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# Elizabethan And Early Stuart Drama

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## Abstract:

Drama is a performing art which is performed on the stage with the help of actors. Unlike a novel, drama has action that is shown on the stage before the audience. So, drama is very close to our life as it reflects our life on the stage and depicts the reality of our life. This is the reason why the drama has always been a popular form of art. During the Elizabethan and early Stuart period, drama was the most important form of art. The drama of those period described the life style and the way of the living of the people. So, in fact, drama was a mirror of the Elizabethan society. Moreover, the drama was very popular during the Elizabethan period. But the theatre going was very expensive so the common people could not afford to go to the theatre. But, realizing this issue, later on a lot of theatre was established for the common people and gradually the Elizabethan drama developed and became accessible to the common people of the society. In this paper, we will trace the development as well as the characteristics of the Elizabethan and early Stuart drama.

**Keywords:** Actors, Drama, Elizabethan, Stage, Stuart.

## Introduction:

In the Elizabethan and early Stuart period, the theatre was the focal point of the age. Public life was shot through with theatricality—monarchs ruled with ostentatious pageantry, rank and status were defined in a rigid code of dress—while on the stages the tensions and contradictions working to change the nation were embodied and played out. More than any other form, the drama addressed itself to the total experience of its society. Playgoing was inexpensive, and the playhouse yards were thronged with apprentices, fishwives, labourers, and the like, but the same play that was performed to citizen spectators in the afternoon would often be restaged at court by night. The drama's power to activate complex, multiple perspectives on a single issue or event resides in its sensitivity to the competing prejudices and sympathies of this diverse audience.

Moreover, the theatre was fully responsive to the developing technical sophistication of nondramatic literature. In the hands of Shakespeare, the blank verse employed for translation by the earl of Surrey in the first half of the 16th century became a medium infinitely mobile between extremes of formality and intimacy, while prose encompassed both the control of Hooker and the immediacy of Nashe. This was above all a spoken drama, glorying in the theatrical energies of language. And the stage was able to attract the most technically accomplished writers of its day because it offered, uniquely, a literary career with some realistic prospect of financial return. The decisive event was the opening of the Theatre, considered the first purpose-built London playhouse, in 1576, and during the next 70 years some 20 theatres more are known to have operated. The quantity and diversity of plays they commissioned are little short of astonishing.

### **Theatre in London and the Provinces:**

The London theatres were a meeting ground of humanism and popular taste. They inherited, on the one hand, a tradition of humanistic drama current at court, the universities, and the Inns of Court (collegiate institutions responsible for legal education). This tradition involved the revival of Classical plays and attempts to adapt Latin conventions to English, particularly to reproduce the type of tragedy, with its choruses, ghosts, and sententiously formal verse, associated with Seneca (10 tragedies by Seneca in English translation appeared in 1581). A fine example of the type is *Gorboduc* (1561), by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, a tragedy based on British chronicle history that draws for Elizabeth's benefit a grave political moral about irresponsible government. It is also the earliest known English play in blank verse. On the other hand, all the professional companies performing in London continued also to tour in the provinces, and the stage was never allowed to lose contact with its roots in country show, pastime, and festival. The simple moral scheme that pitted virtues against vices in the mid-Tudor interlude was never entirely submerged in more sophisticated drama, and the Vice, the tricky villain of the morality play, survives, in infinitely more amusing and terrifying form, in Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1592–94). Another survival was the clown or the fool, apt at any moment to step beyond the play's illusion and share jokes directly with the spectators. The intermingling of traditions is clear in two farces, Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1553) and the anonymous *GammerGurton's Needle* (1559), in which academic pastiche is overlaid with country game; and what the popular tradition did for tragedy is indicated in Thomas Preston's *Cambises, King of Persia* (c. 1560), a blood-and-thunder tyrant play with plenty of energetic spectacle and comedy.

