English Renaissance Drama

Peter Womack
English Renaissance Drama
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English Renaissance Drama

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Imagine putting the clock back by exactly four hundred years, so that I finish writing this book in the summer of 1605. In the spring I could have seen the first performance of *King Lear*, followed a few weeks later by *Eastward Ho!*, a topical satire two of whose authors, Ben Jonson and George Chapman, are still in jail as a result of it. In the meantime, Thomas Middleton is producing a string of comedies of contemporary London life, a genre he invented about a year ago. *Macbeth*, *Volpone* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* are currently being written; all three will have had their first performances by the time this book comes out in the middle of 1606. This is a schedule whose energy and ambition are unmatched in the history of English drama. The year 1605–6 is an *annus mirabilis* in the middle of an extraordinary half-century: to get the measure of it, we could wonder which five new plays of 2005–6 will be holding the stage in the early twenty-fifth century. Besides marvelling at it, there are two things to say about it by way of introduction to this guide.

First, the site of this extraordinary productivity was the theatre. As far as we can tell, all these plays were staged as soon as they were written, and printed only after they had been staged: they were shows first and books second. Their making was a theatrical rather than a literary process in the sense that, typically, the writers were not independent authors, but theatre managers, collaborators, dramatizers, adaptors. The pace of production, the visual and formal conventions, the size of the cast, the distinction of genres, the language spoken on the stage – all these things were determined in the playhouse rather than the study. In a sense, the scripts were produced partly by individual poets, but partly by the fast-
moving theatrical culture to which – more or less closely, more or less discontentedly – they all belonged.

To reflect that mode of work, this guide to drama will concentrate not so much on dramatists as on the institution they worked in, not on the personal emphases that distinguish Massinger from Middleton, or Beaumont from Fletcher, but rather on what they all shared. Accordingly, the first two substantive sections are ‘The Set-Up’ – an analytic description of the early modern theatre and its social and material environment – and ‘Background Voices’ – an account of some of the discourses and tones out of which plays were made, the raw materials, as it were, to which all dramatists had access. Only then is there a section on the principal ‘Writers’ of English Renaissance plays, giving a brief biographical account of each, and focusing on each one’s particular relationship with the theatre.

In other words, I have deliberately downplayed the category of authorship. This decision has an effect of paradox, because one of the people who wrote for the early modern stage happens to have become the most famous author on the planet. One view of this phenomenon is that it is a posthumous distortion – that if the mechanisms of eighteenth-century publishing and nineteenth-century imperialism had worked slightly differently, we would now be patronizing the Royal Jonson Company, or securing our credit cards with holographic images of Marlowe. I should perhaps say that I don’t share this view: it seems to me that Shakespeare’s personal mastery of the medium was of a different order to everyone else’s, and that what made 1605–6 not just a good year but an astonishing one was the arrival in the repertoire of Lear and Macbeth. But that is a point on which readers of this book can freely make up their own minds; the trickier question concerns Shakespeare’s proper place in a guide to English Renaissance drama. If he is placed according to his position in our knowledge and understanding of Elizabethan theatre, he will simply take over the book. If he is excluded – a fairly common strategy, which makes ‘Renaissance drama’ mean everyone else’s plays – that leaves a bizarre hole in the centre of the dramatic landscape. Shakespeare was, after all, not an obscure figure in his own time. He was much quoted, much alluded to, much imitated; his collected plays were grandiously published within a few years of his death; for most of his career he was the principal dramatist in the most successful of the theatre companies; he was the only dramatist who retired rich. In short, he was one of the leading playwrights
of his age, not only in bardolatrous retrospect but also at the time. To represent the drama of 1590–1610 without him would be to misrepresent it. In this dilemma, what I have done is to refer to Shakespeare’s plays readily and often, considering them, however, not as products of an individual imagination but as uses (sometimes supremely exact and forceful uses) of a common language. To the limited extent that this is a book about Shakespeare, then, it is about the collective character of what we call his genius. He didn’t become Shakespeare all by himself.

