

# Shakespeare Supplements: Historical and Biographical Backgrounds

I strongly believe the best way to understand Shakespeare's work is to pay close attention to his own words. Actors who have memorized and played roles in the plays often seem to me to understand Shakespeare better than some critics who have spent more time studying the context in which the work was written than they have the texts themselves. Nonetheless, the context can be very helpful and interesting.

The following information leaves out a great deal. Please see the Introduction to the *ShakeFest for Book Clubs* for an idea of the general intent behind these supplements, and please see the [Bibliography](#) at the end of these supplements for suggested further reading.

## Shakespeare - Biographical Supplement

This Supplement contains a brief biography of Shakespeare, highlighting those facts that seem to me possibly to shed light on the plays. Any corrections you'd like to propose will be welcome, especially if you can provide authority. A list showing the approximate order and years in which the plays are believed to have been written is provided at the end. For additional information regarding the historical and political background, please see the [Historical Supplement](#) below. For the principal sources used in preparing this Supplement, please see the [Bibliography](#) below.

Although record-keeping in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was scant by today's standards, the records regarding Shakespeare's life are in fact relatively full.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, eighty-five miles northwest of London. A baptismal record indicates he was born on or about April 23, 1564, the date traditionally regarded as his birth date. April 23 is the day of England's patron Saint George and was also the date on which Shakespeare died, in 1616.

Shakespeare's mother was Mary Arden; her family came from a forested region abutting Stratford known as the Forest of Arden (*c.f.* the Forest of Arden in *As you Like It*). The Ardens were landed gentry, probably Catholic. Shakespeare's father's family were farmers; his father, John Shakespeare, became a glover, who tanned leather and made gloves. John and

Mary had seven children, only four of which survived childhood. William was the eldest of the surviving children. Of two sisters born before him, one died before he was born and the other by the time he was five; another, younger sister died by the time he was fifteen. Two brothers and a sister born after William survived along with him.

Shakespeare's parents' first child (one of the sisters who died young) was born during the last year of the reign of "Bloody Mary" (Queen Mary I) and was christened in the Catholic manner. The other children, born after the ascent of the Protestant Elizabeth I, were baptized in the Anglican manner. That John Shakespeare may nonetheless have retained Catholic belief is suggested by his will, which indicated that he died a Roman Catholic; such circumstances might have disposed William to appreciate tolerance of religious or other differences.

Stratford appears to have been an average, conventional town of its time. When young William was four, his father John was elected bailiff of the town, an office comparable to mayor. In the same year, at least two professional theater troupes including the Queen's Players performed in Stratford, and troupes toured through Stratford with gradually increasing regularity thereafter (London companies commonly toured outside of London during summers to avoid the plague). London's first theater building was built when William was twelve, by the actor James Burbage, the father of another actor who later became one of William's business partners and best friends, Richard Burbage.

William in all likelihood attended the Stratford grammar school, taught by Oxford graduates paid better than teachers in larger towns. The school day was nine hours long, and school was in session year-round, with only brief holiday breaks. The curriculum included Latin—the students read Ovid and other classical authors in the original Latin, as well as learning to write in Latin—and probably at least some Greek. (Ben Johnson's comment that Shakespeare had "small Latin, and less Greek" should be viewed in perspective; during the same period, Queen Elizabeth I spoke *nine* languages.) Discipline was strict.

In 1576 John Shakespeare applied for a coat of arms. The family's fortunes, however, began to decline. John Shakespeare stopped attending Stratford council meetings and was replaced as alderman. That the family may have been suffering financial difficulties is indicated by the fact that the council did not fine John for his failure to appear.

William married Anne Hathaway in 1582, when he was only eighteen. Anne was eight years older than he and probably pregnant; their first child, Susanna, was born just six months after the wedding. Three years later the couple had twins, Judith and Hamnet. Hamnet, William's only son, later died at the age of eleven.

There is little record of Shakespeare during the five years following the birth of the twins in 1585 when he was twenty-one; this period is sometimes called the "lost years." According to one report, he was a schoolmaster during this period.

In 1587 Christopher Marlowe's first play appeared. Marlowe was very nearly the same age as Shakespeare and wrote five plays and a few other works before being killed in a tavern brawl in 1593.

By 1592, Shakespeare is appearing in the London theater scene, with *Henry VI* winning popular success. The city population at the time has been estimated at just 150,000. London was thriving notwithstanding traffic, sanitation problems and periodic bouts of the plague.

By this time, Queen Elizabeth I was fifty-nine years old. She had managed England's internal and external affairs more or less brilliantly, re-establishing the Anglican Church with herself at its head, restoring the nation's finances, and successfully coping with seemingly endless insurrections or attacks from within and without the realm. Mary Queen of Scots, a chief instigator of such insurrections, had recently been executed. Challenges to Elizabeth's reign continued to arise regularly thereafter, but a period had begun of relative calm and prosperity within England. Elizabeth, still unmarried (although almost certainly not celibate), was celebrated as the "Virgin Queen." (See the [History Supplement](#) for additional historical information.)

Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, in part a tribute to Elizabeth, appeared in a series of volumes published between 1590 and 1596 (beginning when Spenser was approximately thirty-eight).

Once Shakespeare was embarked on his theatrical career in London, he spent most of his time there but probably spent time in Stratford most summers.

In 1591 Shakespeare formed a strong relationship with an important patron, the young Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. In 1592, Shakespeare is believed to have become involved with Emilia Bassano Lanier, the most likely "Dark Lady" addressed in the Sonnets. Lanier was an accomplished musician and poetess of limited means and flexible morals. Shakespeare introduced Lanier to Southampton; Southampton is believed to be the fair youth addressed in the Sonnets. The Sonnets were probably written between 1593 and 1609. Lanier later became the mistress of the Lord Chamberlain, an important patron of Shakespeare's troupe. Another important patron was William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke.

The first play by Ben Jonson, another well-known contemporary of Shakespeare's, appeared in 1597, when Jonson was twenty-five. Jonson wrote eleven plays and numerous other works.

Shakespeare was an actor as well as a playwright, but from early in his theatrical career, he wrote plays at a rapid rate. He is believed to have begun writing plays by 1590, when he was twenty-six. By 1598 he had written at least sixteen plays including *Richard III*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV - Parts 1 and 2*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Midsummer Night's*

*Dream*, among others. He continued thereafter to write approximately two plays per year, producing a total of thirty-seven plus one or two collaborations, in addition to the Sonnets and other poems.

He continued to act, however, and is noted as having played a principal part in one of Ben Jonson's plays as late as 1603. In Shakespeare's day, there were no women actors. The roles of young women characters were played by boys.

Shakespeare is only known to have played two parts in his own plays, that of the old gardener, Adam, in *As You Like It*, and that of Hamlet's father's ghost. His friend Richard Burbage often played the leads such as Richard III, Lear, Hamlet and Romeo.

A.L. Rowse reports one of my favorite anecdotes about Shakespeare as follows:

"The tale went round London - reported by one of the young lawyers addicted to the theatre - that a woman fell for Burbage in the role of Richard III and at the theatre gave him an assignation to come to her that night under the name of Richard III. But [Shakespeare] overheard it and got free from the theatre beforehand, gained admittance and was 'at his game ere Burbage came. Then, message being brought that Richard III was at the door, Shakespeare caused return to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard III.'"

(*Shakespeare the Man*, St. Martin's Press, 1988.)

Shakespeare did well financially. In 1598-1599 Shakespeare, in a venture with a few of the others in his company, built the theater now most associated with Shakespeare, The Globe, on London's west bank. The Globe was circular or donut-shaped, open to the sky in the center. The stage extended from the inside wall into the central area and was raised, with room beneath for ghosts and other machinations. Sheltered seating lined the inside walls; less expensive standing room was afforded in the central area. The theater held 2,000, and performances were well-attended, with visitors often returning more than once to see the same play. A replica of The Globe has been constructed near the site of the original theater.

