

# The Renaissance: Historical Context

**KEY IDEAS** Writers, as well as kings, queens, and everyday citizens, could not help being affected by the religious conflict that defined their society during the Renaissance years.

## The Monarchy and the Church

Writers during the English Renaissance often found their fates married to the shifting winds of political influence. As kings and queens rose to power and as varying forms of Christianity became the law of the land, writers found themselves either celebrated for their work or censured for it. Some writers, including **Sir Thomas More** and **Sir Walter Raleigh**, were even put to death for falling out of favor with the ruler of the day. As you will see, the kings and queens who ruled during this period held widely differing views on just about everything of importance, but especially religion.

**THE TUDORS** In 1485, **Henry Tudor** took the throne as Henry VII. A shrewd leader, Henry negotiated favorable commercial treaties abroad, built up the nation's merchant fleet, and financed expeditions that established English claims in the Americas. He also arranged for his son **Arthur** to marry the Spanish princess **Catherine of Aragon**, thereby creating a political alliance with Spain, England's greatest "New World" rival. When Arthur died unexpectedly, the pope granted a special dispensation, allowing Arthur's younger brother Henry, the new heir to the throne, to marry Catherine—a marriage that would have lasting consequences.

**THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION** During the reign of **Henry VIII**, dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church was spreading in Europe. The great wealth and power of the church had led to corruption at many levels, from cardinals living in luxury to friars traveling the countryside selling "indulgences" to peasants in exchange for forgiveness of their sins.

In response, in 1517 a German monk named **Martin Luther** wrote out 95 theses, or arguments, against such practices and nailed them to the door of a church. Though the pope condemned him as a heretic, Luther's criticisms created a sensation, and printed copies were soon in circulation across Europe. Luther wanted the church to reform itself, but other protesters went farther, splitting off from Rome into reformed, **Protestant** churches.

**THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND** Henry VIII had at first remained loyal to Rome, yet he became obsessed with producing a male heir and so sought an annulment from his wife (who had given him only a daughter, Mary). When the pope refused, Henry broke with Rome and in 1534 declared himself head of the **Church of England**. He then divorced Catherine and married her court attendant, **Anne Boleyn**. In all, Henry went through six wives, but only one produced a son—the frail and sickly **Edward VI**, who succeeded at the age of 9 but died when he was just 15. During Edward's reign, a group of radical Protestants believed the church needed even

*Queen Elizabeth Watching The Merry Wives of Windsor at the Globe Theatre*, David Scott. Oil on canvas.  
© Victoria & Albert Museum, London/Art Resource, New York.



### SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS

#### Literary Analysis

**Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.8** Explain how ideas, values, and themes of a literary work often reflect the historical period in which it was written.

**Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.3** Organize information to show understanding or relationships among facts, ideas, and events (e.g., representing key points within text through charting, mapping, paraphrasing, summarizing, comparing, contrasting, outlining).

### ▶ TAKING NOTES

**Outlining** As you read this introduction, use an outline to record the main ideas about the history and literature of the period. You can use headings, boldfaced terms, and the information in these boxes as starting points. (See page R49 in the **Research Handbook** for more help with outlining.)

#### 1. Historical Context

A. The Monarchy and the Church

1. the Tudors

2. the Reformation

3. the Church of England



### ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

For more on the English Renaissance, visit the **Literature Center** at **ClassZone.com**.



further reform and sought to “purify” it of all Roman practices. This group became known as **Puritans**. In coming years, Puritans would increasingly clash with the monarchy.

Following Edward, Catherine’s daughter, Mary, took the throne. To avenge her mother, she brought back Roman Catholicism and persecuted Protestants, which earned her the nickname **Bloody Mary**. On her death in 1558, most citizens welcomed the succession of her half-sister, Elizabeth.

