The extant Edward III can be dated any time between 1577 and 1595 when the play was registered. An early version may well have been composed in the early 1570s.

Line numbers below are given both by act and scene (according to Melchiori’s Cambridge edition) and by Through Line Numbering (TLN according to Eric Sams’s Yale edition).  

**Publication Date**

Edward III was first registered on 1 December 1595, a year after Titus Andronicus and The First Part of the Contention (2 Henry VI) were registered and published anonymously, and in the same year that The True Tragedy (3 Henry VI) was published, also anonymously:

[S.R. 1595] primo die Decembris Cuthbert Burby Entred for his copie vnder the handes of the wardens A booke Intituled Edward the Third and the blacke prince their warres wth kinge Iohn of Fraunce vj

Edward III was first published in Quarto in 1596:

[Q1. 1596] THE RAIGNE OF KING EDVVARD the third: As it hath bin sundrie times plaied about the Citty of London. London. Printed for Cuthbert Burby. 1596

No (other) play by Shakespeare was registered or published in 1596. In 1597, Richard II and Richard III were registered and published anonymously and in 1598 1 Henry IV was registered and published also anonymously (though it was attributed to Shakespeare in Q2 in 1599). Edward III was published again, anonymously, three years later:

[Q2. 1599] THE RAIGNE OF KING EDVVARD the third: As it hath bene sundry times plaied about the Citty of London. Imprinted at London by Simon Stafford for Cuthbert Burby: And are to be sold at his shop neere the Royall Exchange. 1599

The SR records that ownership of the play was transferred in 1609 to William Welby, in 1618 to Thomas Snodham, in 1626 to William Stansby and finally to George Bishop in 1639. Despite these transfers, there seems to have been no further edition after 1599. The play was not included in the First Folio of 1623. Both Sams and Melchiori review possible explanations for this omission.

**Performance Date**

While there are vague references to performances in London in the title pages of 1596 and 1599 quartos, there are no definite records of performances until 1911 (Melchiori). However, Sams (173–4) reports the possibility that Lord Hunsdon provided a copy of Froissart’s Chronicles and that the play was performed under his tutelage shortly after he established the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1594.

**Attribution**

Because the play was published anonymously in the quartos of 1596 and 1599 and omitted from the First Folio (and subsequent Folios), it has remained an ‘anonymous’ play. Melchiori has reviewed the attributions. The consensus for Shakespearean authorship has gradually increased
since Edward Capel (in 1760) first argued a serious case. Nineteenth-century German scholars were especially persuaded that Shakespeare was (at least in part) author. Chambers tentatively accepts this position as a possibility. Wells & Taylor (Textual Companion 136–7) exclude the play from the complete works but accept as likely that Shakespeare wrote part of it. Slater’s statistical approach seemed to have established the play as by Shakespeare. The evidence for joint authorship, mainly on an analysis of strings of three words, has been explored by Brian Vickers, who sees the play as 60% by Kyd and 40% by Shakespeare. Some commentators, notably Eric Sams, have envisaged the play as by Shakespeare alone.

**Sources**

Unfortunately for modern scholarship, neither W. G. Boswell-Stone nor Geoffrey Bullough dealt with this play. According to Melchiori, the first principal source was Holinshed’s Chronicle (first edition 1577, second edition 1587), which supplied
many details including names such as Chatillon. The usual assumption is that the dramatist(s) used the second edition, but this has not been firmly established. The second principal source was Froissart’s *Chroniques* (completed in French in 1373, and translated into English as *Froissart’s Chronicle* by 1525) for many important details, including the mis-dating of the founding of the Order of the Garter (apparently in 1344 rather than in 1348) and the knighting of the Prince (at 3.3.172–218, TLN 1494–1542). Melchiori also cites reference to William Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure* (1566–75) and to some pamphlets written c. 1589–90, which celebrated the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. These pamphlets apparently provided a few additional details for the description of the sea Battle of Sluys (at 3.1.141–84, TLN, 1190–1231). These few details may, however, have been added in a later revision. Thus the last definite source for *Edward III* is the first edition of Holinshed, 1587.

### Orthodox Dates

Most commentators accept a date range of 1590–1595. Chambers dates the play between 1590 (after the Armada pamphlets) and before its registration in 1595, inclining towards a date of 1594 for a possible Shakespearean contribution (in ES, not repeated in WS). Wells & Taylor are also uncertain about its date, merely stating that it clearly post-dates the Armada. Slater’s statistical analysis led him to the conclusion that the play was contemporary with the so-called first tetralogy, i.e 1, 2, 3 Henry VI–Richard III which he dates to the early 1590s. In his review, Melchiori prefers 1592–3. Sams prefers a slightly earlier date, shortly after 1589 (with a possible revision c. 1594). Godshalk prefers a date 1589–92. Wiggins dates this play to 1593 (III: 231). Vickers argues that the play was co-authored by Kyd and Shakespeare.

### Oxfordian Date

Oxfordians generally propose that Oxford wrote the history plays from the mid 1580s at about the time of his being granted a £1,000 annuity by Elizabeth. They argue that the Queen awarded him this sum in payment for writing patriotic drama, which would be all the more effective for being anonymous (Anderson, 211). In the case of *Edward III*, however, it is usually viewed as one of his youthful works, perhaps dating to the early 1570s, when Oxford was in his early twenties.

