

Elizabethan beliefs



Just having a tooth pulled out could lead to infection and death.

Life in Elizabethan England could be cruel and hard. The poor often went hungry, disease was widespread, medical remedies often felt more like tortures, and many women died in childbirth. But through their beliefs, people found ways of making sense of their existence.

17th-century medical tools

Religion

People in Elizabethan England were, in general, much more religious than people today. Almost everyone believed in God, and expected to go to heaven or hell after death. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet won't kill his stepfather, Claudius, while Claudius is praying, because he doesn't want him to go to heaven.

At this time, England was a Protestant country – it had broken away from the Catholic Church of Rome. This was part of the European movement called the Reformation, which had started with attacks on corruption in the Catholic Church and led to the founding of non-Catholic, or Protestant, churches.



Edmund Campion, like many other English Catholics, was accused of treason and tortured. He was executed in 1581.

As many wars were fought in the name of religion, all English Catholics were seen as potential traitors to their country and were forbidden to hold any public office.

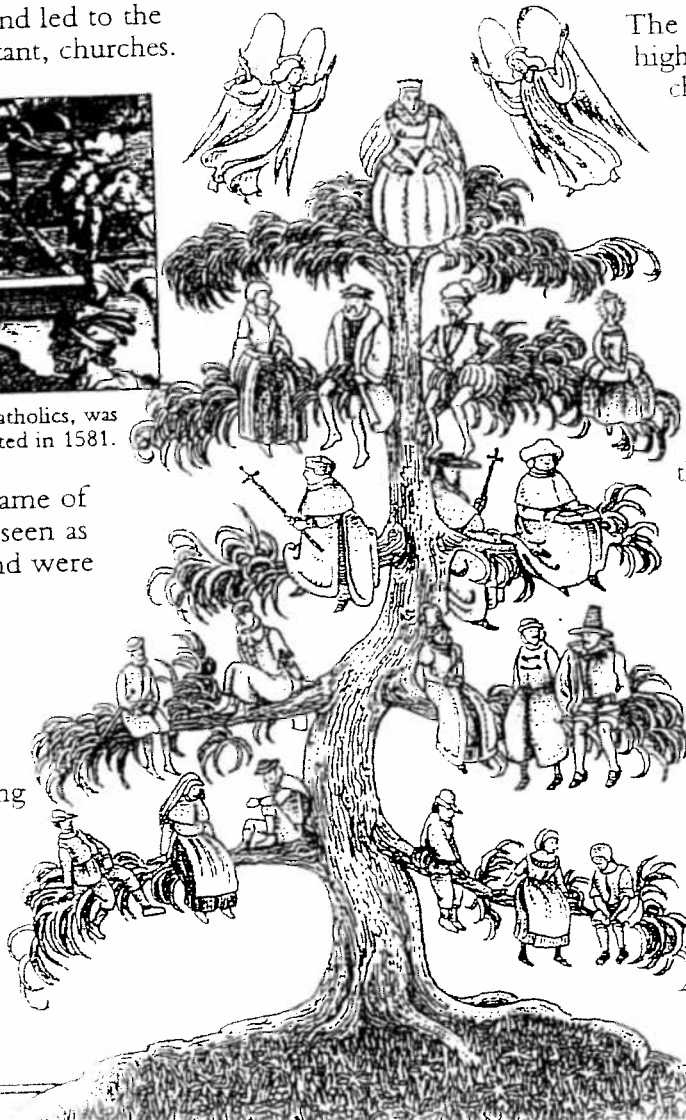
Some Protestants, called Puritans, felt the Church in England hadn't gone far enough in its rejection of Catholicism. They wanted to "purify" the Church of its remaining Catholic elements, such as bishops and ceremonial robes. Puritans also had strict ideas about what was sinful, or could lead to sin: fine clothes, drinking, gambling and going to see plays were all thought to pave the way to hell.

The Chain of Being

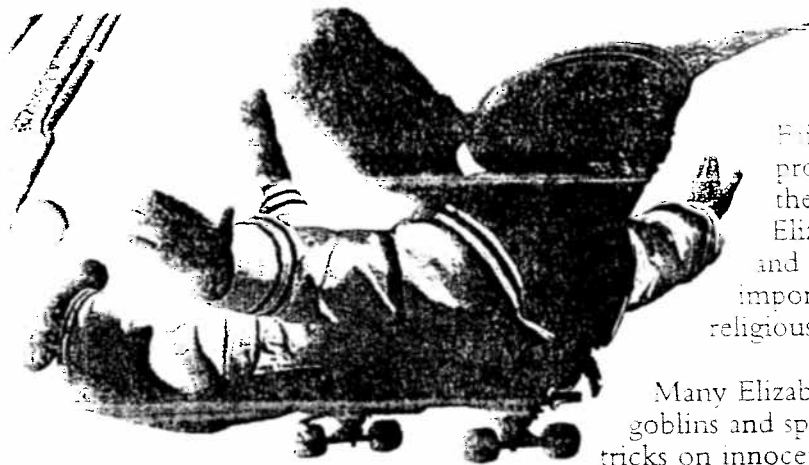
The Chain of Being was a concept the Elizabethans inherited from the Middle Ages. It was an attempt to give order (or "degree" as the Elizabethans often called it) to the vastness of creation. The idea was that God created everything in a strict hierarchy, or chain, that stretched from God himself down to the lowest things in existence. Everything had its own place. Humans occupied a place in the chain below the angels but above animals, plants and stones. Some humans were higher in the chain than others.