## The Elizabethan Era

**Elizabeth I**, the unwanted daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, proved to be one of the ablest monarchs in English history. During her long reign, England enjoyed a time of unprecedented prosperity and international prestige. Elizabeth was a consummate politician, exercising absolute authority while remaining sensitive to public opinion and respectful of Parliament. She kept England out of costly wars, ended the unpopular Spanish alliance, and encouraged overseas adventures, including **Sir Francis Drake’s** circumnavigation of the globe and **Sir Walter Raleigh’s** attempt to establish a colony in Virginia.

In religion, she steered a middle course, reestablishing the Church of England and using it as a buffer between Catholics and Puritans. Catholics, however, considered her cousin **Mary Stuart**, the queen of Scotland, to be the rightful heir to the English throne. After enduring years of conspiracies, Elizabeth ordered Mary beheaded in 1587. In response, Catholic Spain’s Philip II sent a great Armada, or fleet of warships, to challenge the English navy. Aided by a violent storm, the smaller, more maneuverable English ships defeated the Spanish Armada, making Elizabeth the undisputed leader of a great military power.

*Elizabeth I, Armada portrait (c. 1588), English school. Oil on panel, 110.5 cm x 127 cm.*  
© Bridgeman Art Library.



### A Voice from the Times

*I know I have the body but of  
a weak and feeble woman; but  
I have the heart and stomach  
of a king, and of a king of  
England too, and think foul  
scorn that Parma or Spain, or  
any prince of Europe, should  
dare to invade the borders of  
my realm.*

—Elizabeth I

### ANALYZE VISUALS

This portrait of Queen Elizabeth is rich with symbolism. The pearls adorning her hair and gown suggest purity, the imperial crown to her right suggests power, and the scenes of the defeat of the Spanish Armada behind her represent her greatest victory. In addition, Elizabeth’s right hand is resting on a globe—specifically, her fingers rest upon the Americas. What might this last symbol suggest?



## The Rise of the Stuarts

With Elizabeth's death in 1603, the powerful Tudor dynasty came to an end. Elizabeth was succeeded by her cousin James VI of Scotland (son of Mary Stuart), who ruled as **James I** of England.

James supported the Church of England, thus angering both Roman Catholic and Protestant extremists. Early in his reign, a Catholic group including Guy Fawkes plotted to kill him and blow up Parliament in the unsuccessful **Gunpowder Plot** of 1605. James and his son Charles both aroused opposition in the Puritan-dominated House of Commons with their extravagance, contempt for Parliament, and preference for Catholic-style "High-Church" rituals in the Anglican Church. Clashes with the Puritans only worsened when **Charles I** took the throne in 1625.

In 1629, Charles I dismissed **Parliament**, and he did not summon it again for 11 years. During this time, he took strong measures against his opponents. Thousands of English citizens—especially Puritans—emigrated to North America to escape persecution. Then, in 1637, Charles's attempt to introduce Anglican practices in Scotland's Presbyterian churches led to rebellion there. In need of funds to suppress the Scots, Charles, in 1640, was forced to reconvene Parliament, which promptly stripped many of his powers. He responded with a show of military force, and England was soon plunged into **civil war**.

## The Defeat of the Monarchy

The English Civil War pitted the Royalists (mainly Catholics, Anglicans, and the nobility) against supporters of Parliament (Puritans, smaller landowners, and the middle class). Under the leadership of General **Oliver Cromwell**, the devout, disciplined Puritan army soundly defeated the Royalists in 1645, and the king surrendered a year later.

At first, Parliament established a **commonwealth** with Cromwell as head; later, they made him "lord protector" for life. The Puritan-dominated government proved no less autocratic than the Stuart reign, however. England's theaters were closed, most forms of recreation were suspended, and Sunday became a day of prayer, when even walking for pleasure was forbidden.

When Cromwell died in 1658, his son inherited his title but not his ability to handle the wrangling among political factions and an increasingly unruly public. In 1660, a new Parliament invited **Charles II**, son of Charles I, to return from exile and assume the throne. His reign ushered in a new chapter in English history, the **Restoration**.

