Elizabethan and Jacobean Age

Historical and Cultural Background
Henry VII
Background: The Tudors

- Centralization of authority under Henry VII
- 1509: Henry VIII of England is crowned, he marries Katherine of Aragon
- 1533: Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn and divorces Katherine of Aragon
- 1534: The Act of Supremacy separates the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church.
- 1536: Act for Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries
Henry VIII
Political situation - Timeline:

- 1547: Edward VI of England is crowned.
- 1553: Mary I of England is crowned, and prosecutes Protestants → “Bloody Mary”
- 1554: The future Queen Elizabeth is imprisoned by her half sister, Queen Mary.
- 1558: Elizabeth I of England, is crowned.
- 1559 Act of Uniformity re-establishes the Anglican Church with Protestant doctrines, but episcopacy and much of the Catholic ritual are preserved
- 1587 execution of Mary Stuart
- 1588 Defeat of the Spanish Armada
Elizabeth I
Characteristics of the Tudor Period

- from medieval feudal state to a centralised absolute state
- distinction against other nations – esp. Spain (Catholic!)
- pragmatic legitimation
- Reformation
  → emergence of a nation state
- 'political body building‘ of monarchs
- literature participates in the establishment of a ‘Tudor Myth’
The Tudor Myth

- History told according to the needs of Tudor monarchs, with a moral theme:

- Guilt of Henry IV (1st Lancastrian king) in deposing an anointed king, Richard II (last Plantagenet king), leads to moral and political chaos for next century
- Wars of the Roses (1377-1485): dynastic struggles between two noble houses, Lancaster (red rose) and York (white rose)
- Wars capped by Richard III, embodiment of evil
- Harmony restored by Henry Tudor, last Lancastrian, God's “white knight,” who defeats Richard III (Yorkist)
- By marrying the heiress of York, Henry Tudor—King Henry VII—unites rival dynasties (➔ Tudor Rose combines white and red)
- Accession of Henry VII is divinely sanctioned: wrong of Richard II’s deposition finally made right
The Tudor Myth

- An oversimplified view of history:
  - Ignores wrongs committed by Richard II himself
  - Misrepresents causes of the Wars of the Roses as dynastic struggle (real causes still debated)
  - Leaves out non-elite players
  - Omits or adapts important events and persons for sake of symmetry and moral pattern
The Tudor Myth –
Why tell history this way?

- celebrate a new dynasty
- grant divine right of the monarch
- implies that God watches over England
- restoration of order after chaos
- create a national myth
- provide ideology and symbolism for the sovereigns
The Iconography of the Tudor Myth: Elizabeth I

Pelican portrait

Ditchley portrait
The Iconography of the Tudor Myth: Elizabeth I
Cultural Orientations in the 16th Century: Renaissance

- Renaissance = re-birth or new birth, i.e. return towards antiquity
- In England, Renaissance later than in Italy
- Impacts of the Reformation and national Tudor identity
Cultural Orientations in the 16th Century:
Humanism

- revival of ancient languages ➔ translations, these also help to revaluate English
- man into the centre; book of nature
- in England: esp. educational programme, e.g. Thomas Elyot, *The Boke named the Governour*; or Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*
- important: idea of order
- Elyot: "A public weal is a body living, compact of sundry estates and degrees of men, which is disposed by the order of equity and governed by the rule and moderation of reason"
  ➔ state as body politic is an image of divine orders and laws
Shakespeare had his Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* deliver his famous "degree speech" drawing a dark portrait of the horrible and universal chaos caused by the loss of the old geocentric order:

“O, when degree is shaked,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick!
How could communities,
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenitive and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree, stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows!”
Hierachy of body politic

1. Nobility (Hochadel)
2. Gentry (Niederer Landadel)
3. Yeomanry (landbesitzendes Großbürgertum)
4. Artisans, farmers, workmen
5. Vagabonds and beggars
Macrocosm vs. Microcosm

1. Macrocosm
   (celestial spheres => court/ state)

   vs.