A third tradition was that of revelry and masques, practiced at the princely courts across Europe and preserved in England in the witty and impudent productions of the schoolboy

troupes of choristers who sometimes played in London alongside the professionals. An early play related to this kind is the first English prose comedy, Gascoigne's *Supposes* (1566), translated from a reveling play in Italian. Courtly revel reached its apogee in England in the ruinously expensive court masques staged for James I and Charles I, magnificent displays of song, dance, and changing scenery performed before a tiny aristocratic audience and glorifying the king. The principal masque writer was Ben Jonson, the scene designer Inigo Jones.

### **Professional Playwrights:**

The first generation of professional playwrights in England has become known collectively as the university wits. Their nickname identifies their social pretensions, but their drama was primarily middle class, patriotic, and romantic. Their preferred subjects were historical or pseudo-historical, mixed with clowning, music, and love interest. At times, plot virtually evaporated; George Peele's *Old Wives' Tale* (c. 1595) and Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (1600) are simply popular shows, charming medleys of comic turns, spectacle, and song. Peele was a civic poet, and his serious plays are bold and pageantlike; *The Arraignment of Paris* (1584) is a pastoral entertainment, designed to compliment Elizabeth. Greene's speciality was comical histories, interweaving a serious plot set among kings with comic action involving clowns. In his *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594) and *James IV* (1598), the antics of vulgar characters complement but also criticize the follies of their betters. Only Lyly, writing for the choristers, endeavoured to achieve a courtly refinement. His *Gallathea* (1584) and *Endimion* (1591) are fantastic comedies in which courtiers, nymphs, and goddesses make rarefied love in intricate, artificial patterns, the very stuff of courtly dreaming.

### **Marlowe:**

Outshining all these is Christopher Marlowe, who alone realized the tragic potential inherent in the popular style, with its bombast and extravagance. His heroes are men of towering ambition who speak blank verse of unprecedented (and occasionally monotonous) elevation, their "high astounding terms" embodying the challenge that they pose to the orthodox values of the societies they disrupt. In *Tamburlaine the Great* (two parts, published 1590) and *Edward II* (c. 1591; published 1594), traditional political orders are overwhelmed by conquerors and politicians who ignore the boasted legitimacy of weak kings; *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589; published 1633) studies the man of business whose financial acumen and trickery give him unrestrained power; *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (c. 1593; published 1604) depicts the overthrow of a man whose learning shows scant regard for God. The main focus of all these plays is on the uselessness of society's moral and religious sanctions against pragmatic, amoral will. They patently address themselves to the anxieties of an age being transformed by new forces in politics,

commerce, and science; indeed, the sinister, ironic prologue to *The Jew of Malta* is spoken by Machiavelli. In his own time Marlowe was damned as atheist, homosexual, and libertine, and his plays remain disturbing because his verse makes theatrical presence into the expression of power, enlisting the spectators' sympathies on the side of his gigantic villain-heroes. His plays thus present the spectator with dilemmas that can be neither resolved nor ignored, and they articulate exactly the divided consciousness of their time. There is a similar effect in *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1591) by Marlowe's friend Thomas Kyd, an early revenge tragedy in which the hero seeks justice for the loss of his son but, in an unjust world, can achieve it only by taking the law into his own hands. Kyd's use of Senecan conventions (notably a ghost impatient for revenge) in a Christian setting expresses a genuine conflict of values, making the hero's success at once triumphant and horrifying.

Above all other dramatists stands William Shakespeare, a supreme genius whom it is impossible to characterize briefly. Shakespeare is unequalled as poet and intellect, but he remains elusive. His capacity for assimilation—what the poet John Keats called his “negative capability”—means that his work is comprehensively accommodating; every attitude or ideology finds its resemblance there yet also finds itself subject to criticism and interrogation. In part, Shakespeare achieved this by the total inclusiveness of his aesthetic, by putting clowns in his tragedies and kings in his comedies, juxtaposing public and private, and mingling the artful with the spontaneous; his plays imitate the counterchange of values occurring at large in his society. The sureness and profound popularity of his taste enabled him to lead the English Renaissance without privileging or prejudicing any one of its divergent aspects, while he—as actor, dramatist, and shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's players—was involved in the Elizabethan theatre at every level. His career (dated from 1589 to 1613) corresponded exactly to the period of greatest literary flourishing, and only in his work are the total possibilities of the Renaissance fully realized.