The monarch was the highest, with nobles and churchmen below. Then followed gentlemen and finally commoners. All women were considered to be inferior to men, with the obvious exception of Elizabeth I. Her position as monarch outweighed the fact that she was a woman.

Accepting one's place in the chain was a duty that would be rewarded by God in heaven. Disrupting the chain was thought to lead to chaos, but of course many people still did challenge their position in society.



The Chain of Being was sometimes depicted as a tree.



In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck, played here by Toyah Wilcox, is a mischievous fairy.

Myths and magic

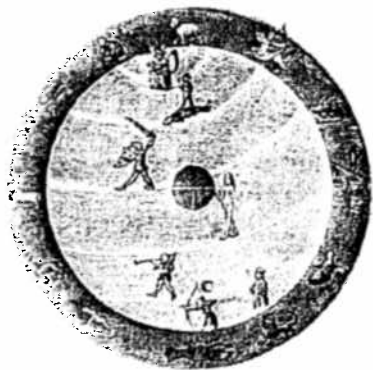
Fairies, magic, witches, spells and prophecies (utterances that foretell the future) all formed part of the Elizabethan view of life. Folklore and superstition were often as important to people as the official religious beliefs taught by the Church.

Many Elizabethans thought that fairies, goblins and sprites came out at night to play tricks on innocent people. It was believed they could make people go insane, give them terrible nightmares or even lure them into a devilish underworld.



This woodcut shows a woman being hanged for witchcraft. She would have been tortured until she "confessed" to being a witch.

Diseases and disasters were often blamed on witches. Many women who didn't fit into society were branded as witches and accused of working for the devil. Astrology – the belief that the position and movement of the stars can foretell and influence events on Earth – was more important than it is today. Respected astrologers could have great influence over people's lives. The astrologer John Dee was said to influence Elizabeth I.



The signs of the zodiac, based on a medieval drawing

Little and large

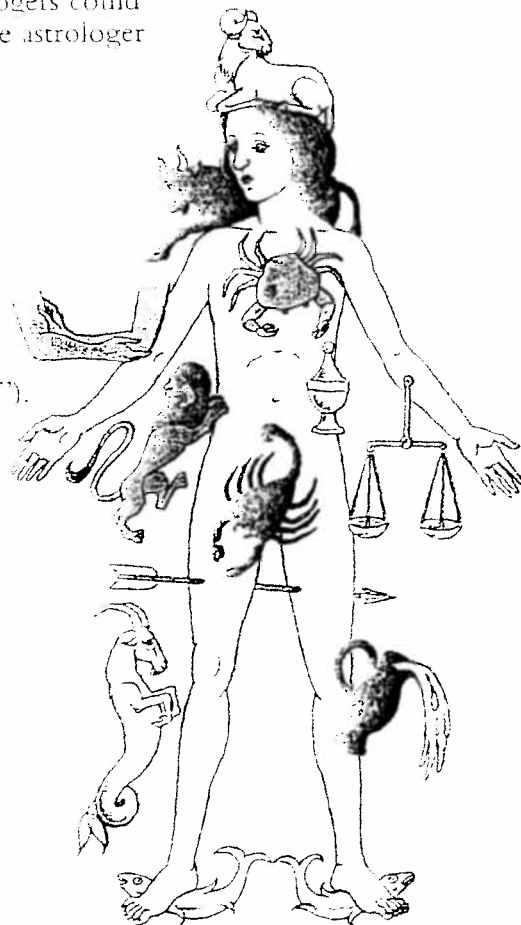
The human body was thought to be a miniature representation of the universe as a whole. Various parts of the body were linked to the planets and the signs of the zodiac. Things that happened in the universe, which was known as the "macrocosm", were supposed to happen on a much smaller scale within the human body (the "microcosm").



Hamlet is a famous example of a character with too much "black bile", causing a melancholic (depressive) temperament.

The body was also thought to contain four "humours", or fluids – black bile, phlegm, blood and choler. A person's temperament depended on the way the humours were mixed. In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Anthony describes Brutus as a man in whom all these humours are mixed perfectly. But most people were thought to have one humour that was more dominant than the others.

Illnesses and mental disorders were blamed on an imbalance of the humours. For example, melancholia (depression) was thought to be caused by an excess of black bile.



The picture above, based on a sketch in a medieval manuscript, shows the parts of the body and their corresponding zodiac signs.

There are more things in heaven and earth... Than are dreamt of in our philosophy

Hamlet, I.v.168-9

Go to www.usborne-quicklinks.com for a link to a website where you can read more about the beliefs and superstitions of Shakespeare's day.