Elizabeth I

(1533–1603). Popularly known as the Virgin Queen and Good Queen Bess, Elizabeth Tudor was 25 years old when she became queen of England. The golden period of her reign is called the Elizabethan Age.

Elizabeth became queen after the death of her half sister in 1558. She rode at once to London from her country home, traveling in a slow procession to give the people a chance to see her. Guns boomed, bells rang, and the people cheered her and scattered flowers in her path.

At the beginning of her reign, England was in despair. The country had been weakened by war and religious strife, and the treasury was empty. Spain and France were powerful, and both wanted to rule England. The people hoped their young queen would soon marry a strong man who would guide her.

But Elizabeth at once took the government into her own hands. And though she had many suitors and close friendships with several men, she steadfastly refused to marry. When she died at the age of 69, she was still called the Virgin Queen. By then rich and secure, England was enjoying its greatest literary period. English ships were sailing around the world, and the island kingdom had begun to establish its position as a world leader.

Elizabeth’s Childhood and Youth

Elizabeth was born near London on September 7, 1533. Her father was Henry VIII. Her mother was Anne Boleyn, the second of Henry’s six wives. Henry’s first wife, Catherine of Aragon, had only one surviving child, Mary. Henry wanted a male heir, so he asked the pope to annul the marriage. Because the pope refused, Henry broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and set himself up as head of the church in England. Then he married Anne. He was disappointed that Anne’s child also was a girl. Before Elizabeth was three years old, he had her mother beheaded.

Henry gave Elizabeth a house of her own in the country. He paid little attention to her, and her governess complained that the princess “hath neither gown, nor kirtle, nor petticoat.” Henry provided excellent tutors, however, and Elizabeth showed a love for learning. She received the type of education normally reserved for male heirs, with a course of studies centering on classical languages, history, rhetoric, and moral philosophy.

One of her tutors, Roger Ascham, wrote: “Her perseverance is equal to that of a man, and her memory long keeps what it quickly picks up. She talks French and Italian as well as she does English. When she writes Greek and Latin, nothing is more beautiful than her handwriting. She delights as much in music as she is skillful in it.”

Henry’s third wife, Jane Seymour, gave birth to a son, Edward. Henry died when Edward was 9 years old, and the boy came to the throne as Edward VI. Elizabeth and Edward were both brought up in Henry’s new church, called the Church of England. Their half sister Mary was brought up a Roman Catholic. When Edward died in 1553, Mary became queen and at once made Catholicism the state religion. Mary suspected Elizabeth of plotting with the Protestants to gain the throne and had her imprisoned for two months in the Tower of London.

When Mary I died, there were two claimants to the English throne. If Elizabeth did not produce an heir, the next in line for the throne was her cousin Mary Stuart—the Catholic queen of Scotland commonly known as Mary, Queen of Scots—who was married to the dauphin Francis of France. If she won the throne of England, both Scotland and England would be joined to France. Philip II of Spain, though a Catholic, threw his influence on the side of Elizabeth because he was jealous of France’s power. Later the Spanish ambassador hinted to Elizabeth that she owed her throne to Philip. Elizabeth replied that she owed it to her people. “She is very much wedded to her people,” the ambassador wrote, “and thinks as they do.”
Queen Elizabeth at 25

Elizabeth at age 25 was tall and slender. Her eyes were bright, and her long, pale face was crowned with a mass of curly reddish hair. Her health was excellent, and she loved riding and shooting. But she would turn from these pleasures to spend long hours with her secretaries, reading dispatches, dictating, and carefully examining the accounts. She spoke in splendid sentences when she addressed Parliament or the people. With her courtiers her speech was elegant and witty—and sometimes coarse, because she liked a resounding oath as well as her father had. She laughed loudly when amused. When angered, she showed furious fits of temper. She was vain of her good looks, especially of her long, beautiful hands, and she loved extravagant dress and jewels. She had a genius for diplomacy, being both cautious and wily. She understood finance and was extremely frugal in the expenses of government. She hated war because it was wasteful of both men and money.

The young queen chose as her chief minister Sir William Cecil (Lord Burghley), who was cautious and conservative like herself. For 40 years he was her mainstay in both home and foreign affairs. Her favorite courtier was the charming and handsome Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester.

The Marriage Question

Elizabeth’s refusal to marry was the cause of great national and international discussion. For one thing, it was generally believed that only men were suited to rule and that the proper role for a woman was that of a wife. Beyond this notion, however, the dynastic and diplomatic stakes of a possible royal marriage were very high. If Elizabeth died childless, the Tudor line would come to an end, and Mary, Queen of Scots, would assume the throne in England. Protestants viewed the possibility of a Catholic monarch as a nightmarish threat that could best be averted if Elizabeth produced a Protestant heir.

