

The Role of the Drama
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Introduction

Origin

Greek

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Sophocles

Euripides

Aristophanes

Roman

Livius Andronicus

Plautus and Terence

Indian

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Chinese

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Aristotle says drama is imitated action. A common means of imitation by all peoples, is by gesture and voice. The first step toward a drama is to assume a real or fictitious character, but the true drama is not reached until imitation extends to action. The drama gratifies the wish of all men to see their life portrayed in the life of others. A requisite of the drama is unity of action; that is, every thing in it should be grouped in the direction of a single end or purpose.

Almost all nations had a drama of some kind, though it did not always reach a permanent form in literature. The Hebrew writings partook of the dramatic feature, and of their work, we have today, the Book of Job and the Book of Ruth.

It is due to the Greeks that the drama first attained its literary form. Aristotle says Homer prepared the way for the drama, by display of power in both grave and tragic lines, which suggested plots and devices for dramatic subjects.

The Greek drama is of a religious origin, growing out of the songs and dances

given in honor of the god of wine, Dionysus. This religious form it never lost. The drama presented two main features, the chorus and the dialogue. The chorus was an important part, and was sung between the acts. Its purpose was to reflect on the action that was going on, and to represent in verse the sentiments of the poet as spokesman. Later on, the dialogue formed the more important feature of the dramatic entertainment.

The first plays were acted on a temporary stage, but as the art was perfected, the theatres were built. The most noted was the Theatre of Dionysus at Athens. It was uncovered, semicircular in form, and built on a sloping hillside. The theatres were in three divisions: the stage, the orchestra, and the place for spectators. The scenery was usually nature, or painted representations, that were turned on a pivot. The actors were required to represent their characters in every way, using masks and padding to accomplish the purpose.

The Marmon Chronicle records Thepis as the first actor of unwritten tragedy.

He is said to have introduced the dialogue, and his works were of a satirical nature.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides belong to the classical age, and are the three best representations of Greek tragedy.

Aeschylus was an honored warrior, having fought in the Persian wars. He wrote in a tragic style, was the creator of written tragedy, and the originator of the trilogy. He expanded the dialogue; his characters were bold and strong, and his plots simple. Of ancient poets, his genius closely resembles that of Shakespeare. The obscurity of some of his plays is due to overstrained epithets, and harsh compounds.

Among his few works that have reached us, is a complete trilogy, "Agamemnon." The three parts are "Agamemnon," "Electra," and "Furies." The subject of the first is the murder of Agamemnon by his wife, Clytemnestra. In the second, Orestes avenges his father's death by killing his mother. The last deals with the torture of Orestes by the furies, and his refuge in the temple of Delphi.

Agamemnon is classed the master piece of Aeschylus.

Under Sophocles, Greek tragedy was perfected. He introduced more characters, subordinated the chorus, and gave the dialogue a prominent part. He excelled Aeschylus in smoothness of finish, and beauty of style. His greatest works are the three plays on the fate of the house, "Oedipus". "Oedipus Colonus" is a most wonderful work, written in the poet's ninetieth year. Sophocles sings to us of his birthplace, with much grace and beauty, and more fully expresses his feelings and sentiments. The ancients called him The "Attic bee."

Euripides had much talent, but lacked the wisdom and ingenuity of Aeschylus and Sophocles. His aim was to please the people. Some of his works have attained the high standard of excellency. He is considered the most humane and pathetic of ancient poets. He did not observe the ideals of tragedy laid down by Aeschylus and Sophocles, and under him tragedy declined.

The foremost of all comedy writers is

Aristophanes. His comedies are of a mixed nature. Some are full of brilliancy, and of a grand polished style, while others are severely criticised for their many deficiencies. This comedian introduces us to the common life of Athenian society. His best works are said to be "The Clouds", "The Wasps", "The Birds", and "The Knights".

In "The Clouds", he ridicules the rising school of philosophers and teachers of Athens. "The Wasps" is a satire against the Athenian law courts. "The Birds" is a satirical allegory, aimed at Alcibiades, for his shameless ambitions and schemes. The subject of "The Knight", is the punishment of Cleon, a conceited demagogue of Athens.

