Elizabethan Drama

Of all the arts in Elizabethan England, drama was the most popular, and left behind the most enduring legacy. Not a single theater existed in England until well after Elizabeth I (1533–1603) took the throne in 1558. Within two decades of the building of the first major theater in the mid-1570s, however, a huge and varied body of Elizabethan comedy, tragedy, revenge plays, and history chronicles arose. Rising Elizabethan dramatists like John Lyly (1554–1606), Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593), and Thomas Kyd (1558–1594) surpassed the limits of known drama—European theater and the classical drama of ancient Greece and Rome—by portraying complex political, psychological, and historical themes. The most noted playwright of the English language, William Shakespeare (1564–1616), was only twelve years old when the first theater was built in England. With his plays Shakespeare brought Elizabethan drama—and English culture in general—to unexpected new heights.

At the beginning of the Elizabethan Era, the period associated with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603) that is often considered to be a golden age in English history, most English drama was based on two ancient genres: mystery plays and morality plays. Mystery plays were simple enactments of scenes from the Bible. Performed in churches or churchyards, they were popular on religious holidays like Christmas and Easter. Morality plays were allegories (stories that represent abstract ideas or principles as characters, figures, or events) that depicted a struggle between the forces of good and evil. The characters of these plays had names like Justice or Vice. They did not have developed personalities because they were intended to represent either a moral virtue or a form of evil rather than a flesh-and-blood human being. Morality plays could be very long—some lasted an entire day—and their goal was to improve their audiences’ moral behavior.

By the mid-sixteenth century new variations on morality plays had arisen, reflecting the audiences’ growing desire to be entertained.
Playwrights wanted to amuse their audiences rather than preach to them. They added farce (comedy that presents absurd characters and scenes in order to make the audience laugh) or current political events, thinly disguised in order to avoid trouble with the authorities. Some plays incorporated the local events of the village in which they were being performed, presenting hastily written plots about the latest scandal or catastrophe. This timely, relevant subject matter appealed to the villagers. Often the characters representing vice or evil were given
the largest roles so that they could create more chaos on stage in the spirit of fun. The plays in the early years of Elizabeth’s reign blended different types of drama: morality play, farce, English history play, and pastoral drama, which idealized country settings. The plays were often secular (non-religious) and much shorter than the morality plays of the past. They were rarely written down, however, so today we know about them only from descriptions in letters and journals from the time.

Early acting companies

By the 1550s plays were almost exclusively being performed by acting companies—small groups of four to ten adult men and possibly a boy or two. Women were not permitted to act on stage until long after the Elizabethan Era, so female parts were played by boys or men dressed as women. The acting companies traveled from town to town carrying their stage scenery and costumes in wagons. Although most townspeople were eager to be entertained, the local authorities and religious leaders viewed the acting companies as a threat to the morals, health, and safety of their towns. At the time actors were not viewed as working artists; they were usually scorned for being homeless and unemployed. Indeed, though some acting troops were honest professionals, others were notorious for committing petty crimes and behaving improperly.

In 1572 Elizabeth banned all companies that were not bound to a patron, a nobleman who was responsible for them. This law made it difficult for the troublemakers to stay in business, since no one would sponsor them. All troops soon became known by their patron’s name. Some of the major acting companies in the early 1570s were Leicester’s Men, the company that worked for Robert Dudley (Earl of Leicester; 1532–1588), Lord Oxford’s Men, Lord Admiral’s Men, Lord Buckingham’s Men, and so forth. On special occasions these acting companies performed at their patron’s estates to entertain guests. But the noble patrons did not financially support the acting troops, and to earn a living the companies spent most of their time traveling throughout England, performing for any town that agreed to let them set up their makeshift stage in the yard of a local inn. Local farmers and working people, as well as the upper classes, eagerly gathered to watch, paying what they could when a hat was passed around to collect money after the performance.
Regulating the plays

