



English Drama: From Sacred Scripts to Stage Spectacle

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Abstract

English drama has evolved throughout more than a thousand years to display the spiritual and cultural and social transformations of society. The medieval church served as the origin of English drama because its liturgical performances evolved into three distinct play types known as Mystery, Miracle and Morality plays. The initial dramatic works united religious teachings with entertainment value which transitioned from sacred buildings to public stages to become central to community activities. The Renaissance brought back classical knowledge which led to the creation of English comedies and tragedies that followed the structures of Plautus, Terence and Seneca. The University Wits developed dramatic art through their work which created advanced dramatic techniques that led to William Shakespeare becoming the greatest English playwright. The theatrical form of drama has transformed throughout history starting with Restoration comedies of manners and continuing through experimental works by Eliot Beckett and Pinter until the present day. Modern playwrights examine political issues and identity alongside globalization to keep English drama alive as a living representation of human life.

Keywords: English drama, medieval theatre, university wits, Shakespeare, restoration comedy, modernism, contemporary theatre

English Drama: From Sacred Scripts to Stage Spectacle

English drama is a literary form that has captivated audiences for over a thousand years. It has evolved from its modest roots in medieval churches to the global stages we see today. English drama mirrors the changing aspects of society, culture, and human experience. The term comes from the Greek word "dran," which means "to do" or "to act." It is a type of composition meant for performance in theatre. In this form, actors take on the characters, perform the actions, and deliver the dialogue that has been written. Drama made its way to England through the Romans. The first recorded performance took place in 1110. A Latin play in honour of St. Katherine was performed in Dunstable.

Birth of English Drama

At first, religious dramas came into England from France. Their goal was to teach spirituality to people. During this time, drama was completely controlled by the church. English drama, as we recognize it, started in the medieval church. The Catholic liturgy was naturally dramatic, so priests began adding simple dramatic elements to religious services to make biblical stories easier for mostly illiterate congregations to understand. The earliest performances were liturgical dramas, which were brief scenes acted out during church services and were initially all in Latin. Mystery and Miracle plays emerged from religious drama.



Mystery Plays

Mystery plays were cycle plays that dramatized biblical stories, especially from the Old and New Testaments. They were performed by craft guilds, also known as "guild plays." Famous cycles include: York Cycle (48 plays), Chester Cycle (25 plays), Wakefield/ Towneley Cycle (32 plays), and N-Town Cycle (42 plays). These plays moved from inside churches to church courtyards, and eventually to town squares, turning drama into a community event.

Miracle plays

Miracle plays focused specifically on the lives and miracles of saints. They served both as entertainment and as a way to educate, reinforcing Christian teachings while providing moral instruction. These plays often featured stories of saints' martyrdom and miracles, moral lessons about faith and devotion, and impressive staging effects to show miracles.

Morality Plays

Morality plays marked an important evolution in dramatic form. Unlike mystery and miracle plays, they featured allegorical characters representing virtues, vices, and abstract concepts. They explored universal themes about the human condition and psychological drama, focusing on internal moral struggles. The best-known morality play is *Everyman* (c. 1510), which depicts Everyman's journey toward death and judgment, with characters like Knowledge, Good Deeds, and Fellowship accompanying him. Morality plays bridged the gap between religious drama and secular theatre, introducing psychological depth and universal themes that would influence later playwrights.

The Beginning of Regular Comedy and Tragedy

The rise of comedy and tragedy began with men's interest during the revival of learning. Writers sought inspiration from the classics. They looked up to Latin writers, notably the comedies of Plautus and Terence and the tragedies of Seneca. The first English comedy was written by Nicholas Udall. It was titled *Ralph Roister Doister*. The first tragedy in English is

Gorboduc, also known as *Ferrex and Porrex*, written by Thomas Sackville in 1561.

The University Wits: Pioneers of Professional Drama

The University Wits were a group of educated playwrights who changed English drama in the 1580s and 1590s. The University Wits include Marlowe, Kyd, Lyly, Greene, Lodge, Peele, and Nashe. These graduates from Oxford and Cambridge brought classical knowledge to popular theatre. The Seven University Wits improved the literary quality of popular drama. They introduced classical themes and structures, developed blank verse as the main dramatic form, and created complex characters with psychological depth in their works. Among them, Christopher Marlowe stands out. He gave us the "mighty line" of blank verse and powerful heroes who aspired to greatness, such as *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, and the *Jew of Malta*. His works paved the way for the greatest playwright of all time, Shakespeare. William Shakespeare and the Theatre of His time William Shakespeare inherited these traditions and refined them.

His tragedies, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, explore deep human emotions. His comedies, such as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, are full of wit, romance, and laughter. His histories capture the rise and fall of English kings. The theatres of his time, like The Globe, were open-air and round in shape. They had no scenery. The audience relied on the poet's words and their imagination. Shakespeare's plays appealed to everyone from nobles to commoners, which is why they remain timeless.

Modern and Recent Drama

After Shakespeare, English drama continued to evolve. The Restoration Age produced comedies of manners by Wycherley and Congreve. The 18th and 19th centuries saw domestic dramas and realistic plays influenced by Ibsen and perfected by George Bernard Shaw. The 20th century introduced experimental theatre with T.S. Eliot's poetic plays, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Pinter's modernism.



Recently, playwrights like Caryl Churchill, David Hare, and Mark Ravenhill have explored issues of politics, gender, migration, and identity.

Conclusion

The story of English drama starts in the church, flourishes in Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and carries on in today's modern stage. From religious teachings to examining deep questions about human existence, drama has always reflected life

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