The first part of Shakespeare's career had unfolded under Elizabeth I. At the time his career began, he may have played with the favored theatrical company, the Queen's Men, but apparently soon went out on his own. By 1594, Shakespeare had become a leading member of another leading theatrical company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

Shakespeare's patron, Southampton, was a supporter of Essex, who had begun as a favorite of the Queen but had ambitions to the throne and had courted popular support with apparent success. In 1601 Essex's forces attempted an ill-fated insurrection. They subsidized a special performance of *Richard II* to be played the same day, apparently hoping to put the deposition of monarchs in the public mind. The plot failed, and both Essex and Southampton were condemned to death.

Southampton was relatively young and was ultimately reprieved but spent two years in the Tower. Regarding *Richard II*, Queen Elizabeth is reported to have said, “I am Richard II: know ye not that?”

Between 1598 and 1609 there appeared *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *Macbeth* as well as *Hamlet* and others. Shakespeare’s company became the Lord Chamberlain’s Company, entertaining the Queen and court regularly.

As noted above, it was in 1596 that Shakespeare’s son, Hamnet, died. Two months later, the coat of arms for which Shakespeare’s father had applied was finally granted. Shakespeare’s father died in 1601. The play, *Hamlet*, about a prince kept from the throne by his father’s murderer, was probably written in 1601 (some authorities believe Shakespeare began the play in 1599 and completed it in 1601).

In 1603 Queen Elizabeth died, and in 1604, King James acceded to the throne. James I was believed to have descended from a Scottish nobleman, Banquo, and had a keen interest in witches and the occult. *Macbeth* was probably written as a tribute to the new king and cultivated these subjects while exploring the requirements for good government. It was reported that King James was so pleased with *Macbeth* that he wrote Shakespeare a letter, which would have been extremely unusual given the low standing generally accorded actors and playwrights. Under King James, Shakespeare’s troupe became the King’s Men. In 1608 the company leased a new, more upscale theater space, Blackfriars. Shakespeare’s mother died the same year.

Another famous contemporary author was Sir Francis Bacon. Bacon began as a barrister (a litigation lawyer) and then held a number of government offices. He wrote poems, books, and essays and is probably primarily esteemed today as a philosopher.

Shakespeare’s Sonnets appeared in 1609, when Shakespeare was forty-five years old, although they were probably written earlier. Thereafter appeared *Winter’s Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *Henry VIII*, and in 1612, *The Tempest*, traditionally believed to be Shakespeare’s last complete play. By 1612, Shakespeare had retired to Stratford. He died in 1616, at the age of fifty-two.

Publication of plays was unusual and haphazard in Shakespeare’s time, but his plays were so popular that quarto publications of individual plays began appearing as early as 1597. (“Quarto” refers to the size of the pages resulting from how a standard-sized sheet of paper is folded and cut, denoting a quarter of a sheet; a “folio” results from a single fold and is the size of a half-sheet. A modern folio is over 31 cm. or 12.25” tall).

There are considerable variations among the early published versions of the plays. Many of them appear to have been assembled from actors’ or others’ memories; none are known to have been approved by Shakespeare, nor are any of them

known to have brought any money to him or his estate. The variations in these editions result from their sources' faulty memories, from the fact that spelling remained quite fluid at the time, and in some cases from revisions Shakespeare may have made for subsequent productions of a play, among other factors. (Bear in mind that no relatively complete, monolingual English dictionary was published until forty years after Shakespeare's death.) Shakespeare's fellow actors and friends, John Heming and Henry Condell, published the First Folio ("folio" being a half-sheet) in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death. While this edition was intended to be definitive and is generally of higher quality than most of the quartos, scholars continue to consult the quartos and for some purposes may prefer them.

The introduction Heming and Condell wrote for the First Folio, which appears in its front, shows something of their good humor and of what they thought of Shakespeare, and reads in part as follows (with spelling and punctuation modernized, and with notes in brackets):

"From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are numbered. We had rather you were weighed. Especially, when the fate of all books depends upon your capacities; and not of your head alone, but of your purses. Well! It is now public, and you will stand for [i.e., insist upon] your privileges, we know: to read, and censure. Do so; but buy it first. That best commends a book, a stationer says. Then, how odd soever your brains be, or your wisdoms, make your license [i.e., your freedom in spending] the same, and spare not. Judge your six-pence's-worth, your shilling's-worth, your five shillings'-worth at a time, or higher, so you rise to the just rates, and welcome. But, whatever you do, buy.

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"It had been a thing, we confess, worthy to have been wished, that the author himself had lived to have set forth and overseen [the publication of] his own writings; but since it has been ordained otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envy his friends the office of their care and pain [effort], to have collected and published them, and so to have published them, as where (before) you were abused with diverse stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious imposters, that exposed them; even those, are now offered to your view cured and perfect of their limbs; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them. Who, as he was a happy imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together; and what he thought, he uttered with that easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers. But it is not our province, who only gather his works and give them to you, to praise him. It is yours to read them. And there we hope, to your diverse capacities, you will find enough, both to draw and hold you; for his wit can no more lie hid, than it could be lost. Read him, therefore, again and again; and if you do not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. And so we leave you to other of his friends, whom if you need, can be your guides; if you need them not, you can lead your fellows and others. And such readers we wish him."

Shakespeare had invested his profits in additional properties in Stratford. In his will, he left most of his property to his daughter Susanna. He left his “second best bed” to his wife (the implications of such phrase being still in dispute), and to his friends, Heming, Burbage, and Condell, money to buy rings, presumably for remembrance.

The following list shows the approximate order and years in which the plays are believed to have been written (as distinguished from when they were first *performed*; from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2d ed., 1997):

1589-90 (revised 1594-95)	<i>1 Henry VI</i>
1590-91	<i>2 Henry VI</i>
1590-91	<i>3 Henry VI</i>
1592-93	<i>Richard III</i>
1592-94	<i>Comedy of Errors</i>
1592-95	<i>Edward III</i>
1593-94	<i>Titus Andronicus</i>
1593-94	<i>Taming of the Shrew</i>
1594	<i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>
1594-95 (revised 1597)	<i>Love's Labors Lost</i>
1594-96	<i>King John</i>
1595	<i>Richard II</i>
1595-96	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
1595-96	<i>Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
1596-97	<i>Merchant of Venice</i>
1596-97	<i>1 Henry IV</i>
1597 (revised 1600-01)	<i>Merry Wives of Windsor</i>
1598	<i>2 Henry IV</i>
1598-99	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>
1599	<i>Henry V</i>
1599	<i>Julius Caesar</i>
1599	<i>As You Like It</i>
1600-01	<i>Hamlet</i>
1601-02	<i>Twelfth Night</i>
1601-02	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
1602-03	<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>
1604	<i>Measure for Measure</i>

1604	<i>Othello</i>
1605	<i>King Lear</i>
1606	<i>Macbeth</i>
1606-07	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
1607-08	<i>Coriolanus</i>
1607-08	<i>Timon of Athens</i>
1607-08	<i>Pericles</i>
1609-10	<i>Cymbeline</i>
1609-10	<i>Winter's Tale</i>
1611	<i>The Tempest</i>

## Shakespeare - Historical Supplement

This Supplement contains information regarding the historical and political backgrounds of Shakespeare's plays. For your convenience, I have bolded the names of the monarchs, so you can more easily spot the information in which you're most interested. A printable family tree for the Plantagenet dynasties is available as of this writing at <http://www.royal.gov.uk/files/pdf/plantage.pdf>.

Shakespeare took considerable license in his portrayals of English history. The account below is, I hope, more accurate. I'm no historian, however, and was surprised at the extent of confusion and even conflict among historical authorities. Any corrections you'd like to propose will be welcome, especially if you can provide authority.

For the principal sources for this Supplement, please see the **Bibliography** below. For additional information regarding Shakespeare's own life, please see the **Biographical Supplement** above.

