

THEATRE IN LATE 16TH CENTURY ENGLAND

*By Master Stefano da Urbino.
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The theatre's transition from the medieval to the Renaissance is more readily apparent in England than in Italy or France. In those countries, the shift from medievalism to neoclassism was earlier and more abrupt. The Renaissance did not have as much of an influence in England until the early 16th Century, because of war and internal strife. Thus there are more gradual changes in the English theatre, showing characteristics of medievalism and the Renaissance simultaneously, during the late 16th Century.

As the rediscovered classics gradually found their way to England, English plays did begin to reflect their influence. Ralph Roister Doister (1552) by Nicholas Udall (1505-1556) of Eton Academy concerns a foolish boastful coward – very similar to *The Braggart Warrior* by Plautus – and his courtship of a widow. *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1566) written at Cambridge University by John Still (1543-1607) portrays two households whom disagree with or misunderstand each other over the loss of a needle. It fuses subject matter and characters in the manner of a medieval farce, yet also uses the techniques of Roman comedy. The Inns of Court, London's residences for the training of lawyers, also produced plays for private performance and important guests. *Gorbuduc* (1561) by Thomas Sackville (1536-1608) and Thomas Norton (1532-1584) was the earliest English tragedy, and makes a political statement supporting leaving the order of succession of the throne unknown, thus supporting the reign of Queen Elizabeth, who attended its performance.

Religious and political controversies, such as the line of Royal succession, and religious strife between Catholic and Protestant following the separation of England from the Catholic Church by Henry VIII in 1534, were the forces shaping mid-16th Century English drama. However when Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 she wanted no religious dissention and outlawed drama of a religious nature. There was a rapid development of secular drama as a result. Furthermore in 1588

the Spanish Armada was defeated, and there was a period of peace and relative domestic calm in which the theatre flourished.

At the start of Elizabeth's reign noblemen might maintain a group of actors; otherwise actors were very much considered vagabonds. In 1559 Elizabeth decreed a licence was also required to perform plays. Thus acting became a profession, the English theatre directly under the control of the government, and the licensed acting companies still in the patronage of wealthy nobles. This essentially made acting more secure, with daily performances stimulating the building of permanent theatres and the assembling of larger companies. The merchant class disliked theatre, many being part of the growing puritan population, whilst the aristocracy liked it.

The Earl of Leicester's Men were formed in 1574 and led by James Burbage (1531-1597). Burbage built the first theatre in London simply called 'The Theatre' in 1576. Another company known as Lord Howard's Men, later The Admiral's Men, was formed that same year. In 1583 the Queen became patron of her own company, The Queen's Men, who played regularly in London as well as touring through England. The plague of 1592-93 forced many troupes to dissolve or combine. In 1594 The Queen's Men were replaced by two reorganised companies, The Admiral's Men and The Lord Chamberlain's Men, and shared a monopoly over theatre performances in London. In 1603 The Lord Chamberlain's Men became The King's Men, and by 1604 all troupes were licensed to members of the Royal family, until the outbreak of Civil War closed the playhouses in 1642.

Theatre buildings were illegal within the city limits of London until 1608. Thus were theatres built outside the city limits. There were two kinds of theatre, outdoor or 'public', and indoor or 'private', and whilst both were generally open to the public, private theatres cost more, were smaller, and generally had a more select audience. Nine public playhouses were built between 1576 and 1642, the most important of these being the Swan (1595), the Globe (1599), and the Fortune (1600). They were typically round, rectangular or

octagonal, and could seat two to three thousand people. They had an unroofed 'yard' or 'pit' where 'groundlings' paid for the cheapest admission – standing room only. This surrounded the stage on three sides, and was itself enclosed by three tiers of roofed galleries, which cost more and provided seating, a private gallery costing most of all.

The stage was raised approximately six feet from the floor of the 'yard' and extended to the centre of it. While off-stage, actors waited and changed in the 'tiring house' at the rear of the stage. Doors in the 'tiring house' could be used to represent widely different locales, with the first and second tiers of the 'tiring house', also known as the lower and upper tiers, typically used by the actors. The third tier was typically a musician's gallery, although it too was sometimes used as part of the stage.

Above this was a hut for equipment and machinery, upon which a flag was placed to advertise a day of performance. The stage was also roofed – called 'the heavens' – supported by columns. Flying was a common special effect, performed with cranes and ropes, as were trap doors in the stage floor, for entrances and exits, and also fire, smoke and other effects. There might also be curtains and other drapery enlivening the stage and concealing the 'tiring house' doors. Public theatres were however too open to be used in Winter, and were typically only used about five months a year.

Less is known about the indoor theatres. They were smaller and fully roofed, and sat less than half the capacity of the public theatres. It is likely however that staging and seating arrangements were similar. The first indoor theatre was Blackfriar's, a former monastery, opened in 1576 and closed by 1584. New Blackfriar's was opened in 1596 by James Burbage. The King's Men used it after 1610 as their Winter stage. By 1642 there were six private theatres in London, which rose in popularity from about 1610 onwards.

By the last decade of the 16th Century acting had achieved a satisfactory level of financial and social stability. Actors were paid a yearly fee by the court plus other expenses. Most troupes self-governed themselves by sharing risk and profit. Some members of troupes owned theatre

buildings, and were known as 'householders', and hired 'hirelings' on salary. Troupes were all male, men or young boys playing womens' roles, and members might specialise in particular types of roles. Richard Tarleton (d.1588), William Kemp (d.1603) and Robert Armin (1568-1615) specialised as clowns, Richard Burbage (1568-1619) and Edward Alleyn (1566-1626) as tragedians. Troupes often performed large repertoires, with a different bill each day.

