

## Development of Elizabethan Drama

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**Abstract:** Drama or a play is an adaptation to entertain the crowd in Greek, Roman and Indian civilizations. Gradually, it spread to other parts of the world and has become a major genre in literature. Romans influence over the English is predominant, when it comes to the development and rise of English drama. The introduction of Christianity and Latin language made it necessary for people to understand the Bible in Latin. However, education of noble languages like Latin was confined only to the nobles and members of the Church. This has led to the development of preliminary drama, which was in control of the Church than production units [as found today]. The first play ever recorded performed at Dunstable, England is St. Katherine [1110 A.D.]. It was performed in Latin but was aimed to enlighten the English audience about the life and martyrdom of Katherine. From the Church interpretations of the Bible and various religious stories, the rise of English drama was slow. Gradually, this form of entertainment has divided based on the performances. The play became secular with the development of “Folk Celebrations”, where the English were entertained with various stories like Robin Hood during the festival season. However, these plays were considered as degenerate by the members of the Church and drama again came to its origins [Bible]. The Church at that time also banned Strolling Minstrels representing the Barbarians, who invaded England. Therefore, the primary progress of drama came back to the Church. The increase in new kind of plays led to the formation of concrete theatres. The first theatre was built in the year 1576 by James Burbage and called “The Theatre”. Years later, in 1598, The Globe theatre was established and it went on to become the most famous theatre. The formation of theatres encouraged the growth of commercial playwrights, who made a living out of their works. The University wits helped the acceleration of the rise of English drama through their learned yet imaginative way of writing. The Elizabethan age [1558-1603] witnessed a great evolution of the plays. The master playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, etc. completely found a new way of writing plays and were never in line with the Church. As a result, many genres of plays came forth and nourished during the era; therefore, the Elizabethan age is considered as the Golden age of English drama. The rise of English Drama was emphatic and glorious in the hands of Elizabethan playwrights and they have completely changed the course of drama from the early liturgies.

**Keywords:** Drama, Theatre, Elizabeth.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In view of the twofold fact, that English drama was destined to rank not only among the most glorious but among the most characteristic of national achievements, and that an English nation and an English national literature were already in existence before the Norman conquest, it may seem strange that, with the exception of certain suggestive features in the church liturgy to which attention will be directed below, the beginnings of the growth which we are considering cannot be safely traced beyond that date. In other words, we are unable to assume the existence in these islands, before the Norman conquest, of anything recognisable by us as drama or dramatic literature. Our English ancestors, with whose advent the Roman empire in Britain had come to an abrupt end, can hardly, except in a few isolated instances, have been brought into contact with the broken and scattered remnants of the Roman theatre—the strolling mimes who, after their fashion, may have preserved some ignoble reminiscences of the Roman acting drama in the days of its decadence. And when Christianity—that is to say, Roman Christianity—came to England, and gradually, more especially through the efforts of king Alfred, fostered the growth of English literature, the last literary form which it was likely to introduce or sanction was that of the drama, the feeder of the theatre. The strange and shifting relations between the Christian church and the stage had begun, in the fourth century, with loud anathemas launched by the one against the other; in the fifth, the whole craft of actors and entertainers was denounced by an ecclesiastical council; and, as the empire of the west broke up under the inroads of the barbarians, histriones and nugatores went forth as homeless outlaws under the ban of both church and state. If any of these found their way to England and, as they

passed along the highways and byways, displayed their tricks for a crust of bread or a cup of ale, they were, no doubt, despised and accounted infamous. Far otherwise was it with the gleeman, who sat among the warriors, telling in a solemn and religious strain of the great deeds of the past, and the scop, whose songs had the king and his companions for an audience, and who, on his travels, found himself everywhere an honoured guest. Anything less dramatic could hardly be imagined than the poems of recitations of the Old English singer, and even in those dialogues which form an interesting part of English literature before the Norman conquest a dramatic element is only occasionally perceptible—for there could be no greater mistake than to suppose that a dialogue, be its progress never so vivacious, is, of necessity, a drama in embryo. 2

There were performances called mystery plays and miracle plays which were the main part of early Elizabethan performance and drama – and these had been going around for centuries. They dramatised the Bible and illustrated the lives of saints, so were linked to the church's calendar being performed at special times of the year, such as holy days and saints feast days.

Play wagons were taken around the towns, halting at important locations to perform plays outside for the general public. Players would sometimes act out the whole Bible and a holiday atmosphere prevailed with side shows and music and trade.

However Henry VIII split with the Catholic church so the religious drama died out and the space was filled with tragedies, histories and comedies which we now link with Shakespeare and other writers of his time.

This new kind of drama was more professional and commercial performed by employed actor/writers who travelled the country staging plays wherever they might get a ready audience such as pubs, taverns, guildhalls, churches and churchyards, Eventually of course, one enterprising young actor/writer realised the entrepreneurial potential of a fixed venue - and that was William Shakespeare's first theatre.

