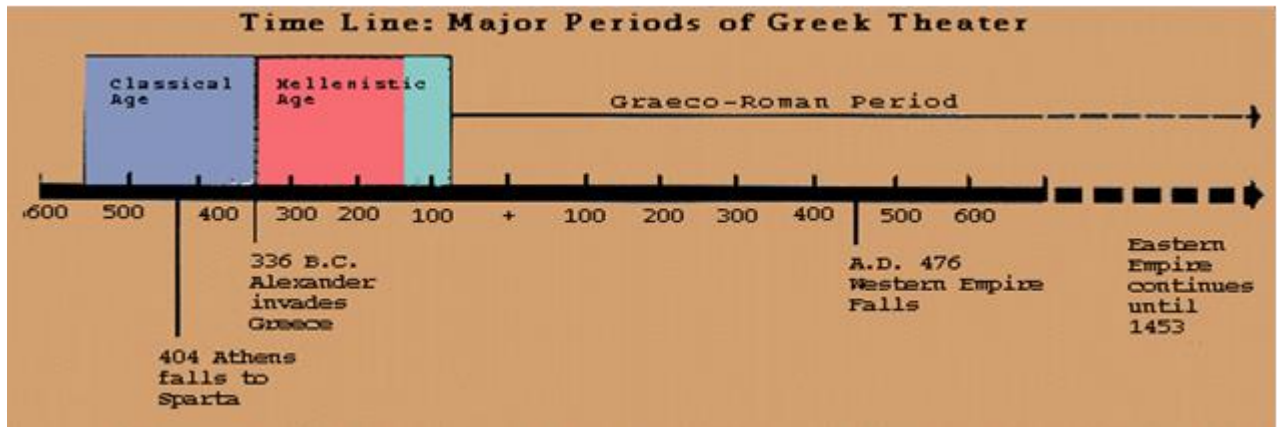


A Brief History of Western Drama

1. Ancient Greek Drama



wine. In keeping with the god's special interests, his cult ceremonies are exciting occasions. His female devotees, in particular, dance themselves into a state of frenzy. Carrying a long phallic symbol, known as **thyrsus** (a staff tipped with a pine cone and sometimes entwined with ivy or vine leaves), they tear to pieces and devour the raw flesh of sacrificial animals.



Maenad dancing holding a Thyrsus with Satyr



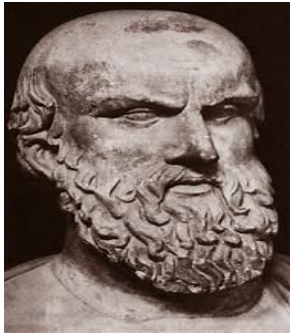
Thespis

The Dionysians also develop a more structured form of drama. They dance and sing, in choral form, the stories of Greek myth. In the 6th century BC a priest of Dionysus, by the name of Thespis, introduces a new element which can validly be seen as the birth of theatre. He engages in a dialogue with the chorus. He becomes, in effect, the first actor. Actors in the west, ever since, have been proud to call themselves Thespians. According to a Greek chronicle of the 3rd century BC, Thespis is also the first winner of a theatrical award. He takes the prize in the first competition for tragedy, held in Athens in 534 BC.

Theatrical contests become a regular feature of the annual festival worshipping Dionysus, held over four days each spring and known as the City Dionysia. Four authors are chosen to compete. Each must write three tragedies and one satyr play (a lascivious farce, featuring the sexually rampant satyrs, half-man and half-animal, who form the retinue of Dionysus).

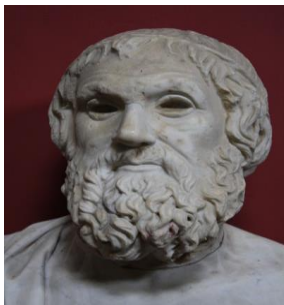
The performance of the plays by each author takes a full day, in front of a large number of citizens in holiday mood, seated on the slope of an Athenian hillside. The main feature of the stage is a circular space on which the chorus dance and sing. Behind it a temporary wooden structure makes possible a suggestion of scenery. At the end of the festival a winner is chosen.

The Three Great Greek Tragedians: 5th century BC



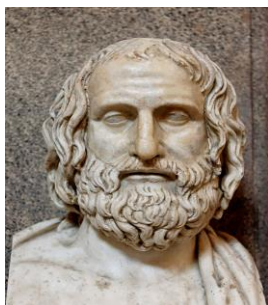
Only a small number of tragedies survive as full texts from the annual competitions in Athens, but they include work by three dramatists of genius. The earliest is the heavyweight of the trio, **Aeschylus**. He adds a second actor, increasing the potential for drama. He first wins the prize for tragedy in 484 BC. He is known to have written about eighty plays, of which only seven survive. One of his innovations is to write the day's three tragedies on a single theme, as **a trilogy**. By good fortune three of his seven plays are one such trilogy, which remains one of the theatre's great masterpieces—the *Oresteia*, celebrating the achievement of Athens in replacing the chaos of earlier times with the rule of law. The trilogy

consists of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*.



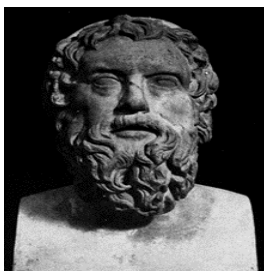
Sophocles gains his first victory in 468 BC, defeating Aeschylus. He is credited with adding a third actor, further extending the dramatic possibilities of a scene. Whereas Aeschylus tends to deal with great public themes, the tragic dilemmas in Sophocles are worked out at a more personal level. Plots become more complex, characterization more subtle, and the personal interaction between characters more central to the drama.

Although Sophocles in a very long life writes more plays than Aeschylus (perhaps about 120), again only seven survive intact. Of these *Oedipus the King* is generally considered to be his masterpiece.



The youngest of the three great Greek tragedians is Euripides. More of his plays survive (19 as opposed to 7 for each of the others), but he has fewer victories than his rivals in the City Dionysia - in which he first competes in 454 BC. Euripides introduces a more unconventional view of Greek myth, seeing it from new angles or viewing mythological characters in terms of their human frailties. His vision is extremely influential in later schools of tragic drama. Racine, for example, derives *Andromaque* and *Phèdre* from the *Andromache* and *Hippolytus* of Euripides.

