

## THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE (1558-1625)

- ❖ The **Age of Shakespeare** covers the years from **1558 to 1625** – from the **accession of Queen Elizabeth I** to the **death of King James I**.
- ❖ This period lasted **67 years** and is divided into **three natural parts**:

Division	Years	Description
<b>1. Early Elizabethan</b>	1558-1579	The <b>time of preparation</b> – the spring of Elizabethan literature.
<b>2. Later Elizabethan</b>	1579-1603	The <b>period of greatness</b> – the summer or full bloom of English literature.
<b>3. Jacobean</b>	1603-1625	The <b>period of decline</b> , or autumn of the same age.

- ❖ Strictly speaking, the first two periods are **Elizabethan**, and the third is **Jacobean**.
- ❖ However, since **literary growth continued without a break**, we include all three under the name **“The Age of Shakespeare.”**

### A Great Age in World Literature

- ❖ The period from **1558 to 1625** ranks among **the greatest in the history of world literature**.
- ❖ Its **fertility, variety, and splendour** came from the union of many powerful forces working together.
- ❖ It was a time when **England was full of energy, faith, and imagination**.
- ❖ Men like **Spenser, Bacon, and Shakespeare**, who grew up in Elizabeth’s reign, were **fortunate to live in such an inspiring world**.

### Influences Shaping the Age

- ❖ **The Renaissance (Revival of Learning)**
  - The **Renaissance spirit** now spread far beyond the **universities and the court**.
  - **Translations of classical works** made the **ideas of Greece, Rome, and Italy** available to the common educated reader.
  - As a result, **Greek and Roman culture** deeply influenced English thought and art.
  - Every “breeze,” it was said, was **“dusty with the pollen of Greece, Rome, and Italy.”**
- ❖ **The Growth of Intellectual Curiosity**
  - People developed a **passion for reading, knowledge, and beauty**.
  - The **love of literature and art** became part of national life.
- ❖ **The Reformation and Religious Awakening**

- The **printing press** that spread classical learning also spread the **English Bible**.
- This gave people a new **moral seriousness and spiritual depth**.
- The **Reformation** stirred their **consciences**, just as the **Renaissance** excited their **intellects**.
- ❖ **The Age of Discovery**
  - **Voyages and adventures** opened up **new worlds** beyond the seas.
  - English explorers like **Hawkins, Drake, Frobisher, and Raleigh** brought back **thrilling tales** and **new ideas**.
  - These discoveries **expanded men's imaginations** and made them feel the **vastness of life and possibility**.
- ❖ **National Prosperity and Peace**
  - England enjoyed **internal peace** and **growing wealth**.
  - The country had **thrown off foreign domination** (after the break with Rome).
  - Religious conflicts between **Catholics and Protestants** had largely subsided.
  - The defeat of the **Spanish Armada (1588)** united the nation in **patriotism and pride**.
- ❖ **Intense National Feeling**
  - A strong **love of country** filled the hearts of Englishmen.
  - They showed **pride in England's past, loyalty to their queen, and hatred of national enemies**.
  - **Patriotism** became a key theme in literature and drama.

### The Spirit of the Age

- ❖ The Elizabethan and early Jacobean years were an age of **intensity**.
- ❖ As one critic said, men of that time "**lived intensely, thought intensely, and wrote intensely.**"
- ❖ **Passions were deep, imagination was strong, and speculation was bold.**
- ❖ Writers found a **great public ready to respond** to their ideas.
- ❖ Everything – social, political, and intellectual – **helped genius to blossom**.
- ❖ The literature of this age **reflects the fullness and variety of life** in one of England's most glorious periods.

### The Beginning of the Golden Age

- ❖ The publication of **Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579)** marks the **opening of the golden age of Elizabethan poetry**.
- ❖ Before that, during the **first half of Elizabeth's reign**, there was **plenty of poetic activity** but **little poetry of high value**.
- ❖ The writers were **experimenting and preparing** for the great literary achievements that were soon to come.

### Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst (1536–1608)

- ❖ The best poetry before Spenser appeared in **Thomas Sackville's contributions** to a collection called *A Myrroure for Magistrates*.
- ❖ This book was designed as a **continuation of Lydgate's *Falles of Princes*** (see §16).
- ❖ It consisted of **tragic stories of famous Englishmen**, each told as a **warning to rulers** about the downfall of pride and power.

