

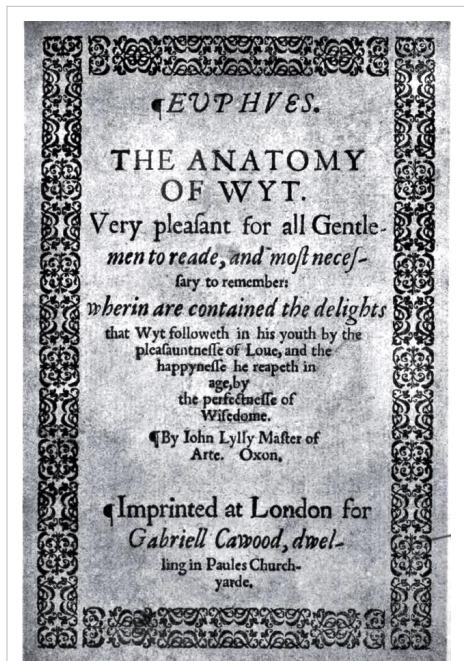
Elizabethan literature

The term **Elizabethan literature** refers to the English literature produced during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558 - 1603).

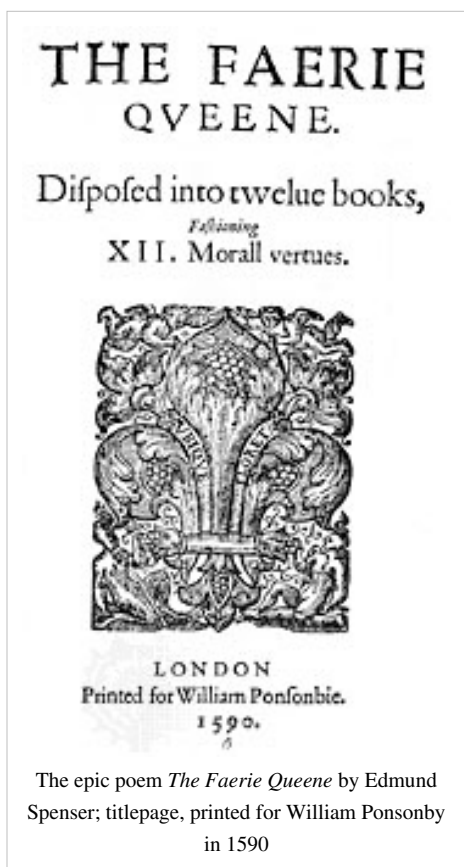
The Elizabethan era saw a great flourishing of literature, especially in the field of drama. The Italian Renaissance had rediscovered the ancient Greek and Roman theatre, and this was instrumental in the development of the new drama, which was then beginning to evolve apart from the old mystery and miracle plays of the Middle Ages. The Italians were particularly inspired by Seneca (a major tragic playwright and philosopher, the tutor of Nero) and Plautus (its comic clichés, especially that of the boasting soldier had a powerful influence on the Renaissance and after). However, the Italian tragedies embraced a principle contrary to Seneca's ethics: showing blood and violence on the stage. In Seneca's plays such scenes were only acted by the characters. But the English playwrights were intrigued by Italian model: a conspicuous community of Italian actors had settled in London and Giovanni Florio had brought much of the Italian language and culture to England.

Following earlier Elizabethan plays such as *Gorboduc* by Sackville & Norton and *The Spanish Tragedy* by Kyd that was to provide much material for *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare stands out in this period as a poet and playwright as yet unsurpassed. Shakespeare was very gifted and incredibly versatile, and he surpassed "professionals" as Robert Greene who mocked this "shake-scene" of low origins. Though most dramas met with great success, it is in his later years (marked by the early reign of James I) that he wrote what have been considered his greatest plays: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, a tragicomedy that inscribes within the main drama a brilliant pageant to the new king.

Shakespeare also popularized the English sonnet which made significant changes to Petrarch's model. The sonnet was introduced into English by Thomas Wyatt in the early 16th century. Poems intended to be set to music as songs, such as by Thomas Campion, became popular as printed literature was disseminated more widely in households. See *English Madrigal School*. Other important figures in Elizabethan theatre include Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont. Had Marlowe (1564-1593) not been stabbed at twenty-nine in a tavern brawl, says Anthony Burgess, he might have rivalled, if not equalled Shakespeare himself for his poetic gifts. Marlowe's subject matter focuses more on the moral drama of the Renaissance man than any other thing. Marlowe was fascinated and terrified by the new frontiers opened



Title page of *Euphues*, by John Lyly



The epic poem *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser; titlepage, printed for William Ponsonby in 1590

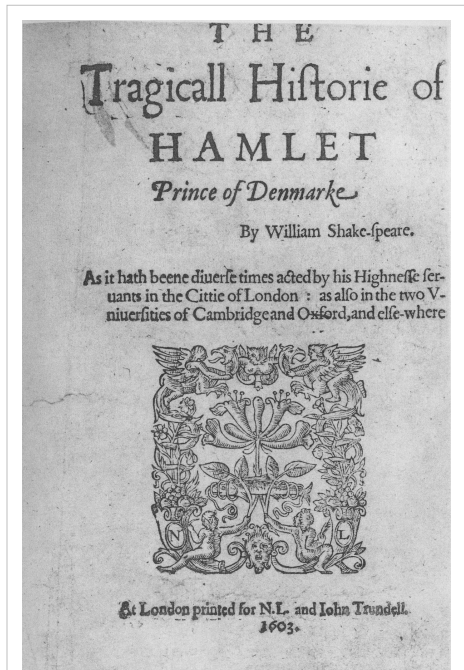
by modern science. Drawing

on German lore, he introduced Dr. Faustus to England, a scientist and magician who is obsessed by the thirst of knowledge and the desire to push man's technological power to its limits. His dark heroes may have something of Marlowe himself, whose untimely death remains a mystery. He was known for being an atheist, leading a lawless life, keeping many mistresses, consorting with ruffians: living the 'high life' of London's underworld.

Beaumont and Fletcher are less-known, but it is almost sure that they helped Shakespeare write some of his best dramas, and were quite popular at the time. It is also at this time that the city comedy genre develops. In the later 16th century English poetry was characterised by elaboration of language and extensive allusion to classical myths. The most important poets of this era include Edmund Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney. Elizabeth herself, a product of Renaissance humanism, produced occasional poems such as *On Monsieur's Departure*. The most famous themes of the Elizabethan Drama are: Revenge, Sensationalism, Melodrama and Vengeance.

The following is an incomplete list of writers considered part of this period.

- William Shakespeare
- Christopher Marlowe
- Ben Jonson
- Edmund Spenser
- John Fletcher
- Thomas Kyd
- Thomas Middleton
- Thomas Nashe
- John Webster
- John Donne
- Philip Sidney



William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* Q1 title page,
1603

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