

## *The Age of Shakespeare*

The age is also called the Elizabethan period because Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) ruled through most of the period. It was one of the most colourful times in English history. It saw the foundation of the British Empire; the power of Spain opposed on the seas and finally broken by the defeat of the Armada (1588); the flowering of the Renaissance in the works of Shakespeare, Thomas More and Christopher Wren (St. Paul's Cathedral) to name but a few; a change from the life in the country of England in the Middle Ages to life in cities with manufacturing and trading. The age of gunpowder, coaches, tobacco, spices, telescopes, pocket watches, papermills and bookprinting was dawning.

The queen was a powerful monarch who had her power and privileges from God, being his representative on earth, "God's anointed deputy". She did not have absolute power, though, as Parliament had to be consulted at least in money matters, but *she* decided when to call Parliament.

### ***Shakespeare's Time***

Remarkable changes and developments took place not only in England, but in the whole of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries; so far-reaching that they may be considered to mark the beginning of modern society.



Elizabeth on her travels. To ease the pressure on her own money she spent a large part of the year travelling round the country letting herself and her train of followers be kept and entertained by noblemen and cities. An angel's trumpet announces her fame.

### Developments in the Country

The population lived mostly in the country and the most important industries were farming and animals, but money was needed to invest in the growing wool industry and the trade that followed. There was a development from subsistence farming (where you produced what you needed yourself and to exchange for necessary goods such as soap and salt) to capitalist farming. Small landowners were forced to sell and big landowners invested in sheep, the most profitable kind of farming.

Both farmland and common land were enclosed (fenced in) and people who had rented the land from the big landowners were turned out. For those smallholders who tried to stay on their land the rents were raised. The result was that whole areas were depopulated, vil-

lages disappeared and the peasants either became homeless vagabonds or they tried to find employment in the growing towns and cities. A direct social consequence of this development was that Houses of Correction and Poor Houses were established. The first Poor Law was introduced in 1553, revised in 1601, making the parishes responsible for their inhabitants, although to a limited degree, instead of the feudal principle of the nobleman's protection of his subjects.

### **Developments in Trade**

The new men of power were the merchants. England, which had always been a sheep-raising country, now began to manufacture on a larger scale and to export cloth. Business in a modern sense began to develop. As early as under Henry VII (1485-1509) commercial treaties were made with other European countries and subsequently London became a metropolitan market. With this development came also the need for new trading routes and new trading partners. This is the period of discoveries and geographical expansion.

Trading companies were established in what later became colonies. Africa companies in Morocco (1585) and Guinea (1588) developed the slave trade. The East India Company established in 1600 set up silk, cotton, china and carpet factories on the Indian mainland (Surat 1612, Madras 1639, Bombay 1665 and Calcutta 1690) (see map of Empire p. 42).

### **The English Reformation**

This was also the period of reformation of the church. The reformation in England took place mainly for political reasons. Henry VIII (1509-47) broke with the Pope because he could not get his way with him. He also wanted to emphasize his power in opposition to the two great rivals on the continent, the kings of France and Spain. Although the monasteries were closed and their lands shared out to noblemen, the Reformation never took the violent form it did on the continent. Under Elizabeth I the Anglican church confirmed its "middle of the road" position in European church life.

### **Emigration**

The extreme Protestants – the Puritans (see p. 155) – emigrated to the new-found world of America either because of persecution or be-

cause they were dissatisfied with church affairs at home. The earliest of the Puritan settlements was Plymouth, founded in 1584 by the Pilgrim Fathers, which was the name of the early emigrants setting out from Plymouth, England.

The first colony was called Virginia (1607) to celebrate the virgin Queen Elizabeth. The Puritans mostly settled in areas north of Virginia, whereas the southern states were settled by the English nobility who ran cotton, tobacco and sugar plantations by means of slaves imported from West Africa.