The Greek Comedy: 5th century BC

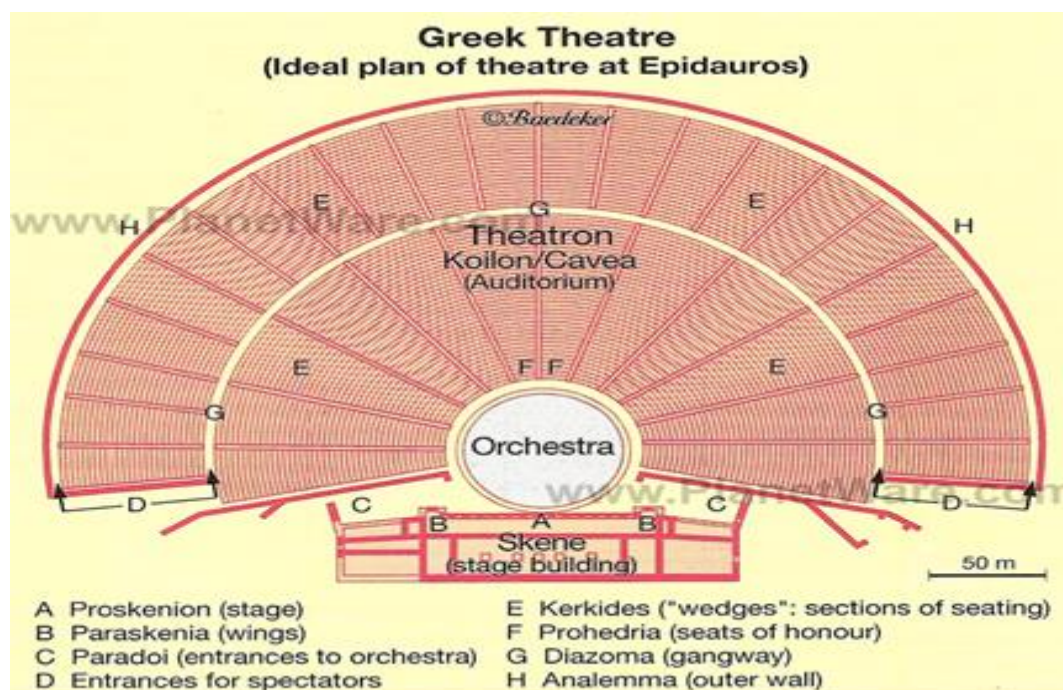


From 486 BC there is an annual competition for comedies at Athens - held as part of the Lenaea, a three-day festival in January. Only one comic author's work has survived from the 5th century. Like the first three tragedians, he launches the genre with great brilliance. He is **Aristophanes**, a frequent winner of the first prize in the Lenaea (on the first occasion, in 425 BC, with the *Acharnians*). Eleven of his plays survive, out of a total of perhaps forty spanning approximately the period 425-390 BC. They rely mainly on a device which becomes central to the tradition of comedy. They satirize contemporary foibles by placing them in an unexpected context, whether by means of a fantastic plot or through the antics of ridiculous characters. *The Clouds* (423 BC), a satire on the

misuse of philosophical argument directed chiefly against Socrates, and *The Frogs* (405 BC), a satire on Greek drama directed chiefly against Euripides. After the death of the great man, Dionysus goes down to Hades to bring back his favorite tragedian. A competition held down there enables Aristophanes to parody the style of Euripides. As a result Dionysus comes back to earth with Aeschylus instead. In *The Wasps* the Athenian love of litigation is ridiculed in the form of an old man who sets up a law court in his home, to try his dog for stealing cheese. In *Lysistrata* the horrors of war are discussed in a circumstance of extreme social crisis; the women of Greece refuse to make love until their men agree to make peace.

However, Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War signaled the end of Old Comedy, because a sense of disillusionment with the heroes and gods who had played a prominent role in Old Comedy became marked.

Diagram of Ancient Greek Theater



Orchestra: The orchestra (Orchesina--literally, "dancing space") was normally circular. It was a level space where the chorus would dance, sing, and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene. The earliest orchestras were simply made of hard earth, but in the Classical period some orchestras began to be paved with marble and other materials. In the center of the orchestra there was often an altar. The orchestra of the theater of Dionysus in Athens was about 60 feet in diameter.

Theatron: The theatron (literally, "viewing-place") is where the spectators sat. The theatron was usually part of hillside overlooking the orchestra, and often wrapped around a large portion of the orchestra (see the diagram above). Spectators in the fifth century BC probably sat on cushions or boards, but by the fourth century the theatron of many Greek theaters had marble seats.

Skene: The skene (scene--literally, "tent") was the building directly behind the stage. During the 5th century, the stage of the theater of Dionysus in Athens was probably raised only two or three steps above the level of the orchestra, and was perhaps 25 feet wide and 10 feet deep. The skene was directly in back of the stage, and was usually decorated as a palace, temple, or other building, depending on the needs of the play. It had at least one set of doors, and actors could make

entrances and exits through them. There was also access to the roof of the skene from behind, so that actors playing gods and other characters appear on the roof, if needed.

Parodos: The parodoi (literally, "passageways") are the paths by which the chorus and some actors (such as those representing messengers or people returning from abroad) made their entrances and exits. The audience also used them to enter and exit the theater before and after the performance.

About 330 B.C. the theater's present stone tiers of seating were built. The 64 tiers (of which 25 survive in part), which could accommodate some 17,000 spectators, are divided into three sections by transverse gangways, and the lowest section is divided vertically into 13 wedges separated by stairways.

2. The Ancient Roman comedy: 3rd - 2nd century BC

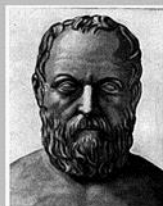
Following the expansion of the Roman Republic (509–27 BC) into several Greek territories between 270–240 BC, Rome encountered Greek drama. Rome was greatly influenced by Greece, and this was particularly true of theatre. Two Roman writers of comedy, Plautus and Terence for example, achieved lasting fame in the decades before and after 200 BC –Plautus for a robust form of entertainment close to **farce**, Terence for a more subtle **comedy of manners**. But neither writer invented a single plot. All were **borrowed from Greek** drama, and every play of Terence's is set in Athens.