In Shakespeare's plays as well as in other English histories, nobles are often referred to by more than one name—the same individual may be referred to by given name, the castle or region where the person was born, or one or more dukedoms or even kingdoms (*e.g.*, James VI of Scotland became James I of England). I've tried to provide ALL commonly used names for the leading figures in this Supplement. Although some may find this practice tedious, my own experience was that other historical accounts were confusing or difficult to reconcile insofar as they used only one such name, or used different names in different places without explaining that the same person was meant.



At the time this account begins, neither England, Scotland, France, nor most other countries in northern Europe existed as such. Rather, areas were inhabited by tribes led by chieftains or kings whose areas of control fluctuated as a result of wars, invasions, marriages, and other factors.

In its early history, England was mainly inhabited by Celtic tribes. In 43 A.D., the Romans invaded. The Romans founded “Londinium” and constructed roads and other improvements, including the 73 mile-long Hadrian’s Wall built as a defense against the northern tribes. The Romans also introduced early Christianity into England. As the Roman Empire declined, its forces were needed elsewhere, and by 410 A.D., the Romans had abandoned England, leaving London a ghost town.

In the Romans’ absence, the English natives and remaining Romans endured attacks and invasions from various tribes including Germanic Angles and Saxons. By about 450 A.D., Anglo-Saxons began to predominate. Beginning around 800 A.D., Danish Vikings began attacking and gained a foothold.

In 1066 **William the Conqueror** invaded (from Normandy, in northern France; hence the “Norman Conquest”) and quickly conquered in the Battle of Hastings. William established his capital in London, constructing as a lookout the White Tower, which today remains the tallest of the towers in the Tower of London complex.

After William’s victory, English lands were divided among the Normans, with each landholder required to swear allegiance to King William and to promise to provide mounted, armored knights when needed, thus establishing in England the feudal system of land in return for military obligations. The Normans introduced European culture, institutions, theology, philosophy, and science. They also perpetuated much of the Saxon heritage they found.

William was ruthless in his suppression of numerous Saxon rebellions. Apart from his methods of dealing with insurrection, however, his justice and administration were perceived as rough but fair, ultimately helping England to attain unification, blending Norman and Saxon cultures. He loved hunting deer and reserved almost a third of kingdom acreage as game parks. He is said during his reign to have executed only one man; but he punished poachers with mutilation. For the next three centuries, however, French continued to be the language used by English nobility or in English courts (even Chaucer’s early poems were written in French). Under William, the first census, called the Domesday Book, was taken for taxation purposes.

After William, the crown passed through several of his descendants who are of little importance for understanding Shakespeare’s plays. We’ll pick up the line again with **Henry Plantagenet** (that is, **Henry II**). Henry II was descended from William the Conqueror through Henry’s mother, Matilda (a.k.a. Maude and previously married to the Holy Roman Emperor).

Henry II's father was Geoffrey of Anjou, a French noble. Henry was thus the first English monarch in what is known as the **Angevin** line.

**The Plantagenets are sometimes divided into three families, Anjou, Lancaster, and York**, which together produced fourteen English monarchs.


Henry II ascended the throne in 1154 and, partly as a result of his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, ruled a vast, wealthy empire that stretched through France to the Mediterranean. (Eleanor's own story is extraordinary. Among other feats, before marrying Henry, she'd reigned as Queen of France for fifteen years and then obtained an annulment of her marriage to Louis VII. She was eleven years older than Henry II.) As king of England, Henry undid some of the harm caused by his predecessors since William. Among other modernizations, he instituted trial by judges and groups of witnesses that later became the basis for the modern jury, instead of trial by ordeal or battle.

However, Henry II was bested in struggles with the Church. At that time, Church clerics could not be tried in the king's secular courts but only in the separate courts of the Church, where the only punishment for criminal clerics was demotion. Anyone who could read a Latin text from the Bible could claim the "benefit of clergy," that is, immunity from the king's justice. Henry instituted a system of shared jurisdiction in which clerics, once convicted, would be sentenced by a lay court. These reforms were opposed by Thomas Becket, whose murder at Canterbury Cathedral gave his opposition strength it might not otherwise have had. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reflect the popularity of St. Thomas. Henry ultimately retained the right to appoint his own nominees to fill vacant bishoprics—a cause of continuing struggle with the Pope—but as to most other matters, the Church won. Not until the Reformation did royal power regain predominance.

Henry II's last years were further troubled by rebellions, some involving his own sons, incited by their mother Eleanor with support from France and Scotland. He died of a "bloody flux," a coughing up of lung tissue, an inherited disorder that killed several other Plantagenets.

Henry II was succeeded in 1189 by **Richard I**, "Coeur-de-Lion" (the "Lion-Hearted"), an Angevin who spent little of his reign in England, led the Third Crusade, fought in Cyprus, Normandy, and elsewhere and at one point was imprisoned for over a year while held for ransom. Fortunately, the government in England was in the hands of capable deputies.

Richard I was succeeded in 1199 by his brother **King John**. During his youth, John was sometimes called "Lackland," because his brothers had been given land but John had none until later. He had intrigued against Richard I, but the brothers were later reconciled, and Richard on his death bed had named John heir to the throne.



King John was an archetypal “wicked king,” cruel and avaricious. He proceeded to lose most of the Angevin empire and quarrelled with his own lords and with the Church, rejecting Pope Innocent III’s nominee, Langton, as Archbishop of Canterbury. After the Pope excommunicated John, he capitulated and, as a way of combatting the lords, made England a papal fiefdom.

John’s extortionate taxation to finance incompetent campaigns to recover Angevin lands proved his undoing. His misconduct encouraged intellectuals to conceive of the law as separate from and even above the monarchy. A party of Langton and the nobles forced John to sign the Magna Carta in 1215. The Magna Carta provided that the Church would be free to choose its own officials, that no money above certain payments should be exacted from the king’s feudal tenants without their prior consent, and that no freeman should be punished except in accordance with the laws of the land. John soon reneged, and the barons invited the French Dauphin to lead them in a revolt. During the invasion, John died of the Plantagenet bloody flux. He himself had abandoned Henry I on his deathbed, whose body was stripped by servants; when John died, the same befell him.

His son **Henry III** was only nine when John died, but under capable deputies the invaders were expelled and John’s remaining adherents crushed.

After Henry took control, he proved weak and untrustworthy. His father and uncle had impoverished the throne. Henry tried to replenish it through heavy taxation, but he engaged in costly, fruitless wars. His acquiescence in the Pope’s decrees and arbitrary appointments had already fueled anti-papal sentiment when he agreed to finance papal wars in Sicily in return for a promise of the Sicilian crown for his son Edmund. The exorbitant sums Henry demanded without any benefit to England precipitated civil war. The insurgents, led by Simon de Montfort, included two constituencies, conservative barons on the one hand and on the other, reforming barons, gentry, clergy, Oxford students, and London citizenry. Henry’s son, Prince Edward, exploited this division so as to cause key barons to desert de Montfort in battle, where he died.

By the time Henry III died in 1272, he had all but relinquished rule to his son, **Edward I**. Edward further modernized the nation, and by the end of his reign, the government, laws, and society had assumed forms that would endure the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses. He was a skilled soldier and an authoritarian, feared and distrusted. Edward successfully re-took Wales, but despite or perhaps partly because of the slaughter he ordered in Scotland, he failed to subjugate the Scots. He crowned his son and namesake the first Prince of Wales.

Edward I took seriously his responsibilities toward his subjects, however, and had learned from observing de Montfort the virtues of a consultative process with local representatives in deciding affairs of state. To pay for his wars and for the expanding judicial and administrative functions performed by the government, Edward needed money from the new merchant class, and he summoned a national parliament to get it. His “Model Parliament,” which has been called the “Mother of all Parliaments,” was convened in 1295 and brought Lords and Commons together for the first time. Edward I died of the bloody flux.

