

PART IX

ENGLAND, 1560–1650

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This chapter surveys the history of England between 1550 and 1650, drawing particularly on evidence from the years 1580–1620 whenever possible, to provide a focused view of developments roughly in the period of Shakespeare’s adulthood.

There have been claims that England during the reign of Elizabeth, if not during the reign of James I, was a self-confident and expansive nation, and there is certainly evidence of dynamism and advance. Yet this was also an age of insecurity, wracked by plague, infant and maternal mortality, and devastating fires, and for a large section of the population, feeding, housing, and clothing themselves and their families was a daily challenge. In the realm of high politics, statesmen and political commentators were constantly worried about England’s survival in the face of a resurgent European Catholicism, and both they and the more articulate clergymen worried that England’s potential for sinfulness might cause the Almighty not to give them the aid that had saved them from the Armada in 1588 and the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. All English men and women, William Shakespeare among them, realized that they lived in an uncertain world. Their reactions to that realization varied.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Social structure: the elites
- Social structure: the lower orders
- The economy
- Community and family
- An educational revolution?
- Women and gender
- The built environment
- Political history 1550–1650
- The structure of government and the growth of national consciousness
- Voyages, colonies, and trade
- The English abroad: going on the grand tour, going to war

79. SORTS, CLASSES, HIERARCHIES

David Schalkwyk, University of Cape Town, South Africa

A list of “actors’ names” printed in the First Folio between the texts of *Henry IV, Part Two*, and *Henry V* ranks them in a precise hierarchy: royalty, nobles, “gentlemen,” men who make their living with their hands, “irregular humourists” (Falstaff and his boon companions), and finally women. It was second nature, even for those acting the parts of members of the society, to categorize people into distinct sorts and to list such characters in the order of their degree. Society at large was concerned with identifying people who belonged together and ranking them vis-à-vis people outside their rank – but also differentiating among people *within* their rank.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- “Actors” in the First Folio
- Degrees: in clothing, behavior, church attendance, and personal pronouns
- Possible mobility
- Gentlemen
- The “middling sort”
- The lowest class
- Service

- Reciprocal obligations
- Women

80. TRADE AND COMMERCE: MERCANTILISM

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Trade and commerce in early modern culture were deeply entwined with conceptions of biology, cultural identity, domestic regimes, passion, love, and marriage. These connections help us understand why commercial language is used by Shakespearean characters to discuss topics that seem to have little to do with acquiring wealth. Money in the Renaissance was more intimately entwined with the whole of life than we today think it is. Modern economic theories, often expressed in mathematical equations, ignore the emotional side of commercial interactions, presuming that we can separate the realm of money from the “priceless” realms of love, marriage, and cultural identity. But perhaps we cannot, so there may be something we can learn from Renaissance conceptions of wealth.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- The social function of wealth
- Mercantilism
- Humoralism
- Merchandising bodies
- Love and money
- The dark side of mercantilism

81. SHAKESPEARE’S MONEY

David J. Baker, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, United States

When it comes to money, Shakespeare does not just show us how crucial and consequential money is in most human affairs (although he does that), nor even just how often it is the secret sharer of hypocrisy, evasion, and denial (although he does that too). Plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* suggest that in early modern England (just as today) many people cared a good deal about money but often avoided thinking and talking about it very clearly. And, then as now, feelings about money were often involved and contradictory. “Seeing through” the hypocrisies of money, and encouraging us to do so, might be enough for a lesser dramatist. Shakespeare implicates us in these hypocrisies.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Caring about more than money
- Owning up to hypocrisy
- Knowing and not knowing
- Surplus value
- Mercenary Shakespeare?

82. BIRTH, MARRIAGE, AND DEATH

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Shakespeare’s age was litigious: a population of about four million people was involved in more than one million legal actions every year. In contrast to the present day, the language of the law was common currency, and many people had legal knowledge of inheritance, property, and family law. Most family law matters were reserved to the church courts, which decided questions about the validity of marriage, divorce or separation, legitimacy, and the inheritance of personal property. The large number of prosecutions for marital and sexual offenses explains why the church courts were colloquially known as “bawdy courts.” An extreme example of state regulation of private morality is shown in *Measure for Measure*.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Birth
- Illegitimate birth
- Infanticide
- Maternal mortality
- Forming a valid marriage
- Forms of marriage contracts
- Shakespeare's use of the ambiguous state of contracts
- Solemnization of marriage
- Clandestine marriage
- Contention about Anglican marriage ceremonies
- Age at marriage
- Married women and the doctrine of coverture
- Death
- Widows
- Illegitimacy and inheritance
- Suicide

83. GENDER RELATIONS AND THE POSITION OF WOMEN

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Customs and opportunities may have differed according to social and economic strata, but in every station in life in early modern England there was a recurrent fact: women, whether from the aristocracy or gentry circles or from the middling classes, occupied a secondary place with respect to education, professional careers, and participation in public life. Among the developments that distinguish early modern England from medieval England, one of the most important was a clearer divide between male and female social and professional roles. Men dealt with the public sphere – politics, finance, law, literary publication – whereas women were expected to devote themselves to raising their own families and domestic tasks.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Gender roles after the Reformation
- Considerations of marriage
- Protestant emphasis on marriage
- Marriage in *King Lear*
- Domestic life vis-à-vis community life
- Theorizing women's inferiority
- Sexuality
- Education
- Women in public life