The naval references to the Battle of Sluys need not depend on the Armada pamphlets, being rather general in nature. They seem to point to the Battle of Lepanto on 7 October 1571, when the Christian Alliance utterly smashed a slightly larger Turkish fleet in one great clash under Don John of Austria, the leader of the Christian fleet (satirised as Don Armado, the fantastical Spaniard in *Love’s Labour Lost*). The play’s description is of one terrific battle taking place in one day, unlike the series of actions in 1588, while the invading English navy is described as:

- The proud Armado of King Edward’s ships
  [3.1.64; TLN 1111]
- Majestical the order of their course
  [3.1.71; TLN 1119]
- Figuring the hornéd circle of the moon
  [3.1.72; TLN 1120]

The crescent moon formation was adopted at Lepanto by the Turks. Both the Turkish crescent at Lepanto and the Armada crescent in 1588 were mainly defensive, unlike Edward III’s formation:

- The greatest before, well furnished with archers, and ever between two ships of archers, I had one ship with men-at-arms (Froissart, 50).

In *Edward III*, the French mariner reporting the battle to his King refers to a French ship:

- Much did the Nonpareille, that brave ship…
  [3.1 177; TLN 1225].

The ship’s name was not mentioned by Holinshed. The emendation was suggested by Capell in 1760. Both Q1 and Q2 actually read “Nom per illa”, which links the name with an English Nonpareil which fought successfully (but in a secondary role) against the Armada in 1588. In Edward III, the French mariner reporting the battle to his King refers to a French ship:

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(a) Nina Green, following up Slater’s analysis of rare words in the play, of which he identifies about 900, notes that a high proportion (over 100) of these are found in the letters and early poems of Oxford.6
(b) Tillyard (111) describes the play as “one of the most academic and intellectual of the Chronicle Plays”. He quotes the King’s address to the Black Prince (1.1 157–9; TLN 157–9):

And, Ned, thou must begin
Now to forget thy study and thy book
And use thy shoulders to an armour’s weight.

This is in keeping with the age and situation of the young Earl of Oxford and the advice given to him by Gabriel Harvey (Gratulationum Valdensis, 1578; quoted by Nelson, 181):

England will discover in you its hereditary Achilles. Go, Mars will see you in safety . . . Your British numbers have been widely sung, while your Epistle testifies how much you excel in letters, being more courtly than Castiglione himself . . . But, O celebrated one, put away your pen, your bloodless books, your impractical writings. Now is the need of swords. Steel must be sharpened.

(c) Although Holinshed’s first edition of the Chronicles was not published until 1577, it is very likely that Oxford had access to the same material, as both Holinshed and Oxford were attendant at Cecil House with Lord Burghley in the late 1560s and early 1570s (Nelson, 90–2).7

(d) The absence of clear attributions in any publication after that date may well make this a very early play indeed. There are no Italian influences at all, which might well put the play as early as 1573–4, before Oxford went to Italy. Alan Nelson (121–154), who does not accept Oxonian authorship, recounts Oxford’s visit to Italy in 1575–6.

(f) The 1596 Quarto was apparently set in type based on a manuscript with the same characteristics as Hand D: critics agree that many of these were very old fashioned by 1590: “Current in the 15th century but antiquated in the days of Elizabeth” (Sams, 216). These characteristics are set out in extenso by Sams (193–7; 214–217) and logically push the writing back a decade or two. A provincial wordsmith would make sure his writing would be in fashion or have his spelling modernised by the printer. Only a powerful person not affected by such matters would have his out-of-date peculiarities preserved as in the print of the 1596 Quarto of Edward III.

The play was previously rejected as unworthy of Shakespeare. Now we may think of it as an apprentice effort, revised later, perhaps by or with the help of Thomas Kyd in the early 1590s.

**Conclusion**

The extant Edward III can be dated any time between 1589 and its registration in 1595. An early version may well have been composed in the 1570s.

**Notes**

1. There is no edition available in the Oxford Shakespeare series.
2. Thomas Snodham published the sixth edition of The Rape of Lucrece in 1616 but is not known to have published any other work of Shakespeare. He was mainly a printer of religious texts and died c. 1625, after the publication of the First Folio. See Chambers, WS, I 513 and Sasha Roberts, Reading Shakespeare’s Poems in early modern England (2003).
3. As reported by The Times of London (12 October 2009), Sir Brian Vickers is now convinced that Shakespeare was involved in the composition of the play along with Kyd in the 40–60 ratio mentioned in the text. According to this article, Jonathan Bate gave qualified support to the attribution but Stanley Wells remained sceptical over these findings. Vickers had suggested Shakespeare’s possible contribution to Edward III in Shakespeare Co-Author, 2002.
4. Neither W. G. Boswell-Stone, Shakespeare’s Holinshed (1896) nor Geoffrey Bullough in his Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays (1957–74) considers this play.
5. As reported by Melchiori (28) and Sams (164). For further details of these sea battles, see Hugh Bicheno, Crescent and Cross, 2004 (for Lepanto) and Garrett Mattingly, Defeat of the Spanish Armada, 1972: 281.
6. Nina Green, Edward de Vere Newsletter, 1994, No 60 www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Newsletters,

**Other Cited Works**

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