The second point to make about the 1605–6 season concerns the tempo of production. I mentioned only the better-known plays; in the season as a whole there were probably thirty or forty new productions, mounted by four or five London companies between them. That was on top of the existing repertoire, which was already large: hobbled by official prohibitions, companies needed to act every day they could, and to keep drawing audiences by changing the programme every day. These are the imperatives of an entertainment industry: underlying the immense expressive range of the great plays was a technical fluency that came from high turnover, precarious success, and the relentless demand for material. Today, the scripts that survive from this business do so primarily in academic contexts, so we tend to think of them as academic texts, and to ask what values they embody, what ideological problems they address, what doctrines they are designed to enforce or question. And of course it is bound to be true that playwrights also aspired to be moralists, political activists, representatives of this or that social or confessional grouping. But before they could be any of those things in practice, they had to be entertaining. Academics tend to underestimate the seriousness and complexity of this requirement, perhaps because their own audience is a captive one.

To correct that underestimation, this guide adopts an attitude of conscious superficiality. In discussing the selection of ‘Key Plays’, it often neglects the question of what the play means in favour of the question of what pleasure it affords, and how (and whether) it works. Similarly, for the final substantive section, I have chosen not to identify the ‘themes’ or ‘topics’ which appear at the same point in other books in this series, but instead to consider a range of ‘Actions That A Man Might Play’ – the things that are literally done on the stage – and to ask what makes them interesting to watch. I hope the effect of these decisions is to make the book itself more entertaining than it would otherwise have been. There
are too many critical essays about these reckless and inventive scripts which, unforgivably, make them sound dull.

Note on Dates and Readings

Throughout this book, the date attached to a play is the year of its first performance, not necessarily the year it was written, or the year it was published. Very often, these dates are uncertain: the early modern theatre kept no systematic record of performances, and its chronology has been established by scholarly detective work that includes a good deal of guessing. Since the exact date is often not important, I have simply adopted the dates given in the standard reference work, Alfred Harbage’s *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700*, revised by S. Schoenbaum (London: Routledge, 1989), and not added the many question-marks and caveats which the state of the evidence strictly requires. Whenever a play receives more than a passing mention I have given its date, except in the case of ‘key plays’, which are asterisked.

Getting access to the texts of these plays is also a matter of making reasonable compromises. Most of the playwrights are available in university libraries in multi-volume editions of their collected works – but in some cases these editions are well over a century old, and very dated in their presentation of the text, their sense of what sort of notes and explanations a reader needs, even in their assumptions about who wrote what. Wherever a relatively modern and student-friendly edition is available, it offers a much better way of getting at the play. Most of the plays that are studied or performed today can be found in single-play series such as the New Mermaids from A. & C. Black and W. W. Norton, or the Revels Plays from Manchester University Press, or else in the selected editions produced by Penguin and by the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses. It can also happen that a play is republished to coincide with a new production in the theatre: these editions should be treated with a little care, because sometimes they give the acting text of the new production, which may well be heavily adapted from the original. There is nothing wrong with adaptation, but it’s as well to know what you’re reading.

In this rather muddled situation, I have elected to be user-friendly rather than consistent. Each entry in the ‘Writers’ section notes the fullest edition of a dramatist’s complete plays, however old and dusty it is. But
when I am discussing an individual play, in the ‘Key Plays’ section or elsewhere, I have used a helpful and readily available modern edition. All the editions used are listed in the bibliography at the end of the book.

Some editors choose to preserve the archaic (and various) spelling of the earliest texts, others use modern spelling. I have modernized the spelling in all my quotations, so as not to give the impression that some Renaissance writers are more ancient than others.

It is worth adding that all these scripts are also available in electronic form. Two databases produced by Chadwyck-Healey both include virtually all the extant drama texts from 1576–1642 and beyond: Literature Online (www.lion.chadwyck.co.uk) and Early English Books Online (www.eebo.chadwyck.com). Neither of these resources is in the public domain, but many university libraries are subscribers, so they make an enormous library of drama available to students. And there is also a selection of full texts on the open web, less comprehensive, but large and growing.

