**Shakespeare and Elisabeth I**

When Shakespeare began his writing career, Queen Elizabeth I had been on the throne for nearly thirty years, and by the time of her death in 1603 she **had ruled over England and Ireland for forty-five years**.

She was a popular monarch, and her long reign helped establish England as a **major** European **commercial and political power**. Elizabeth also **supported the arts**, which enabled poetry, music, and theatre to flourish throughout the second half of the sixteenth century.

Elizabeth belonged to the **Tudor monarchy**, which her grandfather, Henry VII, had founded. The Tudors inherited the throne after Henry VII plunged England into decades of religious turmoil. **Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII,** broke with the Catholic Church and appointed himself the Supreme **Head of** a new Protestant institution known as **the Church of England**. Henry VIII’s break with Catholicism caused religious conflict throughout England and inspired the ire of Catholic kingdoms in Europe. England remained Protestant under Edward I, but when **Mary** I ascended the throne in 1553, she **declared England Catholic once again**. When **Elizabeth** became queen in 1558, **she inherited a kingdom wracked by persecution and bloodshed**, and her first act as queen was to **restore the Anglican Church**.

Though from today’s perspective we often consider **Elizabeth’s reign a golden age of English history,** at the time things seemed far less certain. Elizabeth spent much of her time as monarch managing **religious strife between Catholics and Protestants**, and trying to satisfy the demands **of radical Protestant sects like the Puritans.** Such religious instability rattled the kingdom and **made everyday life uncertain**. **Political threats** also undermined the kingdom’s sense of security. Elizabeth was **the target of assassination plots** like the Babington Plot of 1586, which sought to replace Elizabeth with her Catholic cousin, **Mary, Queen of Scots**. After **Mary was executed in 1587** for conspiracy, **Mary’s ally, King Philip II of Spain, sought retribution** by turning his **armada against the English**. Elizabeth’s navy famously **defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588**, and though in hindsight this victory helped establish England as an **important naval power**, at the time the ongoing war with Spain caused much anxiety. Elizabeth’s status as the **“Virgin Queen”** also caused anxiety in the kingdom. Her refusal to marry meant that she **would die without an heir**, and it was rumored that the King of Scotland, James VI, would invade if his claim to inherit the English throne wasn’t acknowledged.

**Shakespeare never wrote about Elizabeth directly.**

Perhaps his most direct reference to the queen herself appears in [*A Midsummer Night’s Dream,*](https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/msnd/)when Oberon speaks of a beautiful virgin, “a fair vestal thronèd by the west” (II.i.). Shakespeare’s history plays also address the lives of Elizabeth’s Tudor forebears. For instance**,**[***Richard III***](https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/richardiii/)**concludes with Henry Tudor**, then Earl of Richmond, killing the king and assuming the throne as Henry VII. Shakespeare also dramatized the reign of **Elizabeth’s father in his final history play,**[***Henry VIII,***](https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/henryviii/)**which examined the monarch’s break with the Catholic Church.** Shakespeare also found subtle ways to reflect the national mood in the tragedies and comedies he wrote during the final years of Elizabeth’s reign, when the queen’s health was in decline and it remained uncertain what would happen after her death. In [*Julius Caesar,*](https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/juliuscaesar/)written around 1599, Shakespeare depicts the outbreak of a bloody civil war in the aftermath of a beloved leader’s death. [*Hamlet,*](https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/hamlet/)which Shakespeare likely wrote around 1600, dramatizes a power struggle that results in the prince of a neighboring kingdom invading Denmark and taking the throne for himself. Finally, in [*Measure for Measure,*](https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/measure-for-measure/)likely written in 1603—the year of Elizabeth’s death—Shakespeare imagines a city-state riddled with corruption and abuse because the ruler has relinquished responsibility for his people. **Each of these plays reflects real-world tensions and anxieties in Elizabethan England**.

<https://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/life-and-times/historical-context/political/elizabeth-i/>