Comic Playwrights

Plautus
254-184 BCE



Terence
195-159 BCE



Roman plays were presented as part of a broader event, the Roman games. The games, held every September, are originally a harvest festival. Taking place in an area known as the Circus Maximus, the main events are sporting contests—**chariot races or boxing** matches. Clowns soon become one of the side shows, to be joined from 240 BC by plays—enjoying much the same status. A play of Terence's, in 165, fails to attract much attention because it is going on at the same time as a rope dancer and a boxing match.

Since 264 BC gladiatorial contests have also been part of Rome's entertainments. In popular terms make-believe drama proves no match for the excitement of real death. The Roman circus is more famous than Roman theatre.

Following the expansion of the Roman Republic (509–27 BC) into several Greek territories between 270–240 BC, Rome encountered Greek drama. From the later years of the republic and by means of the Roman Empire (27 BC-476 AD), theatre spread west across Europe, around the Mediterranean and reached England; Roman theatre was more varied, extensive and sophisticated than that of any culture before it.

While Greek drama continued to be performed throughout the Roman period, the year 240 BC marks the beginning of regular Roman drama. From the beginning of the empire, however, interest in full-length drama declined in favor of a broader variety of theatrical entertainments. The first

important works of Roman literature were the tragedies and comedies that Livius Andronicus wrote from 240 BC. Five years later, Gnaeus Naevius also began to write drama. No plays from either writer have survived. While both dramatists composed in both genres, Andronicus was most appreciated for his tragedies and Naevius for his comedies; their successors tended to specialize in one or the other, which led to a separation of the subsequent development of each type of drama.



Livius Andronicus



Gnaeus Naevius



Seneca

From the time of the empire, the work of two tragedians survives—one is an unknown author, while the other is the Stoic philosopher Seneca. Nine of Seneca's tragedies survive, all of which are adapted from Greek originals; his *Phaedra*, for example, was based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*. From the later years of the republic and

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(27 BC-476 AD), theatre spread west across Europe, around the Mediterranean and reached England; Roman theatre was more varied, extensive and sophisticated than that of any culture before it.

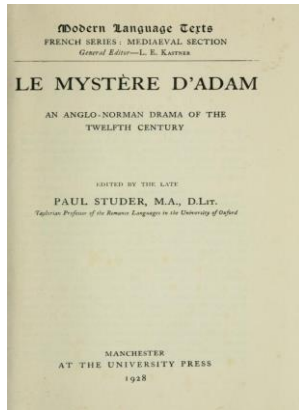
3. Medieval Drama

During the centuries of upheaval in Europe, after the collapse of the Roman empire, theatre played no part in life. But with the approach of the first millennium, in the late 10th century, Christian churches introduced dramatic effects in the Easter liturgy to enliven the theme of resurrection. The gospels described Mary Magdalene and two other women visiting the tomb of Jesus and finding it empty. In about 970 the bishop of Winchester, eager to emphasize this important moment, introduced a custom which was already in use in certain French monasteries.

During the Easter morning service in Winchester three monks enact the arrival at the tomb of the three women, while another (as the angel in the story) sits beside the high altar (the holy sepulchre). The angel, intoning in Latin, asks the women whom they are seeking? Jesus of Nazareth, they chant in reply. He says Jesus is not here, he has risen, go and tell the people. The three turn to the choir with a joyous *Alleluia! resurrexit Dominus* ('the Lord is risen'). From these small beginnings there develops the great tradition of medieval Christian drama. More and more scenes are enacted during church services, some quite boisterous. Herod, in particular, tends to make a lot of noise.

Mystery plays: 12th - 16th century

In about 1170, priests somewhere in France decide to move a performance to a platform outside their church and to give it in the language of the people. Their French play, the *Mystère d'Adam* ('Mystery of Adam'), introduces some very popular characters in medieval imagination—the wicked devils, who can be vividly enacted in the street but not inside the church. The play ends with devils arriving to tie Adam and Eve up in chains, before dragging them off with a great clatter of pots and kettles. They and their victims vanish into a hole from which smoke belches forth. The flaming mouth of Hell is set to become a standard and increasingly spectacular element in the mystery plays.



Over the centuries the narrative of such plays extends from Adam and Eve to encompass the entire Bible story, from the Creation to the Last Judgement. The lives of saints are also much performed, in what are known as miracle plays. The torments suffered by saints in their martyrdom give these stories a special appeal for medieval audiences.

Gradually the plays become longer and the productions more elaborate. In some places the performance lasts for an hour a day spread over a month, in others the entire biblical cycle is enacted in a dusk-to-dawn pageant lasting three days. In most of Europe the plays are done on fixed open-air platforms, usually along one side of a square, with little 'houses' or mini-stages set up for different scenes. A famous illustration of one such stage survives from Valenciennes in 1547. But in some places an entirely different style of performance evolves, with the players forming a long slow procession.

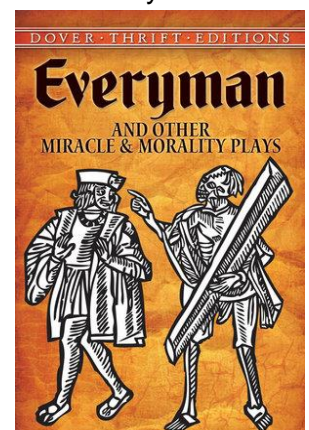
The term "mystery" refers to "the spiritual mystery of Christ's redemption of humankind." Mystery plays were typically written in "cycles" (a series) that would begin with the Creation, chronicle the major events of the Old Testament through the New Testament and the Last Judgment. The mystery plays "endeavored to make the Christian religion more real to the unlearned by dramatizing significant events in biblical history and by showing what these events meant in terms of human experience." They are thought to have evolved from the liturgies and plays that were conducted in Latin.



Wakefield," did this in his play *The Second Shepherds' Play*. As the play opens, the shepherds complain about the cold, the taxes, and the high-handed treatment they get from the gentry—evils closer to shepherds on the Yorkshire moors than to those keeping their flocks near Bethlehem. With this anachronism, this convention would help lay people identify with the characters and make the religious message, that Christian charity doesn't go unrewarded, seem more personal.