**Edward II**, who ascended in 1307, was his father’s greatest failure. Described as perverted, lazy, and incompetent, in his defaults, Parliament grew stronger. Repeated struggles over the role in government of Edward’s favorite and probable lover, Piers Gavestone, ended only when Parliament finally had him beheaded. After an unsuccessful attempt to conquer Scotland, Edward was forced to relinquish authority to a Lancastrian cousin, Thomas. Through Thomas’s own ineptitude, however, Edward managed to regain control and execute Thomas. Edward’s own wife, Isabella, despised Edward and had taken their son (who became Edward III) to France. There she fell in love with Roger de Mortimer. They led an invasion and captured Edward, who was forced to abdicate. Subsequently, an unsuccessful rescue attempt prompted his murder.

The **Hundred Years War** was carried on intermittently between England and France from 1337 to 1453. The conflict involved grievances over English territory and sovereignty in France, English commerce in Flanders, French support for Scottish independence, and the claim of Edward III through his mother to the French Crown. Until 1360, the advantage lay with England. England fortunes declined with the accessions of the Black Prince and Richard II and reached their nadir in 1372. Matters improved for England under Henrys IV and V with victories at Harfleur and Agincourt, marked by the Treaty of Troyes, which allowed the marriage of Henry V to Katherine of Valois and made him heir to the French throne. English successes were not reversed until 1429, when Charles VII of France and Joan of Arc defeated the English at Orleans. By 1453, all that remained of English possessions in France was Calais. These events are described in more detail below.

**Edward III** was crowned in 1327 when he was only fifteen, after his mother, Isabella and her lover, Roger Mortimer, deposed his father. His marriage a year later had been arranged before he was crowned. After two more years, Edward instigated a palace revolt and had his mother banished to Norfolk and Mortimer executed.

Edward III first fought unsuccessfully to end Scottish independence. Then, in 1337, Edward began the Hundred Years War, ostensibly to enforce his claim to the French throne but also because of French support for the Scots and for economic reasons relating to the wine trade centered in Bordeaux and the wool market in Flanders. During Edward’s reign, the English prevailed at sea at Sluys, where the French fleet was surprised and the English gained control of the Channel; on land at Crécy, where English bowmen and Edward’s first son, also named Edward and known as the “Black Prince” (and a.k.a. Edward of Woodstock), performed feats that became legendary; and at Calais, which then remained in English control for the

next hundred years. At Poitiers, the English army led by the Black Prince captured French King John, who, unable to raise his ransom, later died in London. By treaty in 1360, the French ceded to English rule huge portions of northern and western France.

The bubonic plague, the “Black Death,” broke out in 1348, killing nearly a third of the population of England. Plague hastened the decline of the feudal system, and the military was weakened to the point of losing most of what it had gained. Surviving peasants were overworked, and mercenaries replaced troops mustered in discharge of feudal obligations. By around 1375, England retained only three coastal towns in France, and The Hundred Years War was brought to a temporary close by treaty. Outbreaks of plague would occur over a roughly three hundred-year period.

More lands and wealth were consolidated into the hands of fewer nobles. As feudalism declined, mercantilism rose. Trade grew, notably in wool export, and the middle class, especially the mercantile class, expanded in size and gained power in Parliament, which formally divided into two houses, Commons and Lords, which began to meet regularly to vote material support for the war.

In 1362, English replaced French as the official language in the law courts, and within the next twenty years, the first Protestants promulgated the first English translation of the Bible and Chaucer wrote his greatest works in English.

**Edward III had six sons**, in the following order: Edward of Woodstock, the “Black Prince,” who died before his father, but not before fathering **Richard II**; William, who died in infancy; Lionel of Antwerp, Duke of **Clarence**; **John of Gaunt**, Duke of **LANCASTER** and King of Castile, who fathered **Henry IV (Henry Bolingbroke)**; **Edmund of Langley**, Duke of **YORK**; and Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of **Gloucester**. (Beginning with Edward III’s sons, it was a tradition that royal sons be granted ducal rights.) To help avoid confusion, remember that during the Wars of the Roses, generally the “Henry”’s are Lancastrian while most (but not all) of the “Edmund”’s, “Edward”’s, and “Richard”’s are Yorkist.

Edward was much grieved at the death of his son, the Black Prince, in 1376, from the Plantagenet bloody flux. One of Shakespeare’s most important sources, the *Chronicles of England* by Rafael Holinshed, suggested that Edward believed the death of his son was punishment for Edward’s usurpation of his own father (albeit at the instigation of his mother and Mortimer).

Edward’s very capable wife, Philippa, died in 1369, and Edward retreated to Windsor. Public finances dwindled while he became increasingly senile. He relinquished the government to his fourth son, John of Gaunt.

Edward III was succeeded in 1377 by the Black Prince’s son, **Richard II**, when Richard was only ten and during a time of social unrest. The Black Death had resulted in rapid wage and price increases, and Parliament had placed limits on

wages but not prices. A series of poll taxes finally incited the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. A hundred thousand marched on London, led by Jack Straw and Wat Tyler, burning the Temple Bar, occupying the Tower and killing the Archbishop of Canterbury, among others. At the age of fourteen, Richard showed unusual ability in defusing this threat, riding among the insurgents and persuading them to disperse by granting their demands. The revolt was put down, and Richard reneged on his promises. The government had been in the hands of a council dominated by Richard's uncle, John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster; but Richard now assumed control.

Richard II proved extravagant, faithless, and unjust. His generosity toward unworthy favorites such as Michael de la Pole and Richard de Vere inspired Thomas of Gloucester and others in Parliament to convict five of Richard's inner circle of treason in 1388. Richard never forgave this act; and his antagonism toward Parliament proved his undoing. By 1397, Richard had banished, executed or murdered those responsible, including John of Gaunt's son, Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV), whom Richard first banished and then disinherited from the great Lancastrian estate. Bolingbroke subsequently intercepted Richard on his return from a trip to Ireland and forced Richard to yield the crown. Richard lacked support. Parliament quickly deposed him and chose Bolingbroke as successor (Richard had no children, although there was a named heir). Richard was then murdered in prison.

Richard's one good act had been to terminate the conflict with France in 1396.

Richard II was the last of the Angevin kings. His deposition marked the beginning of the **Wars of the Roses**, the long struggle for the crown between the Lancastrian descendants of John of Gaunt and the descendants of his brother, Edmund, Duke of York. The white rose was the family badge of the York family. The Lancaster family had many badges, only one of which was a red rose. Beginning with Henry Bolingbroke (Henry IV), the Lancastrians held the throne until the Yorkist Edward IV deposed Henry VI. The Lancastrians usurped in turn when Henry Richmond took the throne from Richard III, Richmond having descended in an illegitimate line from John of Gaunt. The struggle was finally resolved only by the marriage of the Lancastrian Henry Tudor (Henry VII) and Elizabeth of York, giving rise to the Tudor dynasty, whose preeminent issue was Queen Elizabeth I, England's monarch during most of Shakespeare's life.

**Henry IV**, whose name derived from where he was born, Bolingbroke Castle, ascended in 1399, usurping Richard II notwithstanding that others lived with better claim than Henry's. Henry IV had proved himself as a soldier under Richard's reign, and after Henry's ascent, he dreamed of going on a Crusade; but he never did. Most of his reign was troubled by rebellions, the first led by Richard's half-brothers. Owain Glyndwr in Wales and his sons-in-law, the Harry "Hotspur" of the powerful Percy family and Douglas from Scotland, continued the warfare, together with the Mortimer family, whose claim to the throne was stronger than Henry IV's (Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March, having been Richard's named heir). At Shrewsbury

in 1403, they were routed and Hotspur killed, but Yorkists and the Earl of Northumberland attempted further rebellions until 1408, when they were defeated and Northumberland killed. The efforts necessary to quell the rebellions were expensive, and the House of Commons used the purse strings to expand its own powers.