Acknowledgements

I’m grateful to Andrew McNeillie for suggesting this project, to the University of East Anglia for giving me the time to complete it, to Tony Gash for literally inexhaustible advice and encouragement, and above all to Laura Scott, the reader without whom there would be no text.
Timeline

With a few exceptions, this table logs only those plays and events which I have touched on elsewhere in the book. The idea is to avoid burdening the reader with items whose significance she has no way of seeing. It does mean, though, that the table is not a safe guide to the history of the period, as it omits many things which a different point of view might register as centrally important.

Plays are assigned to the year of first performance, other writings to the year of first publication unless otherwise stated. Performance dates are of course subject to the health warning I issued in the Introduction. As for the writers, I have tried to show when they entered and left the theatre rather than the world; so there are no births in the timeline, and deaths only in the cases where a dramatist died more or less in harness. If anyone is referred to by surname alone, he has an entry in the ‘Writers’ section. As throughout the book, titles discussed in the ‘Key Plays’ section are asterisked.

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<td>Francis Drake’s world voyage (–1580)</td>
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<td>Children’s company begins playing commercially at Blackfriars</td>
<td>Raphael Holinshed, Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland</td>
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<td>1577 The Curtain playhouse opens</td>
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<td>John Northbrooke, A Treatise</td>
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<td>Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Interludes</td>
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| 1580 | Last (unsuccessful) attempt to stage biblical cycle plays in York | Population of London about 100,000  
Proclamation prohibits building in City of London because of overcrowding |
| 1581 | The Master of the Revels is commissioned to regulate all playing companies | Philip Sidney writes *Arcadia*  
Thomas Newton and others, *Seneca His Ten Tragedies* |
| 1582 |  | Philip Sidney writes *Astrophil and Stella* and *The Defence of Poesy* |
| 1583 | Formation of the Queen’s Men  
Edward Alleyn begins acting career  
Philip Stubbes, *An Anatomy of Abuses*, attacks theatre, fashion and popular festivities |  |
| 1584 |  | End of Elizabeth’s last marriage negotiations opens the way to the cult of the Virgin Queen |
| 1585 |  | Declaration of war with Spain (–1604) |
| 1586 | *The Famous Victories of Henry V*  
Richard Tarlton at the height of his fame |  |
| 1587 | Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*  
Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*  
Rose playhouse built | Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots  
Launch of papal crusade against England |
| 1588 | *The Wounds of Civil War* | Failure of Spanish invasion force, the ‘Armada’ |
| 1589 | Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*  
Peele’s first play | Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations of the English Nation* |
1590 Greene, *The Scottish History of James IV*  
Peele, *The Old Wives Tale*  
Shakespeare, *1 Henry VI*  
Children's companies close down  

1591 *Arden of Faversham*  

1592 *Thomas of Woodstock*  
Marlowe, *Edward II, Doctor Faustus*  
Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors, Richard III*  

1593 Arrest and interrogation of Kyd  
Death of Marlowe  

1594 Heywood, *The Four Prentices of London*  
Establishment of Lord Admiral's Men and Lord Chamberlain's Men; emergence of Richard Burbage as Lord Chamberlain's Men's leading actor  

1595 Anthony Munday and others, *Sir Thomas More*  
Shakespeare, *Richard II*  
Swan playhouse built  

1596 Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet*  
Death of Peele  

1597 Shakespeare, *Henry IV*  
Edward Alleyn withdraws from full-time acting  
Chapman, Dekker and Heywood begin writing for the stage  

Thomas Lodge, *Rosalind*  
Philip Sidney, *Arcadia*  
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene, Books I–III*  

Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil*  
Death of Greene  
Plague (~1594)  

Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*  
Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*  

First of five consecutive bad harvests  
Start of Irish insurgency  
Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller*  

Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti*  

Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene, Books I–VI*  
Drake's last (unsuccessful) voyage  