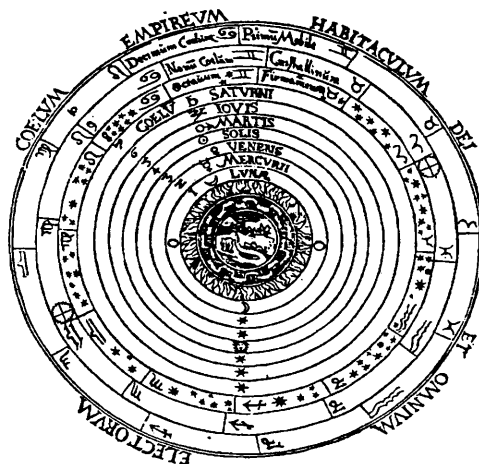
### **Life in the Towns**

For ordinary people life in the towns was crowded, noisy, and dirty and they lived in much more poverty than they had imagined when they moved in from the country hoping for new opportunities. Although London was the one big metropolitan city (in 1563 it had 90,000 inhabitants, twenty years later 120,000 and by the end of the century almost 200,000) other towns were expanding too, especially so in the 17th and following centuries with the development of the Industrial Revolution (typical examples are Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and Birmingham). Fires were frequent, sanitary conditions were appalling because the towns were not at all prepared for the growth in number of inhabitants. Diseases like the plague carried away hundreds of thousands. The inns and alehouses, however, were many and they provided comfort and forgetfulness.

### ***The Elizabethan World Picture***

The Elizabethan understanding of the world was in many ways more closely linked to the

tradition of the Middle Ages than to the age of progress and expansion that it saw the beginning of.

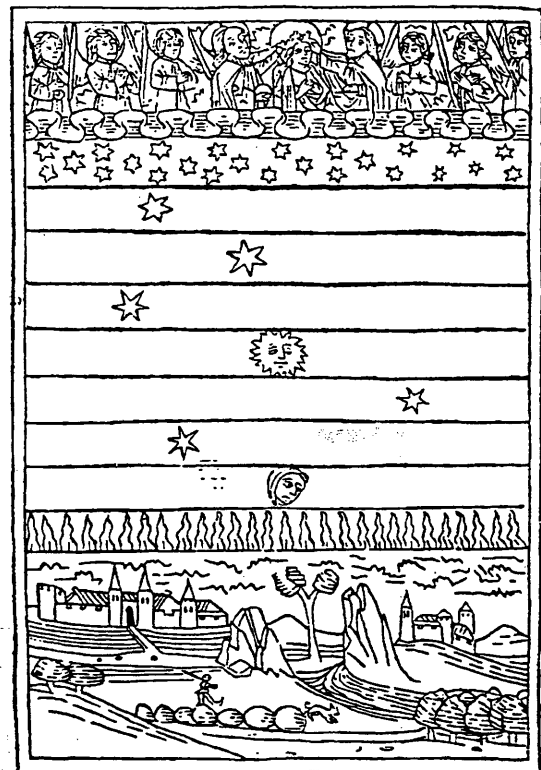
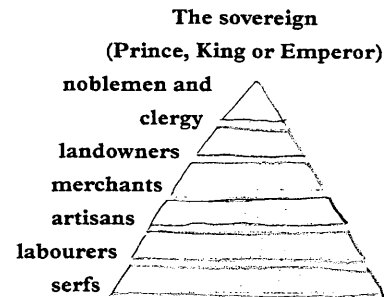


As the picture shows, the Elizabethan world picture was a simplified version of how the Middle Ages thought the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) had imagined the universe. The picture shows us the earth with water in the middle surrounded by the two other basic elements, air and fire. All earthly things were believed to be composed of these four elements in varying relations and degrees. Above the four elements we see the heavenly spheres from the moon up to the Primum Mobile – the First Mover – the divine power coming from God from which all movement and energy first came, and finally we have "Heaven, dwelling of God and all the elected", as it says.

God was at the top of the universal or cosmological hierarchy as shown in the picture, where the crown is put on his head by the surrounding angels.

