

# Module: Literary Texts

Level : 2<sup>nd</sup> year

Teacher: Dr. Nassima Amirouche

## Lecture 5: ELIZABETHAN Drama

English Renaissance drama grew out of the established Medieval tradition of the mystery and morality plays. These public spectacles focused on religious subjects and were generally enacted by either choristers and monks, or a town's tradesmen.

At the end of the fifteenth century, a new type of play appeared. These short plays and revels were performed at noble households and at court, especially at holiday times. These short entertainments, called "*Interludes*", started the move away from the didactic nature of the earlier plays toward purely secular plays, and often added more comedy than was present in the medieval predecessors.

The first extant purely secular play, Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Luces*, was performed at the household of Cardinal Morton. Early Tudor interludes soon grew more elaborate, incorporating music and dance, and some, especially those by John Heywood, were heavily influenced by French farce.

Not only were plays shifting emphasis from teaching to entertaining, they were also slowly changing focus from the religious towards the political. John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (1515), for example, while on the face of it resembling the medieval allegory plays with its characters of Virtues and Vices, was a political satire against Cardinal Wolsey. *Magnyfycence* was so incendiary that Skelton had to move into the sanctuary of Westminster to escape the wrath of Wolsey.

Writers were also developing English tragedies for the first time, influenced by Greek and Latin writers. Among the first forays into English tragedy were Richard Edwards' *Damon and Pythias* (1564) and John Pickering's *New Interlude of Vice Containing the History of Horestes* (1567). The most influential writer of classical tragedies, however, was the Roman playwright Seneca, whose works were translated into English by Jasper Heywood, son of playwright John Heywood, in 1589. Seneca's plays incorporated rhetorical speeches, blood and violence, and often ghosts; components which were to figure prominently in both Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

The first prominent English tragedy in the Senecan mould was *Gorboduc* (1561), written by two lawyers, Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, at the Inns of Court (schools of law). The play is also important as the first English play in blank verse. Blank verse, non-

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rhyming lines in iambic pentameter, was introduced into English literature by sonneteers Wyatt and Surrey in the 1530's.

## **English Renaissance Theater: Background and Context**

Theater looked very different before the Renaissance. In England, there were no established theater venues, and it was illegal to perform within the City of London. Instead, travelling troupes of performers took the stage at inns and in the courtyards of court buildings. However, people did enjoy the theater, and there was high demand for more elaborate productions. This signaled the presence of cultural and intellectual developments that would prove essential for theater's success, due in part to the English Renaissance and the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

## **Elizabethan Theater: Facts and Development**

Early playwrights built on the tradition of performances they had inherited from the Middle Ages. In medieval England, traveling bands of actors performed mystery plays and dramatized folk stories for both commoners and nobles alike.

While they had gained some acceptance, actors still had to jump through bureaucratic hoops in order to perform. Those not directly associated with an aristocratic house had to seek permission from the office of the Master of Revels to perform. If granted, they were given a license that protected them from prosecution. The establishment of formal theaters eventually led to the popularity of theater in England.

Before 1576, and continuing after the establishment of permanent theater venues, performances were held at the informal locations that had served as impromptu stages for centuries. Among them were: Inns, Churches, Schools

## **The First Permanent English Renaissance Theaters**

Though theater remained illegal within the City of London, numerous playhouses were built in the suburbs in the mid- to late-1570s. City-dwellers simply crossed the River Thames to go see a performance. Technically, all performances were simply "open rehearsals," justified because theater companies needed to practice before performing for Queen Elizabeth. However, most of their income came from these "rehearsals."

As a result, the Elizabethan era is the first to see the establishment of permanent theater buildings in England. The first, the Red Lion, opened in 1567, but it quickly failed. However,

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The Theatre, England's first commercial success, opened its doors in 1576, with more following quickly thereafter.

## **Plays and Playwrights During the Renaissance in England**

While a number of the greatest English playwrights date from the Renaissance period, one towers above all: **William Shakespeare**. His plays contributed to the Renaissance culture by unearthing deep conflicts in human nature. His entirely believable characters are profoundly individual, torn apart by love and loyalty. In the space of a few lines, Shakespeare pierced to the beating heart of humanity. Other popular playwrights of the period include:

- Ben Johnson
- Christopher Marlowe
- John Webster
- Thomas Middleton
- John Ford

All English playwrights were influenced by Aristotle's *Poetics*, a masterful analysis of theater. Aristotle wrote that a great play should have "unity of time and place," which means that the action should occur in one place over the course of one day.

## **The Characteristics of English Renaissance Theater and Performance**

Modern theater companies tend to tour a single play for months, and if it is popular, they may tour it for quite a long time. Not so during the English Renaissance. During this period, it was almost unheard of for a company to perform the same play two nights in a row. Instead, every night would bring a new play with it. Much more was demanded of actors in that time than today.

The plays that these actors would perform each night did possess a number of shared characteristics. Among them are:

- Sparse scenery with few props
- Low pay for playwrights
- Texts that were rarely printed
- Only male actors

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## **Popular Themes and Subject Matter**

As with all cultural trends, English Renaissance theater had its popular themes and subjects. Plays that focused on love and conflict, such as those written by Shakespeare, were especially important. Many historical plays rose to prominence during this period. Historical plays were set in history, often in ancient Greece or Rome, and they often dramatized real historical events.

## **Popular English Renaissance Plays and Performances**

Some of the most popular examples of Renaissance drama include:

- *Dr. Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe
- *The Jew of Malta*, by Christopher Marlowe
- *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd
- *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, by Thomas Middleton
- *Every Man in His Humour*, by Ben Jonson
- *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by William Shakespeare
- *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare
- *King Lear*, by William Shakespeare
- *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare