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### Essay on Elizabethan Drama

*If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story. (From Hamlet)*

Out of all dramatic genres, tragedy ruled the English stage during the Elizabethan age. The English tragedy, at any rate, was not developed from the miracle plays, but from the classical models of Seneca. Seneca's tragedies are notable for the horrors, for their exaggerated character-drawing, their aggressively rhetorical language coupled with emotional hyperboles, and a wealth of epigram. By 1581, Seneca had become the first classical dramatist to have all his works translated into English. Gorbudoc (1562) was the first English play in Senecan form, and was followed by Gascoigne's Jocasta (1566) and Hughes's Misfortunes of Arthur (1588), both on the Senecan model. Most important of the Senecan plays was Kyd's The Spanish Tragedie (1593) and Philotas (1604). With Kyd began the tradition of the Revenge Play, many features of which are to be seen in Shakespeare's Hamlet, and in the work of late Elizabethan or Jacobean dramatists like Webster, Tourneur, and Marston. Other Shakespearean plays showing a strong Senecan influence are Richard III and Macbeth.

Elizabethan drama began and flourished in the hands of University Wits, matured to the fullest with the genius of Shakespeare and almost ended with the creative writer Ben Jonson.

#### The University Wits:

These young men, nearly all of whom were associated with Oxford and Cambridge, did much to found the Elizabethan school of drama. They were all more or less acquainted with each other, and most of them led irregular and stormy lives. Their plays had several features in common.

- (a) There was a fondness for heroic themes, such as the lives of great figures like Mohammed and Tamburlaine.
- (b) Heroic themes needed heroic treatment: great fullness and variety; splendid descriptions, long swelling speeches, the handling of violent incidents and emotions.
- (c) The style also was 'heroic'. The chief aim was to achieve strong and sounding lines, magnificent epithets, and powerful declamation. In this connection it is to be noted that the best medium for such qualities was blank verse, which was sufficiently elastic to bear the strong pressure of these expansive methods.
- (d) The themes were usually tragic in nature, for the dramatists were as a rule too much in earnest to give heed to what was considered to be the lower species of comedy. The general lack of real humour in the early drama is one of its prominent features. Humour, when it is brought in at all, is coarse and immature. Almost the only representative of the writers of real comedies is Lyly, who in such plays as Campaspe(1584), Endymion(1592), and The Woman in the Moone' (1597) gives us the first examples of romantic comedy.

#### 1. George Peele(1558-98)

Peele's plays include The Araygnement of Paris(1584), a kind of romantic comedy, The Famous Chronicle of King Edward the First (1593), a rambling chronicle-play; The Old Wives' Tale(1591-94), a clever satire on the popular drama of the day; and The Love of King David

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and Fair Betsabe(1599). Peele's style can be violent to the point of absurdity; but he has his moments of real poetry; he could handle his blank verse with more ease and variety than was common at the time; he is fluent; he has humour and a fair amount of pathos. In short, he represents a great advance upon the earliest drama, and is perhaps one of the most attractive among the playwrights of the time.

## 2. Robert Greene (1558-92)

Greene's four plays : Alphonsus, King of Aragon(1587), an imitation of Marlowe's Tamburlaine; Frier Bacon and Frier Bongay (1589), easily his best, and containing some fine representations of Elizabethan life; Orlando Furioso (c.1591), adapted from an English translation of Ariosto; and The Scottish Historie of James the Fourth (acted in 1592), not a 'historical' play, but founded on an imaginary incident in the life of the King. Greene is weak in creating characters, and his style is not of outstanding merit; but his humour is somewhat genial in his plays, and his methods less austere than those of the other tragedians.

## 3. Thomas Nash (1567-1601)

Nash finished Marlowe's Dido, but his only surviving play is Summer's Last Will and Testament (1592), a satirical masque.

## 4. Thomas Lodge (1558-1625)

Lodge's available works are comparatively less in numbers. He probably collaborated with Shakespeare in Henry VI, and with other dramatists, including Greene. The only surviving play entirely his own is The Woundes of Civile War, a kind of chronicle-play. The most famous of his romances is Rosalynde: Euphues Golden Legacie (1590), which Shakespeare is believed to have followed very closely in the plot of As You Like It.

## 5. Thomas Kyd (1558-94)

Out of Kyd's surviving plays, The Spanish Tragedie (abt 1585) is the most important. Its horrific plot, involving murder, frenzy, and sudden death, gave the play a great and lasting popularity. There is a largeness of tragical conception about the play that resembles the work of Marlowe, and there touches of style that dimly foreshadow the great tragical lines of Shakespeare. The only other surviving play known to be Kyd's is Cornelia (1593), a translation from the French Senecan, Garnier, but his hand has been sought in many plays including Soliman and Perseda (1588), the First Part of Jeronimo (1592), an attempt, after the success of The Spanish Tragedie, to write an introductory play to it, and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus.

## 6. Christopher Marlowe (1564-93)

Marlowe is one of the most renowned among the pre-Shakespearean dramatists. Marlowe's plays, all tragedies, were written within the period of five years (1587-92). All the plays, except Edward II, revolve around one figure drawn in bold outlines. Each of the plays has an artistic and poetic unity. It is, indeed, as a poet that Marlowe excels. Though not the first to use blank verse in English drama, he was the first to exploit its possibilities and make it supreme. His verse is notable for its burning energy, its splendour of diction, its sensuous richness, its variety of pace, and its responsiveness to the demands of varying emotions.