While the mystery play was "sometimes boisterous comedy," the morality play opted for a more austere, overtly didactic approach. *Everyman* is a strong example of this. While the name might imply an attempt at

Mystery plays produced in the vernacular (common language rather than Latin) in the streets of towns were a way of reaching a wide audience that included educated lay people and clerics as well as the unlearned folk. The authors of these plays usually broadened their appeal by giving the characters of the plays the appearance and characters of contemporary men and women. The Wakefield Master, "probably a highly educated cleric stationed in the vicinity of



personalizing the lesson, the lesson itself keeps the audience at a distance with its direct sermonizing. Where *The Second Shepherds' Play* opened with Coll complaining about the weather and social injustices, *Everyman* opens with a messenger preaching the moral of the story. The names of the characters such as Kindred, Death, Fellowship, and Good Deeds, reinforce the moral lesson through allegory, with every character behaving "entirely within the limits" as "defined by his name." Where *The Second Shepherds' Play* might seem like entertainment that happens to have a subtle message, *Everyman* appears to be a message or lesson that happens to subtly seem like entertainment. Most morality plays, including *Mankind*, do seem to "share with the mysteries a good deal of rough humor." The fact that *Everyman's* friends and relations abandon him so quickly in his hour of need might be construed as rough humor, but that humor is over-shadowed with the directness of the message of the play which is stated at the beginning and reinforced in the summary at the end of the play.

In parts of Europe, particularly Spain, the players perform on carts, each with its own scenery, moving through the town to appear before a succession of audiences. It is an ingenious way of bringing drama to more spectators than can be gathered in one place. These Spanish plays are known as autos sacramentales, 'eucharistic plays'.

The four English mystery cycles (linked with the cities of Chester, Coventry, Wakefield and York) are also of this kind. The plays are performed during the Corpus Christi festivities by different guilds, often with a direct link between their scene and their craft. The tailors are usually entrusted with Adam and Eve—who sew fig leaves to make themselves aprons.

The mystery plays go out of fashion in the 16th century. In Protestant Europe their broad humour and bawdiness offend the reformers. But this vigorous popular entertainment also seems unduly frivolous to solemn humanists of the Renaissance. Performance of the plays is banned in Paris in 1548. Many other places follow suit.

The exceptions are the strongholds of the Catholic Reformation, where the church recognizes the power of drama if doctrinally correct. The autos sacramentales still flourish in Spain in the late 17th century (many of them written by Calderon, a dramatist turned priest). Europe's best-known surviving cycle of plays, at Oberammergau, dates from 1634.

4. Renaissance Drama

Roman revivals and intermezzi: 16th century

In the spirit of the Renaissance, Roman plays are performed on festive occasions at the courts of Italian princes. Perhaps they prove a little heavy going for some of the guests. It becomes the custom to have rather more lavish musical entertainments (intermezzi, or intermediate pieces) between the acts, with spectacular stage effects, beautiful costumes and much singing and dancing.

Isabella d'Este (1474 –1539) was marquise of Mantua and one of the leading women of the Italian Renaissance as a major cultural and political figure. She much favored the intermezzi in which satyrs chase wild beasts in time to a musical clock, Swiss soldiers engage in a dance of war, and a golden ball melts away to reveal four Virtues who sing a quartet. The first intermezzi to be preserved in detail for posterity (because they are the first to be published as etchings) are performed to celebrate a wedding at the Medici court in Florence in 1589. The scenes are now close to those which



will become familiar to opera audiences over the next two centuries—they include a heaven made up of clouds (in which the characters can sit and sing), a delightful garden, a rocky cave guarded by a dragon, and a sea scene with mermaids, dolphins and a ship. This combination of music and spectacle is now so popular with courtly audiences that it leads to a new development in Florence in 1597.

London's theatres:1576-1599

The theatres built in London in the quarter century from 1576 are a notable example of a contribution made by architecture to literature. In previous decades there have been performances of primitive and rumbustious English plays in the courtyards of various London inns, with the audience standing in the yard itself or on the open galleries around the yard giving on to the upper rooms. These are ramshackle settings for what are no doubt fairly ramshackle performances.

In 1576 an actor, James Burbage, builds a permanent playhouse in Shoreditch—just outside the city of London to the north, so as not to require the permission of the puritanical city magistrates. Burbage gives his building the obvious name, so long as it is the only one of its kind. He calls it the **Theatre**. It follows the architectural form of an inn yard, with galleries enclosing a yard open to the sky. At one end a stage projects beneath a pavilion-like roof. In such a setting, custom-built, writers, actors and audience can begin to concentrate on dramatic pleasures. A second playhouse, the **Curtain**, rises close to the Theatre in 1577. A third, the **Rose**, opens in 1587 on the south bank of the Thames in the area known as Bankside. In that year one of these three theatres puts on a play which reveals how far English playwrights have progressed in a very short while—*Tamburlaine*, by Christopher Marlowe.



In about 1594 a fourth theatre, the **Swan**, is built close to the Hope. There are now two theatres to the north of the city and two south of the river. But soon the balance shifts decisively to Bankside. James Burbage, builder of the original Theatre, dies in 1597. Two years later his two sons dismantle the building and carry the timber over the river to Bankside, where they use it as the basis for a theatre with a new name—the Globe. This name resounds in English theatrical history for two good reasons. It is where Richard, one of the Burbage brothers, develops into one of the first great actors of the English stage. And it is where many of Shakespeare's plays are first presented.

The structure of the Globe and the other London theatres has a **significant influence on English drama** at its greatest period, because of the audiences which these buildings accommodate. Ordinary Londoners, the groundlings, stand in the open pit to watch plays for a penny. Others pay a second penny to climb to a hard seat in the upper gallery. A third penny gives access to the two lower galleries and a seat with a cushion. A few places in the first gallery, to left and right of the stage, are reserved for gentlemen who can afford a shilling, or twelve pennies. This is a cross-section of nearly all the people of London, and the audience is vast—with four theatres giving regular performances in a small city. It has been calculated that during Shakespeare's time one Londoner in eight goes to the theatre each week. A city of 160,000 people is providing a weekly audience of about 21,000.