Henry IV's popularity suffered as a result of the execution of Richard Scrope, Archbishop of York, who had opposed Henry. He was also undermined by his marriage to Joan of Navarre, who was convicted of witchcraft in 1419. During the last years of Henry's reign, he suffered from epilepsy and leprosy, seen by some as punishment, and which encouraged his son, Prince "Hal," to take control two years before Henry died, ousting the King's Chancellor, Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury.

**Henry V** (formerly Prince Hal) ascended in 1413. He was magnanimous, pious, stern, and a skilled soldier. Soon after his ascent, he freed the Earl of March, a contender for the throne, and restored to Hotspur's son his father's estate. He had to suppress certain conspiracies, but by renewing the Hundred Years' War, Henry V diverted the nobles' energies from internal conflict while pursuing what Henry had convinced himself was a just claim to the French throne (through his great-grandfather Edward III, grandson of Philip IV).

In 1415, he proposed to marry Katherine, daughter of the French Charles VI, demanding as dowry the old Plantagenet lands of Anjou and Normandy. He was refused. With assistance from the Duke of Burgundy and Emperor Sigismund (then king of Germany, Hungary, and Bohemia and later Holy Roman Emperor), Henry V invaded France with even greater success than Edward III had attained. Henry won Agincourt in 1415 against tremendous odds, inflicting 7,000 casualties while suffering only 500 and proceeded to master northern France. With support from a disaffected group within France, the Treaty of Troyes was signed in 1420, under which Henry gained marriage to Katherine and was recognized as the French heir in preference to the lunatic Charles's own son, the Dauphin. Whether Henry could have successfully ascended or held the French throne is doubtful; however, just two years later, he died suddenly of dysentery, just two months before Charles. Holinshed praised Henry V as "a king [whose] life [was] without spot, a prince whom all men loved . . . [who] left no offense unpunished, nor friendship unrewarded . . ."

**Henry VI** ascended in 1422 at the age of nine months. Charles VI of France died two months later, making Henry VI in addition the nominal king of France, although the Dauphin assumed that title. For the first twenty years of Henry VI's reign, the government was in the hands of quarrelsome uncles and cousins.

At first, the wars in France continued successfully; at Verneuil in 1424, the Dauphin Charles' army was decimated. However, the English had few good leaders and their finances were low. In 1428, Joan of Arc helped break the siege of Orléans and rescue the Dauphin. She was captured two years later and ultimately burned at the stake after conviction as a heretic by a court in Rouen nominally French but controlled by English sympathizers. Nevertheless, French resistance had

been revived. Burgundy's allegiance reverted to the French. Henry VI was crowned king of France in Paris in 1431, but it was little more than a charade. When the Hundred Years War finally ended in 1453, only Calais remained in English control.

Through the long campaigns in France, English nobility had become practised in warfare. The government was weak and unable to control the nobles. Meanwhile, the merchant and peasant classes continued to gain freedom and power. The loss of Normandy further diminished the standing of an English government already seen as incompetent, and domestic turmoil mounted.

Henry VI was religious and sweet-natured, but by the time he reached adulthood, it was clear he would be a weak king. His marriage was arranged to Margaret of Anjou, in the belief that her strong character would be helpful. In 1453, the Lancastrian Henry succumbed to the madness that was hereditary on his mother's side, and over Margaret's objections, Richard, Duke of York, was selected to act as Regent.

The Wars of the Roses bloomed. The struggle between Lancastrians and Yorkists during the next seventeen years was convoluted, with key figures changing allegiance and neither faction remaining ascendant for long.

Initially, the Lancastrians were led by Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, a strong supporter of Henry and Margaret. The Yorkist side was led by Richard, Duke of York, supported by his wife Cicely Neville's brother, Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick (as an influential noble with the opportunity to determine the successor to the Crown, sometimes called "Kingmaker"). The first actual battle in the Wars was at St. Albans in 1455. Henry did nothing but pray, yet managed to injure his neck. Richard of York defeated Margaret's forces, but was nonetheless subsequently forced to flee to Ireland. In 1460, the Yorkists won another battle and captured Henry.

Richard of York urged his claim to the lords. They waffled and finally honored their fealty to Henry VI but named Richard of York as successor in place of Henry's son Edward, notwithstanding that they had already recognized Edward as Prince of Wales. Then Margaret's forces then defeated the Yorkists at Wakefield, and Richard of York was killed. Richard of York's son Edward inherited his father's claim and proved more determined. In 1461, he marched on London, crowned himself **Edward IV** at Westminster Hall, and proceeded again to defeat Margaret's forces, compelling her to flee with Henry VI and their son. In 1465, Henry VI was captured and the Lancastrians defeated.

The Yorkist claims to the throne are considered by some to have been stronger than those of the Lancastrians, since Edward IV and Richard III traced their lineage to three of the sons of Edward III including the second son, Lionel Duke of Clarence, while the Lancastrian claims derived from Edward III's third son, John of Gaunt. Nonetheless, during this first part of Edward IV's reign, his hold on the crown was tenuous. "Kingmaker" Warwick was angered at Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville Grey, a Lancastrian commoner, widow of Lancastrian Sir John Grey. Others among the nobility were



also displeased with the marriage and the favor subsequently shown the Woodvilles. Warwick married his daughter Isabel to Edward IV's younger brother, George, Duke of Clarence, over whom Warwick had greater control than he'd manage to retain over Edward VI. Warwick then allied himself with Louis XI of France and Henry VI's wife, Margaret, and married his youngest daughter, Anne, to Margaret's son Edward, the Prince of Wales.

In 1470, Warwick invaded, freed the mad Henry VI and reinstalled him on the throne. Edward IV fled to Burgundy. Just five months later, Edward IV returned and, through further warfare in which Warwick was killed, regained the throne. Then at Tewkesbury, Henry VI's son Prince Edward was killed and Margaret captured. Soon after, in 1471, Henry VI was killed, possibly by Edward IV's brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who later became the infamous Richard III. (Soon after Prince Edward was killed, Richard III married his widow, Anne Neville, who stood to inherit considerable Warwick wealth.)

Edward IV was an effective statesman and soldier, but he was greedy, debauched, and cruel, as evidenced by his orders for the execution of Prince Edward, and later, the murder of his own brother, George of Clarence. (It should be noted that many authorities consider it unfair that Richard III has sometimes been blamed—by Shakespeare, among others—for the murders of Henry VI and George of Clarence, since there is no evidence that Richard III had any hand in them, and the deaths were doubtless pursuant to Edward IV's express wishes.)

After the battle at Tewkesbury (referred to above), Edward IV's position became more secure. He made his brother Richard the "King's Lieutenant in the North" and through him strengthened control of the Welsh and Scottish borders. He revived the English claim to the French throne and, allied with his brother-in-law, the Duke of Burgundy, invaded France. In 1475 he won a settlement from Louis XI that provided Edward an annuity that, together with confiscated Lancastrian estates, supported him during the remainder of his reign. Meanwhile, Edward's younger brother Clarence had caused him considerable trouble. Edward had Clarence convicted of treason on arguably exaggerated charges. In 1478, while Clarence remained in the Tower, Edward had him quietly murdered (as rumored, Clarence was allowed to select the method and chose to be drowned in a barrel of very good wine).

Edward IV died suddenly, perhaps worn out by his debauched life, leaving two sons aged twelve and nine, named Edward and Richard respectively. At the time of his death, they were living outside of London at Ludlow Castle with their mother Elizabeth Woodville. On their way to London, they were intercepted by Edward IV's brother Richard, Duke of Gloucester. Initially, the elder son, **Edward V**, was incarcerated in the palace part of the Tower, while Elizabeth, her younger son, and her daughters took sanctuary in Westminster Abbey. For reasons still not clear, Elizabeth was persuaded to release her younger son to join Edward V in the Tower.