Shakespeare's early plays were principally histories and comedies. About a fifth of all Elizabethan plays were histories, but this was the genre that Shakespeare particularly made his own, dramatizing the whole sweep of English history from Richard II to Henry VII in two four-play sequences, an astonishing project carried off with triumphant success. The first sequence, comprising the three Henry VI plays and Richard III (1589–94), begins as a patriotic celebration of English valour against the French. But this is soon superseded by a mature, disillusioned understanding of the world of politics, culminating in the devastating portrayal of Richard III—probably the first “character,” in the modern sense, on the English stage—who boasts in Henry VI, Part 3 that he can “set the murderous Machevil to school.” Richard III ostensibly monumentalizes the glorious accession of the dynasty of Tudor, but its realistic depiction of the workings of state power insidiously undercuts such platitudes, and the appeal of Richard's quick-witted individuality is deeply unsettling, short-circuiting any easy moral judgments. The second

sequence—Richard II (1595–96), Henry IV, Part 1 and Part 2 (1596–98), and Henry V (1599)—begins with the deposing of a bad but legitimate king and follows its consequences through two generations, probing relentlessly at the difficult questions of authority, obedience, and order that it raises. (The earl of Essex’s faction paid for a performance of Richard II on the eve of their ill-fated rebellion against Elizabeth in 1601.) In the Henry IV plays, which are dominated by the massive character of Falstaff and his roguish exploits in Eastcheap, Shakespeare intercuts scenes among the rulers with scenes among those who are ruled, thus creating a multifaceted composite picture of national life at a particular historical moment. The tone of these plays, though, is increasingly pessimistic, and in Henry V a patriotic fantasy of English greatness is hedged around with hesitations and qualifications about the validity of the myth of glorious nationhood offered by the Agincourt story. Through all these plays runs a concern for the individual and his subjection to historical and political necessity, a concern that is essentially tragic and anticipates greater plays yet to come. Shakespeare’s other history plays, King John (1594–96) and Henry VIII (1613), approach similar questions through material drawn from Foxe’s Actes and Monuments.

### **The Early Comedies:**

The early comedies share the popular and romantic forms used by the university wits but overlay them with elements of elegant courtly revel and a sophisticated consciousness of comedy’s fragility and artifice. These are festive comedies, giving access to a society vigorously and imaginatively at play. The plays of one group—The Comedy of Errors (c. 1589–94), The Taming of the Shrew (c. 1589–94), The Merry Wives of Windsor (c. 1597–98), and Twelfth Night (1600–01)—are comedies of intrigue, fast-moving, often farcical, and placing a high premium on wit. The plays of a second group—The Two Gentlemen of Verona (c. 1589–94), Love’s Labour’s Lost (1589–94), A Midsummer Night’s Dream (c. 1595–96), and As You Like It (1598–1600)—have as a common denominator a journey to a natural environment, such as a wood or a park, in which the restraints governing everyday life are released and the characters are free to remake themselves untrammelled by society’s forms, sportiveness providing a space in which the fragmented individual may recover wholeness. All the comedies share a belief in the positive, health-giving powers of play, but none is completely innocent of doubts about the limits that encroach upon the comic space. In the four plays that approach tragicomedy—The Merchant of Venice (c. 1596–97), Much Ado About Nothing (1598–99), All’s Well That Ends Well (1601–05), and Measure for Measure (1603–04)—festivity is in direct collision with the constraints of normality, with time, business, law, human indifference, treachery, and selfishness. These plays give greater weight to the less-optimistic perspectives on society current in the 1590s, and their comic resolutions are openly acknowledged to be only provisional, brought about by manipulation, compromise, or the exclusion of one or more major

characters. The unique play *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1601–02) presents a kind of theatrical no-man’s-land between comedy and tragedy, between satire and savage farce. Shakespeare’s reworking of the Trojan War pits heroism against its parody in a way that voices fully the fin-de-siècle sense of confused and divided individuality.

