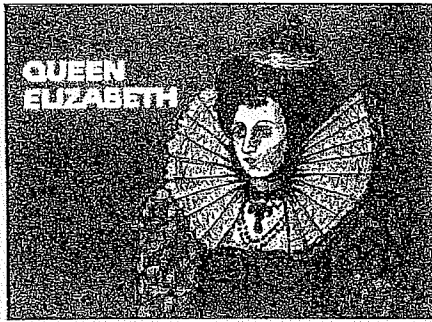


VII.6 – ELIZABETHAN THEATER



To England, the center of the Renaissance theatre explosion, came a new type of theatre, Elizabethan theatre. Named after the queen who ruled throughout much of the period and who was a patron of the arts, the Elizabethan era produced many great plays and playwrights, three of whom stand above the rest: Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare.

At this time in history, performers sought the patronage of wealthy noblemen. This protected their reputations while providing funding and stability. In the eyes of their fellow actors, those with noble endorsement were considered "legitimate." Any actors who failed to secure this royal support were considered rogues. The idea of "legitimate" theatre has its roots in the Elizabethan era.

During the Elizabethan period, women were not permitted to act because the stage was considered unladylike and unsuitable for women. Instead, young boys who possessed smaller frames and higher voices played the women's parts. While we might consider this practice odd today, it was all that the players of the time knew, so it was considered quite normal and acceptable.

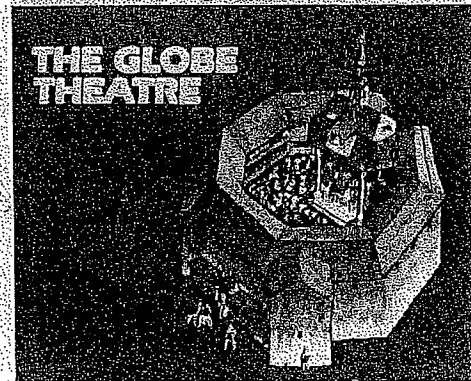
The plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Jonson drew large boisterous crowds seeking out bawdy entertainment, especially in the lower levels where admission was the cheapest. However, in the early 1600s, theatre started to veer off in a new direction and a different kind of play started to emerge. This new form of entertainment, called *court plays*, was geared to a more intellectual audience — royalty and nobility. Unlike the raucous plays of Shakespeare and Jonson, the newer works by Beaumont and Fletcher were subtle and sophisticated.

Civil war erupted in 1642, and the theatre again went into hibernation. Banned by the Puritans, most of the stages were destroyed or allowed to deteriorate. England would not see a new theatre until 1660.

The Elizabethan Stage

Playhouses in the Elizabethan period were round or octagonal with three levels of seating (*galleries*), which were reserved for those who could afford the fee. Those with little money stood in the *pit*, the bare dirt floor in front of the stage; thus, they were called *groundlings*. Those willing to pay the greatest fee could sit on the stage.

The actors performed on a platform stage with trap doors throughout, but because the theatre itself was open, little scenery was used. Likewise, there was no stage lighting, so plays were performed in the daylight. The stage did have a partial roof, however, and it was elaborately decorated to resemble the nighttime sky with stars and the zodiacs surrounding the sun, thus its name — *the Heavens*. The wall behind the actors resembled the exterior of a building. An area above the stage could be used as an additional acting area, but more often it housed the musicians. Above that was storage, and at the top of the building was a flag to inform the public of an impending performance.



The Globe Theatre —
An example of the Elizabethan Stage

Elizabethan Playwrights

Christopher Marlowe

Born in 1564 in Canterbury and dying just shy of his thirtieth birthday in 1593, Marlowe is credited with the introduction of blank verse. He acted and wrote under the patronage of Lord Admiral. He was also hailed as the greatest English dramatist, until Shakespeare began to make his mark. This comparison and eventual dethroning led to a fierce rivalry between Marlowe and Shakespeare. His unfortunate death after being stabbed in a tavern brawl may have robbed history of a literary genius before his prime.

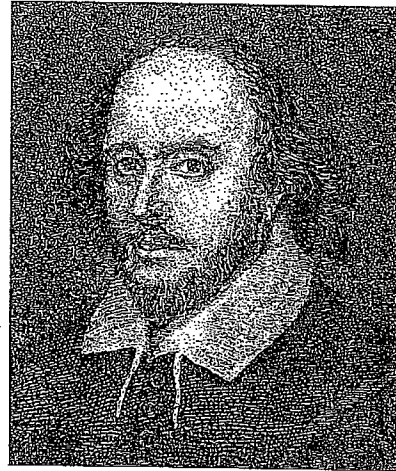
- His most famous plays are *Tamburlaine the Great*, *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward the Second*, and *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*.
- Although born the same year as Shakespeare, Marlowe began his theatre career at an earlier age.

Ben Jonson

Jonson (1573–1637) is considered the first real English comic. He was born the son of a clergyman and educated at Westminster School by William Camden, the great classical scholar. However, he was deprived a university education by a domineering stepfather who made him an apprentice bricklayer. Eventually he joined the army, serving in Flanders, and returned to England in 1592, marrying Anne Lewis.

Painfully aware of his lack of higher learning, Jonson became bitter and often found himself in trouble. His rebellious nature was also evident in his work, as he wrote and spoke with little self-censoring.

- His most famous plays are *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Every Man in His Humour*.
- He was imprisoned several times.



William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) has almost undisputedly been granted the title of the greatest playwright ever. He wrote thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets.

- His most famous plays are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Tempest*.
- None of his plays were published until after his death; consequently, many dispute the purity of the plays, arguing that they were altered by the playhouses that kept them over the years.