THE EMERGENCE OF ENGLAND II:
POLITICS, RELIGION, AND THE ARTS,
1550–1600

WITH HUMPHREY TONKIN

The second of two courses describing the emergence of an English identity in the century of the Tudors, 1500–1600.

Dates  Monday, March 27;
        April 3, 10, 17, 24
Time    3–4:30 p.m.
Location Harry Jack Gray Center
        Wilde Auditorium

Register for this course at hartford.edu/presidentscollege.
THE EMERGENCE OF ENGLAND II

ENGLAND BECAME A UNIFIED POLITICAL ENTITY IN THE CENTURY after Caxton set up his printing press in Westminster in 1476. In 1485, Henry Tudor seized control of the English throne and pacified the country. Under Henry VII and his successors (including Henry VIII, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth), literacy expanded rapidly, the machinery of local government and tax collection was created, universities doubled and tripled in size, and the uneasy establishment of the Church of England separated England and Rome.

The English language was stabilized, and literary and artistic production flourished. By century’s end, not only were England and Englishness realities in the imagination of the people, but England was turning into Britain as James I came down from Scotland to claim the English throne.

The Emergence of England 1500–1600 will tell this troubled and stirring story by looking at how the distinctive concept of England was formulated and how it expanded to embrace the British Isles. Each week, we will look at one decade, focusing particularly on some architectural or literary artifact of that decade and its larger historical and artistic implications.

HUMPHREY TONKIN’S second book on Spenser, The Faerie Queene, was reissued last year. He has recently retired as University Professor of Humanities and as director of the Presidents’ College, which he was instrumental in founding when he was president of the University of Hartford in the 1990s, and for which he has led a number of trips to England over the years.
THE EMERGENCE OF ENGLAND II

APRIL 24
1590–1600
SHAKESPEARE’S HENRY V AND THE VISION OF BRITAIN

Theater came to London as a commercial venture in the 1570s and 1580s, as the city grew large enough to support an audience. In the early 1590s, a new figure appeared on the London theatrical scene—William Shakespeare. He took the city by storm—in a series of four plays dealing with the long reign of Henry VI and the start of the Wars of the Roses, and ending with the reign of Henry VII’s predecessor, Richard III. He wrote comedies that looked back to a pastoral England, tragedies where the difference between right and wrong seemed clearer than in the messy and morally compromised 1590s—and a further series of history plays tracing the period before the Wars of the Roses and culminating in Henry V’s victory at Agincourt. With the tragedies Macbeth and King Lear, Shakespeare recognized the coming of a new era after Elizabeth’s death and James I’s accession, as England became Britain and (in The Tempest) old England morphed into New England.

THE EMERGENCE OF ENGLAND II: 1550–1600 will continue this story by examining the upheavals of the reigns of Edward VI and Mary Tudor, and the uneasy but enduring Elizabethan settlement that followed in 1558. The newly wealthy invested in grand and ostentatious country houses, the better to declare their importance. Poets both praised the Queen and advocated for their political positions. Dramatists, exploiting the opportunity provided by a populous London, wrote plays that amused, entertained, and edified the public, indulging their nostalgia and providing them with a sense of history. And, through it all, the traditionalists kept writing poetry, telling stories, and composing music that looked backwards to the middle ages as much as they looked forward to a new England. This was a time for the unscrupulous and the gallant, the cruel and the compassionate, the insular and the cosmopolitan. Out of it came a new England in the British Isles, and a New England beyond the seas.

MARCH 27
1550–1560
MARY AND ELIZABETH: DAUGHTERS OF HENRY VIII

When Mary Tudor, Edward VI’s half-sister and a Catholic, came to the throne in 1553, she reversed the Protestant religious practices of her predecessor’s reign, restoring England to fealty to the Pope. Thus began a half-century of female rule in England. It was left to Mary’s half-sister Elizabeth to seek, only partially successfully, a balance among religious extremes—and to keep her main rival for power, Mary Stuart, at bay. Mary’s brief and scandalous reign in Scotland ended Catholicism in that country (at least until the uprisings of 1715 and 1745 in favor of a Catholic king). When in 1558 the Scottish Protestant reformer John Knox published his pamphlet The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women, he had in mind Mary Tudor of England and Mary of Guise, Dowager Queen of Scotland, but his was only the most extreme of the denunciations of women rulers (indeed of women in general) in the 16th century.
APRIL 3
1560–1570
SIR JOHN THYNNE, ROBERT SMYTHSON, AND THE ELIZABETHAN COUNTRY HOUSE

The Thynne family, like many other newly wealthy families, benefited enormously from the new order in England resulting from the break with Rome. In 1567, a devastating fire at Longleat, in Wiltshire, burned the country house of Sir Thomas Thynne to the ground. Thynne set about building a new house, looking to France and Italy for models and corresponding with other wealthy landowners on architectural matters.

Longleat was one of the first houses that Robert Smythson, the 16th century genius of the Elizabethan country house, worked on. He had a hand in Wollaton (in Nottinghamshire), and, above all, in what could be called the culmination of a distinctive Elizabethan style, the new home of Bess of Hardwick, Hardwick Hall. This new style combined elements of the new with elements of the old, simultaneously echoing Renaissance palaces and medieval English buildings. In the course of the century, the wealthy families of England set their conspicuous mark on the countryside, leaving feudalism behind and ostentatiously announcing the arrival of a new landowning class.

APRIL 10
1570–1580
THOMAS TALLIS AT CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL: THE ENGLISH MUSICAL TRADITION

Although celebration of the Eucharist in Latin was forbidden in the parish churches of England following Mary’s death and the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, an exception was made for royal chapels, where Latin persisted, since Latin was identified with the sophisticated upper classes and the higher reaches of the professions. No clearer reminder of the continuity between the old and the new could be imagined: the new power in England established its authenticity by tolerating or promoting the old traditions, appropriately defanged.

APRIL 17
1580–1590
SPENSER AND THE WRITING OF THE FAERIE QUEENE

The ambitious Edmund Spenser, middle-class son of London tradesmen, set about creating for himself a reputation as England’s primary poet with the publication of the ostentatious Shepherd’s Calendar in 1579. It was the first step toward his paean of praise for Elizabeth, The Faerie Queene. One of the longest and most intricate poems in the language, The Faerie Queene draws on the English penchant for medieval romance (which the Elizabethans re-enacted in their love of tournaments and other faux representations of the past) to lay out a scheme for the education of a gentleman in virtue and clean living. Adapted to the English Church and the Elizabethan order, the poem also grappled with contemporary issues, such as the execution of Mary Stuart, Mary Queen of Scots, in 1587, and the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. And it skillfully combined the new Renaissance style with that of medieval England, artfully balancing continuity and change, simplicity and sophistication.