### THE ARTISTS' GALLERY



*Self-Portrait*, Nicholas Hilliard. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London/Art Resource, New York.

### Renaissance Portraiture

During the Reformation, many Protestants objected to the practice of richly adorning churches with paintings and sculptures of biblical scenes and saints. Denied their traditional occupation, many English artists turned instead to painting the portraits of wealthy patrons.

**Royal Portraits** The most notable early portrait painter in England was actually a German, Hans Holbein the Younger. The son of a respected German painter, he came to England during the reign of Henry VIII, hoping to escape the turmoil of the Reformation. Soon, however, England broke with Rome, and Holbein had to give up painting religious subjects. Instead, he became the court painter for the royal family. One of his most striking paintings was his portrait of Henry VIII (see page 284).

**Miniatures** Unlike Holbein, who painted his subjects just the way he saw them—with their expressions revealing their personalities—later English portraitists painted in a refined, elegant style that flattered their noble patrons. During the reign of Elizabeth I, **miniatures** were in fashion—tiny portraits that could be set among precious stones and worn as jewelry or discreetly given as a token of romance at court. Nicholas Hilliard, whose *Self-Portrait* (1577) is shown here, was a master of the miniature.



# Cultural Influences

**KEY IDEAS** Creativity flourished during the Renaissance, a time of invention, exploration, and appreciation for the arts.

## The Renaissance

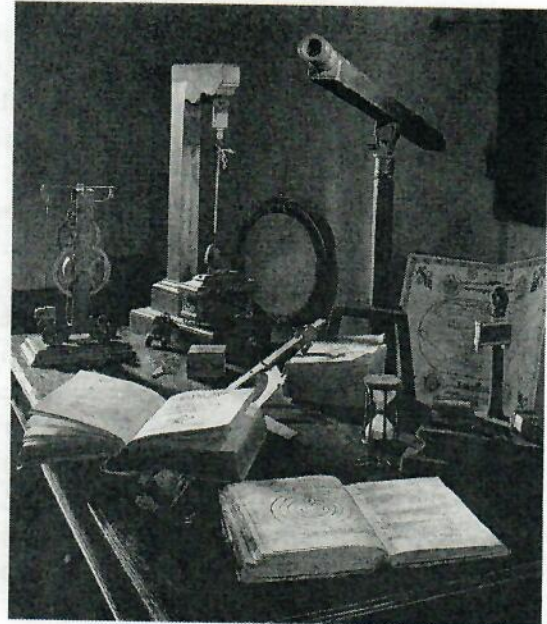
For writers, artists, scientists, and scholars—in fact, for anyone gripped by curiosity or the urge to create—the **Renaissance** was an amazing time to be alive. The Renaissance, which literally means “rebirth” or “revival,” was marked by a surge of creative energy and the emergence of a worldview more modern than medieval. It began in Italy in the 14th century and rapidly spread north throughout Europe. In England, political instability delayed the advent of Renaissance ideas, but they began to take hold after 1485, when Henry VII took the throne, and reached full flower during the reign of Elizabeth I.

**THE RENAISSANCE WORLDVIEW** All through the Middle Ages, Europeans had focused their energy on religion and the afterlife, viewing this world primarily as preparation for the world to come. During the time of the Renaissance, people became much more interested in, and curious about, life on earth. A new emphasis was placed on the individual and on the development of human potential. The ideal “Renaissance man” was not a bold and dashing knight or a scholarly monk but a well-rounded person who cultivated his talents to the fullest.

**CREATIVITY AND EXPLORATION** Renaissance Europeans delighted in the arts and literature, the beauty of nature, human impulses, exploration, and a new sense of mastery over the world. This was the time of **Shakespeare**, **Galileo**, and **Columbus**, after all. Inventions and discoveries made possible things that had been previously unimaginable. The compass, for example, along with advances in astronomy, allowed ships to venture into uncharted seas, and subsequent exploration profoundly altered narrow medieval perceptions of the world. Gutenberg’s **printing press** expanded horizons of a different sort. It meant that books no longer had to be copied out by hand. Once the rare and precious treasures of a privileged few, books were now widely available. In turn, by 1530 more than half of England’s population could read.

