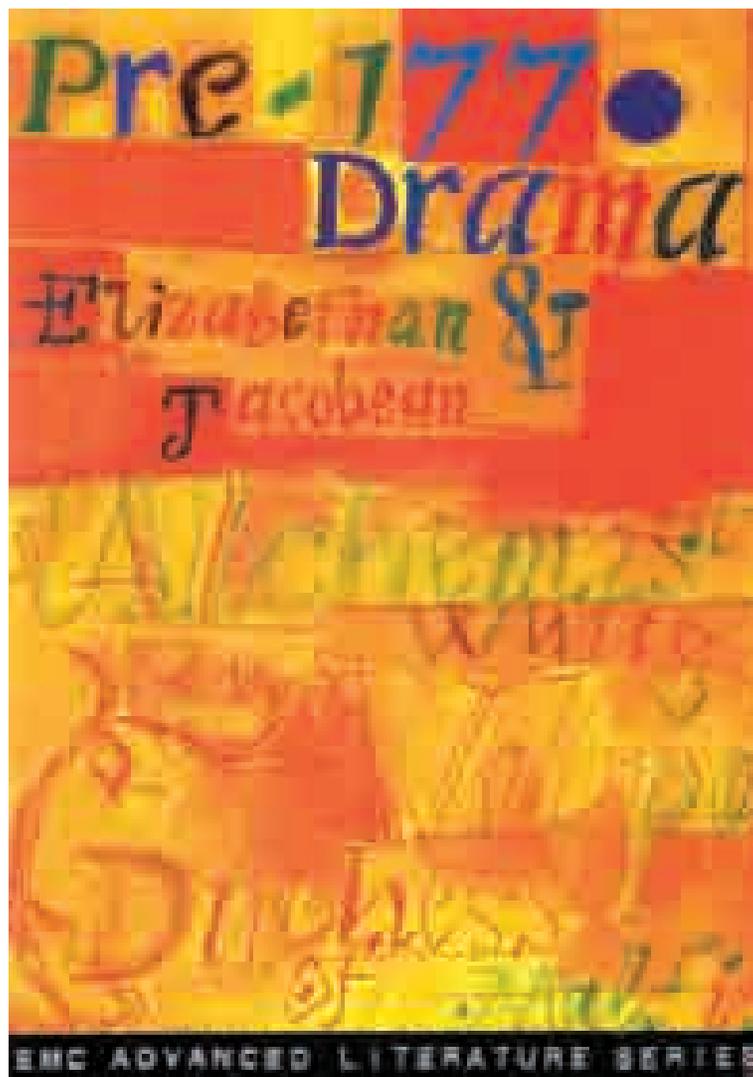


# Contexts & Genre from Pre-1770 Drama



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# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama

## An introduction to the age

In this unit you will:

- gain an overview of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods and the contrasts between them
- begin to think about the idea of the 'context' of literature and explore how useful and relevant it is to developing an interpretation of the play you are studying for AS or A2
- read and interpret paintings, just as one reads and interprets literary texts.

### A portrait of Elizabeth – what it can tell you about the Elizabethan Age

- In groups, look at the painting of Queen Elizabeth I on page 2. Jot down your first ideas about it.
- Share your thoughts as a class, then record agreed ideas about the painting in the first column of a chart like the one below, numbering each point made.

Portrait of Elizabeth I	Elizabethan Age	Portrait of James I	Jacobean Age

- In your group, look at the quotations you have been given about the Elizabethan Age. See whether you can match any of these statements to your points about the portrait. Use the statements to help you further develop your response to the portrait.
- The painting of Elizabeth has been described in the ways listed below. Choose at least one detail from the painting to support each description.
  - It represents the state 'reinforcing Protestantism'.
  - It represents 'majesty' and a 'potent and victorious monarch'.
  - It represents the 'feminine'.
  - It represents 'naval power' and 'the securing of English boundaries'.
  - It represents the conquering of 'the forces of evil'.
  - It represents the 'economic success' of the Elizabethan era.
  - It represents 'England's dominion of the seas' and 'plans for imperialist expansion into the New World'.
- Share your ideas as a class, then fill in the second column of the chart with adjectives and phrases that seem to you to sum up key aspects of the Elizabethan Age.

# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama



The Armada Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I by George Gower, 1588, in the collection of Woburn Abbey, by kind permission of Marquis of Tavistock and the Trustees of the Bedford Estate

# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama

## A portrait of James I – what it can tell you about the Jacobean Period

- Look at the portrait of James I on page 4 and, in your group, jot down your first ideas about it. Share these as a class and fill in column 3 of the chart on page 1.
- Now read the second set of quotations you have been given, this time about the Jacobean period. Try to match your quotations to the points you made about the portrait of James I. Use the statements to help you further develop your response to the portrait.
- The painting of James I has been described in the ways summarized below. Choose at least one detail from the painting to support each description.
  - It represents the gloom created by ‘the evaporation’ of Britain’s ‘greatness’.
  - It represents the ‘legitimacy of his succession’.
  - It shows him both ‘ill at ease and ill’.
- As a whole class use what you have learnt about the Jacobean period to fill in the last column on the chart.

# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama



James I of England and VI of Scotland by Daniel Mytens, 1621, National Portrait Gallery

# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama

## Elizabethan and Jacobean plays

The preoccupations and mood of an age are often reflected in the literature of the times. This is very true of the plays of this period.

- Look at this list of features of plays from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. For each feature, talk about whether it is most likely to be a feature of Elizabethan or Jacobean drama, or both. Be prepared to explain your thinking.
  - Comedy as an important genre
  - Tragedy as an important genre
  - Poisonings
  - Intrigue
  - Violence
  - Women disguised as men in tragic situations
  - Women gender-swapping in comic situations
  - Women involved in dangerous intrigue
  - Women resolving intrigues, or potentially tragic situations
  - Love, happiness and praise of human virtues
  - Fear, hatred, anger and a low opinion of humanity
  - Idyllic, rural or make-believe settings.
  - Metropolitan settings

### Thinking about the play you are studying

- Think about what you have learnt about the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, in relation to the play you are studying. You will need to decide:
  - which aspects of the paintings relate to your play and in what ways
  - which descriptions of the age relate to your play and in what ways
  - which features of plays, if any, are displayed in your play and in what ways (for example, through language, themes, mood, what characters say).

You should bear in mind the following points:

- although written during the Elizabethan or Jacobean period, the play you are studying may not be set in that period
- that Shakespeare wrote plays in both periods. Can you begin to speculate about whether the play you are studying is an early or a late play? What makes you think this?

# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama

## A false comparison?

One danger of studying the past is that of applying twentieth century thinking uncritically. This can result in misunderstandings and over-simplifications. One critic has stated that, 'The simplified approach to literature as social criticism has produced many false antitheses between Elizabethan optimism and Jacobean pessimism'. There are two further points to be aware of:

- the attitudes and beliefs of individual writers affect the way they present the issues of their age so Webster, Shakespeare and Marlowe all had their own individual perspective on their world
  - the attitudes and beliefs of each critic or member of an audience affect their interpretation. Shakespeare has been presented by some people as *reflecting* the concerns and attitudes of his age and by others as a radical who *challenged* these attitudes.
- As a class talk briefly about these problems and issues in interpreting texts from the past:
- how easy is it to see whether a playwright's view of their times is typical of the period
  - how helpful have you found it to think about the mood of the age as a way of understanding the play you are studying?

# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama

## The Elizabethan age

### Sixteenth and seventeenth century views

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

*Queen Elizabeth I, from a speech given at Tilbury, 1588*

The realm aboundeth in riches, as may be seen by the general excess of the people in purchasing, in buildings, in meat, drink and feastings, and most notably in apparell.