The Reformation—the sixteenth-century religious movement that aimed to reform the Roman Catholic Church and resulted in the establishment of Protestant churches—created an altogether new environment for drama. During the reign of the Catholic Mary I (1516–1558; reigned 1553–58), mystery and morality plays had been popular, and the Bible was viewed as the most appropriate source for drama. When Elizabeth took the throne and made Anglicanism (a form of Protestantism) the national religion, she was concerned that religious plays would be used to stir English Catholics against the Anglican church and herself. In 1559 Elizabeth prohibited all plays that were not licensed by the crown. Drama quickly became more secular. In accordance with Protestant beliefs, in the 1570s she banned all mystery plays in which men played the role of God, which were considered by Protestants to be idolatry, or the worship of religious icons (sacred
images, statues, objects, and monuments). Many other religious plays were banned, particularly those that allowed too much freedom of the imagination in dealing with Bible stories, which many Protestants believed should be understood literally, that is, according to the exact words of the Bible. The effect of this regulation was to shift the dramatic arts away from religion.

In 1574 Elizabeth placed her Master of the Revels in charge of licensing all plays performed in England. The Master of the Revels was an officer of the state who worked for the Lord Chamberlain, the chief officer of the royal household. The queen’s Master of Revels had the authority to censor all English plays. He could ban entire plays or delete parts of plays that were considered objectionable, and it was his job to eliminate anything that seemed to be critical of the queen or the Anglican church. For a time the crown licensed only a few acting troops, but the demand for plays in London was so great that competing acting companies arose and prospered despite the regulations.

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**A Taste for Violence**

The English population in the mid-sixteenth century had a large appetite for blood and gore in their entertainment. They did not consider the theater as high art, but rather as a spectator entertainment along the lines of bearbaiting and cockfighting.

In a bearbaiting a bear was tied to a stake in the middle of a ring, and bound with tethers that allowed the bear to reach only a short distance. The stagers of the bearbaiting set packs of large dogs loose to viciously attack the bear. Despite the tethers, the bear often killed or disabled dogs that were not quick enough to escape its deadly claws. Faster dogs, though, brutally tore up the bear. The bears were used over and over and became well known to the crowds, who cheered them on by name. Sometimes the dogs would kill the bear as the crowds breathlessly watched.

In cockfighting the owners of roosters tied sharp blades to the birds’ feet and then placed them in a pit to fight. The birds would continue to maul each other with their blades until one of them died. The spectators usually bet large sums on their favorite bird.

Bearbaiting and cockfighting were extremely popular among most of the English people, including the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate. Queen Elizabeth enjoyed watching bearbaiting, and she ordered it performed for visiting diplomats from Europe as a special treat. Bearbaiting pits were situated close to the early theaters. It was not unusual for a family to divide their holiday afternoon between watching a bearbaiting and attending a play. To compete, the plays often provided violent action such as sword fights, murder, and other bloody crimes onstage.
London and the first theaters

By late sixteenth century London was a bustling city of about two hundred thousand people. The city had become the center of a thriving capitalist economy. (Capitalism is an economic system in which private individuals or companies own and invest in the country’s businesses and industries with little government control.) There was a large demand for entertainment among all segments of London’s population—working people, merchants, and nobles. Intelligent investors quickly learned there was money to be made in the theater.

In 1576 actor James Burbage (1531–1597) decided to build a permanent structure in which plays could be staged. He called it simply The Theater. The Theater was a huge amphitheater (a large semi-circular outdoor theater with seats rising in tiers from a central acting area), capable of holding about three thousand spectators. It had a very large outdoor stage with a small, enclosed room at the back, in which the actors changed costumes and waited for their cues to go on stage. The stage was surrounded on all sides by a yard into which standing spectators crowded for the low admission of one penny. These crowds ate, drank, talked, and moved around in the standing yard as the play was performed. It was necessary for the acting to be extremely bold and loud to compete with the commotion in the yard. For those who could afford higher priced tickets, there were three tiers of seating along the walls above the standing yard. For the wealthy, there were enclosed boxes over the stage.

Playhouses were not allowed within the city because authorities viewed the theaters as a cause of lawlessness, neglect of work, and the spread of the plague, a deadly and highly contagious disease. London’s city leaders were mostly Puritans (a group of Protestants that followed strict religious standards), and believed that acting in itself was ungodly. Puritans considered it a sin to play any role other than one’s own God-given identity. But even with the flood of Puritan sermons and pamphlets against the theater, the London public could not get enough of it. Because of the city’s restrictions, investors simply built theaters outside of city limits but within walking distance.