The Renaissance flourished in Elizabethan times, when **theater** and literature reached new heights. Even Elizabeth’s successor, James I, contributed to the period’s literary legacy with his commissioning of a new translation of the **Bible**. With the reign of Puritan Oliver Cromwell and his closing of theaters, however, the period was near its end. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 marked the official conclusion of the Renaissance period in English history.

Telescope, triangle, magnet compass, and pendulum clock belonging to Galileo Galilei (1564–1642)





# Renaissance Literature

**KEY IDEAS** The English Renaissance nurtured the talents of such literary giants as Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne. Poetry, drama, humanist works, and religious writings defined the literature of the period.

## Pastoral Poems and Sonnets

During the Renaissance, the creative energy of the English people burst forth into the greatest harvest of literature the Western world had yet known. Poets and playwrights, readers and listeners, all delighted in the vigor and beauty of the English language.

The glittering Elizabethan court was a focus of poetic creativity. Members of the court vied with one another to see who could create the most highly polished, technically perfect poems. The appreciative audience for these lyrics was the elite artistic and social circle that surrounded the queen. Elizabeth I herself wrote lyrics, and she patronized favorite poets and rewarded courtiers for eloquent poetic tributes. Among her protégés were **Sir Philip Sidney** and **Sir Walter Raleigh**. Raleigh, in turn, encouraged **Edmund Spenser**, who wrote the epic *The Faerie Queene* (1590) in honor of Elizabeth.

Sir Walter Raleigh and his contemporary **Christopher Marlowe** wrote excellent examples of a type of poetry popular with Elizabeth's court: the **pastoral**. A pastoral is a poem that portrays shepherds and rustic life, usually in an idealized manner. The poets did not attempt to write in the voice of a common shepherd, however. Their speakers used courtly language rather than the language of common speech. The pastoral's form was artificial as well, with meters and rhyme schemes characteristic of formal poetry.

**IMPROVING NATURE** The Elizabethans viewed nature as intricate, complex, and beautiful. To them, however, the natural world was a subject not for imitation but for improvement by creative minds. Nature provided raw material to be shaped into works of art. The greater the intricacy or "artificiality" of the result, the more admired the artistry of the poet. Elizabethan poets thus created ingenious metaphors, elaborate allegories, and complex analogies, often within the strictures of a popular verse form that came from Italy, the **sonnet** (see page 302).

Earlier poets, such as **Sir Thomas Wyatt** and **Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey**, had introduced into England the 14-line verse form, modifying it to better suit the English language. During Elizabethan times, the sonnet became the most popular form of love lyric. Sonnets were often published in sequences, such as **Edmund Spenser's** *Amoretti*, addressed to his future wife. **William Shakespeare's** sonnets do not form a clear sequence, but several address a mysterious dark lady some scholars think may have been the poet **Amelia Lanier**. The English sonnet eventually became known as the **Shakespearean sonnet**, in tribute to Shakespeare's mastery of the form.



*Young Man Leaning Against a Tree Among Roses*, Nicholas Hilliard. Miniature.  
© Victoria & Albert Museum, London/  
Art Resource, New York.

### ► For Your Outline

#### PASTORAL POEMS AND SONNETS

- Pastorals portray shepherds and rustic life, usually in an idealized manner.
- Elizabethans admired intricacy and artifice.
- The sonnet is a 14-line verse form, often published in sequences.



## Shakespearean Drama

Although Shakespeare's contributions to poetry were great, he left an even clearer mark on drama, which came of age during the Elizabethan period. Elizabethan drama emerged from three sources: medieval plays, 16th-century interludes, and Latin and Greek classics.

The **mystery, miracle, and morality plays** of medieval times—simple plays performed in churches, inns, and marketplaces as a way of spreading religious knowledge—provided the opportunity for actors and writers to develop their craft within biblical story outlines already familiar to audiences. In the 16th century, another form of drama arose. Certain noble families of the time maintained their own companies of actors who, when they weren't doubling as household servants, amused their patrons with brief farcical **interludes** that ridiculed the manners and customs of commoners. These interludes had little to do with the Bible, paving the way for later Elizabethan dramatists to write plays with secular themes. The third source, **Latin and Greek dramas** that were revived during the Renaissance and studied at university centers such as Oxford and Cambridge, modeled for Elizabethan playwrights the characteristics of comedy and tragedy.

Renaissance dramatists borrowed devices from these earlier works but inserted their own elements consistent with the thinking of the age. As products of the Renaissance mindset, dramas dealt with the complexities of human life on earth rather than with the religious themes of earlier times. Plays were often staged at court, in the homes of wealthy nobles, and in inn yards where spectators could sit on the ground in front of the stage or in balconies overlooking it. A similar plan was used in England's first theaters, such as the famous **Globe Theatre** in London.

**SHAKESPEARE'S INFLUENCE** By 1600, London had more playhouses than any other European capital. The Globe was the most successful, thanks to actor, poet, and playwright William Shakespeare. Tremendously versatile and prolific, Shakespeare contributed 37 plays to the theater's repertory: **tragedies**, such as *Othello*; **comedies**, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and **histories** about the kings of England. Shakespeare's clever wordplay, memorable characters, and complex plots appealed to everyone in his audience, from the uneducated "groundlings," who paid a penny to stand and watch, to the royal family, who received special private performances.

Being an actor himself, Shakespeare knew well the capabilities and limitations of the theater building and of the acting company for whom he wrote his plays. It wasn't easy putting on a crowd-pleasing performance in Elizabethan times. Besides having to memorize their lines, actors had to be able to sing and dance, wrestle and fence, clown and weep. Because the stage had no front curtain, the actors always walked on and off the stage in full view of the audience. Plays had to be written so that any character who died on stage could be unobtrusively hauled off.

### ► For Your Outline

#### SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

- Elizabethan drama came from three sources: medieval plays, 16th-century interludes, and Greek and Latin classics.
- Plays focused on human complexities rather than religious themes.
- The Globe was the most successful of many English theaters.
- Shakespeare contributed 37 plays—comedies, tragedies, and histories.
- Marlowe and Jonson were popular playwrights.
- After 1649, Puritans closed theaters.





Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh in *Othello* (1995)

In retrospect, Shakespeare dominates the theater of the late 16th and early 17th centuries—in fact, his plays represent the height of the English dramatic tradition. At the time, however, others were equally admired. **Christopher Marlowe** was the first playwright to exploit the potential of the English language as a dramatic medium. His tragedies show the kind of psychological probing that is a hallmark of the finest Elizabethan and 17th-century dramas. Also popular were the comedies of a rugged, boisterous poet and playwright named **Ben Jonson**. His plays provided a satiric, somewhat cynical commentary on the lives of ordinary Londoners. Jonson's **masques**, especially, attracted aristocratic audiences, who flocked to the spectacular pageants with their elaborate scenery, costumes, music, and dance.

By the time of Elizabeth's death in 1603, the influence of the Puritans had begun to grow in England. Puritans, who believed that the Elizabethan dramas and the rowdy crowds they attracted were highly immoral, worked to close all the theaters. They were not immediately successful.

Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest tragedies, including *Macbeth* (see page 340), during the reign of Elizabeth's successor, James I. Shakespeare's interest in issues of power may have been sparked by the intense conflicts between the king and Parliament. When the Puritans overthrew James's son Charles in 1649, however, they finally closed all the playhouses. This act brought the final curtain down on the golden age of drama.