1579

During her life, what peace in her country! what plenty in her land! what triumphs in her court! what learning in her schools! what trades in her cities! what wealth in her kingdom! what wisdom in her council and what grace in her government! What monarch ever sent to her whose ambassador did not admire her? Was she not mistress of the narrow seas and feared even in the ocean?

*Nicholas Breton, In Praise of Queen Elizabeth, 1603*

Shee maintained Justice at home, and Armes abroad, with great wisdom and authority in eyther place. Her majesty seemed to all to shine through courtesy: but as shee was not easy to receive any to especiall grace, so was shee most constant to those whom shee received; and of great judgement to know to what point of greatnesse men were fit to bee advanced. Shee was rather liberall than magnificent, making good choys of the receivoures; and for this cause was thought weake by some against the desire of money. But it is certaine that besides the want of treasure which shee found, her continuall affayres in Scotland, France, the Low Countries, and in Ireland, did occasione great provisione of money, which could not be better supplied, than by cutting off eyther excessive or unnecessary expence at home. Excellent Queene! What doe my words but wrong thy worth? What doe I but guild gold? What but shew the sunne with a candle, in attempting to prayse thee, whose honor doth flye over the whole world upon the two wings of Magnanimity and Justice, whose perfection shall much dimme the lustre of all other that shall be thy sexe?

*Sir John Hayward, Annals, 1612*

She certainly is a great queen, and were she only a Catholic, she would be our dearly beloved daughter. Just look how well she governs! She is only a woman, only mistress of half an island, and yet she makes herself feared by Spain, by France, by the Empire, by all!

*Pope Sixtus V, 1588*

# Introducing Pre-1770 Drama

## Twentieth century views

Europe in the 16th Century was dominated by kings. In the Middle Ages, culture and to a large extent the forms of government had been moulded by the Church of Rome, but the Middle Ages in this sense came to an end in England with the Reformation of Henry VIII (1529-39) ... the whole balance of political and religious life in England was altered, and consequently the balance of literature, art and thought. The new literature of Elizabeth's reign (1558-1603) was centred on the Crown.

*L.G. Salinger, 'The Social Setting' in Pelican Guide to English Literature: The Age of Shakespeare, 1955*

Militarism and hostility to Spain and Spain's Catholicism amongst London audiences found mirrors on stage (between 1587-1600). For more than ten years wars and stories of wars were the main meal on the broad platforms of the amphitheatres.

*Andrew Gurr, Playgoing in Shakespeare's London, 1987*

Spain came to supplant France as the nation's 'natural' enemy following the death of Queen Mary in 1558, thanks not only to Spanish support for plots to restore England to the Catholic faith ... but also to the threat posed by her seafaring strength (and the wealth this had enabled her to win from her many conquests in the New World).

*Lacey Baldwin Smith, The Horizon Book of the Elizabethan World, 1967*

Shakespeare and the dramatists of the public playhouses ... had Elizabeth to thank for the security which gave them time to take in as much as they could of that world's richness and energy.

*Marion Jones, 'The Court and the Dramatists' in Elizabethan Theatre, 1966*

The world seemed a far larger place to men of the Elizabethan age than it had to earlier generations. New kingdoms had been discovered in America, and the distant Orient had become more accessible.

*Lacey Baldwin Smith, The Horizon Book of the Elizabethan World, 1967*

It was the poets and dramatists ... who did most to promote the cult of Elizabeth. In his epic poem *The Faerie Queen* (1596), Edmund Spenser referred to her as 'Gloriana' ... William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Sir Walter Raleigh called her Cynthia or Diana, Diana being the virgin huntress, 'chaste and fair' ... Throughout her reign, poems, songs, ballads and madrigals sang her praises and called upon God to preserve her from her enemies, or commended her for her virtues and her chastity. No English sovereign, before or since, has so captured the imagination of his or her people or so roused their patriotic feelings.

*Alison Weir, Elizabeth the Queen, 1998*