The term Elizabethan drama covers not only the beginning of poetic drama (1588-1600) but also the period after the reign of James I up to the closing of theatres in 1642. But modern critics generally designate the mature phase as Jacobean drama and the decline as Caroline drama.

Considered the greatest English-speaking writer in history and known as England's national poet, William Shakespeare has had more theatrical works performed than any other playwright. To this day, countless theatre festivals around the world honour his work and his works have been a major influence on subsequent theatre, students memorise his eloquent poems and Born into a family of modest means in Elizabethan England, the 'Bard of Avon' wrote at least 37 plays and a collection of sonnets, established the legendary Globe Theatre and helped transform the English language.

The distinction between tragedy and comedy was particularly important in Shakespeare's time. Elizabethan tragedy was the familiar tale of a great man or woman brought low through hubris or fate (though some of Shakespeare's tragic heroes--such as Romeo or Macbeth--do not easily accommodate Aristotle's definition of the type). Tragedies and comedies are two of the genres into which the First Folio of Shakespeare divides the plays; the third category is Histories, comprising plays that chronicled the lives of English Kings, but these plays themselves often tended toward the tragic (Richard II or Richard III, for instance) or the comic (the Falstaff subplots of both parts of Henry IV). Thus, almost from the start, Shakespeare's method was to mingle the heretofore antagonistic visions of comedy and tragedy in ways that still seem novel and startling. There is more to laugh at in the tragedy of Hamlet than there is in a comedy like *The Merchant of Venice*, and some modern critics go so far as to consider *King Lear* at once the pinnacle of Shakespeare's tragic achievement and a kind of divine comedy or even absurdist farce. *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy assembled from comic materials (a story of young lovers struggling to overcome the obstacle of parental disapproval), and in Shakespeare's later tragedy of romantic love, *Antony and Cleopatra*, there is much poignant humour at the expense of middle-aged lovers attempting with difficulty to sustain the passion usually associated with adolescence. Indeed, some of Shakespeare's comedies--*Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* are the most notable--seem so far removed from the optimism usually associated with that genre that they have acquired the qualifying title of "problem comedies."

Therefore, Shakespeare united the three main streams of literature: verse, poetry, and drama. To the versification of the Old English language, he imparted his eloquence and variety giving highest expressions with elasticity of language. The second, the sonnets and poetry, was bound in structure. He imparted economy and intensity to the language. In the third and the most important area, the drama, he saved the language from vagueness and vastness and infused actuality and vividness. Shakespeare's work in prose, poetry, and drama marked the beginning of modernization of English language by introduction of words and expressions, style and form to the language. The blank verse of his early plays is quite different from that of his later ones. It is often beautiful, but its sentences tend to start, pause, and finish at the end of lines, with the risk of monotony. Once Shakespeare mastered traditional blank verse, he began to interrupt and vary its flow. This technique releases the new power and flexibility of the poetry in plays such as *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*. Shakespeare uses it, for example, to convey the turmoil in Hamlet's mind:

### **The Miracle Play or the Mystery Play**

The term 'miracle' and 'mystery' are often interchanged and there lays a confusion when trying to know about them separately. However, it would be convenient to understand them together as both of the plays are based on the stories present in the Bible or based on the miraculous happenings in the lives of saints that led to their martyrdom.

The use of Biblical figures in plays was observed as early as 10<sup>th</sup> century and they were called as "tropes". The tropes gradually evolved taking into consideration several popular elements of the audience and by the 14<sup>th</sup> century the evolution of the drama was considerable. During this time, York and Chester cities witnessed the performance of developed plays in the form of "cycles". Fascinatingly, all the plays were written under anonymous authorship and the cycles were well-known based on the regions at which they were performed. Therefore, one would be familiar with Chester miracle plays, Wakefield miracle plays, etc. rather than knowing the playwright.

Some of the well-known and frequently used in miracle and mystery plays are Resurrection of Christ, Abraham and Isaac, Noah, Crucifixion, fall of man and the Last Judgement. Virgin Mary and Saint Nicholas were the most desirable characters to show the greatness of Saints and martyrdom.

## **II. THE MORALITY PLAY**

Morality plays of the medieval period revolved around the dramatization of allegories mainly based on the Christian life and the journey to seek salvation. Any drama of this kind would have a clash between virtues and vices. All of these characteristics were personified and the audience could actually see the virtues or vices trying to get better of each other.

This was a revolutionary improvement in the medieval drama and audience were liked the fresh ideas presented through these dramas. The most prevalent character seen is the personification of "vice" or the "devil", which made the audience, fall into a state of wonder. The use of these personifications continued even in the Elizabethan drama as one can see in Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus.

The finest examples of the morality plays are The Castle of Perseverance, Everyman and Mankind. They exhibit every element expected of a morality play. Plays like these were considered as links between the medieval drama and the Elizabethan drama.

The morality play has its roots in the miracle and mystery plays of the eleventh century.<sup>[1]</sup> Miracle plays were dramas that revolved around the lives of Saints or the Virgin Mary. Mystery plays revolved around stories from the Bible and were also known as Pageants or as Corpus Christi plays. Mystery plays were performed across Europe during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Miracle plays were performed even earlier, often as a church service (until the thirteenth century, when they were separated from church services and could instead be seen performed at public festivals).<sup>[2]</sup> However, most miracle plays were lost in the zeal of the Reformation, when the scripts were burned and destroyed.