Richard, Duke of Gloucester had the two sons declared illegitimate, based on the claim that Edward IV's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville was bigamous (and abetted by the nobility's resentment of the Woodvilles). In 1483, within a year after the death of the boys' father, Richard had himself crowned **Richard III**. The two boys disappeared.

Richard III was already regarded by many as responsible for the deaths of Henry VI, Henry's son and his own brother, the Duke of Clarence (albeit with the approval if not under the orders of his brother, Edward IV). His ruthless extinction of anyone who opposed his will made him unpopular and incited plotting against him.

Henry Stafford, the Duke of Buckingham, although a former collaborator of Richard III, was soon discovered in a plot with Henry Tudor, the Lancastrian heir, then in Brittany. Buckingham was executed, and it is believed this incident may have triggered the murders of Richard's nephews. Richard was generally believed to have ordered or at least acquiesced in the murders of his nephews (and he is still blamed for their deaths, although their remains in the Tower were not discovered until nearly sixty years after Shakespeare died and the charge remains unproved). The suspicious disappearance of Richard's nephews cost Richard further support.

Henry Tudor remained in Brittany. Henry was Earl of Richmond and the Lancastrian heir, son of Edmund Tudor and Margaret Beaufort, descended from Edward III through an illicit union between John of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford, and from Katherine of Valois, wife of Henry V, through her liaison after Henry V's death with a handsome commoner, Owen Tudor. Henry Tudor gathered a small army in France and landed at Milford Haven in Wales, where more forces joined him. The last important battle of the Wars of the Roses, the Battle of Bosworth Field, was fought in Leicestershire, where Richard III was killed.

In 1485, Lancastrian Henry Tudor was crowned **Henry VII**. After eighty-five years of civil war, he was determined to bring order to England, and he soon married the Yorkist heiress, Elizabeth of York, uniting red and white roses and creating the Tudor line. Elizabeth was the daughter of Edward IV, sister of Edward V, and niece of Richard III, and she soon became the mother of Henry VIII. The name, "Wars of the Roses," was invented by Henry VII. When Henry Tudor ascended, he created the badge of red and white roses intertwined and called it the Tudor rose.

Henry VII was aloof but a wise politician, avaricious but a hard worker. His claim to the throne being relatively weak, initially his reign was challenged by pretenders and the disaffected, but the rival claims were put down. Henry imposed heavy taxes and fines, bringing the nobles to heel, and helped to make the medieval government he inherited more modern and efficient. He buttressed his position through dynastic marriages, marrying his eldest son Arthur to the Spanish princess Katherine of Aragon and his daughter Margaret to King James IV of Scotland. Arthur died within months, so Henry obtained papal consent to marry Katherine to his next son, the future Henry VIII. The tie Henry VII created between his daughter and the king of Scotland would eventually result in the ascent of James Stuart to the English throne.

Henry VII sought peace in France and obtained a lucrative treaty with Charles VIII of France; the treaty was also beneficial in promoting trade. In 1496, John Cabot was sent on an expedition in which he discovered Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, and the English navy began to be established. When Henry VII died, he left a large fortune to his only surviving son, whom he had made Duke of York at an early age and who in 1509 succeeded to the throne without opposition as **Henry VIII**.

Henry VIII is best-known for having had six wives. Although he was not inclined to deprive himself sensually, his principal motive may have been not lust but a desire to ensure as trouble-free a succession as he himself had enjoyed. As successive wives failed to produce a male heir, they were disposed of by whatever means necessary.

1. Katherine of Aragon—This marriage to the widow of Henry's brother Arthur was originated to preserve the Spanish alliance. Henry found her an exemplary wife, and the marriage lasted for twenty-four years; but after the death of the couple's only son and a series of miscarriages and still births, Henry had the marriage declared invalid. (Katherine and Henry had a surviving daughter who later became Mary I, a.k.a. "Bloody Mary", but at this point, whether a female could succeed to the crown remained subject to dispute.)

2. Anne Boleyn—the sister of one of Henry VIII's many mistresses, Henry ordered her secret betrothal to another courtier broken off and then, while Henry was still married to Katherine, himself began pursuing Anne. She defended her "honesty" for seven years, until he was able to marry her. To accomplish that, Henry broke from Catholic Rome in order to divorce Katherine, and established the Church of England. Anne gave birth to Elizabeth I, but Anne was sharp-tongued and had made enemies as well as friends. After she miscarried, she was falsely accused of adultery with five other men including her brother, and she and all five men were executed.

3. Jane Seymour—Jane, sister of Admiral Thomas Seymour, had been maid of honor to both Katherine and Anne. She died giving birth to Edward VI.

4. Anne of Cleves—Henry now wanted a marriage that would be politically advantageous, but few royals would have him. Cleves was a dukedom in Germany. After the marriage treaty had been signed and Anne arrived, Henry found her completely unattractive. When Anne realized Henry wished to be rid of her, she cooperated, and the marriage was annulled on the ground of non-consummation.

5. Catherine Howard—A pretty but foolish cousin of Anne Boleyn; discovery of her hidden, previous attachments prompted the accusation of adultery for which she was executed.

6. Catherine Parr—Twice widowed when Henry began courting her, she may have been in love with Admiral Thomas Seymour (brother of Jane Seymour and of Edward Seymour, who later became Edward VI's Protector); but she was too wise to refuse Henry. Her maturity and ability to get along with Henry's children may have helped her survive the King.

Between his marital and extra-marital affairs and his love of sports, partying and pageantry, Henry VIII largely left the responsibilities of government to three advisers, Thomas Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell, and Thomas More, author of "Utopia." The ostentatious Wolsey became particularly powerful as a Church cardinal and the King's Chancellor (similar to Prime Minister). Henry proved no more loyal to his political allies than to his wives.

Henry VIII's first wife, Katherine of Aragon, had been his brother's widow, and Henry had originally had to obtain license from a previous pope in order to marry her. To divorce her, Henry at first again sought papal permission. After Wolsey proved unable to procure it, he was dismissed and charged with treason. (Among other reasons for Pope Clement VII's reluctance, he was beholden to Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and the nephew of Katherine).

More became Chancellor. Meanwhile, Cromwell, a member of Parliament, had become a chief advisor of the King. Monastic practice had decayed, and many among the clergy were idle, dissolute, or corrupt. In 1532, Cromwell obtained a series of acts in Parliament that curtailed Church power and gave Henry the right to curtail its revenues. More resigned in protest. Henry appointed as Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who had apprised Henry of his belief in the supremacy of royal decree over Church law, at least as to matters of marriage. The Pope perceived the threat to Church revenues and ratified Cranmer's appointment.

Cranmer crowned Anne Boleyn as queen. The Pope then responded by excommunicating Henry. Subsequent legislation prohibited appeals to Rome, denied validity to its judgments and excommunications, designated the king as the sole and supreme head of the Church of England. By 1536, the Reformation Parliament had passed 137 statutes confirming a complete break from Rome and inaugurating a new era "conformity of mind." The clergy were forced to choose allegiance between England and Rome. Thomas More chose Rome, and was executed. Cranmer, who had married twice even before the break, survived to facilitate Henry's subsequent matrimonial adventures.

Henry VIII dissolved the papal monasteries and confiscated their estates in a process known as "enclosure." Despite the decadence among the clergy, the monasteries had been the main source of alms for the poor. Enclosure involved the most dramatic redistribution of land since William the Conqueror and involved the conversion into pasture of common lands that had been subject to peasants' feudal, farming rights. Many peasants were deprived of their means of subsistence, and employment was reduced. Opposition to the dissolution of the monasteries and to the enclosure movement gave rise to a mass

pilgrimage and rebellion, among the main aims of which were the dismissal of Cromwell and to save the monasteries. The rebellion was savagely suppressed by the Duke of Norfolk.

