ancient Greece and Rome; 'humanist' from the Latin *humanitas* indicated learning or literature concerned with human culture, including grammar, rhetoric and poetry, and especially the study of ancient Latin and Greek classics (*OED* humanity II. 4.). In the course of your study you might come across the term 'early modern', which is sometimes used by critics in an attempt to get away from the patronizing notion that the Renaissance came just after the cultural lull of the Middle Ages, yet neither term is free of ideological implications since 'early modern' has the flaw of suggesting that everything that came earlier was before the 'modern' and thus somehow inferior.

### The printing press

There was a distinct shift in the sixteenth century towards a literature that was less exclusive than much of what had gone before. This was essentially due to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century by Johannes Gutenberg. Manuscript culture produced books that were beautifully crafted objects but they were inordinately expensive and thus exclusive. The impact of the printing press was remarkable: for the first time, books were a commodity rather than a specially commissioned, precious and exclusive work of art. Although books were still relatively expensive, printing meant that they could be produced more quickly and at a lower cost than was previously the case. The invention of the printing press had an enormous impact upon English cultural life but literature also became less exclusive because of a fresh effort to re-establish literature for English people in the vernacular, that is, the language commonly spoken by the people. There emerged an increasing number of texts translated from Latin into English, not least the Bible, and an interest in adapting foreign forms to suit an English audience. This was in no small part due to the English Reformation, which demoted Latin, the recognized language of the Roman Catholic Church, and brought about a renewed interest in English.

### More's *Utopia*

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, first published in Latin in 1516, was translated into English and published in 1551. *Utopia* is a prose work in which a fictional traveller, Raphael Hythloday, whose second name means 'dispenser of nonsense' in Greek, describes the social organization of the island of Utopia, which in Greek means 'no place' but might also be a pun on *eutopos*, meaning 'good place' (More 1992: 3). Some critics claim that Utopia constitutes a blueprint for perfect social organization but others that More meant *Utopia* as a grand joke at your (the reader's) expense, which mocks the ideal of communal ownership of wealth (see SATIRE). Certainly the text is full of contradictions and conflicts, such as the name of the island itself, which suggest that More wanted the reader to consider carefully if Utopia really is an ideal place. In 1535 More was executed for his refusal to swear to the Act of Succession and the Oath of Supremacy, which made Henry VIII and his heirs, not the Pope, head of the Church of England. It is perhaps ironic that the split from Rome that led to More's downfall was part of the process that led to the wider dissemination of his writings and all texts formerly only available in Latin.

### The Court and patrons

Before the emergence of the professional theatre industry in the late sixteenth century, literary dissemination was via the Court; therefore authors who were not aristocratic and thus wealthy and well-connected depended on patrons to promote and fund their creativity. Amongst notable sixteenth-century aristocratic courtiers and authors were Sir Philip Sidney, whose *Apology for Poetry* (sometimes called *The Defence of Poesy*) presents a philosophically informed treatise praising the virtues of poetry and poets. Arguing against Plato, who claimed that poets should be omitted from his model state, Sidney contends that the poet creates anew that which in nature is flawed: 'Her world is brazen, the poets only [that is, only poets] deliver a golden' (Sidney 2002: 85). Sidney also wrote the influential sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* and the hugely popular romance *The Arcadia*, sometimes termed *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* after his sister Mary Herbert for whom he wrote the text, or *The Old Arcadia*, to distinguish it from the revision begun by Sidney but left unfinished (Sidney 1970; 1985).

Winning favour at Court depended upon behaving according to specific rules and an important prose text from the period is Baldesar Castiglione's *The Book of The Courtier*, translated into English from Italian by Sir Thomas Hoby and published in 1561. The text outlines the basic requirements of a successful courtier: '... beside noblenesse of birth, I will have him ... by nature to have not onely a wit, and a comely shape of person and countenance, but also a certaine grace ... that shall make him at the first sight acceptable and loving unto who so beholdeth him' (Castiglione 1974: 33). These are the kinds of attributes one might expect from a lover, and a romantic frisson between

courtier and prince was fully exploited in the court of Queen Elizabeth. The female monarch, the Virgin Queen, presented herself as chaste mistress to a host of male suitors, a behaviour undoubtedly influenced by sixteenth-century love poetry, specifically the kind of poetry influenced by Francesco Petrarch.