The Theater did so well that five more amphitheater playhouses were built in areas surrounding London: the Curtain in 1577, the Rose in 1587, the Swan in 1595, the Globe in 1599, and the Fortune in 1600. The Swan, Rose, and Globe were all built across the Thames River in the Bankside district. The amphitheater playhouse neighborhoods, much to the concern of the Puritans, were filled with taverns, gambling dens, and...
houses of prostitution, as well as bearbaiting and cockfighting pits. The neighborhoods became notorious for petty crimes such as picking pockets and fist fighting, but crowds continued to fill the theaters anyway.

**Theater for the upper classes only**

The large amphitheaters outside the city attracted people of all classes, but these were not the only places where dramas were performed. The most prestigious site for drama was the royal court. Elizabeth was extremely fond of theater. Initially her favorite nobles tried to amuse her by presenting their own plays, but as the London theater improved the queen preferred the professionals. In 1583 Elizabeth instructed her Master of the Revels to bring together a company of the top actors in England. Leading actors were selected from all the good acting companies and these became the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. For actors nothing promised a brighter or more lucrative future than being selected to play in the royal court.
Elite audiences might also attend plays in the halls of schools, universities, and law courts. Young boys at the Chapel Royal and St. Paul’s Cathedral choir schools in London began to perform plays around 1575. Higher admission was charged at these smaller and more intimate indoor halls than at the amphitheaters. The audiences tended to be educated and wealthy, and the plays were more likely to be based on the Greek and Roman classics, using highly elaborate language. Some were even performed in Latin. Because of regulations against public playhouses within the city of London, private theaters were built on former monastery and church grounds that were not under the control of the city authorities.

The acting companies
In 1578 the queen, trying to keep the theater under control, licensed only six acting companies: the Children of the Chapel Royal, the Children of St. Paul’s, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Lord Warwick’s Men, Leicester’s Men, and Essex’s Men. These companies, and others that arose later, became competitive businesses. Most companies had been formed by a core group of actors who had invested in them. These investors were called sharers, or partners, and they divided up the profits of the company among themselves. Though the sharers were often the principal actors in the company, they hired other actors as well. Hoping to compete with other companies, the sharers hired writers to create entertaining and popular plays and searched for top-quality actors. Every actor in the company had a specialty: some played clowns, some played warriors, and some played women. All actors were expected to be able to sing, dance, and do their own stunts in battle scenes. By the 1580s the acting companies that had survived the competition had become highly professional.

Playwrights: The University Wits
For centuries the purpose of England’s two large universities, Cambridge and Oxford, had been to educate young men who were preparing for the clergy. By the 1570s, though, increasing numbers of middle-class young men were attending college, far too many for all of them to enter careers in the church. The growing theater industry presented a new opportunity for some of the recent university graduates. By the late sixteenth century the theater companies produced new plays on an almost daily basis; by one estimate, at least fifteen hundred plays were produced during the Elizabethan Era. Theater companies sought writers who could quickly
write entertaining plays. Becoming a professional playwright was suddenly an acceptable way for educated young men to earn a living. It is important to note, however, that university-educated young gentlemen would never consider acting in a theater company or participating in the business aspect of the company, as this was considered beneath their social standing.

A small group of top professional playwrights, known as the University Wits, arose from 1584 to 1594. These young men developed the signature characteristics of Elizabethan drama. Included in this group were: John Lyly, George Peele (c. 1556–1596), Robert Greene (1558–1592), Thomas Kyd, and Christopher Marlowe. Lyly had made a name for himself with his prose fiction (see Chapter 9). In the 1580s he became an assistant director of the child acting company of St. Paul’s Cathedral. He also worked for the Queen’s Men, and he wrote plays for both companies. In his early dramas Lyly used his highly elaborate style, but in his later works he began to experiment with the more natural manner of ancient Roman comedy. (A comedy is a play written in a light and amusing manner that presents the struggles and eventual successes of everyday heroes as they overcome ordinary problems.) Though Lyly is considered only a minor playwright today, he was nevertheless a pioneer in the development of the romantic comedy and a strong influence on the playwrights who followed him.

