

## ENGLISH RENAISSANCE & ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

The Renaissance was a time that, as in classical times, once again focused on the human form, or man as the measure of all things, and this concept took form in the plays of the time. Gone were the grandiose pageant cycles and the rural settings were giving way for city life. Renaissance society was explorative, curious, and adventurous for discovery. Playwrights wrote of exotic locales all over the world, of settings and times befitting the imagination of the new and intellectually emerging Londoner, and of tales calculated to thrill him with discovery, perspective, and awe. There were a variety of plays for this era, including interludes, tragedies, comedies, tragicomedies, chronicles, city plays, domestic dramas, and court masques. The dominant structure of the dialogue was blank verse, started by Lyly, but most notably perfected by Shakespeare. There was also a movement away from verse towards prose. But these were not the only form of dialogue found in the plays of the era, there were also songs, sonnets, and rhymed couplets.

The term Interlude is commonly given to the style that appeared after the Morality plays (like *Everyman*) and before the true English comedies. They are the first group of wholly secular plays in English that don't have Biblical connections and are written exclusively for entertainment. They paved the way for the entry of the Renaissance spirit into English theatre. The first English tragedy that has survived is the 1562, Gorboduc, by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. This is a blank verse Senecan play on an English theme. The earliest regular comedy is the 1553, Ralph Roister Doister, by Nicholas Udall, from Eton University.

Unlike the Greeks, the Shakespearean audience did not expect, nor would they probably endure, long, pregnant pauses or studiously projected 'moments of truth'. This was an audience that expected and demanded action and vigor, whether in movement on the stage or quick wit of the tongue. The Elizabethans went to the public theaters boisterously, with little reverence or consideration for dramatist or actor, the dandies anxious to show themselves superior to the entertainment by which they were passing idle hours, aiming at conspicuous attendance, and the groundlings in the pit offering vociferous approval or disapproval at every opportunity.

The price of a day at the theatre was well within the range of virtually all Londoners, resulting in a vastly diverse collection of social stratum - a challenge for the playwright to produce a work of general appeal to his crowd. The playwright used all his available tools in filling the play with attention sustaining elements: jokes, witty banter, puns, taunts, challenges, curses, vows, crudities, and ringing declarations, which gave the Elizabethan drama an energetic liveliness all its own.

The Court Masque audience was much different from the public audience. They demanded more poetic spectacle than dramatic and passionate action or low-comedy relief. Shakespeare's The Tempest is such an example. Ben Jonson began writing exclusively for these Court performers with a combination of spectacle, dance, and formal recitation. Court masques were a dramatization of courtly qualities of beautiful and dignified appearance, refined speech, and graceful movement. When Inigo Jones returned from Italy, he brought with him the techniques of elaborate stage devices, such as colored lighting and scenery moving devices. These devices became an integral part of the masques.

The Elizabethan Age showered the world with a burst of brilliant playwrights. The Elizabethan playwrights who were forerunners of Shakespeare were for the most part brilliant young college men: John Lyly, Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene, and Christopher Marlowe. The supremacy of Shakespeare provides the zenith of the Renaissance period; after Shakespeare came playwrights of narrower vision; most well known among them was Ben Jonson.

The age was ushered in by John Lyly (1554?-1606) an Oxford graduate, poet, and playwright of high favor in the court of Queen Elizabeth. John Lyly was inspired by the classics and developed a prose style made up of puns and the fashionable play with words. His work deals with legendary themes and characters in a romantic but elegantly artificial way. It is from his *Anatomy of Wit*, or "*Euphues*" that the term "euphuism" (an artificial, highly elaborate style of writing) is derived. Through his comedies and poetry, he did much to add refinement, eloquence, and taste to the prevailing ruggedness of the English style. The most famous of his works is Endimion.

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), an M.A. graduate from Cambridge, whose poetic richness is comparable to Shakespeare was one of the greatest tragic playwrights in England. No one before him had written blank verse with such mastery. Marlowe produced the first notable Elizabethan plays and was considered at the time of his death to be more successful than Shakespeare. By the time of his death at age 29, he had produced one great poem and four great tragedies: Tamburlaine the Great, The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, The Jew of Malta, and Edward II.

From 1573 to 1587, there were twenty-three visiting companies giving performances in Stratford (Shakespeare's hometown). It is believed that Shakespeare followed a strolling troupe out of his hometown one day, and by 1592, he was in London as a recognized actor and playwright at the age of 28. When Shakespeare arrived in London, theatre was alive and strong, enjoyed by the people; nobles, citizens, and common people all loved the stage, its pageantry and poetry. Wealthy people encouraged and supported the actors. Playwrights of the time were practical and bent on making a living and pleasing the public more than pleasing the critics. If

the theaters were not filled, the troupe would go hungry. Shakespeare wrote his plays to be acted, he took whatever forms were attracting attention and made them better. During the time of the plague the theaters were kept closed, which allowed Shakespeare to write his earliest sonnets and two long narrative poems, Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece. They were published and well received, which helped establish him as a poet.

Shakespeare had four periods as a playwright. His *first period* of writing was his apprenticeship (ages 26 and 30) when he was learning his craft. Here he imitated Roman comedy and tragedy, and followed the styles of the playwrights who came just before him. Most likely he collaborated with other playwrights, such as Christopher Marlowe, as was common practice in that day. By his tragedies, "the audience is moved and shaken. After the show the spectators are calm, washed clean of pity and terror. They are saddened but at peace" (Gay "William Shakespeare"). This is much like the effect of the Greek tragedies upon their audience. Later he wrote chronicle plays when they became popular.

By his *second period* he had mastered his art, which is highlighted by Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice, and Henry IV. He tried the comedy of local middle-class people in the The Merry Wives of Windsor, but his heart was not in it. At this time, his favorite style was the romantic comedy.

His *third period* is marked with the writing of Hamlet, in 1601. This is the beginning of an eight year probe into the evil in the world. At times he reached an almost desperate pessimism. Even his comedies of this period are bitter.

Finally, in his *fourth period*, he shows a new form, the tragicomedy (dramatic romance). In his hands the tragicomedy is calm, sober, and quietly lovely, such as The Tempest, which is perhaps the most beautiful and serene of all his plays.

Ben Jonson (1573?-1637) is among the great playwrights of the Elizabethan theatre and was a contemporary of Shakespeare. Jonson was highly regarded for his satire and comedies, which included: Every Man in His Humor, Sejanus, Volpone, Epicoene, and Catiline. His best loved song is "To Celia" which begins "*Drink to me only with thine eyes.*" Ben Jonson was a bricklayer, soldier, and an actor; he was a big, dashing, daring, Elizabethan man who fought duels with both pen and sword and produced plays that became classics. Shakespeare and Jonson complemented each other in tragedy and comedy much like Euripides and Aristophanes did 2000 years earlier. Jonson remarked in his Sejanus, "Shakespeare came from heaven, Jonson from college." Subsequent playwrights took such liberties with their subjects and language, that the Puritan reformers of 1642 closed the theaters.