#### A Voice from the Times

*Soul of the age!  
The applause, delight, the  
wonder of our stage!  
My Shakespeare, rise. . .  
Thou art a monument, without  
a tomb,  
And art alive still, while thy  
book doth live,  
And we have wits to read, and  
praise to give.*

—Ben Jonson



## The Rise of Humanism

During the Renaissance, literature reflected another important influence: **humanism**. At this time, the universities of Europe buzzed with new ideas—about the worth and importance of the individual, about the spiritual value of beauty in nature and art, about the power of human reason to decide what was good and right. Those who taught these new ideas were called **humanists**, because they studied the **humanities** (art, history, philosophy, and literature; in other words, subjects that were human rather than sacred) and looked to the classics for wisdom and guidance.

Humanists were often devout Christians—one, in fact, became Pope Pius II—and they tried to reconcile the new ideas with their religious beliefs. In northern Europe, Christian humanists led by the Dutch monk **Erasmus** studied ancient Greek and Hebrew so they could read not just the classics but also the Bible and other sacred writings in the original. Naturally, reading the words of history's greatest thinkers gave Erasmus and his followers high ideals, and they sharply criticized European society, and especially the church, for falling short.

**ENGLISH HUMANISTS** Erasmus traveled widely throughout Europe, writing and teaching, and made many friends, among them the artist Hans Holbein the Younger and English writer and scholar **Sir Thomas More**. Like Erasmus, More saw much to criticize in the way the world was being run and believed humans could do better. In 1516, he published his book called *Utopia* (from the Greek for “no place”), about a perfect society on an imaginary island. In *Utopia*, there was no poverty or greed—not even private property; everything was shared, and everyone was equal. War and competition were unknown, and people were governed by reason.

Humanists were concerned with classical learning. One of their aims was to educate the sons of nobility to speak and write in Latin, the language of diplomacy and all higher learning. For humanist writers, however, reverence for the classics created a conflict: should they write their own works in Latin or English? Although many wrote in the classical Latin, others urged scholars to improve English by writing ambitious works in it. In any case, the humanist reverence for classics combined with a pride in the English language led to many distinguished **translations** throughout the period, including the **Earl of Surrey's** translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* and **George Chapman's** translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

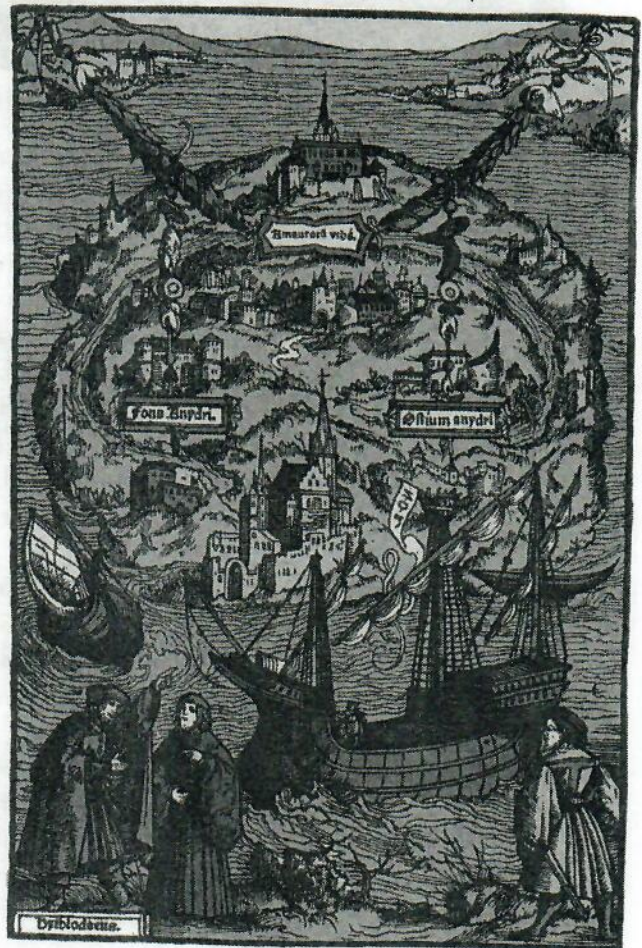
Interestingly, the humanists reflected a fact of life during the Renaissance period—religion was a subject

### ► For Your Outline

#### HUMANISM

- Humanists were so called because they studied the humanities (art, history, philosophy, literature).
- Christian humanists criticized society.
- A reverence for the classics and pride in the English language led to distinguished translations.
- Humanists disagreed on religious issues.