The Romans were translators, and afterwards imitators of the Greeks. The most noted Roman dramatists were, Livius Andronicus, Plautus, and Terence. Nearly all their plays were translations and adaptations from Greek master pieces. They borrowed their plan of theatres from the Greek, but the amphitheatre was entirely original with them. The largest and most wonderful amphitheatre

in the world, is the Colosseum of Rome, built during the reign of Titus. It has a seating capacity for over eighty thousand spectators. The only Roman works handed down to us, are those of Plautus and Terence.

The Indian drama was of a purely native character; a drama of a literary class, exhibiting some of the noblest and most refined characteristics of the Hindu religion.

Kalidasa's "Sakuntala" is a purely dramatic love idyll. It contains passages of great beauty, and is one of the masterpieces of poetic literature. The character of the Indian drama is a lofty one, and some parts are of incomparable loveliness.

The Chinese possessed a national drama of an elevating character, which was largely due to the code, that writers of immoral plays would suffer death in purgatory as long as the plays were acted. The Chinese had a wide range of characters, taking in every phase of society. Some of their passages have a humorous vein, while others are full of grace and beauty.

The Chinese were not aware of the dis-

distinction between comedy and tragedy, and some of their religious illustrations are mere buffoonery. The drama has four periods. In the third period, it rose to its highest plane of excellency.

The writings of this period were called the Yuen Pao plays, and from these we have largely obtained our literary knowledge of the Chinese. "Pi Pa Ki," or the "Story of the Lute," is considered the master piece of Chinese drama. It has many meritorious qualities, and is of a high moral character.

The Japanese plays were simply reproductions of the Chinese drama. The subjects are of a historical and realistic nature. The actors are held in great contempt.

The Italians possessed no natural drama, but imitated other nations. They wrote comedy and tragedy, which was largely borrowed from the Spanish and French.

One of their best writers Metastasio, followed Spanish models. His merits are due to the purity, clearness, elegance, sweetness of language, and correct style. His writings have little variation. Some of his plays are still retained for the stage.

Goldoni reformed the Italian comedy. He wrote masked comedies. His writings though popular at the time have not much depth of character or novelty of invention.

Spain possessed a national drama of much wealth. It was of a religious origin.

Jodela Enzima is called the father of Spanish drama. The national drama was established by Lope de Vega, one of the greatest geniuses of the world. In the number of his dramatic writings, he has had no rival. Fifteen hundred plays are attributed to him. It is from this author's works, that we can best obtain an insight into the manners, religion and sentiments of his countrymen.

The French were imitators of the ancients, mainly of the Greek and Spanish works.

Moliere is the best representative of Greek comedy. He is witty, humorous, and satirical, but his breadth of view and pathetic aim is much narrower than that of Aristophanes. Moliere's master piece of verse comedy is "Tartuffe", a religious hypocrisy. He originated the character of the play, and introduced new dramatic poetry. His best piece

comedies are "Le Misanthrope," and "Femmes Savantes".

"Le Misanthrope" in excellence is generally placed next to "Tartuffe". All the characters of "Misanthrope" are excellently conceived, and the play is of a high uniform style. This comedy is a satire against the higher society of Paris.

"Femmes Savantes", is also a satirical shaft, directed at the Parisian literary circles.

Moliere fascinates his audience by his form of gaiety and variety of manners. He excels Shakespeare in directing his force with greater skill and energy.

Racine is classed as the best French tragedian, and he was better acquainted with the ancients than Moliere. Some critics place Racine second to Virgil. His works have a natural expression, and he has a grace and delicacy of style that has not been excelled. He enriched the language with many new turns and phrases.

Racine's success began in 1667, with his "Andromaque", a tragedy full of much grace and beauty, but containing many insipid lines. "Britannicus" published in 1669,

is an admirable play. In a passage of this play, he has excelled an expression used by Shakespeare in "Antony and Cleopatra". Both obtained their idea from Plutarch.

"Athalie" is Racine's masterpiece. This play is more free of affectations than any of his other tragedies. Its grandeur and simplicity of style; its dramatic effect; its clear and careful management places it above his other works.

The English drama, like the Greek, was of a religious origin. The early plays were first acted in the church, by the priests. The object was to educate the people in Scriptural History, and to extend church authority.

These plays were called Mysteries. The subjects were usually pathetic ones, taken from the Bible, such as the "Crucifixion", and the "Fall of Man". The Miracle plays were representations of mysterious subjects taken from the New Testament.

