

Renaissance Period Authors (1485-1660)

The Renaissance period in English literature spans from approximately 1485 to 1660, coinciding with the Tudor and early Stuart dynasties. This era saw a revival of interest in classical learning and values, the rise of humanism, and significant developments in poetry, drama, and prose. The period produced some of the most celebrated writers in English literary history, including William Shakespeare, and witnessed the flourishing of the English theater.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Life

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in April 1564 to John Shakespeare, a glover and local alderman, and Mary Arden, the daughter of a wealthy landowner. He likely attended the King's New School in Stratford, where he would have received a classical education. At 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith. By the early 1590s, Shakespeare was in London working as an actor and playwright. He was a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men), a leading theater company. Shakespeare prospered financially, investing in real estate in Stratford, where he retired around 1613. He died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.

Works

- **Tragedies:** Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar

- **Comedies:** A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night, As You Like It, The Merchant of Venice
- **Histories:** Richard III, Henry V, Richard II, Henry IV Parts 1 & 2
- **Romances:** The Tempest, The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline, Pericles
- **Poetry:** 154 sonnets, Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece

Contribution to English Literature

- Transformed English theater with unprecedented psychological depth and complexity in characters
- Expanded English vocabulary, coining numerous words and phrases still in use today
- Perfected blank verse as a dramatic medium
- Created the most enduring characters in English literature
- Explored universal themes of love, power, jealousy, ambition, and human nature
- Demonstrated unparalleled versatility across genres
- Established the sonnet as a major poetic form in English
- Influenced countless writers, artists, and thinkers across centuries

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

Life

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury in February 1564, the son of a shoemaker. He attended the King's School in Canterbury and received a scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Unlike most playwrights of his time, Marlowe was university-educated. His career was brief but brilliant, cut short when he was killed in a tavern brawl in

Deptford at age 29. There is evidence suggesting Marlowe may have worked as a government spy, and the circumstances of his death remain mysterious.

Works

- **Doctor Faustus:** A tragic play about a scholar who sells his soul to the devil
- **Tamburlaine the Great** (Parts 1 & 2): Epic plays about a Scythian shepherd who becomes a conqueror
- **The Jew of Malta:** A play exploring religious hypocrisy and revenge
- **Edward II:** A historical tragedy about the deposition of King Edward II
- **Hero and Leander:** An unfinished narrative poem
- **The Passionate Shepherd to His Love:** A pastoral poem

Contribution to English Literature

- Pioneered the use of blank verse in English drama
- Developed the tragic protagonist with psychological complexity
- Created the "Marlovian hero" - the overreacher who defies conventional limitations
- Influenced Shakespeare and subsequent Renaissance dramatists
- Brought intellectual and philosophical depth to English theater
- Challenged religious and political orthodoxies
- Demonstrated how drama could explore controversial ideas

Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-1599)

Life

Edmund Spenser was born in London around 1552 to a family of modest means. He was educated at Merchant Taylors' School and later at Pembroke College, Cambridge. After university, he worked as a secretary to various noblemen and eventually secured a position in Ireland as part of the English colonial administration. In 1589, he was visited in Ireland by Sir Walter Raleigh, who encouraged him to publish the first three books of "The Faerie Queene" and introduced him at court to Queen Elizabeth I. Spenser spent most of his adult life in Ireland until Tyrone's Rebellion forced him to flee in 1598. He died in London in 1599, reportedly in poverty despite his literary fame.

Works

- **The Faerie Queene:** His masterpiece, an incomplete allegorical epic poem celebrating Queen Elizabeth I and Protestant virtues
- **The Shepheardes Calender:** A collection of twelve pastoral poems
- **Amoretti:** A sonnet sequence chronicling his courtship of Elizabeth Boyle
- **Epithalamion:** A wedding poem celebrating his marriage
- **A View of the Present State of Ireland:** A prose work on Irish politics
- **Complaints:** A collection of poems expressing disillusionment

Contribution to English Literature

- Created the Spenserian stanza, an innovative nine-line form
- Developed a deliberately archaic poetic language to evoke the medieval past
- Revived the allegorical epic tradition in English
- Adapted the pastoral form for political and social commentary
- Influenced the development of the English sonnet sequence

- Combined classical, medieval, and Renaissance literary traditions
- Established a distinctly English epic poetry tradition

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)

Life

Sir Philip Sidney was born into an aristocratic family at Penshurst Place, Kent. His father was Sir Henry Sidney, Lord Deputy of Ireland, and his mother was Lady Mary Dudley, sister of the Earl of Leicester, a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I. Sidney received an excellent education at Shrewsbury School and Christ Church, Oxford, followed by extensive European travel. He became a courtier to Queen Elizabeth I and was widely admired for his learning, poetry, and chivalric ideals. Despite his literary achievements, Sidney was also a diplomat and soldier. He died at age 31 from wounds received at the Battle of Zutphen in the Netherlands, fighting for the Protestant cause against Spain.