Microcosm
   (mankind => country/ individual)
Macrocosm and Microcosm – Human Body reflects Universe / Kingdom
(e.g. Robert Fludd)
Great Chain of Being *[aurea catena Homeri]*
(stratified/hierarchical order of the world)

“Since every place in the scale [of being] must be filled, and since each is what it is by virtue of the special limitations which differentiate it from any other, man's duty was to keep his place, and not to seek to transcend it -- which, nevertheless, he was characteristically prone to do” (Lovejoy).
1579 drawing of the Great Chain of Being from Didacus Valades, Rhetorica Christiana
Physiology and Psychology:

four humours the body is composed of:

1. blood
2. black bile (Melancholia)
3. yellow bile
4. phlegm
Physiology and Psychology: The Four Humors

Melancholic
moody
black bile

Choleric
irritable
hot-tempered
yellow bile

Sanguine
happy
healthy
blood

Phlegmatic
slow
droopy
phlegm
Seminal Texts:

Eustace Mandeville Wedenhall Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* [1943]. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972. [Tudor Myth: be careful this is obsolete research!]

The First Stuart Monarchs

1603 James I (King James VI of Scotland) inherits the throne of England. → Jacobean Period
- continuation of the Tudor theory of divinely ordained monarchy
- Population of London over 200,000

1605 First attempts to unite moderate Catholics and Protestants are thwarted by Guy Fawkes’s unsuccessful Gunpowder Plot to blow up Houses of Parliament (Fawkes = radical Catholic convert) → reprisals against Catholics

- heavy debts of the crown lead to conflicts over taxation and the selling of titles to increase the crown’s revenue
The First Stuart Monarchs

1625 Charles II accesses the throne of England
1629 Edict of Restitution allows the Roman Catholic church to recover property seized by Protestants.
1640 Charles I of England calls the Parliament again after years of not having it. So begins the "Long Parliament"
1642 English Civil war begins.
# Timeline of Revenge Tragedies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>1st performance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thomas Kyd</td>
<td><em>The Spanish Tragedy</em></td>
<td>1587 (1582-92)</td>
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<td>Christopher Marlowe</td>
<td><em>The Jew of Malta</em></td>
<td>1589 (c.1589-90)</td>
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<td>William Shakespeare</td>
<td><em>Titus Andronicus</em></td>
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<td>Cyril Tourneur? or Thomas Middleton?</td>
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<td>Cyril Tourneur</td>
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<td>George Chapman</td>
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<td>Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher</td>
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<td>John Webster</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Webster</td>
<td><em>The Duchess of Malfi</em></td>
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<td>Thomas Middleton and William Rowley</td>
<td><em>The Changeling</em></td>
<td>1622</td>
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<td>John Ford</td>
<td>‘<em>Tis Pity She’s a Whore</em>’</td>
<td>1632 (1629-33)</td>
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The Elizabethan and Jacobean Theatre

and Stage
The World is a Stage

“All the world’s a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players” (As You Like It)

“This wide and universal theatre/ Presents more woeful pageants than the scene/ Wherein we play in” (As You Like It)

“I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,/ A stage, where every man must play a part” (The Merchant of Venice)

“I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen/ Upon a parchment” (King John)

“Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (Macbeth).
beginnings of Elizabethan theatre

- initially theatre had to meet severe restrictions (esp. no religious matters)
- confined to the areas outside London; except when invited to play at court
- play areas: inns, inn yards, halls – erecting a platform on one side, with people gathering around or looking from windows
- improvements under Elizabeth I:
  - 1574: introduction of regular weekday performances
  - 1576: first playhouse built by James Burbage (The Theatre) – following the improved pattern of the innyard theatre
- alternatives: private indoor theatres:
A LONDON PLAYHOUSE OF SHAKESPEARE'S TIME

Building above stage known as the "Heavens." It contains a windlass for special effects (e.g., descent of enrobed "gods" from the "sky" to the stage).

Flag is flown every playing day.

Trumpet sounded to announce performance.

Ceiling under roof ornamental, painted as "sky.

A. Privileged spectators seated on stage.
B. Upper stage and windows (the "Upper House").
C. Curtains recessed (see Plate 1 and Volpone I).
D. Trapdoor to "Hell" area under the stage (traditionally used for appearance of ghosts, etc.).
E. One-penny audience ("groundlings") standing in yard.

Backstage area (called the "Tiring House").