Francis Bacon, *Essays*  
John Dowland, *First Book of Songs*  
The 'Islands Voyage' (unsuccessful naval expedition to the Azores)
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<th><strong>1598</strong></th>
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| Jonson, *Every Man In His Humour*  
First of the series of ‘Parnassus’ plays at Cambridge (–1601) | James VI of Scotland, *The True Law of Free Monarchies*  
John Marston, *The Scourge of Villainy*  
Anti-vagrancy law |  |
|  | Chapman, *All Fools*  
Dekker, *The Shoemakers’ Holiday*  
Jonson, *Every Man Out Of His Humour*  
Marston, *Antonio and Mellida*  
Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, *Henry V*  
Globe playhouse built  
New children’s companies launched | Proclamation prohibiting verse satire  
Death of Spenser |  |
|  | Michael Drayton and others, *Sir John Oldcastle*  
Fortune playhouse built | Population of London about 200,000 |  |
|  | Jonson, *Poetaster* and Dekker,  
*Satiromastix* mark the height of the ‘War of the Theatres’  
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night* | Fall and execution of the Earl of Essex  
Foundation of East India Company |  |
|  | Middleton and Webster begin writing for the stage | Foundation of Bodleian Library, Oxford |  |
|  | Heywood, *A Woman Killed With Kindness*  
Jonson, *Sejanus*  
Lord Chamberlain’s Men become King’s Men, Lord Admiral’s Men become Prince Henry’s Men | Death of Elizabeth I and accession of James I  
Plague | Montaigne, *Essays*, translated into English by John Florio |
|  | Dekker and Middleton, *The Honest Whore*  
Marston, *The Malcontent*  
Shakespeare, *Othello* | King’s triumphal entry into the City of London  
End of war with Spain  
Beginning of negotiations to unite England and Scotland |  |
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<td>Fletcher, <em>The Faithful Shepherdess</em> Shakespeare, <em>Coriolanus</em></td>
<td>Children at Blackfriars suspended due to scandals Marston retires from theatre</td>
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| 1612 | Webster, *The White Devil*  
Publication of Heywood’s *Apology for Actors*  
Shakespeare leaves London | Death of Henry, Prince of Wales  
Don Quixote appears in English |
| 1613 | Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*  
Globe playhouse burnt down  
Beaumont’s career ends  
Massinger begins writing for the stage | Marriage of James’s daughter Elizabeth  
Murder of Sir Thomas Overbury  
Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry* |
| 1614 | Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*  
Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*  
Globe playhouse rebuilt, Hope playhouse built – the last amphitheatres  
Chapman leaves London | Sir Walter Ralegh, *The History of the World* |
| 1616 | Jonson, *The Devil Is An Ass*  
Cockpit playhouse, Drury Lane, built | Jonson’s *Works* published in folio  
William Harvey lectures on the circulation of the blood |
| 1617 | Fletcher, *The Chances* | |
| 1618 | | Beginning of Thirty Years’ War in Europe  
James I publishes *The Book of Sports*, endorsing traditional pastimes |
| 1619 | Death of Richard Burbage | |
| 1621 | Dekker, Ford, Rowley, *The Witch of Edmonton*  
Fletcher, *The Wild-Goose Chase*  
Middleton, *Women Beware Women* | Political fall of Francis Bacon  
Confrontation between King and Parliament over the latter’s rights  
John Donne becomes Dean of St Paul’s |
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<td>Middleton and Rowley, <em>The Changeling</em></td>
<td>Building of the Banqueting House at Whitehall, designed by Inigo Jones</td>
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<td>1623</td>
<td>James I seeks marriage between Prince Charles and the Infanta of Spain</td>
<td>Shakespeare First Folio published</td>
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<td>1624</td>
<td>Middleton, <em>A Game At Chess</em>, attacking the Spanish marriage</td>
<td>Middleton and Webster retire from playwriting</td>
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<td>1625</td>
<td>Massinger, <em>A New Way to Pay Old Debts</em></td>
<td>Shirley's first play</td>
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<td>Death of James I, accession of Charles I</td>
<td>Plague</td>
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<td>Death of Fletcher</td>
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<td>1626</td>
<td>Massinger, <em>The Roman Actor</em></td>
<td>Death of Rowley</td>
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<td>1629</td>
<td>Brome, <em>The Northern Lass</em></td>
<td>Breakdown in relations between King and Parliament leads to 11-year period of personal rule by Charles (–1640)</td>
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<td>Jonson, <em>The New Inn</em></td>
<td>Duke of Bedford obtains licence to develop Covent Garden area</td>
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<td>Salisbury Court playhouse built</td>
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<td>1630</td>
<td>Ford, <em>The Broken Heart</em></td>
<td>Milton's early poetry written</td>
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<td>1631</td>
<td>Heywood, <em>The Fair Maid of the West</em></td>
<td>Death of John Donne</td>
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<td>1632</td>
<td>Ford, 'Tis Pity She's A Whore*</td>
<td>Death of Dekker</td>
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<td>1633</td>
<td>William Prynne, <em>Histriomastix; or the Player's Scourge</em> – the most ambitious of the tracts attacking theatre</td>
<td>Building of the Covent Garden Piazza</td>
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<td>Charles I reissues the 1618 <em>Book of Sports</em></td>
<td>George Herbert, <em>The Temple</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1637 Death of Jonson</td>
<td>Charles's personal rule threatened by taxation crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td>1640 Death of Massinger</td>
<td>War with Scotland, recall of Parliament</td>
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<td>Population of London exceeds 350,000</td>
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| 1641 Brome, *A Jovial Crew*  
Death of Heywood | Parliament embarks on revolutionary overhaul of royal institutions |
| 1642 Parliamentary order closes playhouses | Outbreak of English Civil War |
The Set-Up
The Moment

