

History of the Elizabethan era



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The purpose of this essay is to shed some light about the so called Elizabethan era, focusing on important social and cultural changes regarding daily life (namely nourishment and cooking, fashion and language usage) taken place during this period, in a clear way and providing examples supported by academic and scholar sources.

The Elizabethan Era was a historical period named after Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth's reign took place between 1558, when she succeeded her sister Mary I and 1603, when after her death she is succeeded by James VI of Scotland (Woodward, 1994). Her reign marked a transition between the Tudors and Stuarts and was also the end of the period when England was a separate realm before its royal union with Scotland (McDowall, 2009).

Elizabeth's reign was characterized by religious turmoil: both Catholics and Protestants fought to be the official religion of England; this was a period of social confusion as many people struggled to find the "correct" religion (McDowall, 2009). In spite of that, her period as head of state is often referred to as the Golden Age of England (Hibbert, 2010) due to all of the improvements, changes and discoveries taken place; namely the flowering of English poetry, music, theatre, literature and science, marked by the introduction of the printing press by William Caxton (Baugh and Cable, 2002), which lead to the increase of learning and general knowledge and gave way to the emergence of new ideas, concepts, and beliefs which consolidated Renaissance in England. Moreover the defeat of the Spanish Armada went down to history as one of the greatest victories in English history, helping to consolidate Protestant England and turning Elizabeth into a legendary queen (Hibbert, 2010).

Fashion

Throughout the Elizabethan era, clothing and fashion acted as a way of self-expression for all the estates of the realm. This period saw the emergence of “fashion” as a concept itself (Elgin, 2005). In Jeffrey L. Singman (1995, p. 93) words, clothing was one of the most distinctive aspects of Elizabethan culture. Elizabethan’s were highly fashion-conscious and were concerned to be wearing the latest and most fashionable outfits. They were characterized by an elaborate, artificial, stylized and striking style (Singman, 1995). Usually new Fashion trends began at court, then spread through aristocracy and minor nobility to the socially aspiring middle classes to whom they exerted a great influence. (Elgin, 2009)

At that time fashion trends were marked by the influence of the dominant power in Europe. Henry VIII’s period was characterized by the bright colours and extravagantly woven fabrics copied from the French and German courts (Elgin, 2005). A few decades later, in spite of the tense political relations, her daughter Elizabeth I was keen on the stiff, buttoned-up styles and dark colours, of the Spanish court, which was the current dominant power and major England’s enemy (Elgin, 2005).

(Pictured right; Philip II set the style for a dark and severe court dress.
Elegin: 2005)

According to Kathy Elgin (2005, p. 9), Elizabethan fashion went to extremes of design and lavishness, changing almost by the week. Life was a continual performance in which appearance played a major role. This was true for women and even more for men. No one could succeed at court or in business

without the right outfit (Elgin, 2009). Anyone appearing at the court with an unflattering colour or last month's fashion was a target for ridicule; hence members of the court were kept in a constant state of rivalry for the queen's approval, competing with each other in fashion as much as in any other competition (Elgin, 2005). In fact it was not rare for couriers to ruin their families through extravagant expenditures on clothing (Elgin, 2009).

(On the right: Elizabeth I. A lot is known about Elizabethan clothing thanks to the many portraits that were painted and the written documents that described items in minute detail.)

Overall the last stage of the Tudors was a period of relative prosperity that gave people the chance to gather fortunes and to focus on clothes, fashion and leisure. The idea of displaying one's wealth through clothing and possessions reached a new prominence (Elgin, 2009).

During Elizabeth's reign cosmetics were widely used among stylish women, and sometimes even by men. Fashionable men and women also used perfumes. Even though bathing was still rare, grooming was frequent, at least among those who aspired for social respectability. Since a very young age parents taught their children how to clean their nails and comb their hair every morning (Jeffrey L. Singman, p. 108).

Food and Cooking

(Pictured right: Elizabethan feast depicted with a portrait of Elizabeth I on the background)At Elizabethan time, English people generally ate two meals during the day: a light meal Dinner at noon and a larger meal Supper around 5: 00-6: 00 in the evening (Forgeng, 2010). As stated by Jeffrey L. Forgeng

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(2010, p. 163) Elizabethans were well fed by Renaissance standards, being noted by their hearty diet. At a feast, guests usually sat on benches, with chairs reserved for the most honoured guests (Singman, 1995). At their meals, lay people used wooden bowls and spoons, and also ate with their bare fingers instead of forks. Salt was an uncommon commodity, and meat was rare in most homes (Forgeng, 2010).