## Hierarchy on Earth

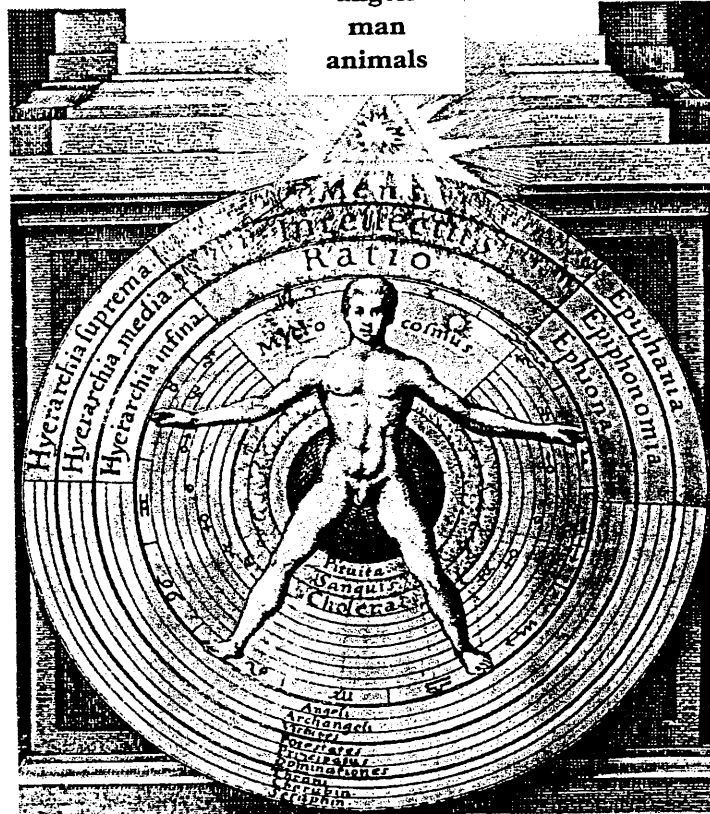
Corresponding to the hierarchy in heaven we find an order or hierarchy of the same kind on earth. Among men, in social life, we find the following hierarchy:



Among the animals we find the lion as "king" of the mammals, and the eagle "king" of birds. In plant life – trees and flowers – their

"sovereigns" (oak and rose) also figure today in imagery and symbolic language.

GOD  
seraphs  
cherubim  
archangels  
angels  
man  
animals

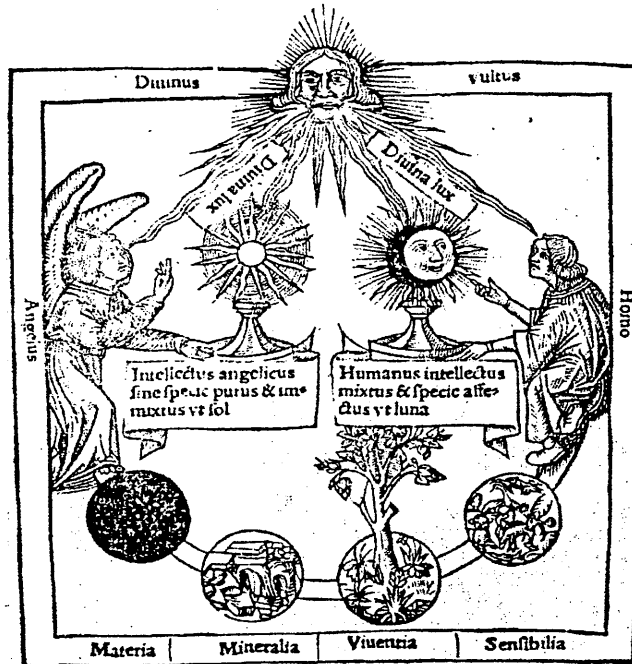


There were nine types of angels from seraphs and cherubim to archangels and angels – the ones closest to man – each belonging to their separate spheres in an order created by God, and all of them composed of the fifth element, "ether", which only bodies above the moon, heavenly bodies, consisted of.

(Robert Fludd, 1619)

## The Great Chain of Being

The picture shows another way of looking at the God-given order namely as "the great chain of being". All God's beings were seen as links in an enormous chain, each link in its proper place and each necessary for the strength, balance and harmony of God's creation. Again we see God at the top sending his divine light to



(Charles Bovillus, ca 1470 – ca 1550)

angels on his right and human beings on his left hand side.

These are again linked to animals, plants, minerals and matter without shape.

When this order was broken it was not only a crime against beings above you in the chain, but also a sin against God.

### Examples from Shakespeare

In this way **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616) together with the people of this time believed some kind of order or degree on earth to have its parallel in heaven. Another word for order is cosmos (the opposite of chaos). The universe with its well-ordered spheres "dancing" in harmony to the music of the spheres was macrocosmos. Life on earth – not so perfect, but hopefully an imitation of the harmony in heaven – was microcosmos, and man – as the creature closest to the angels – was of course at the centre of this microcosmos.

