

# Elizabethan Theatre/Drama

(Part-1)

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During Queen Elizabeth I's reign (1558-1603) in England, drama was the most popular literary genre, and it left behind the most enduring legacy. This Elizabethan drama was based on the three Mediaeval literary genres: Mystery Plays, Miracle Plays and Morality Plays. In the beginning, these dramas were not so well-written. But we can see the division of tragedy and comedy in this age. While Ralph Roister Doister of Nicholas Udall is taken as the first regular English comedy, Gorboduc of Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville was the first regular tragedy.

(I)

## Elizabethan Theatre:

In 1576 actor James Burbage (1531–1597) decided to build a permanent structure in which plays could be staged. He called it simply *The Theater*. *The Theater* was a huge amphitheater (a large semi-circular outdoor theater with seats rising in tiers from a central acting area), capable of holding about three thousand spectators. It had a very large outdoor stage with a small, enclosed room at the back, in which the actors changed costumes and waited for their cues to go on stage. The stage was surrounded on all sides by a yard into which standing spectators crowded for the low admission of one penny. These crowds ate, drank, talked, and moved around in the standing yard as the play was performed. It was

necessary for the acting to be extremely bold and loud to compete with the commotion in the yard. For those who could afford higher priced tickets, there were three tiers of seating along the walls above the standing yard. For the wealthy, there were enclosed boxes over the stage.

It was in this theatre that Shakespeare probably found employment when he first came to the city. The success of this venture was immediate, and the next thirty years saw a score of theatrical companies, at least seven regular theatres, and a dozen or more inn yards permanently fitted for the giving of plays- all established in the city and its immediate suburbs. The growth seems all the more remarkable when we remember that the London of those days would not be considered a small city, having (in 1600) only about a hundred thousand inhabitants.

Almost all classes of citizens, excepting many Puritans and like-minded Reformers, came to them for afternoon entertainment. The large amphitheatres outside the city attracted people of all classes. The most prestigious site for drama was the royal court. Elizabeth was extremely fond of theater. Initially her favorite nobles tried to amuse her by presenting their own plays, but as the London theater improved the queen preferred the professionals. Elite audiences might also attend plays in the halls of schools, universities, and law courts.

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**Elizabethan dramas would include the plays of (II) the University Wits and of (III) the early plays (till 1603) of William Shakespeare (1574-1601).**

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## (II)

### The University Wits

George Saintsbury, a 19th-century journalist and author, used the phrase “University Wits” to name a group of late 16th century English playwrights and pamphleteers who were educated at the universities (Oxford or Cambridge) and who became popular secular writers. Prominent members of this group were **Christopher Marlowe**, **Robert Greene**, and **Thomas Nashe** from Cambridge, and **John Lyly**, **Thomas Lodge**, and **George Peele** from Oxford. **Thomas Kyd** is also sometimes included in the group, though he is not believed to have studied at university. These young men developed the signature characteristics of Elizabethan drama.

**George Peele** brought a different set of standards to English theater. His dramatic presentations often depict a historical, biblical, or traditional event. His well recognised play The Old Wives’s Tale satirised the romantic dramas popular at the Elizabethan time. **Robert Greene** is Shakespeare’s most successful predecessor in blank-verse romantic comedy. The best of his pastorals is Pandosto (1588), the direct source of Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale. **Thomas Nashe** is great satirist of Elizabethan period. His best known work is The Anatomy of Absurdity which is euphuistic in style. **Thomas Lodge**’s best known prose romance is Rosalynde which inspired Shakespeare to compose As You Like It.

**John Lyly**’s two prose romances, Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit (1578) and Euphues and His England (1580), together made him the most fashionable English writer of the 1580s. Euphues is a romantic intrigue told in letters interspersed with general discussions on such topics as religion, love, and epistolary style. Lyly’s preoccupation with the exact arrangement and selection of words, his frequent use of similes drawn from classical mythology, and his artificial and excessively elegant prose inspired a short-lived Elizabethan literary style called

“euphuism.” The Euphues novels introduced a new concern with form into English prose. Some of his other works include Endimion, The Woman in the Moon and otehrs.

**Thomas Kyd** produced his most significant (and only surviving) work, *The Spanish Tragedy*, sometime between 1583 and 1589. Kyd found his model in the tragedies of the ancient Roman playwright Seneca (c. 4 bce–65 ce), whose bloody chronicles of royal family history were well known among Elizabethans. Kyd's play was the first Elizabethan example of a popular genre that became known as the *Revenge Tragedy*, a play concerned with the theme of vengeance for a past wrong-usually murder. Shakespeare's famous revenge play , Hamlet is thought to be taken from a play Kyd wrote known as Ur-Hamlet (or "original Hamlet").

The first great dramatist of the age was **Christopher Marlowe** who showed originality both in choice of subject matter and the use of blank verse. His powerful blank verse strengthens the drama and the development of character heightens the sense of tragedy. His first tragedy Tamburlaine the Great is written in blank verse with colorful images of power and violence. Blank verse had been used before in English poetry, but Marlowe so greatly improved it that it came to be known as "**Marlowe's mighty line.**" He went on to write several other notable plays, including The Jew of Malta, Doctor Faustus, Edward the Second, The Massacre at Paris and others. His poetic lines and his drama earned him the title of the greatest dramatist in England-until the almost immediate rise of Shakespeare.

### (III)

#### **The Early Plays of William Shakespere (1574-1601).**

William Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist of all times. He began his career as a play actor and then moved to play writing. Though according to many editors of his works,

he had written 37 plays, this number is still disputed. The dates of publication of plays are also in vague. Till Elizabethan age (till 1603), almost 25 to 27 plays were published. Some of these famous plays are Love's Labour's Lost, The Comedy of Errors, Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Twelfth Night, All's Well That Ends Well, Othello and others. Shakespeare's most obvious debt was to Raphael Holinshed, whose Chronicles furnished story material for several plays, including Macbeth and King Lear.

His plays look like a living world of people. His audience can identify with his characters because they seem just like one of them. He also explores what it means to be 'English'-the issue of cultural and national identity, and thus contributes to the making of Elizabethan England's identity.

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To conclude, we can draw some of the basic and general features of Elizabethan dramas. These are as follows:

1. The comedies used Italian or Latin comedies as sources.
2. Comedies were often romances or congratulatory works in praise of a patron or monarch.
3. Love and its tribulations were the main theme, as seen in Shakespeare's comedies.
4. Historical plays and chronicles were common.
5. Tragedy used Seneca as a model.
6. Tragedies were melodramatic, full of emotional speeches and scenes, and used a great deal of stage spectacles.

7. Tragedies were concerned with the darker side of human characters: immorality, greed and cruelty. They also touched upon the melancholic aspect of human life.
8. Politics and history interested almost all the playwrights.

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