The English Drama

From the Beginnings to the Jacobean Period

(from the 12th century to 1625)
The Drama in the 12th Century and 13th Century.

The first forms of dramatic performance took place in the Churches during the Mass and they represented Old Testament stories, Christ’s nativity the Crucifixion …

In 1240 the Pope ordered that the ‘plays’ had to be performed outside the church.

Many theatrical forms developed:

- Mystery plays
- Miracle plays
- Cycle plays
- Corpus Christi plays.
The plays were:

- **dramatisations of the Bible**
- performed first in the **churchyard** and then on the **market square**
- presented **at Christmas, Easter and on other public holidays**
- organized by the **guilds** of carpenters, tailors ... who cooperated to produce the play and chose a play according to their craft or skills (e.g.: Bakers: The Last Supper/ Winemakers: The Wedding of Cana).
The Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

Influences:

- Henry VIII’s Schism from Rome and Reformation put an end to Medieval religious drama.

- Humanism revived interest in classical drama and plays of Plautus, Terence and Seneca were translated into English.

- An example of Seneca’s influence on English drama can be seen in the works of Thomas Kid. His most popular play was The Spanish Tragedy and it includes many Senecan elements.
The Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

Senecan elements

- **Horror** /Violence/Bloodshed
- **Villains**/ Corruption/Intrigue
- **Supernatural**
- The human motive of *revenge* to substitute the religious idea that divine justice and fate would punish those who broke the moral law.
- The division of the play into **five acts**.
- The soliloquy and psychologically **morbid characters**
Why Drama Flourished

- Theatre **appealed to all social classes** and plays could be understood both by the illiterate and by the intellectuals.
- There had been a **strong theatre-going tradition** since the Middle Ages.
- The theatre was **patronised by the Court and by the aristocracy**.
- The **language** of the drama was **less artificial** than that of poetry.
- The **prosperity of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods** meant that people had both time and money to go to the theatre.
The Principle of Order and Drama.
The Principle of Order and Drama

Drama was linked to the **Elizabethan** world which was based on the **Principle of Order**.

Early Elizabethan pictured the universal order as having **three main forms**:
- A chain
- A series of corresponding planes
- A cosmic dance

Early Elizabethans found comfort in the existence of a **great chain of being** stretching down from **God to angels, men, animals and to inanimate objects** (vertical level) and everything was contained and harmonized in corresponding several **classes of being** (horizontal planes).
The Principle of Order and Drama

Each class had its leader; e.g.: gold, lion, eagle, the sun and King. Everything in the universe contributed towards the development and well-being of other species.

Man was the central link:
- **his body** linked him to the animal world below him
- **his soul** linked him to the spiritual world above him.

Man was at the centre of the universe because the moon, the sun, all planets and stars revolved in orbit around the earth.

The king was a man who derived his power from God and held together the social and political fabric established by God and Nature.
Factors which Undermined Elizabethan Beliefs

A number of factors weakened late Elizabethan and Jacobean beliefs in the principle of universal order:

- The development of modern experimental science which displaced man from the centre of creation.
- The *Prince* by Machiavelli which rejected the notions of a divinely ordained political hierarchy.
- Fears of wars for succession.
Effects of the Disruption of Traditional Beliefs.

Many Elizabethan dramatists were concerned with the hierarchical order of the universe and what could occur if it was broken.

In particular Shakespeare highlighted in some of his plays some causes which could lead to the loss of the traditional order:

- unrest and civil strife;
- appetite for power/lust/…
- kings relinquishing their responsibilities;
- disobedience

He explored their disastrous effects:

disharmony, chaos, subversion of natural world and cosmic disorder; insanity and tragedy; characters are full of passions and doubts and question the world around them constantly.
Theatres and Acting Companies
The actors

Actors were descendants of Medieval street performers.

In 1572 a law classified actors as vagabonds putting them at risk of being imprisoned. To overcome the problem actors started working in companies patronized by noblemen.

These noblemen granted the actors a letter of permission which allowed them to travel around the country.

The company took the name after their patrons: The Earl of Leicester’s Men, The Lord Chamberlain’s Men ...
A theatre company was a commercial enterprise in which all partners were sharers.

At Shakespeare’s time there were about 20 companies in London.

The plays were property of each company and obviously were not published.

However ‘pirate’ versions were written shorthand during the performances; eg. the circulation of these illegal versions made the editing of Shakespeare’s works very difficult.

As acting was considered immoral there were no women in the companies and female parts were played by boys.

An average play had a cast of about 20 people:
- Main actors
  - Three or four boys for women’s roles
  - Six or more men played minor roles, worked as musicians, stage managers, wardrobe keepers, prompters.

Companies played in London in the winter and spring and travelled around the country in summer.
An Elizabethan Theatre

A CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE INTERIOR OF THE GLOBE PLAYHOUSE

AA Main entrance
B The Yard
c Entrance to lowest gallery
d Entrance to staircase and upper galleries
e Corridor serving the different sections of the middle gallery
f Middle gallery (‘Twopenny Rooms’)
g Gentlemen’s Rooms or Lords Rooms’
h The stage
i The hanging being put up round the stage
k The Hell under the stage
l The stage trap, leading down to the Hell
m Stage doors

n Curtained ‘place behind the stage’
o Gallery above the stage, used as required sometimes by musicians, sometimes by spectators, and often as part of the play
p Back-stage area (the tiring-house)
q Tiring-house door
r Dressing-rooms
s Wardrobe and storage
t The last housing the machine for lowering enthroned gods, etc., to the stage
u The ‘Heavens’
v Hoisting the playhouse flag
The Theatres and Conventions

Before building permanent playhouses, plays were performed in the yards of the inns.

Playhouses were built outside the city because they were considered immoral centres of corruption.

The first playhouse was The Theatre (1576) followed by The Rose, The Swan and the Globe.
Elizabethan theatres

Circular or polygonal
With **three tiers** of galleries around a pit.

The pit had **no roof, no seats** and was occupied by spectators who paid **the basic one penny ticket** and stood throughout the performance.

The stage projected out into the courtyard and had two parts:

- **The outer stage**: the main action of the play took place here
- **The inner stage**: used when a scene took place in a more confined place (e.g.: the tomb scene in Romeo and Juliet).

**Below** the stage there was a cellar called ‘**the Hell**’: 
Through the stage trap actors in ‘the Hell’ playing the parts of ghosts or fairies made dramatic appearances.

Over the main stage there was a place called ‘the Heavens’.

‘In the Heavens’ there was a place for the musicians and a hut housing the machine for lowering gods, angels…

At the back of the stage there was a tiring house were the actors changed.

If a flag flew from the top of the playhouse it meant that a show was in progress.
The performance took place in daylight.
The plays lacked intervals.
Elizabethan plays used no painted scenery and only a few properties (props): a chair, a throne ...
The setting was usually indicated in the characters’ speeches.
Death scenes were very gory and realistic and animal organs and blood were often used to make battle scenes more realistic.
There being no front curtain ‘dead bodies’ had to be carried off the stage at the end of the scene.
The elaborate sixteenth century costumes of the actors did not respect historical accuracy.