George Peele brought a different set of standards to English theater. He had a strong interest in pageantry, derived from his father’s work as a designer of pageants, or dramatic presentations that often depict a historical, biblical, or traditional event. His plays, often written for church events, can be seen as attempts to match spectacle and poetry to dramatic action, and he was known for both history chronicles (plays based on historic people or events) and biblical plays.

Robert Greene’s best-known plays, *The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and *The Scottish History of James the Fourth*, are a blend of humor, myth, history, and fairy-tale. They are notable for creating a strong sense of the specific world in which the play takes place. This world, though fanciful and idealized, is recognizably Elizabethan.

**Thomas Kyd**

Thomas Kyd produced his most significant (and only surviving) work, *The Spanish Tragedy*, sometime between 1583 and 1589. This extremely
popular play did much to shape the great tragedies to come. Tragedy is serious drama, usually featuring an admirable but flawed hero who undergoes a momentous struggle that ends in a devastating downfall. Tragedy had developed in ancient Greece and Rome, but had not yet found popularity in Europe. Kyd found his model for the *The Spanish Tragedy*. 

**Title Page of The Spanish Tragedy by Thomas Kyd.**

MASTER AND FELLOWS OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.
Tragedy in the tragedies of the ancient Roman playwright Seneca (c. 4 BCE –65 CE), whose bloody chronicles of royal family history were well known among Elizabethans. In Kyd’s play a father, driven mad by grief over his son’s murder, plans revenge. He stages a play in which the murderers are enlisted as actors. In a sword-fight scene in this play-within-the-play the murderers are actually stabbed to death before an unsuspecting audience’s eyes. The father then relates to the audience the story of his son’s murder. He then bites out his own tongue before killing himself. Kyd’s play was the first Elizabethan example of a popular genre that became known as the revenge tragedy, a play concerned with the theme of vengeance for a past wrong—usually murder. Hamlet, Shakespeare’s famous (and only) revenge play, is thought to be taken from a play Kyd wrote known as Ur-Hamlet (or “original Hamlet”) that has not survived.

The Spanish Tragedy is viewed as a crude example of Elizabethan tragedy today. Its speeches are very artificial and its gory violence is similar to today’s bloody horror films. But it was immensely popular in its own time. It gave the English audience the gore it demanded, and at the same time presented the downfall of hated enemies, the Spanish, with whom the English were at war at the time. Kyd’s play glorifies England as God’s chosen place on Earth.

Christopher Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe was the son of a shoemaker who, with the help of a scholarship, obtained his master’s degree at Cambridge in 1587. Marlowe associated with some influential members of the court, such as explorer and statesman Walter Raleigh (1552–1618) and poet Edmund Spenser (c. 1552–1599), and he was closely acquainted with the queen’s secretary of state, Francis Walsingham (1532–1590). Many historians believe that Marlowe was one of Walsingham’s spies, working undercover to expose Catholic plots against the queen, but this has not been proved. In his short life of twenty-nine years, Marlowe became known for his wild, nonconforming ways. He was an avowed atheist, or someone who does not believe in God, and he was said to have openly promoted homosexuality. At a young age he was involved in killing a man, though this was eventually determined an act of self defense.

The six or seven plays Marlowe managed to write before his early death were highly successful. In 1587 his play Tamburlaine was first staged in one of the London theaters. Its hero, Tamburlaine, is a shepherd
who forms a gang of warriors. He stops at nothing to fulfill his ambition for power. Tamburlaine becomes a mighty conqueror of several kingdoms. Even after his successful advancement from peasant to ruler, he continues to conquer distant territories. Tamburlaine declares that, though he was born a peasant, he was meant to rule. His success in conquering monarchs who inherited their power by a claim of divine right calls into question the very basis of the English power system. In Elizabeth’s time it was considered treason to question the divine right of the monarch. Nonetheless, this bloody and violent play was extremely popular with English audiences. After the first part of Tamburlaine met with great success, a sequel followed.

