

# 2 The Renaissance, 1485–1660

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This chapter explores the strategic historical and literary contexts for understanding Renaissance England. This was a period of enormous transition in religious, political and social terms. At the end of the fifteenth century, England might be seen as a rather marginal European kingdom governed in many ways by semi-feudal political relationships and local allegiances. By the end of Cromwell's Protectorate and the return of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, a sequence of wide-sweeping religious, political and economic changes had thrust the realm much more centrally into the arena of European affairs and had often traumatised the native population into the bargain. Unsurprisingly, Renaissance writers engaged tightly with the radically changing cultural landscape which their audiences were experiencing and often explored in new and challenging ways the directions which this developing nation might take.

## *Chronology*

	HISTORY AND CULTURE	LITERATURE
1485	Battle of Bosworth. Death of Richard III. Accession of Henry VII	William Caxton, England's first printer of books (since 1477), publishes Sir Thomas Malory's <i>Morte D Arthur</i> (c. 1470) (Caxton printed 100 books by his death in 1491)
1492	Arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean Jews expelled from Spain Rodrigo Borgia becomes Pope Alexander VI	
c. 1495		Anon., <i>Everyman</i> Henry Medwall <i>Fulgens and Lucrez</i>
1497	Vasco da Gama begins journey round Africa to India (–1499)	
1499		John Skelton, <i>Bowge</i> [i.e. rations] <i>of Court</i>
1503	Leonardo da Vinci paints <i>The Mona Lisa</i> Pope Julius II	
1508	Michelangelo begins work on the Sistine Chapel	Scottish poet Gavin Douglas completes translation of <i>Aeneid</i>
1509	Accession of Henry VIII	Desiderius Erasmus, <i>In Praise of Folly</i>
1513	Portuguese explorers begin contact with China	Niccolò Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i> Sir Thomas More, <i>History of Richard III</i>
1515	Birth of humanist Roger Ascham	Performance of Skelton's <i>Magnyfycence</i>