When the order was broken in microcosmos it was reflected on the macro-level, as can be seen from Ulysses' speech from *Troilus and*

*Cressida* (1603) Act I, sc.3, ll. 109-110 "Take but degree away, untune that string. And Hark! what discord follows;" In Shakespeare's plays we have numerous examples of how other links in "the chain of being" reacted to important events. Usurpation and murder as we find in *Macbeth* (1605) turned nature upside down: the night does not give way to day and an owl eats a falcon which Shakespeare's audiences would know to be an impossibility. (Act II, sc.4)

The people of Shakespeare's time always knew that any single event or phenomenon took place within a total cosmic context. When *Othello* (1604) begins to mistrust Desdemona he exclaims, "If she be false O, then heaven mocks itself" meaning that the

heavenly cosmos does not exist.

In that play the main image is one of animals eating themselves – a metaphor for jealousy and extreme disorder in nature.

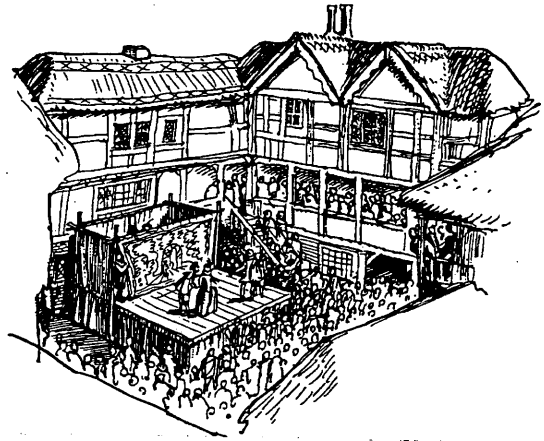
In *King Lear* (1606) we see many examples of correspondence between man and nature, the parallel between the storm on the heath and the storm in Lear's mind (Act III, sc.1), when he realizes that he has been exploited and betrayed by his eldest daughters, while he himself has banned the youngest. A final example from *Romeo and Juliet* (1596): In this tragedy the most important image is the contrast between light and darkness, and the sun itself, of course, reacts when the two young lovers both die (Act V, sc.3).

Shakespeare was deeply influenced by the world picture of his time. This context would also be the one shared by his audience. He could be certain that his audience would recognize it when he referred to the links in the chain, the correspondences, macro/microcosmos etc. in his imagery and linked metaphors. Consequently to enjoy Shakespeare fully it is necessary for the modern reader or audience to be familiar with his world picture.

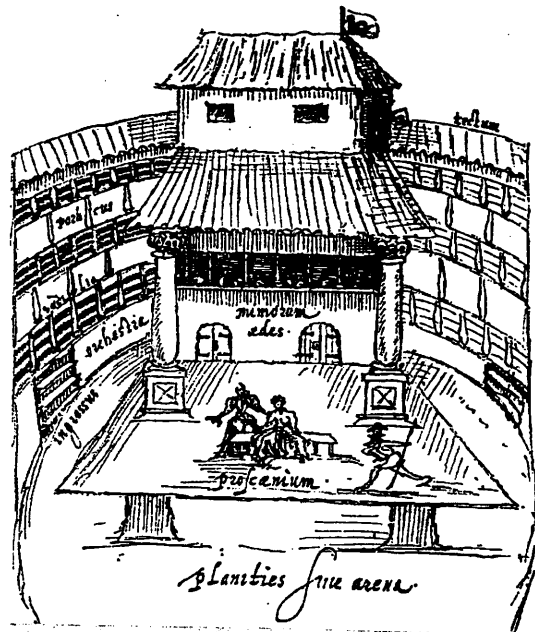
### Shakespearean Theatre

Theatre before Shakespeare's time was performed in the churches by the clergy, especially at Christmas and Easter, in inn courtyards by members of the local trade guilds – these plays were often religious in their contents too – and at noblemen's houses or at court. There were no public theatres.

The Reformation almost killed the religious drama and in 1545 actors were classified by



The public would stand, the better off on the balconies and poor people in the pit (groundlings they were called). If noblemen attended a performance it is believed they were seated on the actual stage.  
(ca 1565)



One of the very few engravings from the time. The theatre is the Swan where Shakespeare's company performed in 1596-99).  
(Johannes de Witt, ca 1596)

law as "idle rogues and vagabonds" and as such, could be arrested anywhere they went.

Some noblemen maintained a company of actors as their personal servants for entertainment at parties and on other occasions. These groups of male actors (women were played by boys before their voices broke), could travel and practise their art, when they were not needed by their masters.

They would travel from town to town, set up a stage in an inn's courtyard and in this way play to the ordinary public.