*Tamburlaine* is remembered not only for its drama, but also for being the first English tragedy to successfully use blank verse. Blank verse is a type of poetry with regular meter (the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables) but no rhyme. In English the meter most commonly used in blank verse was iambic pentameter, a poetic line that contains five iambic units called feet. An iambic foot consists of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, as in the sound of da-DUM. In the following lines of blank verse from *Tamburlaine, Part One*, Act IV, Scene ii, the stressed syllable of the iambic unit is in bold:

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His spear, his shield, his horse, his arm our plumes,
And jetty feathers, men ace death and hell;
Without respect of sex, degree or age,
He razeth all his foes with fire and sword.
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The repetitive sounds of the iambic units created a chant-like sound that elevated the language above the sound of everyday speech and was thus appropriate for the solemn tone of tragedy. Marlowe varied the rhythm when he wanted to bring the tone down to a more humble or uncertain level. Blank verse had been used before in English poetry, but Marlowe so greatly improved it that it came to be known as “Marlowe’s mighty line.” Well into the next century blank verse was the dominant form for English tragedy.

Marlowe went on to write several other notable plays, including *The Jew of Malta*, after which Shakespeare modeled his *The Merchant of Venice*. Doctor Faustus, generally considered Marlowe’s greatest work, was probably also his last. Its central figure, a scholar who feels he already knows everything available to human learning, attempts to gain the ultimate knowledge and power by selling his soul to the devil. The high
point of the play comes in the portrayal of the hero’s final moments, as he awaits the powers of darkness that demand his soul.

Although earlier English dramatists had achieved success in the field of comedy, Marlowe and Kyd made the first significant advances in tragedy. Unlike Kyd’s rather crude dramatic lines, however, Marlowe’s blank verse proved remarkably effective. Marlowe’s poetic line and his drama earned him the title of the greatest dramatist in England—until the almost immediate rise of Shakespeare.

**Shakespeare**

William Shakespeare was born six years after Elizabeth took the throne, in the prosperous market town of Stratford-upon-Avon. Little is known about Shakespeare’s early life, but by 1592 he had apparently begun building a reputation in the London theater. Around this time Shakespeare wrote some of his early plays, such as his first tragedy *Titus Andronicus*; the comedies *The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, and Love’s Labour’s Lost*; and the history series, *Henry VI (Parts 1 and 2)* and *Richard III*. The plays were not published; he wrote a handwritten working draft for the actors.

In 1594 Shakespeare became the principal writer for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. The Lord Chamberlain’s Men became the foremost London acting company, performing at Elizabeth’s court on thirty-two occasions between 1594 and 1603, whereas their chief rivals, the Lord Admiral’s Men, made only twenty appearances at court during these years. Most historians attribute the success of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men to the fact that, after joining the group in 1594, Shakespeare wrote for no other company.

Shakespeare produced a steady assortment of plays between 1589 and 1613. Like most playwrights of his time, he rarely wrote original story lines. He took his plots and characters from ancient Greek and Roman stories, modern European plays, folklore, and history. Shakespeare wrote in four dramatic categories: comedy, history, tragedy, and romance, or literary works about improbable events involving characters that are quite different from ordinary people. Yet for Shakespeare the lines between these categories were not firm. There is comedy mixed in with his tragedy and often a dark side to his comedies. Some of his histories are considered tragedies, while the romances are often grouped with the comedies. His plays are known for their side plots that are
sometimes more interesting than the main plots. In addition, his plays appeal to people from all walks of life, from peasants to nobles.

**Comedies**

Shakespeare’s comedies of the period 1596–1602 included *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*. These plays focus on themes of courtship and marriage. Though most of
the romantic comedies are taken from Italian sources, Shakespeare introduced his own inventions to the plots. They almost always hinge on a case of mistaken identity or some other type of mistake. Some of these mistakes are caused when a female character takes on a male identity.

Another feature of Shakespeare’s comedies are the imaginary realms, such as the forest of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, that provide an escape from the restrictions of society, particularly the law and the social hierarchy. In the relative freedom of such places, conflicts are resolved, permitting a happy ending that typically involves marriage and a renewed society. The comedies have been some of Shakespeare’s most popular plays throughout the centuries. Shakespeare’s dark comedies, including *Troilus and Cressida*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*, are characterized by much more serious themes and dark tones.