Illustration of Sir Thomas More's island of Utopia





dear to most but agreed upon by few. From the outset, humanism was concerned with Christianity; but while early humanists, such as Sir Thomas More, a Catholic, primarily attacked Luther and the Protestants, later humanists, such as Roger Ascham, were earnest Protestants who attacked a more secular humanism coming out of Italy. These men went on to influence later Christian writers, such as the great John Milton.

## Spiritual and Devotional Writings

Despite the religious turmoil that marked this period in English history, England remained a Christian nation, and its literature reflects the beliefs of its people. Spiritual and devotional writings became some of the most popular and influential works of the day. In fact, the **King James Bible** likely did more to mold English prose style than any other work.

For centuries, the church had resisted calls to translate the Latin Bible into languages the common people could understand, on the grounds that it would diminish church authority and lead to heresy. In fact, when the first English version of the Bible was translated by the 14th-century scholar **John Wycliffe**, he was attacked by a British archbishop as “that wretched and pestilent fellow . . . who crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue.” Another English translator, **William Tyndale**, fled to the continent during the early years of Henry VIII’s reign, only to be condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake.

**THE KING JAMES BIBLE** Ironically, in the meantime Henry had broken with Rome, and in the following years English translations of the Bible proliferated. Finally, in 1604, James I commissioned 54 leading biblical scholars to create a new, “authorized” version, one based on the original Hebrew and Greek as well as on earlier translations from the Latin. Masterpieces of literature are not generally created by committee, but the King James Bible, completed in 1611, proved to be an exception. Its beautiful imagery, graceful simplicity, and measured cadences made it the principal Protestant Bible in English for more than 300 years, and it still remains the most important and influential of all the English translations.

**TWO MASTERPIECES** One of the earliest writers to be influenced by the King James Bible was the Puritan poet **John Milton**. In fact, it has been said that he knew the Bible by heart. His epic blank-verse poem *Paradise Lost* is based on the biblical story of the first humans, Adam and Eve, who are tempted by Satan to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. They eat and then are punished by being driven from the Garden of Eden out into the world, where they and all their descendants must suffer and die. A devout believer, Milton filled his work with energy and power, and none of the many “rebel” characters in literature since can equal his portrayal of Satan, the fallen angel. Dignified and elevated, even biblical, Milton’s language is meant to evoke reverence for his religious

### ► For Your Outline

#### SPIRITUAL WRITING

- Early efforts to translate the Bible were censured by the church.
- The King James Bible was created by a committee of scholars; it became the most influential English translation.
- Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is based on a biblical story.
- Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is an allegory of the journey to the afterlife.



Princess Elizabeth, daughter of James I, with book of devotional writing





*Demon Leaving Heaven* from 1800s book illustration for *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. © Corbis.

themes. His rich and complex style, married with his devotion to religious themes, places Milton with other Renaissance Christian humanists, but his talent sets him apart as an artist.

Milton was a typical “Renaissance man”—a scholar who read widely, studying the classics as well as the Bible, and who was fluent in many languages. Fellow Puritan writer **John Bunyan**, on the other hand, was an uneducated tinker and preacher who spent many years in jail for his religious beliefs. While in jail, Bunyan wrote his greatest work, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*—an **allegory** in which a character named Christian undertakes a dangerous journey from this world to the next. Along the way, he encounters such obstacles as the Slough of Despond and meets characters with such names as Mr. Moneylove and Ignorance. Bunyan modeled his style on that of the English Bible, and he used concrete language and details familiar to most readers, enabling even the most basic of readers to share in Christian’s experiences. Though *The Pilgrim’s Progress* lacks the grandeur and complexity of *Paradise Lost*, its deeply felt simplicity made it one of the most widely read books in the English language.

