English Renaissance

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The English Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement in England dating from the early 16th century to the early 17th century. It is associated with the pan-European Renaissance that many cultural historians believe originated in northern Italy in the 14th century. This era in English cultural history is sometimes referred to as "the age of Shakespeare" or "the Elizabethan era."

Poets such as Edmund Spenser and John Milton produced works that demonstrated an increased interest in understanding English Christian beliefs, such as the allegorical representation of the Tudor Dynasty in The Faerie Queen and the retelling of mankind’s fall from paradise in Paradise Lost; playwrights, such as Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, composed theatrical representations of the English take on life, death, and history. Nearing the end of the Tudor Dynasty, philosophers like Sir Thomas More and Sir Francis Bacon published their own ideas about humanity and the aspects of a perfect society, pushing the limits of metacognition at that time. England came closer to reaching modern science with the Baconian Method, a forerunner of the Scientific Method.

Slow transition and mixture

The steadfast English mind clung to the old order of things, and relinquished with reluctance the last relics of a style that had been for centuries a part of its life. If it must have the egg and dart, it would keep the Tudor flower too. Thus all the Renaissance that came into England, after the bloody Wars of the Roses made it possible to think of art and luxury, paid toll to the Gothic on the way, and the result was a singular miscellany, for its Gothic had now forgotten, and its Renaissance had never known why it had existed. It is rather the talent with which the medley of material was handled, the broad masses, yet curious elaboration, and the scale of magnificence, that give the style its charm rather than anything in its original and bastard composition. [1]

Something of this same charm is to be found in most of the literature of the era, in accordance with that subtle relationship existing between the literature and the art of any period. It is in the lawless mixture of Gothic and Grecian characterizing the Elizabethan that Shakespeare peoples his A Midsummer Night's Dream with Gothic fairies reveling in the Athenian forest, and poet Edmund Spenser fills his pages with a pageantry of medieval monsters and classic masks. Shakespeare is a peculiar product of the Renaissance. The machinery of The Tempest and the setting of The Merchant of Venice are direct results of its spirit.
The English Renaissance differs from the Italian Renaissance in several ways. First, the dominant art forms of the English Renaissance were literature and music, and the Visual arts were much less significant than in the Italian Renaissance. The English period began far later than the Italian, which is usually considered to begin with Dante, Petrarch and Giotto in the early 1300s, and was moving into Mannerism and the Baroque by the 1550s or earlier. In contrast, the English Renaissance can only be said to begin, shakily, in the 1520s, and continued until perhaps 1620.

The Italian and English Renaissances were similar in sharing a specific musical aesthetic. In the late 16th century Italy was the musical center of Europe, and one of the principal forms which emerged from that singular explosion of musical creativity was the madrigal. In 1588, Nicholas Yonge published in England the Musica transalpina—a collection of Italian madrigals "Englished"—an event which touched off a vogue of madrigal in England which was almost unmatched in the Renaissance in being an instantaneous adoption of an idea, from another country, adapted to local aesthetics. (In a delicious irony of history, a military invasion from a Catholic country—Spain—failed in that year, but a cultural invasion, from Italy, succeeded). English poetry was exactly at the right stage of development for this transplantation to occur, since forms such as the sonnet were uniquely adapted to setting as madrigals (indeed, the sonnet was already well-developed in Italy). Composers such as Thomas Morley, the only contemporary composer to set Shakespeare, and whose work survives, published collections of their own, roughly in the Italian manner but yet with a unique Englishness; many of the compositions of the English Madrigal School remain in the standard repertory in the 21st century.

The colossal polychoral productions of the Venetian School had been anticipated in the works of Thomas Tallis, and the Palestrina style from the Roman School had already been absorbed prior to the publication of Musical transalpina, in the music of masters such as William Byrd.

While the Classical revival led to a flourishing of Italian Renaissance architecture, architecture in Britain took a more eclectic approach. Elizabethan architecture retained many features of the Gothic, even while the occasional building such as the tomb in the Henry VII Lady Chapel at Westminster Abbey, or the French-influenced architecture of Scotland showed interest in the new style.