Christopher Marlowe: 1587-1593



The year 1564 sees the birth of two poets, **Marlowe and Shakespeare**, who between them launch the English theatre into the three decades of its greatest glory. Marlowe makes his mark first, in a meteoric six years (from 1587) in which his life and his writings are equally dramatic. From his time as a student at Cambridge Marlowe seems to have been involved in the Elizabethan secret service. This dangerous work, combined with a fiery disposition, brings him into frequent clashes with the authorities. He is in prison in 1589 after a street fight. He is deported from the Netherlands in 1592 for the possession of forged gold coins. He is arrested for some unknown reason in London in 1593. And twelve days later he is murdered. Marlowe is killed in a Deptford tavern by one of a group of colleagues with whom he has spent the day. The official explanation is a row over the tavern bill, but it is possible that the event relates to his secret service activities. What is certain is that when he dies, short of his thirtieth birthday, he is already an extremely popular playwright with the London audience.

Marlowe's first play, acted with great success in 1587, is an event of profound significance in the story of English theatre. *Tamburlaine the Great* introduces the supple and swaggering strain of blank verse which becomes the medium for all the glories of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. *Tamburlaine* is so popular that Marlowe adds a second part, staged in 1588. In the remaining five years of his life his plays include *The Jew of Malta* (a melodrama of revenge, in which the Jew indulges in an orgy of killing after his money has been confiscated), *Doctor Faustus* (inspired by a recent biography of Faust, and setting the pattern for later treatments of the subject) and *Edward II*.

When Shakespeare arrives in London, in about 1590, the London stage belongs above all to Marlowe. By the time of Marlowe's death three years later only one of Shakespeare's undeniable masterpieces, *Richard III*, has been produced (with Burbage as the villainous hero). It would be hard to predict at this stage which of the two talented 29-year-olds is the greater genius.

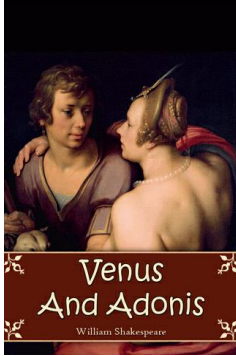


The life of William Shakespeare: 1564-1616

The mysterious death of Marlowe, the Cambridge graduate, and the brilliant subsequent career of Shakespeare, the grammar-school boy from Stratford, have caused some to speculate that his secret service activities make it prudent for Marlowe to vanish from the scene, and that he uses the name of a lesser man, Shakespeare, to continue his stage career. Others, similarly inclined to conspiracy theories, have convinced themselves that Shakespeare's plays are the work of the statesman and essayist Francis Bacon.



The truth is that William Shakespeare is not such an unknown figure, and the education provided in England's grammar schools of the time is among the best available. Shakespeare's baptism is recorded in Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 April 1564. Shakespeare's father, John, is a leading citizen of the town and for a while a justice of the peace. It is a safe assumption (though there is no evidence) that Shakespeare is educated at Stratford's grammar school. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway. Their first child, Susanna, is baptized in 1583, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585.

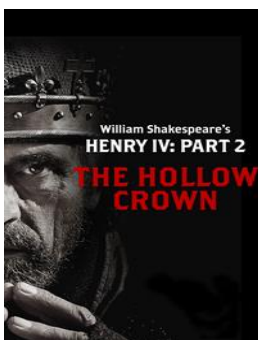


There is then a gap of several years in the documentary record of Shakespeare's life, but he is involved in the London theatre--as an actor trying his hand also as a playwright—by at least 1592, when he is attacked as an 'upstart crow' in a polemical pamphlet by Robert Greene. In 1593 he publishes a poem, *Venus and Adonis*, following it in 1594 with *The Rape of Lucrece*. Meanwhile he has had performed the three parts of *Henry VI* and, probably in the winter of 1592, *Richard III*.

The London theatres are closed for fear of the plague during 1592 and 1593 apart from brief midwinter seasons, but in 1594 things return to normal and Shakespeare's career accelerates. He is now a leading member of London's most successful company, run by the Burbage family at the Theatre. Patronage at court gives them at first the title of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. On the accession of James I in 1603 they are granted direct royal favor, after which they are known as the King's Men.

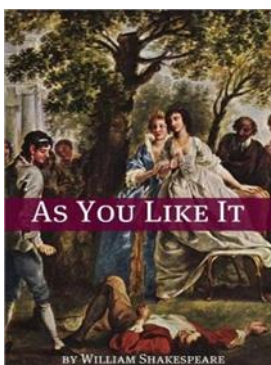
Shakespeare's share in the profits of this company, operating from the Globe on Bankside from 1599, makes him a wealthy man. Most of the subsequent documentary references relate to purchases in his home town of Stratford. In 1597 Shakespeare pays £60 for a large house and garden, New Place in Chapel Street. By 1602 he has enough money to purchase an estate of 107 acres just outside Stratford, and he continues over the next few years to make investments in and around the town. In about 1610 he begins to spend less time in London and more in New Place, where he dies in 1616. He is buried in the chancel of the Stratford parish church.

Shakespeare has shown little interest in publishing his plays, for like others of his time he probably regards them as scripts for performance rather than literature. After his death two of his colleagues, John Heminge and Henry Condell, gather the texts of thirty-six plays which they publish in 1623 in the edition known now as the First Folio.



By 1600 Shakespeare has conclusively demonstrated his genius in every kind of play except tragedy. In dramatizing English history, he has progressed from the fumbling beginnings of the three parts of *Henry VI* (1590-92) to the magnificent melodrama of *Richard III* (1592), the subtle character study of *Richard II* (1595), the jingoistic glories of *Henry V* (1600) and, most successful of all, the superb pair of plays about *Henry IV* and his wayward son Prince Hal. *Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2 (1597-8) present a rich panorama of English life, from court and battlefield to tavern and rustic retreat. They also introduce, in Falstaff, the most rounded and unforgettable

comic character in English literature.



