



E-Content

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DEVELOPMENT TEAM

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William Shakespeare and John Webster, Marlowe is the crucial nexus, in terms of ideas and dramatic forms.

1.2 CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

Christopher Marlowe (1564-93) is the most intellectual of the playwrights during the Elizabethan age in English literature. The period known for unprecedented literary activity in England, finds its genius, chiefly, in drama whose most eloquent spokesman was William Shakespeare. Marlowe is, undoubtedly, the greatest of Shakespeare's predecessors in drama. To him, goes the credit of heralding the powerful English tragic drama that remains, even today, as one of the chief achievements of English literature. Marlowe died very young, before he was thirty, in suspicious circumstances but left about half a dozen tragedies all written in a period of five years — *Tamburlaine* (1587), *Doctor Faustus* (1586), *The Jew of Malta* (1589), *Edward II* (1591), and *The Massacre at Paris* (1592). Endowed with vast biblical and classical scholarship, a rebellious spirit and poetic imagination, Marlowe marks the end of an adolescent phase in English drama and begins its mature tragedy. In effecting this transition, Marlowe had to attempt to reconcile the traditions of medieval Christianity with the rise of the Reformation; on the one hand, and reconcile these two with the continental Renaissance humanism and the revival of the fascinating classical learning and literature, on the other. Additionally, there was the linguistic and lyrical upsurge of the blank verse and its liberating tone of freedom from the rigors of metrical verse. Whatever Marlowe wrote was poignant, for he could never separate his personal yearnings from his dramatic reflections. A very striking personality and a powerful dramatist, he is a significant part of a still greater tradition of the Elizabethan drama—tragedy in particular, which was taking shape in his time. Marlowe is judged with a sense of regret that he died young and that his talents left many a masterpiece unwritten, especially in view of the fact that Shakespeare, similarly gifted could achieve greatness with longer years of life. On Marlowe's four hundredth anniversary, Harry Levin reassessed Marlowe's importance thus:

Marlowe must abide the question of history, which Shakespeare has all but overflowed. Yes, he is for all time, we must agree with Ben Jonson. And Marlowe then, was he primarily for his age? Certainly he caught its intensities, placed its rhythms, and dramatized its dilemmas as no Elizabethan writer had previously done, and as all would be doing thereafter to some extent...

Marlowe's output was meteoric in its development, and in its expression as well. In that sense, his end was not untimely, and it is futile to sentimentalize now over his fragments and unwritten master works. Shakespeare needed maturity to express ripeness, although he could never have matured without assuming first the youthful stance that Marlowe had made permanently his own. Insofar as he must seem for ever young, we are inclined to feel old as we belatedly reread him.

An understanding of this emerging tradition is necessary for clearer perspectives on Marlowe's dramatic endeavours and achievement.

1.3 ELIZABETHAN DRAMA: RELIGIOUS BEGINNINGS

One of the finest dramatic traditions in literature, the Elizabethan drama emerged in the middle of the sixteenth century in England in response to the growing needs of popular entertainment, national and cultural aspirations. To begin with, the

Elizabethans had to reckon with theatre as a vehicle for religious and moral instruction. After the decline of classical drama in Europe, the Middle ages witnessed the use of theatre in the church for religious instruction. This has, in fact, led to the rebirth of western drama after the Middle Ages. The antiphonal singing, the essential part of a Roman Catholic prayer in the church, displayed dramatic possibilities that could be effectively used for instructional purposes. Further, illustrations of the stories of the Old and New Testament, particularly during festivals like Christmas and Easter, through dramatic presentation, became an integral part of the Roman Catholic liturgy.