Works

- **Astrophil and Stella:** The first major English sonnet sequence
- **The Defence of Poesy** (or An Apology for Poetry): A critical essay defending the moral value of poetry
- **Arcadia:** A prose romance existing in two versions (Old Arcadia and New Arcadia)
- **The Lady of May:** A pastoral entertainment

Contribution to English Literature

- Established the English sonnet sequence as a major literary form
- Wrote the first significant work of literary criticism in English

- Developed the pastoral romance in English prose
- Exemplified the Renaissance ideal of the complete gentleman-scholar
- Influenced the development of English prose style
- Created a model for later sonneteers, including Shakespeare
- Combined intellectual rigor with poetic sensibility

John Donne (1572-1631)

Life

John Donne was born in London to a prosperous Catholic family at a time when Catholicism was illegal in England. He studied at both Oxford and Cambridge but could not take degrees due to his religion. After traveling in Europe and serving in military expeditions, he became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. His career was derailed when he secretly married Egerton's niece, Anne More, resulting in his dismissal and brief imprisonment. After years of financial struggle, Donne converted to Anglicanism and eventually took holy orders, becoming Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in 1621. His marriage to Anne was happy but she died in 1617 after giving birth to their twelfth child. Donne's later years were devoted to his religious duties until his death in 1631.

Works

- **Songs and Sonnets:** Collection of love poems
- **Holy Sonnets:** Religious poems exploring faith, death, and divine love
- **Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions:** Prose meditations written during serious illness
- **Sermons:** Over 160 surviving sermons from his career as Dean of St. Paul's
- **Elegies:** Sensual poems written in his youth

- **Satires:** Poems criticizing society and politics
- **An Anatomy of the World:** A funeral elegy

Contribution to English Literature

- Primary figure of the Metaphysical poets, known for intellectual complexity and surprising metaphors
- Revolutionized the love poem with psychological realism and complex arguments
- Developed the metaphysical conceit—extended, intellectually rigorous metaphors
- Bridged secular and sacred themes in innovative ways
- Created poetry that engaged with scientific and philosophical developments of his time
- Wrote some of the most powerful religious poetry in English
- Influenced 20th-century poets like T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden

Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

Life

Ben Jonson was born in Westminster, London, a month after his father's death. His stepfather was a bricklayer, and Jonson worked briefly in this trade after attending Westminster School under the renowned scholar William Camden. Unlike many of his literary contemporaries, Jonson did not attend university. He served as a soldier in the Netherlands before becoming an actor and playwright. His life was tumultuous—he killed an actor in a duel in 1598 but escaped hanging by pleading benefit of clergy. Jonson converted to Catholicism for a period but later returned to Anglicanism. He achieved considerable success, becoming England's first poet

laureate in all but name, receiving a royal pension from King James I. In his later years, he suffered a stroke but continued writing until his death in 1637.

Works

- **Volpone:** A satirical comedy about greed and deception
- **The Alchemist:** A comedy exposing human folly and gullibility
- **Bartholomew Fair:** A comedy depicting London life
- **Epicene, or The Silent Woman:** A comedy of manners
- **Every Man in His Humour:** A humors comedy
- **Sejanus His Fall** and **Catiline His Conspiracy:** Roman tragedies
- **The Forest** and **Underwoods:** Collections of poems
- **Timber, or Discoveries:** Prose reflections on literature and morality

Contribution to English Literature

- Established the "comedy of humours," focusing on character types dominated by particular traits
- Developed precise, classical dramatic structures in contrast to Shakespeare's more romantic approach
- Pioneered the English "tribe of Ben" literary tradition, influencing the Cavalier poets
- Created the court masque as a sophisticated dramatic form, collaborating with architect Inigo Jones
- Advanced literary criticism in English
- Demonstrated how classical learning could inform vernacular literature
- Perfected the classical lyric and epigram in English