From around 1570, playhouses appeared in various parts of London: Shoreditch, Southwark, Blackfriars, Clerkenwell. Some were open-air amphitheatres, others (less famous today) were existing buildings converted for use as indoor playhouses. Altogether some twenty theatres opened between the 1570s and their eventual closure in 1642, though there were never more than six or seven operating at any one time. These were the first buildings since Roman times to be designed specifically for the performance of plays, and they were both cause and sign of a new age in English drama.

Not that there was anything magical about the buildings themselves. Their layout is quite interesting, and lends itself to some distinctive performing conventions. But throughout the period, actors regularly took plays out to non-theatrical spaces at Court or in the provinces: the purpose-built stage was never essential. Rather, the significance of the new departure was economic. Building and equipping a playhouse from scratch cost something like £1,000, at a time when a labourer might earn £10 a year. Whoever invested this large sum was expecting to recoup it from the proceeds of playing. What was new, then, was the assumption that putting on plays could be a sustainably profitable thing to do.

Moreover, if building a playhouse made profit necessary, it also made it more likely. Professional actors were nothing new, but until now, they had been, in effect, servants, performing in someone else’s space. They might literally be household servants, mounting occasional shows for their master’s feasts; or they might be touring players bought in for a special occasion, rather like a band hired for a party today; or else, further down the social scale, some played in public space, that is, they were busking. None of these models offered a predictable income, or any opportunity to establish much in the way of status, audience or repertoire. Actors established in their own house were in a different position. They were there by no one’s favour, they could take money from everyone who wanted to come in, they could play day after day so long as they could keep the customers coming through the door, and as for that, they were free to try any species of entertainment they thought would attract an audience. In other words, the new set-up established the actors as independent producers, offering their wares for public sale on a permanent
basis. The purpose-built theatre is implicitly the commercial theatre, where the show is a commodity.

When we talk about English Renaissance drama, we centrally mean the plays performed in these commercial playhouses. Here, over a period of about sixty years, a distinctive theatre culture rose, flourished and declined. On the whole, its scripts were for immediate, not to say hurried, production. The turnover was high; about 500 plays survive, and hundreds more were never printed and are now lost. In the rather frantic process, the writers achieved far more than was necessary: they not only kept the players supplied with fresh material, but also somehow produced most of the classics of English drama.