### Sackville's Two Notable Poems (1563 edition)

- ❖ *The Induction* – the general introduction to the whole work.
- ❖ *The Complaint of Buckingham* – one of the individual stories.
- ❖ Sackville's *Induction* is far **superior to all other parts** of the collection.
- ❖ It is **noble, serious, and imaginative**, and has been called "**the finest single poem written in England between Chaucer and Spenser.**"
- ❖ Its **gloomy and majestic tone** looks forward to the **moral grandeur** of later English poetry.

### George Gascoigne (1525?–1577)

- ❖ Another poet of this early Elizabethan period was **George Gascoigne**.
- ❖ His poem *The Steele Glas* (1576) is noteworthy as **the first regular verse satire in the English language**.
- ❖ Though not a great poet, Gascoigne was one of the **first writers to experiment consciously with poetic form**.

## EDMUND SPENSER AND HIS POETRY

### Spenser's Life

- ❖ **Edmund Spenser (1552–1599)** was the **greatest non-dramatic poet** of the **Elizabethan Age**, which otherwise found its finest expression in **drama**.
- ❖ He was **born in London** and **educated** at the **Merchant Taylors' School** and **Cambridge University**.
- ❖ At Cambridge, he **studied the classics** and **Italian literature** and came under the **strong Protestant influence** of the time.

### Early Career

- ❖ After university, he lived for a time with **relatives in Lancashire**.
- ❖ He then joined the **household of the Earl of Leicester**, where he became close friends with **Sir Philip Sidney**.

### Life in Ireland

- ❖ In **1580**, Spenser went to **Ireland** as **secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton**, the new Lord Deputy.

- ❖ He spent **most of the rest of his life there**, except for a few visits to London.
- ❖ He lived **in hardship and exile**, disliking the **violent Irish surroundings**.
- ❖ Spenser longed to **return to England**, but his repeated efforts to gain a position at court **failed**.
- ❖ He found consolation in **writing *The Faery Queene***.

#### **Last Years**

- ❖ In **1598**, during **Tyrone's Rebellion**, his **castle was attacked and burned**.
- ❖ He and his family **barely escaped**; it is said that one of his **infant children died** in the fire.
- ❖ Worn by illness and grief, he reached **London** and **died in poverty** on **January 16, 1599**, in an inn at Westminster.
- ❖ He was **buried in Westminster Abbey**, near **Chaucer's tomb**.

#### **Spenser's Minor Poems**

- ❖ Although **his fame rests mainly on *The Faery Queene***, Spenser's **other poems** would still give him the **highest place among Elizabethan poets**.

#### ***The Shepheardes Calender* (1579)**

- ❖ A **pastoral poem** (shepherd poem) divided into **twelve eclogues** – one for each month.
- ❖ Inspired by **Theocritus, Vergil's *Bucolics***, and **Italian Renaissance poets**.
- ❖ Written in **pastoral dialogues** between shepherds.
- ❖ Mixes **love, religion, and moral reflection**.
- ❖ The poet speaks through the shepherd "**Colin Clout**" about his **unhappy love for Rosalind**.
- ❖ It also expresses **strong Protestant views** and criticizes **corrupt clergy**.
- ❖ The work is dedicated to **Sir Philip Sidney**.

#### ***Astrophel* (1586)**

- ❖ An **elegy** on the **death of Sir Philip Sidney**.
- ❖ Uses **pastoral imagery** to mourn his friend.

#### ***Four Hymnes***

- ❖ Poems written in praise of **Love and Beauty**.
- ❖ Show Spenser's **great mastery of melody and rhythm**.

#### ***Amoretti* (1595)**

- ❖ A sequence of **88 sonnets** in **Petrarchan style**, recording Spenser's **courtship of Elizabeth Boyle**, whom he later **married**.

#### ***Epithalamium* (1595)**

- ❖ A magnificent **wedding hymn** written to celebrate his marriage.
- ❖ Universally regarded as **the finest wedding poem in English literature**.