1.4 MIRACLE AND MYSTERY PLAYS

What began as a religious performance by the clergy extended itself to include lay performers. As the performances gradually became buoyant during the festivals, the clergy came to be excluded from participating in such joyous celebrations. The exclusion of clergy entailed the relaxation of church control over such performances, leading to the secular growth of, what is essentially, a Christian drama. This religious tradition of theatre became popular in England by the fourteenth century as Mystery and Miracle plays, the former dealing with biblical stories and the latter with the lives of the Christian saints. In course of time, cycles of plays evolved presenting various stories but with a singular theme. Though composed by the clergy, with a certain secular disposition, in iambic verse, the theatrical organization went into the hands of social and trade guilds associated with towns like York, Chester, Coventry, Wakefield and Lincoln. These cycles, largely bereft of any lasting literary value, facilitated the replacement of Latin by the vernacular as the medium of religion, the shift of theatrical activity from cathedrals to open public places, and in theatrical experience, a change from a sense of religious solemnity to the pursuit of popular taste. A significant development for the later Elizabethan drama was the mixing up of the solemn religious practices with the comic frivolities inherent in day to day life.

1.5 MORALITY PLAYS

The later advances of English religious drama was in the form of a morality play which was, in turn, followed by interludes, the non-allegorical religious plays about earthly characters with a predominant satirical tone. The morality tradition is significant for the abstract characterization of several qualities, both good and vicious. The dramatic story is an allegory of the interplay of the forces of good and evil. The dramatic conflict, essentially between good and evil, leads to the inevitable victory of the good over evil, the former characterized by the strength of religion and the latter smarting under a comic impotence. The morality plays have a long history in England beginning with the fifteenth century and lasting the whole of the sixteenth century. The plays had to reckon with the growth of English nationalism, its political and economic power. More importantly, they had to come to terms with the tides of classical revival and the new humanist learning from Italy. The representative morality plays of the early Tudor period, like *The Castle of Perseverance* (1425), *The Pride of Life* (1425) and *Everyman* (1500) (translated from Dutch, the authors anonymous) survey human life from birth to death through the conflicts occurring between one of the cardinal virtues and the seven deadly sins. Social reality of human life was beneath the concern of the early morality play. Plays of the late period like *Impatient Poverty* (anonymous, 1547-58), Lewis Wager's *Mary Magdalene* (1490), Nathaniel Woodes' *The Conflicts of Conscience* (1581), John Rastell's *The Nature of the Four Elements* (1517-27) largely dispense with the allegorical form, assume a protestant stance and deal with the issues of the upbringing of the youth and the evils of social corruption. Significantly, these morality plays betray an awareness of the new age of Renaissance, its affluence and

learning, though the awareness particularizes the Christian formulation of the essential fallibility of man. The plays are substantially dramatic unlike the early morality plays and display, forcefully, the tenor of the English language.

1.6 RISE OF ELIZABETHAN COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

The long years of the morality tradition, through the vicissitudes of church doctrine and the pressures of the new age, led to the evolution of the Elizabethan dramatic genres of comedy and tragedy. Though the biblical tradition presented dual perspectives on the predicament of man, either of the comical insignificance or of unmitigable suffering, paralleling the generic perspectives of the subsequent comedy and tragedy, the Elizabethan tragedy or comedy, in the making, came to increasingly bear the secular burden of the times. The concern with human condition *per se* is the chief characteristic of Elizabethan drama. The growth of the new classicism or learning is definitely a major contributory factor but, more importantly, the socio-economic and cultural growth of the nation made the focus on human material possible. If we look at the earliest English comedy, Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1553) or the earliest tragedy written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, *Gorboduc* (1561), the Tudor setting and ethos is particularly striking notwithstanding the classical dramaturgy through which the plays take shape. The new blank verse, having unburdened metrical rigor generates a new literary freedom hitherto unknown. The new verse presents a heroic spirit in language, emotion and action.