In most respects, the doctrine of the Church of England under Henry, however, differed little from that of Rome. Prior to the break, Henry had written a tract in opposition to Luther, for which the Pope had conferred on him the title, “Defender of the Faith” (a title retained by English monarchs to this day). Cromwell ultimately proved too liberal for Henry, and Henry had him executed in 1540 after keeping him alive just long enough to testify in Henry’s divorce from Anne of Cleves. Cromwell had been effective not only in Parliament but also as an administrator, among other things instituting public records of births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths. He had also played a large role in bringing about the translation of the Bible into English. As Cranmer noted after his death, Cromwell had been “such a servant . . . in wisdom, diligence faithfulness and experience, as no prince in this realm ever had.”

Although Henry VIII was an effective statesman and was popular with the people, he was ineffectual as a soldier. Much of the wealth that came to him was spent in continental invasions in which little was gained. He continued to strengthen the navy, however, so that England began to challenge the maritime supremacy of Spain.

**Edward VI** ascended in 1547 at the age of nine. Henry VIII had set up a Council of Regency to govern during Edward’s minority, but Edward’s uncle, Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, quickly took control, having himself made Protector and Duke of Somerset, and virtually ruled.

Edward VI was Protestant, as was Somerset, and after Henry VIII’s death, Church doctrine was pushed toward Protestantism. Cranmer had written the formularies that became the basis for the Thirty-Nine Articles and composed much of the Book of Common Prayer, which eloquently avoided controversial issues in an effort to mollify Catholics and which in 1549 was now established as a guide to the new style of worship. Anti-Catholic treason and heresy laws were repealed.

To avert an alliance between Scotland and France, Somerset invaded Scotland in an effort to enforce a marriage agreement between Edward VI and Mary, Queen of Scots (Mary Stuart), defeating the Scots army (Edward died young, however, and never married). Somerset’s brother, the Lord High Admiral Thomas Seymour, was executed after failing in a plot to put himself in power. The economy deteriorated. Clerics had lost their positions and peasants suffered as a result of the enclosure of monastic lands. Meanwhile, religious factionalism worsened; radical Protestants demanded further reform, while Catholic rebellion against the Reformation resulted in Somerset’s own arrest and execution for treason.

Somerset was replaced as the leading noble in Council by John Dudley, the Earl of Warwick and a greedy, ambitious schemer. Warwick introduced Edward VI into the Council’s affairs when Edward was only twelve. The office of Protector was abolished, and Warwick was made Duke of Northumberland. Northumberland pushed the Reformation even further, con-

tinuing the confiscation of lands held by the Catholic Church and otherwise mismanaging the economy. Eager to advance his family, he married his fourth son to **Lady Jane Grey**, who had a claim to the throne through Henry VII's daughter Mary, and persuaded Edward to nominate her as successor over his half-sisters, Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, in order to avoid allowing the Catholic Mary to accede.

Edward VI died at the age of fifteen, and in 1553, Lady Jane Grey ascended. The next in succession after Edward VI was Mary Tudor, but before Edward's death, Northumberland had persuaded Edward to nominate Lady Jane Grey as his successor rather than Mary, based on objection to Mary's strong Catholicism. Lady Jane had no desire to rule but had been pushed by her parents, who had originally hoped her cousin, Edward VI, would marry her, and by Northumberland, to whose son she had been married against her will. Initially, the Council recognized Lady Jane Grey's claim and sent out instructions for her proclamation, but only two towns responded. Mary raised her standard at Framingham and rallied supporters of the Tudor dynasty, and any opposition dissolved. By the time Mary entered London, Lady Jane Grey, her husband, and Northumberland were imprisoned in the Tower.

**Mary I**, who became known as "**Bloody Mary**," ascended in 1553, when she was thirty-seven. As a child, she had suffered neglect and persecution first through Henry VIII's divorce of her mother, Katherine of Aragon, and subsequent insistence that she acknowledge her own illegitimacy and then, under Edward VI, in the form of pressure that she abjure the Catholic mass.

After ascending, Mary executed Northumberland and two accomplices but initially spared Lady Jane Grey, whose participation in Northumberland's machinations had been unwilling. She wanted to reverse the Reformation, but she allowed Protestants who did not want to live under a Catholic ruler the opportunity to leave England, and some 800 left to form a Protestant Church of England in exile. She recognized that those who had bought or received monastic lands would not now give them up. At her insistence, however, Parliament began to repeal various other laws, beginning with the reform that had allowed priests to marry.

During this period, the failure of Mary's half-sister Elizabeth to truly convert to Catholicism, coupled with others' plots, placed Elizabeth in almost constant danger. A rebellion led by Sir Thomas Wyatt broke out in London. It was put down and was followed by hundreds of executions, including that of Lady Jane Grey; and Elizabeth, although careful to disassociate herself from conspirators, was under suspicion and was imprisoned in the Tower.

Mary surrounded herself with zealous Catholics and continued her campaign to convert the English back to Catholicism, earning her title, "Bloody Mary." She may have acted more out of religious zeal than more bloodthirsty motives, but under revived heresy laws, nearly 300 people burned at the stake during her five-year reign. Archbishop Cranmer was condemned. He recanted, but when asked to confirm his recantation at the stake, he refused and thrust the hand

that had written it into the fire. Few gentlemen were among those who burned, however; most were from the lower classes. This inequity, as much as the cruelty of the punishment, damaged the esteem in which the monarchy was held. The burnings also seemed to strengthen support for Protestantism.

It was considered imperative that Mary should marry and produce an heir, but she chose her cousin, Philip II, heir to the Spanish throne and a Catholic. The Commons considered such a match a threat to English independence and begged her to reconsider, but she refused. Philip came to London and they married, but he left again after only fourteen months. What time Philip spent with her during their marriage yielded no heirs, just two miscarried or false pregnancies.

Calais, which the English had held for 211 years, was lost to France in wars Mary embarked upon at Philip II's urging, leaving England with no possessions on the Continent for the first time since the Norman Conquest in 1066. After reigning only five years, Mary died.

In 1558, **Elizabeth I**, the last of the Tudors, ascended at the age of twenty-five. She had been close to her half-brother, Edward VI, and both had received good care from their father Henry VIII's last wife, Catherine Parr, a learned woman. Her childhood had been difficult in some ways, however. After her mother, Anne Boleyn, had been falsely accused and executed when Elizabeth was two years old, Elizabeth had been declared illegitimate (her legitimacy was reinstated by Parliament in 1544). Later, the King had married Anne's cousin, the young and foolish Catherine Howard. Catherine was kind to Elizabeth, but by the time Elizabeth was seven, Catherine too was executed for adultery. Elizabeth is reported to have told the young Robert Dudley soon afterward that she would never marry.

Elizabeth proved an able and industrious politician. She was a remarkable woman, learned and reputed to speak nine languages, and she chose extremely capable advisers, including Sir William Cecil, Sir John Hawkins, Lord Howard, Walsingham, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, and others who helped make England respected and feared. Although like her father she believed in the absolute supremacy of the monarch, she wisely avoided conflict with Parliament, rather playing factions one against the other until the exhausted participants came to her for a decision.

Like her father, Elizabeth enjoyed hunting, dancing, and entertainment. She used make-up (she contracted smallpox in 1562), jewels, and clothing to make herself magnificent. She understood the power of show and made an art of "progresses," visiting her subjects, accompanied by her retinue, for several months each year. Elizabeth became very popular with the commoners as well as with her statesmen. Fashion, courtly behavior and education were appreciated in her court. Literature flourished under Elizabeth: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser, Sidney, and Bacon wrote some or all of their works during her reign. (For more details regarding Shakespeare, see the [Biographical Supplement](#).)

When Elizabeth I ascended, government finances had been exhausted and the country was torn by religious strife. England had lost its last possession in France, while the French king had a foothold in Edinburgh through French marriages to James V of Scotland and his daughter, Mary Queen of Scots. Mary had sworn to convert Scotland to Catholicism and soon claimed the title, “Queen of England and Scotland.”