**History plays**

Shakespeare’s history plays reflect his reliance on two principal sources: Edward Hall’s *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (1548) and Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irlande* (1587). Both works promote the belief that an act of divine (God’s) will unified England under Tudor rule, starting with Elizabeth’s grandfather, Henry VII, in 1485 and ending with her death in 1603. Eight of Shakespeare’s ten history plays collectively trace the period of English monarchy from the fourteenth century to the emergence of the Tudors. They are commonly grouped in two sets: the first contains the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*; the second, depicting chronologically earlier events but written later in Shakespeare’s career, includes *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*.

The second history series is considered the most successful. The series begins in *Richard II* when the forceful nobleman Bolingbroke deposes the weak King Richard II. It continues through the two parts of *Henry IV*, in which the wonderfully amoral and fat knight Falstaff accompanies the rebellious Prince Hal, Bolingbroke’s son, in a series of petty crimes and unprincely antics. In *Henry V* Hal blossoms into England’s honest and valiant king and leads a newly unified England to triumph in a battle with France. The audience feels satisfied with the heroic king in the end, but at the same time many feel deprived of Falstaff who, though dishonest and amoral, was the source of human bonding and joy in the earlier plays. The character Falstaff is acclaimed as one of Shakespeare’s most imaginative comic characterizations. English legend has it that Elizabeth liked
Falstaff so well in the history series she asked Shakespeare to write another play featuring him, and the result was *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Though the second history series seems to support the divine right of the Tudors to reign over England, according to some critics the plays have the opposite effect, subtly exposing the defects of divine-right monarchy. Elizabeth herself was aware of this. In 1601 statesman Robert Devereux (Earl of Essex; 1566–1601), staged an ill-fated uprising against the queen. Some of Essex’s followers arranged a performance of *Richard II* in the hope that Shakespeare’s depiction of the removal of an unfit monarch would generate support for their cause. Elizabeth, upon hearing of the performance, angrily cried, as quoted by Stephen Greenblatt in *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*: “I am Richard II. Know ye not that?”

**Tragedies**

Shakespeare’s tragedies differ greatly from one another, but many share a few notable features. Usually the protagonist’s best and most heroic traits are what destroy him. Even in the darkest tragedy there is a mix of comic and tragic characters. Politics are ever-present in Shakespeare’s tragedies, and though the events are always presented in a different time or setting (to avoid censorship or even criminal charges), many of the tragedies’ political themes are recognizably Elizabethan.

Critics have labeled four of Shakespeare’s tragedies as the great tragedies: *Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth,* and *Othello*. Special mention should be made of Shakespeare’s much earlier tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, which remains one of the most frequently performed Shakespearean dramas. The great tragedies were written during Shakespeare’s last decade as a playwright. As he got older Shakespeare seems to have become less willing to depict humans as all good or all bad. His heroes of the later tragedies are dominated by passions that are not strictly noble. What destroys the hero is what is best about him, yet the best qualities in Macbeth, a power-hungry king-killer, or Othello, who is lost to his obsessive sexual jealousy, are not as sympathetic as Romeo’s overwhelming love for Juliet. In these later tragedies Shakespeare depicts a world in disorder, in which evil is as likely to dominate as goodness.

**Romances**

A final group of plays are called the romances. *Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale,* and *The Tempest* share their conventions with the tragicomedy, a
popular form of Elizabethan play that fell into both the tragedy and comedy categories. Like his comedies Shakespeare’s romances end on a happy note, but they are solemn in tone and they focus more on the human community as a whole than on the individual characters of the play. Romance characters, like those of the old morality plays, tend to represent an aspect of human life rather than embodying complex personalities like Shakespeare’s other characters. Resolution of the romance is often reached through supernatural forces that the characters do not understand.

Shakespeare lived his life without leaving much trace of who he was or what he was like, but so did many other writers of his time. But thanks to two of his actors, who published Shakespeare’s plays in the First Folio, his plays have not been lost to history. Despite this mystery surrounding his life, Shakespeare’s plays are the supreme example of the golden era of the arts in Elizabethan times. They are considered so important, in fact, that the Elizabethan period is frequently called the age of Shakespeare.

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