Morality plays rose from this tradition, and represent a transition between such religion-based plays to secular, professional theater. The earliest surviving example in English is the long Castle of Perseverance (c. 1420), and the best-known is Everyman (c.1510). By the dawn of the fifteenth century, morality plays were common throughout medieval Europe as didactic plays intended to teach good morals to their audience.

Morality plays were originally quite serious in tone and style, due to their roots in religious drama.<sup>[1]</sup> As time wore on and the plays became more secularized, they began to incorporate elements from popular farce. This process was encouraged by the representation of the Devil and his servant, the Vice, as mischievous trouble-makers. The Devil and the Vice soon became figures of amusement rather than moral edification. In addition, the Church noticed that the actors would often improvise humorous segments and scenes to increase the play's hilarity to the crowd. By roughly 1500, the Church no longer officially sanctioned the mystery, miracle, or morality plays.<sup>[1]</sup>

By the sixteenth century, these plays started to deal with secular topics, as medieval theater started to make the changes that would eventually develop it into Renaissance theater. As time moved, morality plays more frequently dealt with secular topics, including forms of knowledge (in Nature and The Nature of the Four Elements) questions of good government (Magnificence by John Skelton and Respublica by Nicholas Udall), education (Wit and Science by John Redford, and the two other "wit" plays that followed, The Marriage of Wit and Science and Wit and Wisdom), and sectarian controversies, chiefly in the plays of John Bale.

Morality plays survived, however, even through the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and only gradually died out as tastes changed towards the beginning of the seventeenth century. Throughout his career, which continued until the early seventeenth century, Shakespeare made references to morality characters and tropes, confirming that the form was still alive for his audiences, at least in memory, if not in practice.

### III. CONCLUSION

This write up has proved that Christopher Marlowe and other Elizabethan dramatists have immensely contributed not only to the field of arts but also in other sectors like education. The works of such poets have continued to shape the career of the up-coming drama players. These dramatists had very enthusiastic writing skills that the world will continue to admire and use.

Attending the theater was an extremely popular pastime during the Elizabethan era. The theater was able to flourish during the sixteenth century partly because Queen Elizabeth herself was a supporter of the arts. She enjoyed attending theatrical entertainments and that legitimized the activity for the rest of the citizens. Most of the populace loved going to the theater, and as Jeffrey L. Singman notes in his book *Daily Life in Elizabethan England*, "There was a constant and insatiable demand for plays, and actors became very popular figures—the first 'stars.'" But not everyone was thrilled with the theater's popularity. There were some who shunned it and others who actively campaigned against it. The Puritans were particularly vocal in their opposition to the English playhouses, and numerous treatises and pamphlets were written, warning citizens of the evil and immorality that could be found festering in these amusements. The first major assault came in 1577, in John North-brooke's *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Interludes*. This was followed by Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* in 1579. As Oscar Brockett comments, "Both works railed in the harshest terms against the theater as an instrument used by the Devil to encourage vice and to take people away from honest work and other useful pursuits." These attacks were answered by theater supporters, with the most famous response being Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* in 1595. Martha Kurtz, in examination of the history plays that were popular with audiences in the late Elizabethan Age, argues that the strong anti-feminist pattern of exclusion is only on the surface. Beneath the obvious is a strong feminine, domestic foundation, to which the men will return when and if they survive their political intrigues. While Elizabethan audiences continued to enjoy theater, the philosophical battle continued to rage, and the Puritans finally succeeded in closing the theaters in 1642.

Elizabethan drama did not disappear, however; the theaters were reopened in 1660, and the works of these fine playwrights were once again brought to the stage. The reputation of the great works of Elizabethan Drama grew steadily in England and throughout the rest of the world. They have consistently been performed and appreciated up to modern times; people in the twenty-first century look to this era as one that produced some of the finest drama in all of theater history. In attesting to the significance of Elizabethan drama, John Gassner writes, "No one with even the slightest interest in English literature needs to be told that its greatest period is the Elizabethan Age, and no one familiar with that period is likely to depart from the consensus that its major literary achievement is the drama." R. C. Bald also weighs in with this superlative praise of the Elizabethan playwrights: "Even if Shakespeare had never lived, the last fifteen years of Queen Elizabeth's reign and the reign of King James I would still be the greatest period in the history of English drama." Plays from this period are still produced all over the world, and Shakespeare is recognized by many as the greatest playwright of all time. His works are considered timeless and universal, and they continue to resonate, more than four hundred years after his death. In her 1997 book *Life in the Elizabethan Theater*, Diane Yancey notes, "The number of Shakespearean acting companies and theater productions that exist today also bears witness to the continuing importance of Elizabethan drama." The Elizabethan playwrights created a body of work that has withstood the test of time. Their work has influenced all succeeding generations of theater artists and audiences.

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