Elizabeth I was Protestant, but not passionately so, which was one reason her accession was not strongly contested by English Catholics. Pope Paul IV, however, soon insisted that Elizabeth renounce the throne, based on his contention that she was illegitimate because of Henry VIII’s subsequent marriage to Jane Seymour; and because England had remained a fief of the Holy See since King John, the Pope further contended that he retained the right to dispose of the Crown. Elizabeth replaced those bishops who refused to swear allegiance to her as head of the Anglican Church, repealed Mary I’s church legislation, and reinstated that of her father, Henry VIII.

After Henry VIII’s death, Elizabeth had received a marriage proposal from Admiral Seymour (who continued to pursue her even after marrying the widowed Queen Catherine), and thereafter Elizabeth had many suitors, including Mary’s widower, Philip of Spain. Despite pressure from Parliament that she marry in order to ensure the succession of the Crown, however, Elizabeth remained single, becoming celebrated as “Gloriana, the Virgin Queen.” Soon after her ascent, she had wanted to marry Lord Robert Dudley, her childhood friend, but may have been dissuaded by popular feeling against him. In any case, by remaining unmarried, she avoided any diminution in her own power. She also used deliberately protracted marriage negotiations with the French to avert an alliance between France and Spain. (Elizabeth nonetheless made Dudley Earl of Leicester, and he was given a bedroom near hers; however, he was probably not her only lover.)

Elizabeth avoided war if at all possible, but she acted promptly against any power that threatened her own sovereignty or English independence. Prompted by the massing of Philip of Spain’s Armada, she allowed Drake to attack Cadiz in 1587, and in brilliant action, he destroyed the ships and stores assembled there. She aided the Protestants in Scotland against the Catholic Mary of Guise, mother of Mary, Queen of Scots, as well as the Protestant Huguenots in France and Belgium’s struggle for independence from Spain. Despite Elizabeth’s relative moderateness toward Catholics, numerous plots in support of her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots were uncovered. After Elizabeth was confronted with evidence of Mary’s involvement in the Babington Plot, she gave orders for Mary’s trial, and Mary was convicted. Parliament beseeched Elizabeth to execute Mary. Elizabeth refused but her council nonetheless had the deed done in 1587. Elizabeth was furious, but she was too much of a realist not to appreciate the result.

In 1588 the Spanish Armada had recovered and attempted an invasion of England. The Armada was then the largest expeditionary force ever assembled. Hawkins had continued the naval reforms begun by Henry VIII, equipping the navy with lighter, faster ships with heavier, longer-range guns. Under the command of Howard, the English navy battled Spain’s for



nine days, first harrying the Armada up the Channel, and then with just eight fire-ships defeating the Spanish at Calais. In the battle and during a subsequent storm, the Armada lost half its ships.

Philip of Spain continued to cause trouble, most successfully with his support of Tyrone's uprising in Ireland in 1595. Tyrone and his Spanish troop were ultimately defeated by Baron Mountjoy after an incompetent defense by the Earl of Essex. In her mid-fifties, Elizabeth may have been in love with the handsome young Essex. Essex later attempted and failed in his own insurrection, in 1601, and was beheaded.

Elizabeth acted to encourage trade, and during her reign, England made tremendous progress in exploring and colonizing the globe. Raleigh's first Virginian colony was founded, Drake circumnavigated the world, returning after three years with captured treasure that afforded his investors a return of nearly five thousand percent. The English enjoyed the lowest taxes in Europe. When Elizabeth died, religious strife had largely disappeared, and England was secure and powerful. She is regarded by many as the greatest monarch in English history.

James Stuart of Scotland, then James VI of Scotland, ascended the English throne in 1603, becoming **James I** of England. He was descended from Henry Tudor's grandfather and was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and her second husband, Lord Darnley. His father Lord Darnley was blown up when he was an infant. His mother remarried the murderer within a year. Soon after that, Mary was forced to abdicate the Scottish throne, and James never saw her again (ultimately, she was executed by Elizabeth I). During his childhood, Scotland was governed by a series of Regents who came to violent or suspicious ends.

In 1589, James I married Anne of Denmark, and in 1594 and 1600 had two sons, Henry and Charles. (Note the resonance between James' life and *Hamlet*, which is believed to have been first performed in 1603—a play in which the Prince of Denmark's mother married his father's murderer.) During the 1590's, James gradually asserted control over Scotland, despite repeated conspiracies and threats. Although a Protestant, he himself engaged in intrigues with Rome until Elizabeth died. When Elizabeth I died, he became the first monarch to rule both Scotland and England.

Initially, England welcomed James with enthusiastic relief. In conversation, James I was intelligent and scholarly, but in conduct he was high-handed, extravagant, and foolish. Like Elizabeth, James believed in the supremacy of the monarch over Parliament and the law; but unlike her, he made an issue of his beliefs. James had never dealt with a strong Parliament, and Parliament was prepared to defend its privileges. During Parliament's first session after James's ascension, in 1604, James proposed to unify Scotland and England. This proposal was rebuffed. Then, in response to another foray by James, Parliament drafted the great Form of Apology, stating that certain rights inhere in the subject and strongly implying they could not be revoked by the monarch. This document was probably seen by James, though never formally delivered.

James' favorites were ill-chosen and corrupt, and his lavishness toward them, among other irritants, incited Parliament to withhold money he needed to pay his debts. In 1611 James dissolved Parliament, ruling without one until 1621. He sold 200 landed titles to raise cash and at one point even offered to sell Sir Walter Raleigh to Philip III of Spain for execution after Raleigh returned from an unproductive voyage up the Orinoco River in which Raleigh's forces had captured a Spanish town in violation of the King's orders.

James' policy regarding religion was inconsistent, angering all sides. He rejected portions of a petition to accommodate the Puritans within the Church of England in 1604 and then failed to follow through to ensure that Church bishops implemented the portions he'd approved. At that time, the authorized King James Bible was commissioned, which was published in 1611. In 1605, after James reimposed penalties against Catholics that he had earlier loosened, Guy Fawkes and other Catholic sympathizers mounted the Gunpowder Plot, an attempt to blow up House of Lords with the King in it. The plot failed but fueled Protestant intolerance toward minority religious groups. James' intolerance toward Protestant extremists resulted in the first wave of immigration by the Puritans to North America.

When James died in 1625 and his son Charles ascended, the national finances were in disarray, the stage was set for English civil war, and following a visit to Madrid by James's son, Charles, and favorite, Buckingham, in a botched effort to match Charles with the Spanish Infanta, England was close to war with Spain.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

There are some wonderful movie versions of the plays. My favorites as of this writing include: Baz Luhrman's *Romeo and Juliet* with Leonardo DiCaprio; Kenneth Branagh's version of *Much Ado About Nothing*; the Public Broadcasting Service version of *Richard II* starring Derek Jacoby; Branagh's *Henry V*; Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (and compare Akira Kurasawa's wonderful *Throne of Blood*); Orson Welles' *Othello* (but I find his *Macbeth* too slow); and *Richard III* with Ian McKellen; plus three terrific *Hamlets*, a PBS version starring Jacoby, a 1996 production with Branagh as lead and Jacoby as Claudius (I find Branagh best brings to life the charisma of Hamlet's character), and an indie gem starring Ethan Hawke.

If you're interested in a particular play, used book stores often have inexpensive, highly portable paperback editions of the individual plays. The Folger Library editions are excellent and have the footnotes on the page across from the text instead of at the back of the play or bottom of the page, which makes them perhaps the easiest read. For more the ambitious, Arden publishes what are considered by some to be the best more scholarly editions of the individual plays.

Rooms full of books and articles, many quite excellent, have of course been written about Shakespeare's works and the biographical and historical backgrounds. Below are a few books I've consulted and found especially helpful. I'm sorry not to provide a more comprehensive list with respect to criticism; but again, I believe the best (and most fun) approach is simply to read and analyze the plays for oneself.

## History

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## Criticism

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