### Petrarch

Petrarch (or 'Petrarca'), the fourteenth-century Italian poet, had an enormous influence on sixteenth-century English poetry (see POETRY). He made commonplace the convention of love poetry being addressed to a chaste lady who was the epitome of beauty and unresponsive to pleas for love. His sonnet sequence the *Rime Sparse* (or the 'scattered rhymes') became a primary canonical text in the Renaissance (Petrarch 1980). Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt were the first to introduce the sonnet into English in the early sixteenth century. In the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet the first eight lines describe a specific situation or problem and the last six provide a commentary on it or a solution. Most of Wyatt's finest poems are translations or imitations of Petrarch's sonnets but with three quatrains and a concluding couplet. In Wyatt's Sonnet 11, 'Whoso list to hunt', the speaker complains, 'Yet may I by no means my wearied mind / Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore / Fainting I follow.' Punning on the word 'deer', Wyatt tells the reader about his problem, which is unrequited love for a particular woman, and then comments on it, noting that there is no point pursuing her because

... graven with diamonds in letters plain  
There is written her fair neck round about:  
'Noli me tangere for Caesar's I am,  
And wild for to hold though I seem tame.' (Wyatt 1978: 77)

Wyatt served in the court of Henry VIII and it is thought by some that the woman being written about in this sonnet is Anne Boleyn, Henry's mistress and later his wife.

### The anti-Petrarchan tradition

Petrarch's influence was pervasive but towards the end of the sixteenth century his poetry had come to be perceived as rather old-fashioned and there was a firmly established anti-Petrarchan tradition. Shakespeare's sonnets in praise of dark beauty are part of that tradition and, unlike Petrarch's clichéd verse, contain protestations of a very sincere love. You will notice that Shakespeare undermines what the reader expects to hear about his love object by refusing to describe her in traditional ways. For example, in Sonnet 130 Shakespeare refuses to describe his lady in terms of the religious hyperbole adopted by Petrarch by denying that she is any kind of ethereal creature: 'I grant I never saw a goddess go; / My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.' But despite his refusal to flatter her – indeed perhaps because of it – Shakespeare's

poem is more heartfelt. To him she is exceptional: 'I think my love as rare' – and here he takes a swipe at the Petrarchan conventions of false flattery – 'As any she belied with false compare.' Petrarch's overworked clichés are replaced with something heartfelt and sincere.

### Spenser's *Faerie Queene*

The adoption and adaptation of older forms is evident also in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the first three books of which were published in 1590 (Spenser 2001). The poem is an epic (see EPIC) but Spenser adapts this classical form so that he can present himself as a kind of English Homer, telling stories of heroic confrontations with monsters and witches but, crucially, in a Christian context and in the English language. Although it is likely that he was influenced by his Italian sources, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and Torquato Tasso's *La Gerusalemme Liberata*, Spenser used an entirely original verse form: the Spenserian stanza. *The Faerie Queene* is an allegorical poem, which means that it has hidden meanings behind the obvious story being told. As a Christian poet, Spenser begins his epic poem with a focus on Holiness, which is the overall theme of Book 1. Given England's break with the Roman Catholic Church, many critics have interpreted this book as an allegory of Protestant England's fight against Roman Catholicism. There is a certain irony in Spenser using Italian (and thus Catholic) sources to construct a Protestant epic for an English readership but, as we have seen, it was usual in this period for writers to reshape older forms and thus make them speak in fresh ways to their readers.

