

A Companion to Renaissance Drama edited by Arthur F. Kinney
Chapter 4
Social Discourse and the Changing Economy by Lee Beier

Tudor Age 1485 – 1603

Queen Elizabeth I reigned 1558 – 1603

E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* was long the standard study of the Elizabethan age. He described a static and hierarchical nature of the social world. But he ignored commentators from the time that did not conform to his model of the Great Chain.

This has been criticized by recent scholarship. It seems that social categories were more fluid than once thought. Trade, manufacturing, and the professions became increasingly important making it less necessary to own land. There was tension and conflict among different classes of people that prevented order.

“My argument is that there was a discourse of social order in the period, but that contrary to Tillyard it was most evident in the reigns preceding Elizabeth I. Further, I contend that the period sees the dissolution of that discourse and its replacement by new representations of society.”

“...it will focus on the early and mid-Tudor age, the articulation of a dominant social ideology, and the contestations of the discourse, which led to its demise.”

Medieval three-estate model

Clergy – prayed so sinful humanity could achieve salvation

Gentry – landed elites that provided military leadership

Common People – performed manual labor

You were born into your station and that was fixed for life. There was mutual dependence of rank, function, and birth. All parts of society had to work in harmony for the other to be. Human body is used as a metaphor.

Tudors

Acceptance of individualism

The idea that careers were open to talent challenged the old notion that your station was fixed at birth. Rise of the humanist thinking. Education began to allow social mobility. They justified elevation for education and intellect as needed for good governance. Most important were gifts of the mind, then gifts of the body, and then riches and possessions. Birth was not a consideration.

Social polarization

Conflict challenged the notion of mutual dependence. In reality there was increasing tension between the three estates. The commonality was exploited by both the clergy and the gentry. The church and monarchy clashed.

“Mid-Tutor Crisis” between 1547 and 1558 saw five monarchs in 11 years, rebellions, riots, changes of the official religion, a direct threat to the crown, six years of deficient harvests, soaring food prices, drops in wages, and a collapse of trade.

Changes in ideology

The end of the Marian Catholic reaction, coming to the throne of Elizabeth I, and the creation of a middle-of-the-road Protestant church led to four ideological positions:

- Patriarchalism (family, gender, and master-servant relations – monarchy / race and racism)
- Focus on the poor (“worthy” vs. criminal)
- Demonology (threat of witches)
- Anti-Catholicism (threat to the crown, the church, and the Protestant community)

Elizabethan social discourse

Ruler

Citizens

Rurals

Emphasis was on political power, social mobility, and conflicts between orders. Society consisted of ranks and orders that lacked coherence. Individualism and competition were now important.