

The History of the English Drama

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The Drama

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1 The drama began in England, as it did in Greece, in religion. In early times none but the clergy could read the story of religion; no sermons were preached, so in order to teach the uneducated of the Bible, as most people were unable to read and had imperfect ideas in regard to scriptural history, the Church encouraged the religious drama, believing it a powerful medium in religious instruction. The first plays were under the directions of the laity for a time but were soon taken out of their hands and acted by the Priests.

The first of these plays appeared about 1110 prepared by Geoffrey, afterwards Abbot of St Albans, entitled *St Catherine*

The first of these representations were known as *Miracle plays*, which represented some part of the scriptural history. These were miraculous narratives, whose chief subject was the life of some noted saint, or passage of scripture. The earliest specimens of these plays were written in Latin by English monks. Some of the subjects used were such as "*The Raising of Lazarus*" and "*The Life of Daniel*"

The *Mystery plays* which followed the *Miracle plays* represented portions of the New

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 Testament history which was concerned with mysterious subjects. These began in towns; went from town to court; from court to the nobles; from nobles to kings. These mystery plays became a part of domestic regulations, as they had become so common.

The next step to the regular drama was the Moral plays. This new division was that class of plays in which the historical or theological characters of the Scriptures were represented by abstract qualities such as The Vices, The Virtues and Sentiment of human nature. Instead of Adam, Abraham and the Holy Spirit they used Justice, Mercy, Gluttony, etc. Satan was retained, as in the Miracle plays, and the comic scenes were for the greater part consisted of a dialogue between Satan and The Vice. Vice and Virtue were always brought together in a story by which some moral might be obtained. We may mention "Hit the Nail on the Head" and "Impatient Poverty" as two of these plays.

It is not a difficult matter to trace the transition from the Moral play to the Regular drama. Virtue and vice stirred no human sympathy because of dullness, so historical

3. characters were introduced who were celebrated for a virtue or a vice. This result was brought about sooner by the impulse of Reformation. Men were dissatisfied with subjects of the past and there arose a desire for a contrast from the sacredness of the mysteries, the spirituality of the moralities, and the ideal loftiness of both, to that of a real representation of human life, consequently the follies of the time were displayed and the result was the origin of the satirical comedy. This was followed by a demand for the comedy and tragedy.

The transition from the Moralities to the regular drama was furthered by the Interludes of John Heywood in 1530 to 1540. These interludes formed a favorite entertainment in the days of Henry VIII. These were shorter and more merrier in character than the preceding drama, and it is no wonder that they were a favorite entertainment to those plays which had taken from one to six days for representation.

Following these interludes which are short dramas, as the name implies, and which were to be performed usually in the intervals of some great ceremony, comes the first stage of the regular drama, represented by the

4 first English comedy, Ralph Roister Doister written by Nicholas Udall, a university man; a famous Latin scholar; the head master of Eton School and also for a time of Westminster. He derived his inspiration from the Latin comedy through the use made of it in his schools. This comedy is written in a jingling rhyme; lines usually of twelve syllables, though sometimes shorter. It is divided into acts and scenes and is full of liveliness and wit, but the style is too barbarous to be interesting, except to a literary antiquarian. This play was acted in 1551 but not published until 1556.

No comedy worthy of mentioning appeared for more than twenty years, not until the time of Peele, Greene and Marlowe, but during this time our first tragedy was introduced in 1562, entitled "Gorboduc" or is probably better known as "Ferrex and Porrex" which was jointly composed by Sackville and Thomas Norton. They arranged the story for their purpose and divided the work between them, Norton writing the first three parts, Sackville the last two. It was written in blank verse and its subject was founded upon a legend of the almost fabulous epoch

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of British history, originally compiled by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century and immoently copied into the histories of most of the Chronicles down to Milton's time.

As dramas were becoming an important thing, both in the line of amusement and occupation, the theatre arose, as a place of performing these acts. Up to this time (1576) no theatre had been built, the plays being performed in the houses of the nobilities. During this year the Blackfriars theatre was built in England, and shortly afterwards 'The Theatre' and 'The Swan' were built, then followed the Swan Theatre which Shakespeare used. This theatre was in the form of a hexagon on the outside, and on the inner side, circular. Here the plays began at three o'clock and the price of admission to the theatre depended upon the pretension of the theatre. The people gathered early and engaged in smoking, reading and joking. The stage had no decoration and the only scenery used was wooden imitations of animals, towers, woods, etc. Movable scenery was not introduced until after the restoration. The female parts were acted by boys and no women

⁶ appeared on the stage until the middle of the seventeenth century. The performance was always closed by prayer for the queen, the actors kneeling.

During the period of 1580 to 1596, or what is called the second stage of the drama, we have the works of Lyly, author of the Euphues. He represents three methods as he wrote seven plays in prose, one in poetry and one in blank verse. The Euphues is a very singular book and is divided into two parts. Lyly's works were characterized by his abundance use of similes and antithesis.