### Renaissance theatre: Shakespeare and his contemporaries

The sixteenth century saw the first purpose-built theatres in England since the time of the Romans and they echoed the open-air circular style of the Roman amphitheatres. These amphitheatres were all in London and included the Rose (1587), the Swan (1595) and the Globe (1599). Both kinds of theatre were open to the public, although the considerably higher cost of entrance to the indoor theatres kept out all but the middle and upper classes. Before the emergence of the open-air theatres drama was performed either on makeshift stages built in public places such as the town square or in large private houses or public buildings which usually served another purpose. Plays available to the public – morality plays, mystery plays and miracle plays – were religious and didactic in nature whilst Latin plays, interludes and masques were performed in great houses or the universities.

We have seen the importance of patronage and gaining influence at court but this pertained to published literary works only. The emergence of professional playing companies and professional dramatists meant that a writer need worry only that his play would appeal to the theatre-going public who paid to see it. William Shakespeare was not a courtier, nor was he an aristocrat, but he

wrote plays that the public wanted to see and thus he proved a successful playwright; the professional theatre was a market and the principles of the marketplace – most importantly, supply and demand – dictated literary success or failure (see MARXISM). Like his contemporaries, Shakespeare made use of classical and Italian source material: for example, *Titus Andronicus* is indebted to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *The Comedy of Errors* to the comedy *Menaechmi* by the Roman dramatist Plautus, and *The Merchant of Venice* to an Italian collection of stories called *Il Pecorone*, meaning 'the big sheep', or 'dunce' (Shakespeare 1988: 125, 257, 425). In the sixteenth century Shakespeare wrote a prolific number of comedies, tragedies and histories and he continued writing plays, including some in collaboration with other dramatists, until his death in 1616.

William Shakespeare's plays remain popular but his contemporary playwrights are unfairly neglected, amongst them Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher and Thomas Middleton. It is not possible here to trace the achievement of all Shakespeare's sixteenth-century dramatic contemporaries so Marlowe will serve as an example. In the 1590s Marlowe offered real competition to Shakespeare and was, in fact, already an established name when Shakespeare was just beginning to make his mark. Marlowe differed quite markedly from Shakespeare: he was university educated and had a reputation for religious and sexual radicalism. It is difficult not to be influenced by Marlowe's biography when seeing or reading his drama because, like the man himself, his plays are exciting, challenging and, even (perhaps especially) today, have the ability to cause controversy: the anti-hero Tamburlaine claims he is known as 'the scourge and wrath of God' (Marlowe 1981: part 1, 3.3.44) and burns a copy of the Koran on stage (Marlowe 1981: part 2, 5.1.171–84), whilst in *Dr Faustus* the devil takes Faustus's soul in exchange for worldly power (Marlowe 1993). It is difficult to know whether, had he lived longer and written more plays, Marlowe would today present a serious challenge to Shakespeare as the best known and most admired playwright of the sixteenth century. It is arguable, however, that, like Ben Jonson, whose best plays were written and staged in the seventeenth century, his tendency to display classical learning, in particular his repeated use of Latin, would appeal less to a modern audience than Shakespeare's ability to present the erudite in a more accessible manner and without apparent effort.

### Summary

The sixteenth century saw a rebirth of classical models and an appropriation of Italian forms but with a focus on reshaping them for an English-speaking, Protestant audience. Classical influence was also apparent with the building of England's first theatres since Roman times but, crucially, the plays written and performed in these spaces were English. The invention of the printing press saw a significant rise in the availability of printed books and, later in the century, literary dissemination shifted from the insular and privileged Court to the public stage, where success was dictated not by birth, wealth or

connections but by the market. These phenomena indicate a democratization of literary and dramatic art, just as there had been a democratization of the Bible via its translation from Latin into English. Although literary works, even those written in English, were still only available to the educated minority who could read, the plays of Marlowe, Shakespeare and others were available to all.