## The Metaphysical and Cavalier Poets

In the early 17th century, two new groups of poets emerged. The first was inspired by the literary man-of-all-trades **Ben Jonson**. Like Shakespeare, his friend and rival, Ben Jonson was not just a playwright but also an accomplished poet. Dissatisfied with the extravagant romance of Elizabethan lyrics, Jonson chose instead to imitate the graceful craftsmanship of classical forms. Far from the typical image of a refined poet, however, Jonson was a great bellowing bear of a man who loved an argument and didn’t mind if it

### ANALYZE VISUALS

Gustave Doré was a 19th-century artist known for his wood-engraved illustrations for famous works such as Dante’s *Inferno*, Cervante’s *Don Quixote*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. According to the historian Millicent Rose, “Gigantic scale and limitless space had always fascinated Doré.” How well does this Doré engraving from *Paradise Lost* capture the scale and space of the heavens?

### ► For Your Outline

#### METAPHYSICAL AND CAVALIER POETS

- Ben Jonson, a boisterous man and an accomplished poet, inspired later poets, called “sons of Ben.”
- These poets were known as Cavaliers because they took the side of Charles I and his Royalist cavaliers.
- Cavalier poetry was charming and witty, dealing with themes of love, war, and *carpe diem*.
- John Donne wrote metaphysical poetry—poems characterized by themes of love, death, and religious devotion.
- Metaphysical poets used elaborate metaphors to explore life’s complexities.



turned into a brawl, and his forceful personality won him as many admirers as his considerable talent did.

Jonson's followers, called "sons of Ben," were sophisticated young aristocrats, among them **Robert Herrick**, **Richard Lovelace**, and **Sir John Suckling**. These poets were known as the **Cavaliers**, because many of them took the side of Charles I in the civil war between Cromwell's "Roundheads" (so called for their closely cropped hair) and the long-haired Royalist cavaliers. Lighthearted, charming, witty, and sometimes cynical, Cavalier poetry dealt mainly with themes of love, war, chivalry, and loyalty to the throne and frequently advocated the philosophy of *carpe diem*, or living for the moment.

Jonson's contemporary, **John Donne**, is representative of a second group of poets, the **metaphysical poets**. These writers broke with convention, employing unusual imagery, elaborate metaphors, and irregular meter to produce intense poems characterized by themes of death, physical love, and religious devotion (see page 506). Whereas the Cavalier poets tended to treat limited, human-focused subjects, Donne and other metaphysical poets tried to encompass the vastness of the universe and to explore life's complexities and contradictions. Some ridiculed Donne for the philosophical tone of his love poems, saying that instead of winning over women he merely succeeded in perplexing them. However, Donne's unique blend of intellect and passion influenced many other poets, from his own time to the 21st century.

## A CHANGING LANGUAGE

During the "great vowel shift" of the 1400s, the pronunciation of most English long vowels changed, and the final *e* in words like *take* was no longer pronounced. Yet early printers continued to use Middle English spellings—retaining, for example, the *k* and *e* in *knave*, even though the letters were no longer pronounced. This practice resulted in many of the inconsistent spellings for which modern English is known.

**Renaissance English** By 1500, Middle English had evolved into an early form of the modern English spoken today. Nevertheless, there are some differences. During the Renaissance, *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine* were used for familiar address, while *you*, *your*, and *yours* were reserved for more formal and impersonal situations. Speakers used the verb ending *-est* or *-st* with *thou* ("thou ledest") and *-eth* or *-th* with *she* and *he* ("he doth"). They also used fewer helping verbs, especially in questions ("Saw you the bird?").



*Andrew Marvell Visiting His Friend John Milton*, George Henry Boughton. Oil on canvas, 69.5 cm × 166 cm. Private collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.