This theatre was not the only context of dramatic writing in the period. Poets wrote so-called ‘closet’ drama – plays written not for public performance, but for reading, or perhaps for private recitation in noble households. Academic plays, in English or Latin, were presented by amateurs at Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Institutions such as the Court, the City of London or the Inns of Court staged seasonal revels and shows, many of which took theatre-like forms – masques, triumphs, dialogues, mock-ceremonies. This para-dramatic activity is historically interesting – the closet dramas, for example, include Elizabeth Cary’s Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry, the first English play known to have been written by a woman – but it did not generate scripts that still live on our stages, bridging or complicating or articulating the great gap of time between then and now. For that remarkable effect – for English Renaissance drama as it plays for us, today – we have to concentrate on the professional theatre.

It lasted a lifetime, which is long enough for a good deal of variation: there were differing theatrical organizations, assorted playing spaces, changing styles of play, passing fashions. All the same, the theatre which staged A Jovial Crew in 1641 was fundamentally the same one, socially, spatially and organizationally, that had done Tamburlaine the Great in 1587. The purpose of this section, then, is to provide a historical understanding of that theatre.

In the terms of conventional national history, it took shape at a moment of relative stability. In 1485, the first Tudor king, Henry VII, had taken the crown from Richard III in the final battle of the Wars of the Roses; and in 1642, the royal and parliamentary armies would meet in the first engagement of the Civil War (it was because of this emergency that the theatres were closed permanently by parliamentary order). In the
intervening century and a half, there were no battles on English soil, and four more Tudor and two Stuart monarchs succeeded fairly peacefully to the throne. This long civil peace, though, was marked by a cultural upheaval more radical than violence. Early in the sixteenth century, the authority of the universal Catholic church was being challenged across Europe by what would later be called Protestantism. In the 1530s, Henry VIII took advantage of this ideological fissure to break with the pope, expropriate the rich network of monastic establishments, and declare himself Supreme Head of the Church in England, thus precipitating a political and doctrinal revolution – the English Reformation – that far outran his immediate purposes. The outcome was uncertain for decades. When Henry VIII died in 1547, he was succeeded first by his nine-year-old son Edward, whose regents were militantly Protestant, and then by his daughter Mary, a Catholic who tried to reverse the whole process. Mary died in 1558 and was succeeded by her younger sister Elizabeth, who imposed a Protestant religious order and, by reigning for forty-five years, effectively ended the disturbing oscillations of the preceding thirty. By the time of the first great Elizabethan plays, in the 1580s, this settlement was starting to seem irreversible, even natural. Internationally, it was more contentious, setting England against Catholic Spain: war between the two states was formally declared in 1585 and not concluded until after Elizabeth’s death in 1603. But although this was gruelling and expensive, it was not politically disruptive; on the contrary, the external threat had the effect of reinforcing internal stability.

This mattered to the theatre because it was a new business which needed reasonably secure conditions for investment. But there is more to this than the mere absence of disorder. If we wanted – simplifying of course – to identify a common theme in these broad epochal developments, we could adopt one of Elizabeth’s mottoes: *semper una* (forever one). The consolidation of Tudor rule after the baronial wars of the fifteenth century involved concentrating power at the centre, curtailing the rights of the aristocracy, and seeking to define local jurisdictions as royal agencies rather than autonomous lordships. Exactly the same principle informed the establishment of a national church. The medieval realm had been a dual sovereignty, in which the king was the temporal head and the pope the spiritual head: Henry VIII’s coup converted this into a single structure, a single principle of legitimacy. This formal unification was then confirmed in practice by the war, which conflated Protestantism,
patriotism and loyalty to the throne in a single ideological formation. So the Elizabethan state was working to secure a monopoly on law and physical force. It was appropriate, to say the least, that Elizabeth’s successor was already the king of Scotland before reigning as James I of England (1603–25), thus irreversibly combining the two crowns and creating the ‘United Kingdom’.

In short, English Renaissance drama emerged in the context of a forceful drive towards national unity. This was reflected directly in stage images of England, notably in the chronicle plays of the 1590s. But more indirectly and radically, unification formed the theatre itself. For one thing, it was the centralization of political and economic life that made London into a metropolis capable of sustaining a permanent professional theatre. And for another, closing the gap between church and state had the inadvertent effect of creating space for a secular culture. I will take this second point first.