The most important names of those who immediately follow Lyly were Peele, Greene, and Marlowe, and these with the addition of Nash and Lodge gradually improved and developed the English literature, and especially the drama, but the greatest of the group is Marlowe. Born at Canterbury about 1562, he received an education at Peter's College, Cambridge. His youth was reckless and he has been described as an irreligious, imaginative, tender hearted, licentious poet. There is no doubt that he was wild as he died from the effects of a wound received in a drunken

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 brawl. In his literary work he is best known by Dr. Faustus. It is said "Nothing can surpass the absurdity of Marlow's plot in this play." yet he is undoubtedly the author of some of the masterpieces of English literature. His works are not equal to Shakspeare's, but of him it is said "Had he of lived, and had his lot been happily cast we should have had two Shakspeare's." Although his works are not equal to Shakspeare's he was worthy to precede him. It may be said he invented the verse of the drama

Along with these writers another dramatist of greater genius appears and that is William Shakspeare, the greatest dramatist of the world, the pride of his nation. He took up the work of Marlowe and his predecessors and within twenty eight years, he made the drama represent the whole of human life Shakspeare was born in a little town of Stratford, on the Avon, in Warwickshire, April 23, 1564 and died on April 23, 1616, being fifty two years old. He was the eldest of eight children; his father, a dealer in wool, was once in flourishing circumstances, but gradually sank, and had to receive charity from a corporation of which

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he was once a member. Nothing can be accurately said of his education, no doubt it was very much limited by the poverty of his father and his intellect was left to develop gradually and naturally. He became an accomplished man by living in society where he could obtain all sort of information.

It is said he was fortunately born as his contemporaries and predecessors had greatly developed literature, and especially the drama until he had better advantages and more could be expected of him. He did not disappoint the people for he has surpassed all writers of both ancient and modern times.

As Shakspeare's greatness is not paralleled and his works contain food for all men. Some think his superiority has been a great trial to the dramatists of England who followed him.

Shakspeare has been called the master of the human heart, as his knowledge of mankind was proverbial. His great art as a portrayer of character and passion, consisted in his manner of making his personages, accidentally, involuntarily express their own character and to admit us into the recesses of their heart. Some one said,

⁹"Shakspeare always holds the mirror up to all that is - the whole reality."

Shakspeare has no system, no mannerism. He wrote well and wrote poorly, and he knew the secret of blank verse to perfection. His versification is powerful, sweet and varied, naturally and enduringly musical. His greatness will forever live and with Welsh we will say "Shakspeare is like a great primeval forest, whence timber shall be cut and used as long as the winds blow and the leaves are green." He wrote comedies, tragedies and historical dramas. Among his comedies we have, "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" which reveals the irresolutions of love and its infidelity to friendship; 'The Taming of the Shrew' which has an Italian air; 'Love's Labour's Lost' a piece written in his youth; 'All's Well That Ends Well', a story of a young girl whose ideal lover was much above her station; and 'The Merchant of Venice', which is one of Shakspeare's most perfect work.

Some of his most important tragedies which we may name are 'Romeo and Juliet', 'Hamlet' and 'Macbeth'. Hamlet is said to be the finest dramatic character ever drawn

10 His historical dramas may be represented by 'Antony and Cleopatra' which may be considered in a measure a continuation of 'Julius Caesar'; 'Timon of Athens' which possesses most the character of satire than any of his works; and 'King John' which is a description of a warlike event. Thus we have very briefly named some of Shakspeare's most important works, some of the greatest dramas the world has known.

While Shakspeare was yet living there began what is called the decay of the drama. This began with Ben Jonson, a man of whose family little is known and one whose life was one of struggle as he was never rich. After many years of hard labor his library was burned, thus destroying all his works, yet he wrote after this.

The drama of Shakspeare's time was the painting of the whole of human life, while Jonson in his drama merely represented that particular human nature which was common to his time. His characters were not represented as they are but as they would become when mastered by humor. Jonson's reputation was established by his play which was acted in

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Rose Theatre in 1596 called "Every Man In His Humor" which was immediately followed by 'Every Man Out of His Humor'. These two plays were followed by several others but the most graceful and pathetic one, was a pastoral drama 'The Sad Shepherd'. This showed, he too like Shakespeare became more gentle and kind as he grew older. This drama shows the dignity and pathos of the man.

The next names that we may add to the list dramatists are Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. They wrote together during the reign of James I and their plays are contained in volumes known as the works of Beaumont and Fletcher. Their first success was achieved in 1608 by the play Philaster.

Phillip Massinger and John Ford are two men who may be mentioned in connection with Beaumont and Fletcher. Some of Massinger's plays were 'The Virgin Martyr' and 'The Duke of Milan'. Through his plays you may trace some of his political opinions. John Ford about two years younger than Massinger wrote merely for the pleasure he found in the exercise of his genius, and not for an income. One of his plays

is 'Broken Heart'

Among other writers which we may name as dramatists are John Webster, who is best represented by his play 'The Duchess of Malfi'; and George Chapman, who was noted for keeping up the spirit of Marlowe in his writings. Chapman did not write any until nearly forty years of age, then he wrote both comedies and tragedies; the comedies may be represented by 'All Fools', and the tragedies by 'The Conspiracy'. We have now named most of the important dramatists and some of their most important works, but in conclusion we will name James Shirley as the last of the list. He left more than thirty two plays, and the one he last produced was 'The Sister'. With him the Elizabethan drama approaches an end.