The queen’s marriage decision was critical not only for the question of succession but also for the tangled web of international diplomacy. England, isolated and militarily weak at that point, sorely needed the major alliances that a marriage could create. Yet Elizabeth found maidenhood to be her most useful diplomatic weapon, particularly in playing the rivals France and Spain against each other. Among her prominent suitors was Philip II of Spain, who hoped to renew the link between Catholic Spain and England. She refused to marry him but held out hopes to more than one of his royal relatives when France seemed to threaten. Later, when Philip turned against England, Elizabeth encouraged French princes. With these and other suitors, she skillfully kept marriage negotiations going for months, even years—as long as it was to her advantage.

The Problem of Religion

In religious matters, Elizabeth steered a middle course between the extreme Protestants (Puritans) and the Catholics. She restored the Protestant service but retained many features of Catholicism, including bishops and archbishops. She hoped this compromise would produce unity in the state, but the Catholics, who formed a majority of her subjects, were not reconciled. From time to time some of them plotted with Spain or France to put Mary, Queen of Scots, on the throne in place of Elizabeth.

In 1568 Mary, having been forced to abdicate her Scottish throne, fled across the English border to ask for Elizabeth’s help. Elizabeth kept her prisoner for 19 years. During this time Mary became involved in some of the plots against the queen. Finally, Mary was accused of having a part in the so-called Babington Plot to assassinate Elizabeth. Parliament demanded her execution, Elizabeth signed the warrant, and Mary was beheaded in 1587. In the last years of Elizabeth’s reign, England’s Catholics were cruelly persecuted, and many were put to death.
Meanwhile, Elizabeth came under great pressure to become more involved in the struggle between Catholics and Protestants in continental Europe. In particular, her advisers urged her to aid Protestant rebels fighting the Spanish armies in the Netherlands. Despite her reluctance to become involved, she agreed in 1585 to send a small military force to the Netherlands.

**Defeat of the Spanish Armada**

During the first 30 years of Elizabeth’s reign, England was at peace. Commerce revived, and English ships were boldly venturing overseas to the West Indies. There they came into conflict with Spain, which dominated the Caribbean region and claimed a monopoly of trade. English smugglers broke through the blockade and made huge profits by selling, in the West Indies, blacks they had seized in Africa. John Hawkins, Sir Francis Drake, and other English seamen also waylaid Spanish ships on their way home and seized their gold. Elizabeth aided the English privateers with ships and money and shared in their profits and stolen treasure. Philip II finally decided to put an end to these attacks by invading and conquering England.

After years of preparation, Philip assembled a great fleet of his best and largest warships, called by the Spanish the Armada (that is, Fleet). In 1588 the Armada sailed into the English Channel. The English were waiting for them. Their ships were of newer design, smaller than the Spanish galleons but faster and more heavily armed. In a nine-day battle the English inflicted terrible losses on the enemy. The ships that escaped ran into bad weather, and only a few returned to Spain. English ships then carried the war to Spain. When the struggle ended—after the deaths of both Elizabeth and Philip—no Spanish fleet dared to contest England’s command of the seas.

**England’s Golden Age**

The most splendid period of English literature, called the Elizabethan Age, began in the later years of Elizabeth’s reign. Francis Bacon, writer of the Essays, was one of the queen’s lawyers. Edmund Spenser wrote The Faerie Queene in her honor. William Shakespeare acted before her, but at the time of her death he had not yet written most of his great tragedies. Elizabeth enjoyed plays, but there is no evidence that she appreciated Shakespeare’s genius.

Elizabeth was 55 years old when the Spanish Armada was defeated. Her joy in the victory was soon followed by grief, however, because her great favorite, Leicester, died a few months later. In 1598 her faithful chief minister Lord Burghley passed away. In her court appeared young men—Sir Walter Raleigh, brilliant and adventurous, and Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, a courtier and soldier. Essex fell from favor, and in 1601 Elizabeth had him executed for trying to stir up a rebellion against her. She died two years later, on March 24, 1603, at the age of 69, and was buried with great magnificence in Westminster Abbey. Mary Stuart’s son, James VI of Scotland, was proclaimed James I of England, thus uniting the crowns of the two kingdoms.

Elizabeth’s reign is most often defined in terms of the religious question, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the flourishing of literature. Also important, however, were hundreds of laws on shipping, commerce, industry, currency reform, roads, relief for the poor, and agriculture. These laws shaped the policy of England for more than two centuries after Elizabeth’s reign had ended.

**Cite**

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.
