

# The Elizabethan World View

The Elizabethan world was in a state of flux and people were confused, frightened, excited at traditional beliefs challenged by scientific discovery, and exploration.

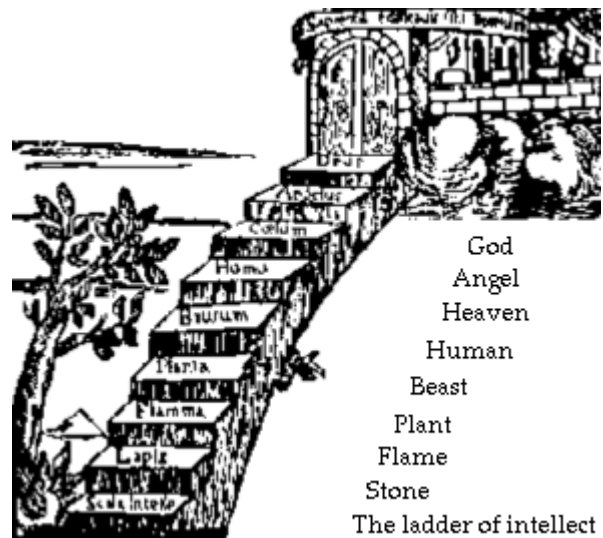
**The Roman Catholic Church** was under attack. The movement which agitated against the Catholic Church was labelled the Reformation. The translation of the Bible into English meant many ordinary people had access to it for the first time.

**Science and Astronomy** – new discoveries were being made all the time. Galileo was the first man to study the stars through a telescope, and people learned for the first time that the world was round, not flat. It was also discovered that the sun, not the earth, was the centre of the solar system.

**Exploration** – Queen Elizabeth encouraged adventurous men like Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh to sail in search of wealth and undiscovered lands. Drake was knighted when he became the first man to circumnavigate the world, and Raleigh sailed to the Americas.

New discoveries meant that discourses arose. Montaigne, for instance, offered the notion that there were two kinds of ‘savages’ – the noble savage, and the ignoble savage. Debates raged as to whether humans were inherently good or bad.

**The Great Chain of Being** – people believed that everyone and everything was arranged in a specific order, and that this order was divinely pre-ordained. God was the head of all things; the king, his representative on Earth, was the head of the State, and the Pope the head of the Church. Everything was allocated a place on the great chain including animals, plants and minerals. Within each tier, there was also a hierarchy. For instance, the oak tree and the rose bush were decreed the higher plants, the lion the highest animal. All other plants and animals came below. Any break in the chain, such as killing the king, or a king abdicating, or marriage across the social spheres, pretty much ensured pre-ordained chaos.



[www.kheper.net/.../gretchainofbeing/index.html](http://www.kheper.net/.../gretchainofbeing/index.html)

Queen Elizabeth had long occupied the throne, but had no heirs of her body. This created a very tense latter part of her reign, as the succession was not assured. It may be argued that the last part of the Elizabethan reign was obsessed with this issue.

**The Music of the Spheres** – another popular belief, that related to the Divine Chain of Being, was that the Universe was made up of a number of spheres contained within one another.

All these spheres were believed to be made of a transparent crystal-like substance called aether.

The outermost sphere, in which all the stars were embedded, was called the firmament. Inside this outer sphere were a number of smaller spheres. They carried the sun, the moon, and the planets. The Earth was the centre of the Universe.

The spheres were said to make musical sounds as they moved. These sounds were in harmony and showed the harmonious working together of the whole of creation. They were known as the Music of the Spheres.

**The Divine Right of Kings** – As God’s chosen representative on Earth, the King was the supreme upholder of order on Earth. If his position was violated, it would destroy the perfect order of the universe and bring strife and chaos to the world. Any act of treason or treachery against the King was considered to be a mortal sin against God. The penalty was death – a cruel death by hanging, drawing, and quartering.

**The Signs of the Zodiac** – in Shakespeare’s day it was popularly believed that the fortunes of everyone and everything were affected by events in the heavens. The signs of the Zodiac were important to everyone. What star you were born under would determine what kind of person you would be and what kind of life you could expect.

**The Four Elements and the Four Humours** – there was also a strong belief that everything that existed beneath the moon was made from a combination of the four elements: Fire,

Air, Water, and Earth. The four elements had their counterparts in the four humours of the human body: blood, phlegm, melancholy and choler. If any of these humours predominated in the body, they determined the mood of the person. Hence the expressions: sanguine phlegmatic, melancholic and choleric. A balance made for a ‘good-humour’; an imbalance made for an ‘ill-humour’.



When about to die, Cleopatra says: ‘I am fire and air; my other elements I give to baser life.’

Based on a diagram from Isidore of Seville, *Liber de responsione mundi* (Augsburg, 1472). Original in the [Huntington Library](http://www.huntingtonlibrary.org/). ([internetshakespeare.uvic.ca](http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/))

**The Wheel of Fortune** - it was widely believed that fate (or fortune) was the main controlling force in life. Just as part of a wheel moves from a low to a high position or from high to low, so does a man’s life. A man in a high position could expect (owing to a change in fortune) to suffer some disappointment or fall. Similarly, a man in an unhappy, lowly position could hope for a change in fortune and consequently a rise to a higher position. However, there was no way of knowing where the wheel would stop, where fortune would lead.



It is thought by some scholars that the belief in the turning wheel of fortune had its beginnings in early seasonal rituals. The decline into misfortune or death was seen to be linked to the beginnings of autumn and the approach of winter; improvements in one's fortunes were linked to the renewal of life in spring and the fruitfulness of summer.

This belief, like the belief in the Zodiac and the humours, tends to be in opposition to the more humanistic beliefs that man could control his own destiny (fortune).

Image of the wheel of fortune from:  
[www.quidplura.com/?p=176](http://www.quidplura.com/?p=176)

**Humanism** - in Shakespeare's time a movement known as "Humanism" had a great influence on men and their philosophy of life. Humanists had great faith in man's ability to shape his own future. They tended to shift the emphasis from life after death to life on earth. The term "Humanism" refers to thoughts and actions which are directed at improving society.

**The Renaissance** - the term *Renaissance* means "rebirth" or "revival". During the Middle Ages (roughly 1100-1400) the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome had, to a large extent, "died out" in Western Europe. But starting in Italy in the middle of the 14th Century and spreading throughout Western Europe during the next centuries, a revival of interest in Greek and Roman civilizations took place – a "Renaissance".

In England and for English Literature, the Renaissance meant more than an involvement in a rebirth of interest in ancient civilizations and cultures. The Renaissance also meant an exposure to the continental developments from the 14th to 16th centuries. It also meant an awakening of Englishmen to their ability for using the heritage of the past and combining it with their own native gifts to produce a great new literary movement.

Perhaps more than any other Renaissance figure, Shakespeare revealed an ability to use the past and shape it for his own dramatic needs.