Meanwhile Shakespeare has developed a sweet and delicate strain of romantic poetry, seen first in the tragic romance of *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and then in the comic romances *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596) and *As You Like It* (1599). And he has shown his skill in a more knock-about vein of comedy, with *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593) and *The Merry Wives*

of *Windsor* (1600). All these dates are approximate, to within a year or two, because there is in most cases no firm evidence of the date of first production. After 1600 there is one more play which combines broad and enchantingly romantic poetry (as in the very first line, 'If music be the food of love, play on'). This is *Twelfth Night*, and its first production possibly occurs less than a week into 1601.



Shakespeare's first attempt at full-scale tragedy, in 1601, brings to the stage a character, Hamlet, whose nature and weaknesses have prompted more discussion than any other Shakespearean creation. His prevailing characteristics of self-doubt and self-dramatization hardly seem promising material for a tragic hero, but Shakespeare uses them to create an intensely personal drama. *Othello* is the next of the major tragedies, in about 1603, with the 'green-eyed monster' jealousy now the driving force on the path to destruction. *King Lear*, in about 1605, is the most elemental of the tragedies, with the old king's sanity buffeted by storms upon an open heath as much as by his treatment at the hands of his unfeeling daughters. *Macbeth*, a year or so later, makes guilt itself the stuff of tragedy after ruthless ambition has set events upon their course.

In the years after *Macbeth* Shakespeare tackles two Roman themes. In *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607) the facts of history carry his two famous lovers to their tragic fates. In *Coriolanus* (1608) it is the arrogance of the central character which creates the drama—resolved only when his duty as a son, in response to the pleading of his aged mother, results in his own death.

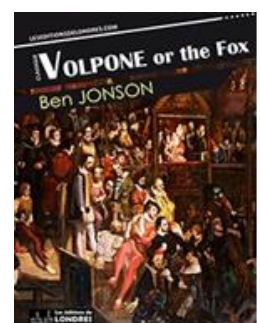
Shakespeare's last four plays, beginning with *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* in about 1608, share a pattern of rupture, retirement, renewal and reconciliation. Rather like the natural rhythm of winter, followed by hibernation and emergence into spring, the plots begin with violently evil deeds. The good characters somehow escape to safety and a new life, often with a new identity. Years pass and children grow up, until eventually all is resolved. In *Cymbeline* (1609) the tormented family is that of the historic Cunobelin, king of a Celtic British tribe. *The Winter's Tale* (1611), set in undefined classical times, takes place in the kingdoms of Sicily and Bohemia. *The Tempest* (also 1611) is set in a much more suitable context for any story of this kind, half real and half magic: 'The scene, an uninhabited island'. At the end of the play, when Prospero has brought the main characters together in reconciliation, he renounces his magic powers in a farewell epilogue. Prospero's final speech has often been seen as Shakespeare's own farewell to his theatrical career, relinquishing the magic with which he has conjured so many stories and characters into life on the stage. It may be so. But he is part author of one more play, *Henry VIII* (1613), and an event during one of its performances certainly puts the seal on his retirement. A spark from a stage cannon sets fire to the thatched roof of the Globe, which burns to the ground. The theatre is rebuilt, reopening in 1614 with a tiled roof. But the event is likely to confirm Shakespeare in his full-time withdrawal to his properties in Stratford, where he died in 1616.



Ben Jonson: 1606-1616



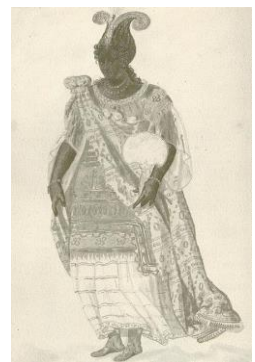
Ben Jonson, almost as prolific in his works for the stage as Shakespeare, achieves his most distinctive voice in two satirical comedies based on an interplay of characters seen as types. In the earlier of the two, *Volpone* (1606), the characters are even given the Italian names of animals



to point up their supposed natures. Volpone (the fox) pretends to be dying so as to extract gifts from people expecting an inheritance. Mosca (the fly) acts as his accomplice. A lawyer, Voltore (the vulture), hovers around the supposed death bed. A feeble old man, Corbaccio (the crow), is willing to disinherit his son for his own benefit. And a self-righteous Corvino (the raven) offers his wife to satisfy Volpone's lust.

Tricks played on the gullible also provide the comedy in *The Alchemist* (1610). Subtle, a confidence trickster pretending to be an alchemist, promises his victims whatever they most desire. A grossly self-indulgent hedonist, Sir Epicure Mammon, and two fanatical puritans, Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome, turn out to share the same longing—to possess the philosopher's stone, with which they will turn base metal into gold. By contrast a simple tobacconist, Druggier, wants nothing more than a design for his shop that will bring in customers. Kastril, an oaf up from the country, is mainly interested in discovering the fashionable way of being quarrelsome.

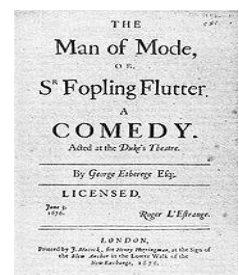
While writing his comedies for the public theatres, Jonson also provides masques for amateur performance at the court of James I. His first, *The Masque of Blackness* in 1605, is specifically written to accommodate the longing of James's queen, Anne of Denmark, to appear in the role of a black African.



A quarrelsome and touchy man, frequently in trouble with the authorities, Jonson is unusual for his time in insisting on the dignity of the craft of playwright. Whereas Shakespeare shows little interest in the survival of the text of his plays, Jonson arranges for his own works to be published in a splendid folio edition of 1616. Three years later, as if taking the point, Oxford university honours him with a degree as master of arts.

4. Restoration and 18th-Century Drama

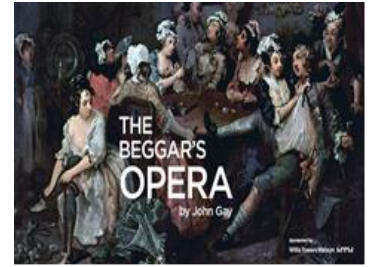
The theaters established in the wake of Charles II's return from exile in France and the Restoration of the monarchy in England (1660) were intended primarily to serve the needs of a socially, politically, and aesthetically homogeneous class. At first they relied on the pre-Civil War repertoire; before long, however, they felt called upon to bring these plays into line with their more "refined," French-influenced sensibilities. The themes, language, and dramaturgy of Shakespeare's plays were now considered out of date, so that during the next two centuries the works of England's greatest dramatist were never produced intact. Owing much to Moliere, the English comedy of manners was typically a witty, brittle satire of current mores, especially of relations between the sexes. Among its leading examples were *She Would if She Could* (1668) and *The Man of Mode* (1676) by Sir George Etherege; *The Country Wife* (1675) by William Wycherley; *The Way of the World* (1700) by William Congreve; and *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) and *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707) by George Farquhar.