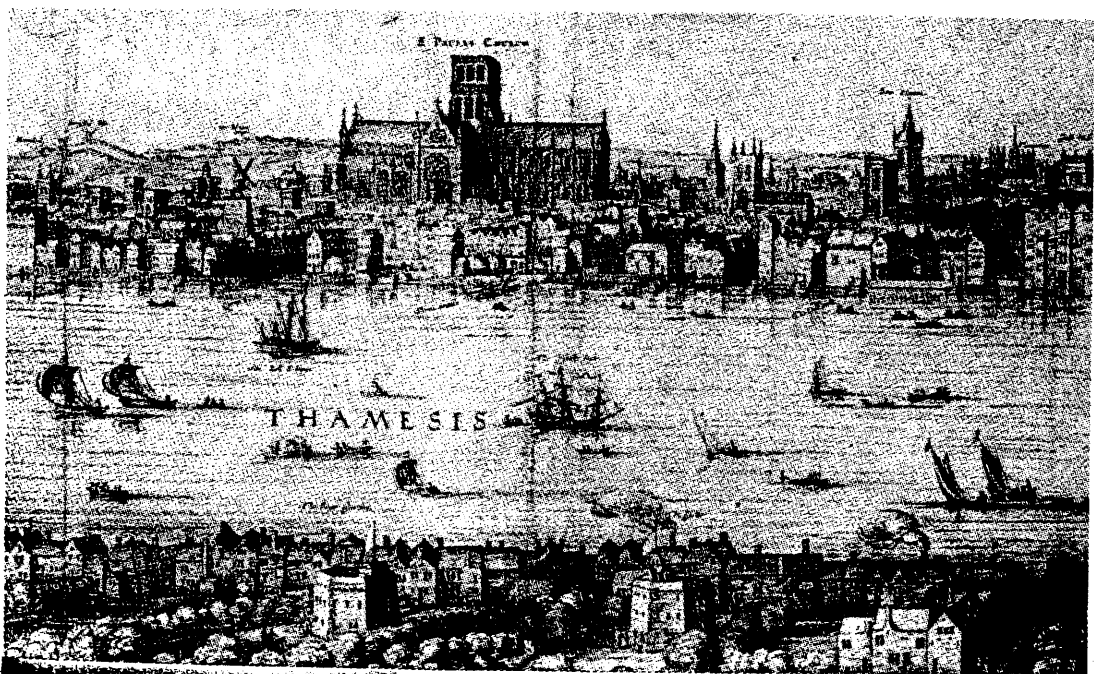
The most profitable audience could of course be gathered in the London innyards.

Their behaviour was not always very orderly and the City authorities argued that such crowds caused riots, fires, ungodliness and the spread of the plague.

To escape from the London authorities and to avoid sharing their profits with the innkeepers, the theatre companies started building theatres outside the city limits – the first one in 1576.

The structure of the inn's courtyard was copied and improved in these early theatres.

In spite of having moved out of the City, the theatres were closed by law on and off because of the plague. Finally all theatres were



The South Bank of the Thames was a favourite location and in 1599 the Lord Chamberlain's Men – Shakespeare's company – built their theatre called the Globe, which can be seen a little to the right of the middle of the picture. (Visscher's View of London, 1616)



closed from 1642 to 1660 for ungodliness, when the Puritans were in power under Oliver Cromwell (see p. 21).

The actors were shareholders in their company, and the companies came to rely more and more on the common people as their audience. However, in Shakespeare's time the noble or royal patronage (being in the pay and under the protection of a nobleman) was of great importance. In 1603 Shakespeare's company (he was both an actor and a writer of plays) was taken under the patronage of Elizabeth's successor, James I, and so became The King's Men.

It is believed that *Macbeth*, written in 1606, was first performed at a court-visit of James' brother-in-law, Christian IV of Denmark.

### **The First Folio**

In about 1610, Shakespeare apparently retired

to his town of birth, Stratford-on-Avon. By now he was a wealthy and well-known man, but he continued to write till he died.

Earlier he had luckily ordered two members of his company to collect and publish his plays – 36 in all.

This edition is called the First Folio and it came out in 1623. Had they not followed his wishes many of the plays would have been lost, among others *Macbeth*. Others would have survived only in very untrustworthy and damaged actors' editions, the so-called "Bad Quartos".

Shakespeare's rival – and friend – Ben Jonson wrote an introductory poem for the First Folio ending with the following lines:

Triumph, my Britain, Thou hast one to show  
To whom all scenes of Europa owe.  
He was not of an age, but for all time!