The confusions and contradictions of Shakespeare’s age find their highest expression in his tragedies. In these extraordinary achievements, all values, hierarchies, and forms are tested and found wanting, and all society’s latent conflicts are activated. Shakespeare sets husband against wife, father against child, the individual against society; he uncrowns kings, levels the nobleman with the beggar, and interrogates the gods. Already in the early experimental tragedies *Titus Andronicus* (1589–94), with its spectacular violence, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1594–96), with its comedy and romantic tale of adolescent love, Shakespeare had broken away from the conventional Elizabethan understanding of tragedy as a twist of fortune to an infinitely more complex investigation of character and motive, and in *Julius Caesar* (1599) he begins to turn the political interests of the history plays into secular and corporate tragedy, as men fall victim to the unstoppable train of public events set in motion by their private misjudgments. In the major tragedies that follow, Shakespeare’s practice cannot be confined to a single general statement that covers all cases, for each tragedy belongs to a separate category: revenge tragedy in *Hamlet* (c. 1599–1601), domestic tragedy in *Othello* (1603–04), social tragedy in *King Lear* (1605–06), political tragedy in *Macbeth* (1606–07), and heroic tragedy in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–07). In each category Shakespeare’s play is exemplary and defines its type; the range and brilliance of this achievement are staggering. The worlds of Shakespeare’s heroes are

collapsing around them, and their desperate attempts to cope with the collapse uncover the inadequacy of the systems by which they rationalize their sufferings and justify their existence. The ultimate insight is Lear’s irremediable grief over his dead daughter: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?” Before the overwhelming suffering of these great and noble spirits, all consolations are void, and all versions of order stand revealed as adventitious. The humanism of the Renaissance is punctured in the very moment of its greatest single product.

### **Shakespeare’s Later Plays**

In his last period Shakespeare’s astonishingly fertile invention returned to experimentation. In *Coriolanus* (1608) he completed his political tragedies, drawing a dispassionate analysis of the dynamics of the secular state; in the scene of the Roman food riot (not unsympathetically depicted) that opens the play is echoed the Warwickshire enclosure riots of 1607. *Timon of Athens* (1605–08) is an unfinished spin-off, a kind of tragic satire. The last group of plays comprises the four romances—*Pericles* (c. 1606–

08), *Cymbeline* (c. 1608–10), *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1609–11), and *The Tempest* (1611)—which develop a long, philosophical perspective on fortune and suffering. (Another work, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* [1613–14], was written in collaboration with John Fletcher, as perhaps was a play known as *Cardenio* [1613, now lost].) In these plays Shakespeare's imagination returns to the popular romances of his youth and dwells on mythical themes—wanderings, shipwrecks, the reunion of sundered families, and the resurrection of people long thought dead. There is consolation here, of a sort, beautiful and poetic, but still the romances do not turn aside from the actuality of suffering, chance, loss, and unkindness, and Shakespeare's subsidiary theme is a sustained examination of the nature of his own art, which alone makes these consolations possible. Even in this unearthly context a subtle interchange is maintained between the artist's delight in his illusion and his mature awareness of his own disillusionment.

### **Playwrights After Shakespeare:**

Shakespeare's perception of a crisis in public norms and private belief became the overriding concern of the drama until the closing of the theatres in 1642. The prevailing manner of the playwrights who succeeded him was realistic, satirical, and antiromantic, and their plays focused predominantly on those two symbolic locations, the city and the court, with their typical activities, the pursuit of wealth and power. "Riches and glory," wrote Sir Walter Raleigh, "Machiavel's two marks to shoot at," had become the universal aims, and this situation was addressed by city comedies and tragedies of state. Increasingly, it was on the stages that the rethinking of early Stuart assumptions took place.