The resurgence of Puritanism, especially after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, had a profound effect on 18th-century drama. Playwrights, retreating from the free-spirited licentiousness of the Restoration, turned towards sentimental comedy and moralizing domestic tragedy. *The London Merchant* (1731) by George Lillo consolidated this trend. A prose tragedy of the lower middle class, and thus an important step on the road to realism, it illustrated

the moral that a woman of easy virtue can lead an industrious young man to the gates of hell.

Satire enjoyed a brief revival with Henry Fielding and with John Gay, whose *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) met with phenomenal success. Their wit, however, was too sharp for the government, which retaliated by imposing strict censorship laws in 1737. For the next 150 years, few substantial English authors bothered with the drama.



5. 19th Century Drama and The Romantic Rebellion



In its purest form, Romanticism concentrated on the spiritual, which would allow humankind to transcend the limitations of the physical world and body and find an ideal truth. Subject matter was drawn from nature and "natural man" (such as the supposedly untouched Native American). Perhaps one of the best examples of Romantic drama is *Faust* (Part I, 1808; Part II, 1832) by the German playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Based on the classic legend of the man who sells his soul to the devil, this play of epic proportions depicts humankind's attempt to master all knowledge and power in its constant struggle with the universe. The Romantics focused on emotion rather than rationality, drew their examples from a study of the real world rather than the ideal, and glorified the idea of the artist as a mad genius unfettered by rules. Romanticism thus gave rise to a vast array of dramatic literature and production that was often undisciplined and that often substituted emotional manipulation for substantial ideas.



Romanticism first appeared in Germany, a country with little native theatre other than rustic farces before the 18th century. By the 1820s Romanticism dominated the theatre of most of Europe. Many of the ideas and practices of Romanticism were evident in the late 18th-century Sturm und Drang movement of Germany led by Goethe and the dramatist Friedrich Schiller. These plays had no single style but were generally strongly emotional, and, in their experimentation with form, laid the groundwork for the rejection of Neo-Classicism. The plays of the French playwright René Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt paved the way for French Romanticism, which had previously been known only in the acting of François Joseph Talma in the first decades of the 19th century. Victor Hugo's *Hernani* (1830) is considered the first French Romantic drama.

6. The Modern Drama

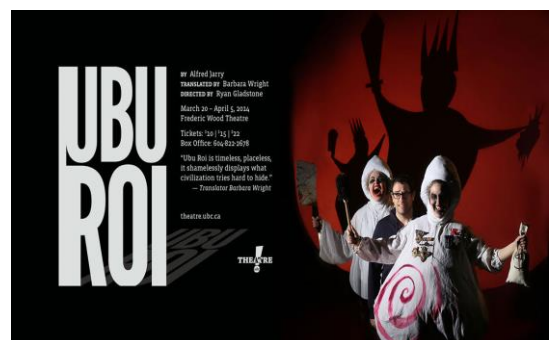
From the time of the Renaissance on, theatre seemed to be striving for total realism, or at least for the illusion of reality. As it reached that goal in the late 19th century, a multifaceted, anti-realistic reaction erupted. Avant-garde Precursors of Modern Theatre Many movements generally lumped together as the avant-garde, attempted to suggest alternatives to the realistic drama and production. The various theoreticians felt that Naturalism presented only superficial and thus limited or surface reality-that a greater truth or reality could be found in the spiritual or the unconscious. Others felt that theatre had lost touch with its origins and had no meaning for modern society other than as a form of entertainment. Paralleling modern art movements, they turned to symbol, abstraction, and ritual in an attempt to revitalize the theatre. Although realism continues to be dominant in contemporary theatre, television and film now better serve its earlier functions.

The originator of many antirealist ideas was the German opera composer Richard Wagner. He believed that the job of the playwright/composer was to create myths. In so doing, Wagner felt, the creator of drama was portraying an ideal world in which the audience shared a communal experience, perhaps as the ancients had done. He sought to depict the "soul state", or inner being, of characters rather than their superficial, realistic aspects. Furthermore, Wagner was unhappy with the lack of unity among the individual arts that constituted the drama. He proposed the Gesamtkunstwerk, the "total art work", in which all dramatic elements are unified, preferably under the control of a single artistic creator.

Wagner was also responsible for reforming theatre architecture and dramatic presentation with his Festival Theatre at Bayreuth, Germany, completed in 1876. The stage of this theatre was similar to other 19th-century stages even if better equipped, but in the auditorium Wagner removed the boxes and balconies and put in a fan-shaped seating area on a sloped floor, giving an equal view of the stage to all spectators. Just before a performance the auditorium lights dimmed to total darkness—then a radical innovation.

1) Symbolist Drama

The Symbolist movement in France in the 1880s first adopted Wagner's ideas. The Symbolists called for "detheatricalizing" the theatre, meaning stripping away all the technological and scenic encumbrances of the 19th century and replacing them with a spirituality that was to come from the text and the acting. The texts were laden with symbolic imagery not easily construed—rather they were suggestive. The general mood of the plays was slow and dream-like. The intention was to evoke an unconscious response rather than an intellectual one and to depict the non-rational aspects of characters and events. The Symbolist plays of Maurice Maeterlinck of Belgium and Paul Claudel of France, popular in the 1890s and early 20th century, are seldom performed today. Strong Symbolist elements can be found, however, in the plays of Chekhov and the late works of Ibsen and Strindberg. Symbolist influences are also evident in the works of such later playwrights as the Americans Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams and the Englishman Harold Pinter, propounder of "theatre of silence". Also influenced by Wagner and the Symbolists were the Swiss scenic theorist Adolphe Appia and the English designer Edward Henry Gordon Craig, whose turn-of-the-century innovations shaped much of 20th-century scenic and lighting design. They both reacted against the realistic painted settings of the day, proposing instead suggestive or abstract settings that would create, through light and scenic elements, more of a mood or feeling than an illusion of a real place. In 1896 a Symbolist theatre in Paris produced Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi*, for its time a shocking, bizarre play. Modeled vaguely on *Macbeth*, the play depicts puppet-like characters in a world devoid of decency. The play is filled with scatological humor and language. It was perhaps most significant for its shock value and its destruction of virtually all-contemporaneous theatrical norms and taboos. *Ubu roi* freed the theatre for exploration in any direction the author wished to go. It also served as the model and inspiration for future avant-garde dramatic movements and the absurdist drama of the 1950s.