84. THE LAW IN SHAKESPEARE'S THEATER

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Mutual influence between political thought and the theater would never again be so strong in the English theater as it was in the last decade of the sixteenth century and the first decade of the seventeenth, especially in Shakespeare's case. Increasingly, law scholars have been citing Shakespeare's plays in law classes, and "Shakespeare and the law" has become a specific area of the recent "law and literature" international stream of studies. While acknowledgment of Shakespeare's juridical and political awareness has been increasing, a more complex picture of law in the incipient English modern state has also emerged. This sociocultural background was mirrored and staged in the theaters, where the ideological debate under Elizabeth and James I attracted large audiences and contributed to Shakespeare's success.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- The measure of equity
- Law in *The Merchant of Venice*
- "Mercy of equity" in *Measure for Measure*

- Hamlet's justice
- Constitutional debate in *King Lear*
- Judges, history, and human rights
- Prefiguring contemporary human rights in *The Tempest*

85. EDUCATION

Eleanor Hubbard, Princeton University, United States

Whether it took place in private houses, schools, churches, or workshops, early modern English education generally had two aims: to fit young people with the necessary skills to fill their proper place in society, and to make them better Christians. No one thought that all children needed or deserved an equal education. The country needed laborers as well as lawyers. Nor was ability necessarily a consideration. Children and young people were taught to fit the roles that they were expected to fill. This does not mean that most people were barred from education, but rather that, for many young people, their education did not only – or even mostly – take place in school.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Learning how to read
- Writing and arithmetic
- Grammar schools
- The universities and the inns of court
- Law education in the inns of court
- Prestigious and practical pastimes for the gentry
- The education of an Elizabethan gentlewoman
- Service
- Apprenticeship
- The education of a merchant
- Apprenticeship versus service
- Learning practical skills

86. RACE AND NATION

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By the time William Shakespeare was born, both *race* and *nation* marked an individual's affiliation with or incorporation into a specific group of people. Depending on circumstances, one concept signified genealogy (*race*), whereas the other concept (*nation*) denoted community or geographic belonging. With the rapidly changing geopolitics that England faced, it became apparent that both terms were rife with fault lines. Awareness that individuals proved quite adept at exploiting the fissures led to frequent recalibrations of the meanings of the terms. Over time, the terms became uncoupled, so that *race* became a biological category and *nation* a political category. It would take the weight of time, geopolitics, science, and ideologies to ensure a complete break.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- Race
- Race and women
- Nation
- Shakespeare and aliens
- Nation or race?
- Race and nation post-Shakespeare

87. ENGLAND'S PLACE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Manfred Draudt, University of Vienna, Austria

Analysis of England's relationship with Europe as reflected in Shakespeare's plays shows that all major political players of the period appear onstage, France, of course, playing the most prominent role. It cannot be denied that Shakespeare's perspective and approach, as shaped by Tudor sources and chronicles, were occasionally biased, selective, and eclectic. Yet, in spite of all his omissions and transformations, Shakespeare's grasp of the essential qualities of power politics is remarkable. The driving forces of self-interest and personal advantage, the underlying causes of wars, the quarrels about dynastic succession, and particularly the role of women as pawns in political machinations are explored in a way that speaks directly to modern spectators and readers.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- England's relations with Europe and the papacy
- The Hundred Years' War
- Shakespeare's Joan of Arc
- Margaret of Anjou
- The reign of Henry VIII
- Emperor Charles V in the background of *Henry VIII*
- Henry's annulment
- English-Spanish relations in the comedies

88. SHAKESPEARE'S NATIONAL TYPES

David Bevington, University of Chicago, United States

Because Shakespeare wrote (at least partly) to please a London audience, the perspective on foreigners that he presents in his plays is essentially that of his spectators. To what degree he shared those spectators' prejudices is not easy to determine, but as a working dramatist he made it his business to exploit, in a generous yet unmistakably English way, the national types that Londoners also encountered (often more crudely) in the plays of his contemporaries. The French are unavoidably a major target of Shakespeare's often satiric portraiture. France and England were embroiled in conflict throughout most of Shakespeare's lifetime. At the other extreme, Welsh figures in Shakespeare are generally treated with affectionate condescension or grudging admiration.

TOPICS COVERED IN THIS CHAPTER INCLUDE

- The French in Shakespeare's work
- French women – Joan of Arc and Margaret of Anjou
- The French Dauphin
- French Princess Katharine
- Italy
- Spain
- Dutch, Germans, and Scandinavians
- The Scots
- The Irish
- The idea of collective nationhood
- Shakespeare's affectionate portrayal of the Welsh
- Satiric portraiture