The Moralities were of an ethical nature. Abstract qualities were personified to represent characters of the Bible. For

instance, instead of using the names, Moses, Adam and the Holy Spirit, the abstract qualities, Mercy, Justice, and Temperance were used. These plays were taken from the church to the church yard, from there to town, and finally passed into the hands of the Guilds.

The Moralities merged into the Interludes, which were used between intervals of feasts and ceremonial entertainments. They were usually of a light character, sometimes exhibiting wit and humor. John Heywood was a writer of Interludes, during the reign of Henry the VIII. He often entertained the court with his plays.

The public taste had been raised by the moral development of the drama, and the people demanded something better. This opened the road for the comedy and tragedy. The first comedy was "Ralph Roister Doister" by Nicholas Udall. It was an imitation of Plautus's comedy, "Braggart Soldiers".

In 1562, the first tragedy, "Ferrex and Porrex", by Sackville and Norton, has its plot carefully drawn from the mythical history of Britain.

The drama now rapidly rose thru the work of Shakespeare's predecessors. The most important were Lyly, Peele, Greene, Nash, and Marlowe. Marlowe, the more important, did much to change the cast of the drama, raising it to a higher standard, by his finer touch and more forcible and grand style. "Faustus", and the "Jew of Malta" are classed as his master pieces.

The predecessors of Shakespeare were of a fiery imagination, and wrote in a powerful style. They had no models, and used language that today would not be tolerated. Their originality established rules by which the drama was placed on a firm basis.

Plays became so popular that it was necessary to have larger and more permanent accommodations. This led to the building of the first theatre, "The Black Friar". The theatres were of two kinds, public and private. The first were very large, uncovered, and therefore very uncomfortable. The last were smaller, but under cover.

Shakespeare found the drama in a progressive condition, and under him, was brought to perfection.

This noted dramatist was born at Warwickshire, in 1564. His mother came from wealthy parents, and his father was a trader and butcher. At the age of fourteen, young Shakespeare, due to the pecuniary circumstances of his father, was removed from school. In 1582, he was married to Ann Hathaway. He went to London in 1587, to seek his fortune. For some years, we have no further account of him. It was here, that he began his dramatic career, by touching up old plays. He rapidly rose to prominence. His popularity aroused the jealousy of other writers. Greene calls him "up an start crow beautified by his feathers."

Though Shakespeare knew "small Latin and less Greek," he read much and was a close observer of the peculiarities of nature. His knowledge of mankind is so great, that he has been called the unfold of the human heart. He has summed up all that has gone before, and given to the world, his works, which are the most complete and instructive of their kind.

Shakespeare has been criticised for play of words, and it is said that some of his

works tend to mere buffoonery. Other critics say that he simply wrote of the age in which he lived. He represented life as it was, concealing nothing.

Shakespeare has largely employed the use of blank verse in all his works. He recognized its value in lowering and elevating the style. Rhyme is used in "Midsummer Night's Dream," and "The Tempest," to give them a higher musical tone. Almost all the subjects of his comedies are romantic love tales, taken from novels.

Comparing Shakespeare with Moliere, Shakespeare has a wider range of character, but Moliere has written the best comedies. The only pure comedy of Shakespeare is, "Merry Wives of Windsor". The "Merchant of Venice" is one of Shakespeare's most perfect works. He has excellently conceived all the characters in "Romeo and Juliet."

Of all his characters, Shakespeare has portrayed "Hamlet" with the richest wit and humor. "Macbeth" is spoken of as one of the grandest works written since the "Oresteia" of Aeschylus. "Cymbeline," a

romance, is another of Shakespeare's grand works. It is founded upon a novel of Boccaccio's, and traditional tales from the Roman Empire.

Some of Shakespeare's historical works have reached perfection. "Julius Caesar" is called his master piece in this line of work. In his historical dramas, he has so clearly and accurately portrayed the principal events and circumstances, that from these, we obtain a true knowledge of the history of his time.

Shakespeare's fame has been sung by many poets. He is called the genius of the British Isles. Ben Jonson says "he was not of an age, but for all time". While Milton proclaims him as,

"Our sweetest Shakespeare, fancy child,
Warbled his native wood notes wild."

Shakespeare's prosperity continued to the time of his death, April 23rd, 1616. He had been proprietor of the Globe theatre, and owned much wealth.

His works still stand as a model, and he is ranked as the greatest of the world's poets and dramatists.