The lower and middle classes generally ate grains, vegetables, eggs, milk, butter and cheese (William Harrison, 2004) whilst the nobility enjoyed eating a great variety of fishes (which represented a bigger size of the English diet than today; Forgeng, 2010), meats (such as beef, mutton, veal, lamb, pork, coney, capon, red or fallow deer and wild fowl etc.) and sweets (such as jellies of all colours, tarts of different hues, conserves of old fruits, marmalades and marzipan among others; 2004, p. 43). Although sugar was a prohibitive luxury, Elizabethan cuisine was overall sweeter than our contemporary cooking. In the absence of spices, meats were generally cooked with fruits for flavoring (2004, p. 43/2010, p. 167)

In spite of the hearty feasts given by the upper classes, it seems to have been a less waste of food. According to Jeffrey L. Forgeng (2010, p. 163) when an aristocratic family finished eating, the leftovers were given to the servants; when the servants were done, the remains were brought to the door for distribution to the poor. In fact in the Elizabethan cuisine very little of the animal went to waste, as an example there were cookbooks for prosperous households which included recipes for pig's and calves's feet or for lamb's head and tripe (2010, p. 167)

Language usage

During XVI century, a series of factors caused the English tongue to evolve in a different manner from that which had characterized its history throughout the Middle Age. As attested by Baugh and Cable (2002, p. 200) some of these were the printing press (introduced in England by William Caxton around 1476), the rapid spread of popular education, the increased communication and means of communication (exchange of commodities and ideas within the growing British empire), the growth of specialized knowledge, and the emergence of various forms of self-consciousness about language.

(Pictured right: William Caxton showing printing proofs to King Edward IV, Elizabeth's Great-grand father)

In spite of the different speech forms of English (reminders of the Saxon, Angle, Jute, Viking and Norman invasions) spoken around the country (McDowall, 2009), the influence of the prestigious culture of the royal court and the advents of printing contributed at the beginning of the XVI century to the creation of an early standardisation of the English language (Cunliffe, et al., 2004). These dialectal forms were one of the reasons for the persistence of latin as a written language of government and education (Cunliffe, et al., 2004).

Latin was also commonly used to communicate with the inhabitants of the Celtic-speaking territories under English rule (Cunliffe, et al., 2004); these were Ireland (Irish), Wales (Welsh), Isle of Man (Manx) and Cornwall (Cornish) (Singman, 1995).

(Pictured right: The British Isles showing Ireland (green), Scotland (blue), Wales (red), Isle of Man (brown) and Cornwall (yellow).)

Within the English church, Latin was also used as a mean of communication, however during Elizabethan era followers of the reformation promoted literacy in the native language of the country, translating into English the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, which were distributed throughout all the parishes of the Tudor territory (2004, p. 152). According to Barry Cunliffe, since all the grammar and spelling of these translations reflected London-Midland English practice, the result was to consolidate these forms as the written standard and perhaps also to influence indirectly the spoken standard then emerging in aristocratic circles (2004, p. 152).

(Pictured right: Dramatist, poet and translator Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare, Elizabethan poet and playwright, widely considered to be one of the greatest English language writers) Latin preponderance on Elizabethan time resulted on a continuous “Latinization” of the vernacular language of the country. In 1582, Elizabethan headmaster Richard Mulcaster already commented on this phenomenon blaming on the sheer ostentation of the growing upper classes mentioned before, who saw Latin language as a sign of education and social superiority (2010, p. 179). Popularity of Elizabethan Drama also contributed to the popularisation of Latin words. The English language owes words such as defunct, reciprocal and retrograde to Shakespeare or Marlowe’s plays (Barber, 2010).

Latin influence not only brought new words to the language; it also caused existing words to be reshaped in accordance with their real or supposed

Latin etymology. For example, Renaissance etymology turned Old French dette and doute into debt and doubt through the influence of Latin debitum and dubitare. Other examples are assault, aventure, describe and parfit which were reshaped into assault, adventure, describe and perfect (Barber, 2010).

Conclusion

Elizabeth is acknowledged as a charismatic performer and a dogged survivor, in an age when government was ramshackle and limited and when monarchs in neighbouring countries faced internal problems that jeopardised their thrones. After the short reigns of Elizabeth's brother and sister, her 44 years on the throne provided welcome stability for the kingdom and helped forge a sense of national identity.

Elizabethan Era was not only outstanding by the important political events taken place in England (consolidation of Protestantism, union of the English and Scottish crowns, defeat of the Spanish Armada), but also for the increase of learning and general knowledge, the social changes, discoveries and improvements on the fields of arts, literature and science, and the emergence of new ideas, concepts, and beliefs which helped to consolidate Renaissance in the country and made from this historical period England's Golden Age (Hibbert, 2010).