2) Expressionist Drama

The Expressionist movement was popular in the 1910s and 1920s, largely in Germany. It explored the more violent, grotesque aspects of the human psyche, creating a nightmare world onstage. Scenographically, distortion and exaggeration and a suggestive use of light and shadow typify

Expressionism. Stock types replaced individualized characters or allegorical figures, much as in the morality plays, and plots often revolved around the salvation of humankind.

Other movements of the first half of the century, such as Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism, sought to bring new artistic and scientific ideas into theatre.

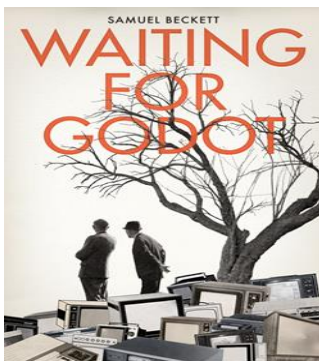
3) Ensemble Theatre



Perhaps the most significant development influenced by Artaud was the ensemble theatre movement of the 1960s. Exemplified by the Polish Laboratory Theatre of Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook's Theatre of Cruelty Workshop, Théâtre du Soleil, the French workers' cooperative formed by Ariane Mnouchkine, and the Open Theatre, led by Joseph Chaikin, ensemble theatres abandoned the written text in favor of productions created by an ensemble of actors. The productions, which generally evolved out of months of work, relied heavily on physical movement, nonspecific language and sound, and often-unusual arrangements of space.

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4) Absurdist Theatre



The most popular and influential nonrealistic genre of the 20th century was absurdism. Absurdist dramatists saw, in the words of the Romanian-French playwright Eugène Ionesco, "man as lost in the world, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless. Absurdist drama tends to eliminate much of the cause-and-effect relationship among incidents, reduce language to a game and minimize its communicative power, reduce characters to archetypes, make place nonspecific, and view the world as alienating and incomprehensible. Absurdism was at its peak in the 1950s with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Endgame* (1957), but continued to influence drama through the 1970s. The American playwright Edward Albee's early dramas were classified as absurd because of the seemingly illogical or irrational elements that defined his characters' world of actions. Pinter was also classed with the absurdists. His plays, such as *The Homecoming* (1964), seem dark, impenetrable, and absurd. Pinter explained, however, that they are realistic because they resemble the everyday world in which only fragments of unexplained activity and dialogue are seen and heard.

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6. Contemporary Drama

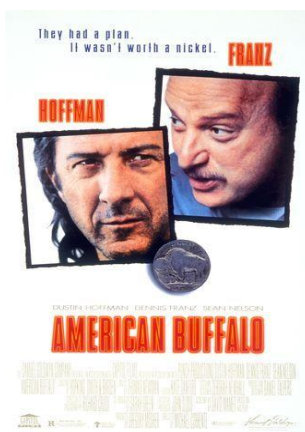
Although pure Naturalism was never very popular after World War I, drama in a realist style continued to dominate the commercial theatre, especially in the United States. Even there, however, psychological realism seemed to be the goal, and nonrealistic scenic and dramatic devices were employed to achieve this end. The plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, for instance, use memory scenes, dream sequences, purely symbolic characters, projections, and the like. Even O'Neill's later works—ostensibly realistic plays such as *Long Day's Journey into Night* (produced 1956)—incorporate poetic dialogue and a carefully orchestrated background of sounds to soften the hard-edged realism. Scenery was almost always suggestive rather than realistic.



European drama was not much influenced by psychological realism but was more concerned with plays of ideas, as evidenced in the works of the Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello, the French playwrights Jean Anouilh and Jean Giraudoux, and the Belgian playwright Michel de Ghelderode. In England in the 1950s John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) became a rallying point for the postwar "angry young men"; a Vietnam trilogy of the early 1970s, by the American playwright David Rabe, expressed the anger and frustration of many towards the war in Vietnam. Under the influence of Brecht, many postwar German playwrights wrote documentary dramas that, based on historical incidents, explored the moral obligations of individuals to themselves and to society. An example is *The Deputy* (1963), by Rolf Hochhuth, which deals with Pope Pius XII's silence during World War II.

Many playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s—Sam Shepard in the United States, Peter Handke in Austria, Tom Stoppard in England—built plays around language: language as a game, language as sound, language as a barrier, language as a reflection of society. In their plays, dialogue frequently cannot be read simply as a rational exchange of information. Many playwrights also mirrored society's frustration with a seemingly uncontrollable, self-destructive world.

In Europe in the 1970s, new playwriting was largely overshadowed by theatricalist productions, which generally took classical plays and reinterpreted them, often in bold new scenographic spectacles, expressing ideas more through action and the use of space than through language.



In the late 1970s a return to Naturalism in drama paralleled the art movement known as Photorealism. Typified by such plays as *American Buffalo* (1976) by David Mamet, little action occurs, the focus is on mundane characters and events, and language is fragmentary—much like everyday conversation. The settings are indistinguishable from reality. The intense focus on seemingly meaningless fragments of reality creates an absurdist, nightmarish quality: similar traits can be found in writers such as Stephen Poliakoff. A gritty social realism combined with very dark humour has also been popular; it can be seen in the very different work of Alan Ayckbourn, Mike Leigh, Michael Frayn, Alan Bleasdale, and Dennis Potter.

In all lands where the drama flourishes, the only constant factor today is what has always been constant: change. The most significant writers are still those who seek to redefine the basic premises of the art of drama.