1.7 THE GROWTH OF THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

The early Elizabethan drama, before the regular playhouses were constructed, permeated a broad gamut of the social life of the times. Nicholas Udall's plays were school plays enacted by the boys as part of the liberalized school curriculum. In spite of their amateur playing, the boys used to be requisitioned to stage the plays before royal dignitaries or in the court itself. The early English tragedy had its advent at the Inns of the Court. *Gorboduc* was written and produced by two lawyers at the Inner Temple. Oxford and Cambridge became important centers for staging Latin drama, so much so that even Queen Elizabeth used to visit the universities to witness the performances. Later, the royal court, with the ostensible purpose of regulating theatre, assumed the function of theatrical organization, providing grants and costumes to several amateur boy groups. John Lyly staged several comedies for Queen Elizabeth and established the genre of Elizabethan comedy. Tragedy, however, could not find patronage either at the royal court or in London. It had to await the advent of adult acting companies and the erection of Public theatres on the outskirts of London. It is in these theatres like the Curtain, the Rose, and the Globe, that the Elizabethan stage came into being, a stage that introduced the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

While the growth of Elizabethan drama as a native tradition was a steady one moving self-assuredly without meekly copying classical models, the same would not have been possible without Elizabethan Drama registering itself as significant European theatre since the Greek drama of the fifth century B.C. In its European phase, Elizabethan theatre not only integrated within itself various elements of classical drama but also the Greek formulations about comedy and tragedy. The task for the Elizabethans was not only to be forcefully English but also thoughtfully European and distinctively Elizabethan.

The Latin form, with its division into five acts, of the plays of Terence and Plautus structured English romantic comedy right from *Ralph Roister Doister*. The plays abounded in classical themes like love, intrigue and friendship and character types like the braggart lover, the parasite servant, and the scheming old man. The comedy developed into two distinct traditions of the romantic and the critical comedy. Beginning with Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*, the romantic comedy grows through the court plays of Lyly like *Compaspe* (1581), *Mother Bombie* (1590) and *Endimion* (1583), George Peele's *The Arraignment of Paris* (1584) and Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1590) and culminates in Shakespeare's comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), *As You Like It* (1600) and *Twelfth Night* (1601). Primarily meant for aristocratic entertainment, romantic comedy pursues the theme of love—love as a blend of sentiment, foible, eccentricity, artifice, dedication and self-centeredness. Romantic love is more in the nature of the ludicrous rather than the ridiculous. Melodramatic to the core and farcical in treatment, this comedy, set in a pastoral or old world ambience, evokes a romantic mood and an atmosphere of exhilaration, celebration, chivalry and enchantment. With song and imaginative idealism, romantic comedy provides an escape route into a world of fancy and imagination from the grim realities of life.

The other tradition of comedy belongs to the redoubtable Ben Jonson who presented what are called the comedies of humour like *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), *Volpone* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610). Essentially city comedies, Jonson evolves his plays as social purgatives to the prevalent moral degradation. Funny yet serious, the laughter evoked is carefully controlled. Falling back on the tradition of rogue fiction, Jonson's protagonists are rogues who succeed until the end by their ability to gull others for their avaricious needs. Their eventual failure is a moral corrective driven home forcefully by the playwright.

1.9 ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY : THE SENECA INFLUENCE

The earliest inspiration for the English tragedy were the Latin plays of Seneca. It was the retributive revenge motive, belief in fortune or chance, stage declamation and soliloquy of the Senecan plays that made the plays of Thomas Kyd, Marlowe and Shakespeare extremely popular with the Elizabethan audiences. The appeal of the blood letting Seneca to the Elizabethans, bred on the Christian morality tradition, is apparently strange and curious. But the Elizabethans found a satisfying correlation between the contradictory traditions. F.P. Wilson sums up the Senecan appeal to the devout Elizabethans.

The extent of his influence on English tragedy, academic and popular, would have not been so great if the themes, the doctrine and the form have not proved congenial. The Elizabethans would enjoy the impression which his tragedies gave that crime meets its punishment in *this* life. They had the same appetite, or at least the same stomach, for sensational incident and violent passion ... Also they shared with him a taste for moral statement, for pity sentential and love of rhetoric. His doctrine, it might be thought would have repelled a Christian audience but this was not so. The medieval *contemptus mundi* had held that we are born in sin linked to it before we are able to sin...²