### The sixteenth century: sample syllabus

- Week 1 An introduction to the major events of the Renaissance
- Week 2 More's *Utopia*: manifesto or satire?
- Week 3 Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*: theories of literature
- Week 4 Castiglione's *The Courtier*: theories of manners
- Week 5 Sonnets by Petrarch: traditions of romantic love poetry
- Week 6 Sonnets by Shakespeare: challenging traditions
- Week 7 *The Faerie Queene* Book 1: allegory and holiness
- Week 8 *The Faerie Queene* Book 3: allegory and chastity
- Week 9 *The Merchant of Venice*: Shakespeare's sources (1)
- Week 10 *The Comedy of Errors*: Shakespeare's sources (2)
- Week 11 Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*: Shakespeare's contemporaries and tragedy
- Week 12 Jonson's *The Alchemist*: Shakespeare's contemporaries and comedy

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#### (b) Further reading

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## The seventeenth century

[Year 2]

Hugh Adlington

The seventeenth century is a golden age in the history of English literature. From the glories of Shakespeare's great tragedies to the stunning achievement of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), the era oozes a literary confidence and ambition that few other periods can match. But the centrality of the seventeenth century in any degree course in English literature is not only due to the brilliance of particular plays or poems. It is also due to the fact that the world changed beyond recognition between 1600 and 1700, in politics, religion, society, art and knowledge itself. Fierce battles for political power and religious freedom broke out in the civil wars in Britain (1642–8), and in the Thirty Years' War in continental Europe (1618–48). Bold new ideas in astronomy, medicine, philosophy and economics – pioneered by famous names such as Galileo, Newton, Harvey, Descartes and Bacon – overturned centuries-old customs and traditions. Technology spurred a host of advances: the printing press widened access to knowledge; the compass aided exploration and colonization; improved farming methods and better sanitation (after the Great Plague of 1665) led to a surge in population. Each of these seismic changes left its imprint on the English literature of the period; each contributed to the verbal energy, stylistic variety and lightning wit characteristic of seventeenth-century writing.

How much of this can you expect to cover in a 12-week course? Not very much, is the short answer. But for a more tangible sense of what to expect, see the sample syllabus at the end of this chapter. In what follows, you will be

introduced to some of the most important authors, works and topics dealt with on that syllabus. A list of further reading is intended to guide your independent study.

## Jacobean and Caroline drama

From the outset of your course, you will consider how broad cultural trends are reflected in particular literary genres (or 'kinds'). One of the most important of these genres is Jacobean drama (see DRAMA). Through close study of the language and structure of plays such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), you will discover a defining characteristic of the drama of this period: namely, a persistent fascination with what it means to be human, and an equally persistent inquiry into the value and limits of verbal art. 'You taught me language,' Caliban retorts to Prospero in *The Tempest*, 'and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse' (Shakespeare 1999: I.ii.364–5). Other kinds of values and limits are also being tested in these plays. Inspired in part by accounts of sea voyages to the newly established colonies in America ('The New World'), *The Tempest* is as much an exploration of old and new habits of thought as it is of a particular place on a map.

Similarly, in *The Duchess of Malfi* Webster's brilliant poetry plumbs the depths of human immorality in an exposé of avarice, lust and cruelty. Webster's bold heroine refuses to submit to male authority, and is brutally murdered as a consequence. Thus Webster's play satisfies his audience's taste for both lurid violence and moral courage. And, most characteristic of Jacobean drama, the threat of divine retribution hangs over all: 'Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out: / ... blood flies upwards, and bedews the heavens' (Webster 1972: IV.ii. 260–2). If you have read or seen Christopher Marlowe's tragedy *Dr Faustus* (1604), you may recognize here an echo of the doomed Faustus's despairing cry, 'O I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down? / See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!' (Marlowe 1989: 13.71–2). To recognize such echoes is to begin to appreciate the ways in which authors imitated one another in the period, when the concept of authorial virtuosity lay as much in the skill of adaptation and translation, as in what we might understand today as 'originality'.

## Lyric poetry: Donne and Herbert

Following Jacobean drama, many courses look at another of the period's great literary achievements: lyric poetry (see LYRIC). In the 1590s, poets such as Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and Shakespeare had written sequences of 14-line sonnets, drawing on classical and Italian poetic models (such as Petrarch), and dealing chiefly with the topics of love, death and literary fame. In the early seventeenth century a new kind of poetic voice emerged. Colloquial, ardent and fiercely intelligent, poems by John Donne such as 'The Sun Rising', 'The Canonization' and 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' captivated