On the one hand, in the works of Thomas Heywood, Thomas Dekker, John Day, Samuel Rowley, and others, the old tradition of festive comedy was reoriented toward the celebration of confidence in the dynamically expanding commercial metropolis. Heywood claimed to have been involved in some 200 plays, and they include fantastic adventures starring citizen heroes, spirited, patriotic, and inclined to a leveling attitude in social matters. His masterpiece, *A*

*Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603), is a middle-class tragedy. Dekker was a kindred spirit, best seen in his *Shoemakers' Holiday* (1599), a celebration of citizen brotherliness and Dick Whittington-like success; the play nevertheless faces squarely up to the hardships of work, thrift, and the contempt of the great. On the other hand, the very industriousness that the likes of Heywood viewed with civic pride became in the hands of Ben Jonson, George Chapman, John Marston, and Thomas Middleton a sign of self-seeking, avarice, and anarchy, symptomatic of the sicknesses in society at large.

### **Jonson:**

The crucial innovations in satiric comedy were made by Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's friend and nearest rival, who stands at the fountainhead of what subsequently became the dominant modern comic tradition. His early plays, particularly *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), with their galleries of grotesques, scornful detachment, and rather academic effect, were patently indebted to the verse satires of the 1590s; they introduced to the English stage a vigorous and direct anatomizing of "the time's deformities," the language, habits, and humours of the London scene. Jonson began as a self-appointed social legislator, socially conservative but intellectually radical, outraged by a society given over to inordinate appetite and egotism, and ambitious through his mammoth learning to establish himself as the privileged artist, the fearless and faithful mentor and companion to kings; but he was ill at ease with a court inclined in its masques to prefer flattery to judicious advice. Consequently, the greater satires that followed are marked by their gradual accommodations with popular comedy and by their unwillingness to make their implied moral judgments explicit: in *Volpone* (1606) the theatrical brilliance of the villain easily eclipses the sordid legacy hunters whom he deceives; *Epicoene* (1609) is a noisy farce of metropolitan fashion and frivolity; *The Alchemist* (1610) exhibits the conjurings and deceptions of clever London rogues; and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) draws a rich portrait of city life parading through the annual fair at Smithfield, a vast panorama of a society given over to folly. In these plays, fools and rogues are indulged to the very height of their daring, forcing upon the audience both criticism and admiration; the strategy leaves the audience to draw its own conclusions while liberating Jonson's wealth of exuberant comic invention, virtuoso skill with plot construction, and mastery of a language tumbling with detailed observation of London's multifarious ephemera. After 1616 Jonson abandoned the stage for the court, but, finding himself increasingly disregarded, he made a hard-won return to the theatres. The most notable of his late plays are popular in style: *The New Inn* (1629), which has affinities with the Shakespearean romance, and *A Tale of a Tub* (1633), which resurrects the Elizabethan country farce.

### **Other Jacobean Dramatists:**

Of Jonson's successors in city comedy, Francis Beaumont, in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607), amusingly insults the citizenry while ridiculing its taste for romantic plays. John Marston adopts so sharp a satirical tone that his comic plays frequently border on tragedy. All values are mocked by Marston's bitter and universal skepticism; his city comedy *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605), set in London, explores the pleasures and perils of libertinism. His

tragicomedy *The Malcontent* (1604) is remarkable for its wild language and sexual and political disgust; Marston cuts the audience adrift from the moorings of reason by a dizzying interplay of parody and seriousness. Only in the city comedies of Thomas



Middleton was Jonson's moral concern with greed and self-ignorance bypassed, for Middleton presents the pursuit of money as the sole human absolute and buying and selling, usury, law, and the wooing of rich widows as the dominant modes of social interaction. His unprejudiced satire touches the actions of citizen and gentleman with equal irony and detachment; the only operative distinction is between fool and knave, and the sympathies of the audience are typically engaged on the side of wit, with the resourceful prodigal and dexterous whore. His characteristic form, used in *Michaelmas Term* (1605) and *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1606), was intrigue comedy, which enabled him to portray his society dynamically, as a mechanism in which each sex and class pursues its own selfish interests. He was thus concerned less with characterizing individuals in depth than with examining the inequalities and injustices of the world that cause them to behave as they do. His *The Roaring Girl* (c. 1608) and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) are the only Jacobean comedies to rival the comprehensiveness of *Bartholomew Fair*, but their social attitudes are opposed to Jonson's; the misbehaviour that Jonson condemned morally as "humours" or affectation Middleton understands as the product of circumstance.