Criticisms of the idea of the English Renaissance

The notion of calling this period "The Renaissance" is a modern invention, having been popularized by the historian Jacob Burckhardt in the nineteenth century. The idea of the
Renaissance has come under increased criticism by many cultural historians, and some have contended that the "English Renaissance" has no real tie with the artistic achievements and aims of the northern Italian artists (Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello) who are closely identified with the Renaissance. Indeed, England had already experienced a flourishing of literature over 200 years before the time of Shakespeare when Geoffrey Chaucer was working. Chaucer's popularizing of English as a medium of literary composition rather than Latin was only 50 years after Dante had started using Italian for serious poetry. At the same time William Langland, author of Piers Plowman, and John Gower were also writing in English. The Hundred Years' War and the subsequent civil war in England known as the Wars of the Roses probably hampered artistic endeavor until the relatively peaceful and stable reign of Elizabeth I allowed drama in particular to develop. Even during these war years, though, Thomas Malory, author of Le Morte D'Arthur, was a notable figure. For this reason, scholars find the singularity of the period called the English Renaissance questionable; C. S. Lewis, a professor of Medieval and Renaissance literature at Oxford and Cambridge, famously remarked to a colleague that he had "discovered" that there was no English Renaissance, and that if there had been one, it had "no effect whatsoever"

Historians have also begun to consider the word "Renaissance" as an unnecessarily loaded word that implies an unambiguously positive "rebirth" from the supposedly more primitive Middle Ages. Some historians have asked the question "a renaissance for whom?", pointing out, for example, that the status of women in society arguably declined during the Renaissance. Many historians and cultural historians now prefer to use the term "early modern" for this period, a neutral term that highlights the period as a transitional one that led to the modern world, but does not have any positive or negative connotations.

Other cultural historians have countered that, regardless of whether the name "renaissance" is apt, there was undeniably an artistic flowering in England under the Tudor monarchs, culminating in Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

**Major English Renaissance figures**

![Image of William Shakespeare]
William Shakespeare, chief figure of the English Renaissance, as portrayed in the Chandos portrait (artist and authenticity not confirmed).

The major literary figures in the English Renaissance include:

- Francis Bacon
- Thomas Dekker
- John Donne
- John Fletcher
- John Ford
- Ben Jonson
- Thomas Kyd
- Christopher Marlowe
- Phillip Massinger
- Thomas Middleton
- John Milton
- Sir Thomas More
- Thomas Nashe
- William Rowley
- William Shakespeare
- James Shirley
- Sir Philip Sidney
- Edmund Spenser
- John Webster
- Sir Thomas Wyatt

Thomas Tallis, Thomas Morley, and William Byrd were the most notable English musicians of the time, and are often seen as being a part of the same artistic movement that inspired the above authors. Elizabeth herself, a product of Renaissance humanism trained by Roger Ascham, wrote occasional poems such as On Monsieur’s Departure at critical moments of her life.

References


See also

- Tudor period
- Elizabethan era
- Canons of Renaissance poetry
- Jacobean era
- Early Modern English literature
- Early Modern Britain
- Sir Walter Raleigh
- William Shakespeare
- Artists of the Tudor court
- Portraiture of Elizabeth I
### History
- Prehistoric
- Roman Britain
- Logres
- Heptarchy
- Anglo-Saxon England
- Kingdom of England
- Norman conquest
- Angevin Empire
- Wars of the Roses
- Tudor period
- Stuart period
- English Renaissance
- English Reformation
- Elizabethan era
- Jacobean era
- Civil War
- Union with Scotland
- Georgian era
- Regency
- Victorian era
- Edwardian period
- The Blitz

### Politics
- Government (Elizabethan)
- Parliament
- Monarchy
- Economy

### Geography
- Regions
- Counties
- Districts
- Gardens
- Islands
- Places
- Towns
- Parishes

### Demographics
- English language in England
- English people (list)

### Culture
- Castles
- Church of England
- Education
- National cricket team
- Rugby League
- The Football Association
- Museums
- National rugby team
- Innovations and discoveries
- Cuisine
- Anglophile
- Wimbledon

### Symbols
- National flag (list)
- Coat of arms
- Tudor Rose
- Oak tree
- St. George
- St. George (St. George's Day)

### England portal


Categories: Stuart England | Tudor England | English Renaissance

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