Staircases to galleries.
Apron stage
The Place of the Stage

London in panorama, 1611
The Place of the Stage

London, 1611
The Place of the Stage

The plays are *given* license and they *take* license.
The place of the stage

- across the river
- outside the walls of the City of London
- outside the Royal City of Westminster
- in the “Liberties”
- on the margin, but also in a commanding position at the threshold of London
- place of the stage pronounces marginality: from its liminal position, it takes a vantage point to observe and comment on the city
The Place of the Stage

“Located in the Liberties, the theater was both part and not part of the city, which no doubt was appropriate for the home of a commercial acting company that was both dependent and not dependent upon its aristocratic patrons; and the actors themselves, deemed rogues, vagabonds, and beggars by the 1572 Poor Act, were formally members of aristocratic households, the members of the King’s Men even entitled to call themselves gentlemen. These contradictions of the theater were the inescapable conditions of playing and suggest that the spectacle of rule was not merely reproduced in its representations but dislocated and redistributed.” (Kastan/Stallybrass, 7)
features of Renaissance theatre

- the commercial playhouse repeats the diversity of language and social rank and thus expresses the heterogeneity of society
- exception with respect to gender: all male actors
- clothes become markers of gender identity and class (cf. dress regulations to establish order)
reconstruction of the interior of a Jacobean playhouse
reconstruction of the interior of a Jacobean playhouse
stage design by Inigo Jones (1635)
Changes in early 17th-century theatre

- development of revenge tragedy runs parallel to the development of a new kind of performance space:
- shift of venue from the open spaces of so-called public playhouses (e.g. Swan, Rose, Globe) to indoor private playhouses (e.g. Blackfriars, Whitefriars, Phoenix)
- private playhouses: smaller, totally enclosed, artificial lighting, higher admission prices
- split between popular public theatre and a more exclusive city audience who attends the private theatres
- mostly run by boy companies with more refined acting
- more intimate acting space of private theatres offers the potential for a more naturalistic acting (e.g. better voice protection, smaller gestures and mimics)
- may account for a comparatively greater complexity of character
Changes in early 17th-century theatre

- shift from public to private places can also be discerned in the texts:
  - Elizabethan tragedy: royalty or eminent political figures; focus on state politics <-> Jacobean and Caroline theatre: domestic settings; increasing focus on personal matters
Anti-theatrical positions

- In July of 1597 the Lord Mayor of London and the Aldermen sent an official letter to the Privy Council requesting the closure of "stage-plays" on the grounds that they contain “nothing but profane fables, lascivious matters, cozening devices, and scurrilous behaviours, which are so set forth as that they move wholly to imitation and not to the avoiding of those faults and vices which they represent. Among other inconveniences it is not the least that they give opportunity to the refuse sort of evil-disposed and ungodly people that are within and about this City to assemble themselves and to make their matches for all their lewd and ungodly practices."

- Philip Stubbes, a Puritan, thought like the Mayor and Aldermen that the audience of stage plays would learn to "play the hypocrite…to devirginate maids, to deflower honest wives…to rebel against princes, to commit treasons" and to "contemn God and all his laws, to care neither for Heaven nor Hell" by visiting the theater (*Anatomie of Abuses*; Blakemore 12)

- → theatre is attacked for being morally and politically subversive
Jacobean City Comedy (c. 1600-24)

- popular genre
- deals predominately with the issues and conflicts arising from life in an increasingly commercialized London
- initially: satiric remarks upon the lack of moral behaviour
- later: attacks the hypocritical nature of capitalist society
- city comedy dramatizes the effect to which changing economic conditions disrupt the social relations (= peoples’ relationship to the material world changed, the ways they thought about themselves)
- Jacobean society faced an ‘identity crisis’
- city comedies specifically deal with teaching citizens proper behavior (topics: e.g. sexuality or the place of desire; distribution of roles in marriage)
- city comedy, because of its liminal position, its space or ‘critical distance’ to the official and dominant ideology, critiques the gaps in society
- (e.g. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*)
Origins of Revenge Tragedy: Seneca

- focus on a single individual’s revenge
- revengers are potentially stronger than their victims (e.g. rulers seeking revenge on subjects, gods on mortals, magicians on nonmagicians)
- revengers act directly and self-assured, without questioning whether their course is correct
- revengers may be temporarily immobilized by their passions but not slowed down by opposition or weak purpose
- revengers use a moderate amount of tricks and disguises
- no comic subplots
- revengers do not die, although a prophesy may indicate that the revenge circle has not been fulfilled yet \(\Rightarrow\) no closure