Middleton's social concerns are also powerfully to the fore in his great tragedies, *Women Beware Women* (c. 1621) and *The Changeling* (1622), in which the moral complacency of men of rank is shattered by the dreadful violence they themselves have casually set in train, proving the answerability of all men for their actions despite the exemptions claimed for privilege and status. The hand of heaven is even more explicitly at work in the overthrow of the aristocratic libertine D'Amville in Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (c. 1611), where the breakdown of old codes of deference before a progressive middle-class morality is strongly in evidence. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), now generally attributed to Middleton, a scathing attack on courtly dissipation is reinforced by complaints about inflation and penury in the countryside at large. For more traditionally minded playwrights, new anxieties lay in the corrupt and sprawling bureaucracy of the modern court and in the political eclipse of the nobility before incipient royal absolutism. In Jonson's *Sejanus* (1603) Machiavellian statesmen abound, while George Chapman's *Bussy d'Ambois* (1604) and *Conspiracy of Charles, Duke of Byron* (1608) drew on recent French history to chart the collision of the magnificent but redundant heroism of the old-style aristocrat, whose code of honour had outlived its social function, with pragmatic arbitrary monarchy; Chapman doubtless had the career and fate of Essex in mind. The classic tragedies of state are John Webster's, with their dark Italian courts, intrigue and treachery, spies, malcontents, and informers. His *The White Devil* (1612), a divided, ambivalent play, elicits sympathy even for a vicious heroine, since she is at the mercy of her deeply corrupt society, and the heroine in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) is the one decent and spirited inhabitant of her world, yet her noble death cannot avert the fearfully futile and haphazard carnage that ensues. As so often on the Jacobean stage, the

challenge to the male-dominated world of power was mounted through the experience of its women.

### **The Last Renaissance Dramatists:**

Already in the Jacobean period, signs of a politer drama such as would prevail after 1660 were beginning to appear. Simply in terms of productivity and longevity, the most successful Jacobean playwright was John Fletcher, whose ingenious tragicomedies and sometimes bawdy comedies were calculated to attract the applause of the emerging Stuart leisured classes. With plays such as *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1609 or 1610), Fletcher caught up with the latest in avant-garde Italianate drama, while his most dazzling comedy, *The Wild Goose Chase* (produced 1621, printed 1652), is a battle of the sexes set among Parisian gallants and their ladies; it anticipates the Restoration comedy of manners. Fletcher's successor in the reign of Charles I was James Shirley, who showed even greater facility with romantic comedy and the mirroring of fashions and foibles. In *The Lady of Pleasure* (1635) and *Hyde Park* (1637), Shirley presented the fashionable world to itself in its favourite haunts and situations.

However, the underlying tensions of the time continued to preoccupy the drama of the other major Caroline playwrights: John Ford, Philip Massinger, and Richard Brome. The plays of Ford, the last major tragic dramatist of the Renaissance, focus on profoundly conservative societies whose values are in crisis. In *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633?), a seemingly typical middle-class family is destroyed by the discovery of incest. In *The Broken Heart* (1633?), a courtly society collapses under the pressure of hidden political maladies. Massinger, too, wrote some fine tragedies (*The Roman Actor*, 1626), but his best plays are comedies and tragicomedies preoccupied with political themes, such as *The Bondman* (1623), which deals with issues of liberty and obedience, and *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (performed 1625, printed 1633), which satirizes the behaviour and outlook of the provincial gentry. The tradition of subversive domestic satire was carried down to the English Civil Wars in the plays of Brome, whose anarchic and popular comedies, such as *The Antipodes* (1640) and *A Jovial Crew* (produced 1641, printed 1652), poke fun at all levels of society and include caustic and occasionally libelous humour. The outbreak of fighting in 1642 forced the playhouses to close, but this was not because the theatre had become identified with the court. Rather, a theatre of complex political sympathies was still being produced. The crisis in which the playhouses had become embroiled had been the drama's preoccupation for three generations.

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