Such large repertoires needed a supply of new plays. Some of these new plays came from 'The University Wits', an informal group of scholars applying classical standards to the contemporary stage, including Robert Green (1558-1592), Thomas Kyd (1558-1594) who wrote *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) the most popular English play during the 16th Century, John Lyly (1554-1606) who wrote prose comedies, and Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593). 'The University Wits' helped develop elegant prose, complex protagonists, theatrical humanism and neoclassicism, and perfected blank verse such as rhymed and unrhymed iambic pentameter. (Metre of the form 'de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum'.)

Marlowe from Cambridge University is today the most critically acclaimed of the four. His focus was on the protagonist, using episodic stories to illuminate complex motivations. He developed the history play by rearranging, telescoping, and altering events to create a causal sense. His plays included "Tamburlaine" parts I & II (1587 & 1588), "Dr. Faustus" (1588) and "Edward II" (1592), but he died young, in a fight, aged 29.

Most prolific and famous of all today is William Shakespeare (1564-1616), who wrote 38 plays between 1590 and 1613, although the authorship of some is technically still in dispute. Like Marlowe he wrote histories, such as Henry IV, V, VI and VIII, and Richard II and III, and tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* (generally considered to be his greatest works), but also comedies such as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *The Comedy Of Errors* and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

He was an actor and shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men by 1595, and a shareholder in

the Globe Theatre by 1599. Actor, playwright, and sometimes director, Shakespeare attempted many popular forms and subjects, and his plays are highly dramatically effective. His reputation during his own lifetime was however less than Ben Jonson (1572-1637), John Fletcher (1579-1625) and Francis Beaumont (1584?-1616), and indeed the survival of his works at all has depended on fellow actors' Henry Condell (d.1627) and John Heminges (1566-1630) edition of his plays in 1623 called the First Folio. His fame grew in the late 17th Century and reached its peak in the 19th Century, with massive grandiloquent productions of his plays featuring forests of live flora and fauna being performed.

In general, Shakespeare's plays characteristically include an early point of attack (the early exposition and portrayal of conflict between two or more protagonists or groups of protagonists), several independent subplots that eventually merge together, a mixing of tears and laughter, and the portrayal of both gentle and violent passions. Time and space is used freely, and there is a sense of ongoing life behind the scenes. There are typically a large range and number of characters, both rich and poor, leads and walk-ons, yet all individuals. Shakespeare's plays possess highly varied language, at once elegant, ribald, witty and prosaic. The subjects of his plays come from mythology, history, legend, fiction, even other plays; but all is reworked to become his own.

Jonson is considered the best contemporary of Shakespeare; he certainly thought he were better. Perhaps the most influential of his own time, he was an actor turned playwright and wrote many 'masques' using masks similar to those of the Italian commedia style, and which King James enjoyed immensely. *Every Man in his Humour* (1598) is his best known comedy. In 1616 he was made England's 'poet laureate'. Yet his plays were limited in scope, clearly more harshly moralistic than Shakespeare, aimed as they seem at the reformation of immoral human behaviour, and concentrating on the foibles of contemporary stereotypes. Jonson's two tragedies *Valpone* (1606), for which he is best known today, and *The Alchemist* (1610), were critically respected flops.

Other less celebrated contemporaries include George Peele, George Chapman, John Marston, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and Thomas Middleton. Characteristic of their plays are an early point of attack, chronological organisation, short scenes developing action, use of both serious and comic tones, and an emphasis on hierarchical moral order, in which man can make choices but is ultimately responsible to forces greater than himself, typically the struggle between good and evil, although this is less obviously so than in earlier medieval plays. After 1610 there are further significant changes in English tragedies. They became arguably more technically proficient than those of Shakespeare, but the subject matter seems shocking or titillating rather than profound. Tragicomedy increased in popularity, exposition became more adroit, with scripts having fewer but longer scenes, alternating between the quiet and the tumultuous, and building in complication to startling and sometimes bizarre climaxes.

The style of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre production and performance is still a matter for dispute. To mount a play in the tradition of the era, barring the availability of a traditional public playhouse, requires a fluid and flexible production style. Small props and set dressings may be necessary, and costumes are quite important, usually contemporary English or European, except for animals, supernatural characters and the like, and the addition of toga-like drapery in the plays concerning antiquity.

Some argue that the acting style was formal and rather unnatural, since males performed female roles, scripts were often fanciful and supernatural, stage sets were conventional, and the large repertory of plays was somewhat repetitive in plot and characterisation. However it seems more reasonable to maintain that on the whole, the acting endeavoured to be natural and realistic, with contemporary references describing convincing characterisations, an emphasis on contemporary life and manners in many comedies, and the often poignantly accurate representation of human psychology. In either case, vocal quality and flexibility were absolutely necessary. But let us in closing consider what William Shakespeare, through Hamlet, has to say,

in his advice to players, in the play of the same name (1600):

In Act II, Scene II: "He that plays the king shall be welcome...the adventurous knight shall use his foil and target; the lover shall not sigh gratis; the humourous man shall end his part in peace; the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickled...and the lady shall say her mind freely..."

And In Act III, Scene II: "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped..."

"Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; ...o'erstep not the modesty of nature...the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature... Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably..."

"O, reform it altogether. And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though, in the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. Go, make you ready."

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