Tamburlaine the Great (1587), centred on one inhuman figure, is on a theme essentially undramatic, in that the plot allows no possibility of complication. The play is episodic and lacking any cohesion save the poetic one already referred to. Yet it contains much of Marlowe's best blank verse. Its sequel, The Second Part of Tamburlaine the Great (1588), is inferior to its predecessor. It contains still less plot and far more bombast. The Jew of Malta (1589) has two fine, economically handled opening acts, but deteriorates later when the second villain, Ithamore, enters. Edward II (1591) shows the truest sense of the theatre of all his plays. Its plot is skilfully woven, and the material, neatly compressed from Holinshed's Chronicles,

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shows a sense of dramatic requirements new in his plays, and indeed, in English historical drama. The play has less poetic fervour than some of the others and its hero is not great enough to be truly tragic, but it works up to a fine climax of deep pathos. In its multiplicity of 'living' characters and lack of bombast it stands apart from the other plays. Doctor Faustus (probably 1592) has good beginning, and an ending which is Marlowe's supreme achievement, but the comic scenes in the middle are poor and may be by another hand. The play contains some interesting survivals of the miracle plays in the conversations of the Good and Evil Angels. The Tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage (1593) is an inferior piece, in which Nash shared, and The Massacre at Paris (1593) is unfinished. A part of the superb ending of Doctor Faustus is created by Marlowe when Faustus realizes the near approach of his departure to Hell.

*Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,  
That time may cease, and midnight never come;  
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make  
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but  
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,  
That Faustus may repent and save his soul !  
O lente, lente curtile, noctis equi !  
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,  
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.  
O, I'll leap up to my God ! – Who pulls me down? –  
See, see, wher Christ's blood streams in the firmament !  
One drop would save my soul, half a drop; ah, my Christ –  
Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ !  
Yet will I call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer ! –  
Where is it now? 'tis gone: and see, where God  
Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows !  
Mountains and hills, come, come and fall on me,  
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God !*

(From Doctor Faustus)

## William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born at Stratford-on-Avon. In 1592, he appeared as a rising actor. His chief function was to write dramas for his company, and the fruit of such labour was his plays.

**His plays.** Concerning the plays that are usually accepted as being Shakespeare's, almost endless discussion has arisen. It was not till 1623, seven years after his death, that the First Folio edition was printed. In the Folio edition the plays are not arranged chronologically, nor are the dates of composition given.

### Classification of the plays.

**(1) The Early Comedies.** In these amateur plays, the plots are less original, the characters less finished, and the style lacks the power of the mature Shakespeare. They are full of wit and word play. Of this type are The Comedy of Errors, Love's Labour's Lost, and The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

**(2) The English Histories.** These plays show a rapid maturing of Shakespeare's technique. Figures like Falstaff illustrate his increasing depth of characterization, and the mingling of low life with chronicle history is an important innovation. The plays in this group, to which belong Richard II, 1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV and Henry V, contain much more blank verse than those of the earlier group.

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**(3) The Mature Comedies.** Here is the time when Shakespeare's comic genius flourished. To this group belong Much Ado about Nothing, Twelfth Night, The Merchant of Venice and As You Like It. The plays are full of vitality, contain many truly comic situations, and reveal great warmth and humanity. In this group there is much prose.

**(4) The Sombre Plays.** In this group are All's Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure and Troilus and Cressida. Though comedies in the sense that the chief characters do not die, their tone is sombre and tragic. They reflect a fondness for objectionable characters and situations.

**(5) The Great Tragedies.** Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear are the climax of Shakespeare's art. In intensity of emotion, depth of psychological insight, and power of style they stand supreme. Hamlet is seen contemplating suicide in his famous soliloquy:

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them. To die: to sleep;* (From Hamlet)

**(6) The Roman Plays.** These are based on North's translation of Plutarch's Lives. Julius Caesar shows the same concern with political security, and in its depth of character study is approaching the great tragedies. Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus follow the great tragic period. Both of them show some relaxation of tragic intensity. In Julius Caesar, Caesar tells his wife, brushing aside her fear that he will soon die, which he does:

*Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once.*

**(7) The Last Plays.** A mellowed maturity is the chief feature of this group, which contains Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, and The Tempest. The creative touch of the dramatist is abundantly in view; the style is notable and peacefully adequate. No more fitting conclusion —rich, ample, and graciously dignified would be found to round off the work of our greatest literary genius than these plays of reconciliation and forgiveness.

**Features of his Plays.** The extent, variety, and richness of the plays are quite bewildering as one approaches them.

**(a) Their Originality.** In the narrowest sense of the term, Shakespeare took no trouble to be original in traditional sense. Following the custom of the time, he borrowed freely from older plays (such as King Lear), chronicles (such as Holinshed's) and tales (such as The Jew, the part-origin of The Merchant of Venice).

**(b) Characters.** In sheer prodigality of output Shakespeare is unrivalled in literature. From king to clown, from lunatic and demi-devil to saint and seer —all are revealed with the hand of the master. Another feature of Shakespeare's characterization is his objectivity. He seems indifferent to good and evil; he has the eye of the creator. Thus the villain Iago is a man of resolution, intelligence, and fortitude; the murderer Claudius (in Hamlet) shows affection. Hence follows the vital force that resides in the creations of Shakespeare. They live, move, and utter speech; they are rounded, entire and capable.

**(c) Meter.** As in all the other features of his work, in meter Shakespeare shows abnormal range and power. In the earlier plays the blank verse is regular in beat and pause; there is a fondness for the stopped and rhymed couplet.

**(d) Style.** For an appropriate name we call Shakespeare's style Shakespearian. It is a difficult, almost an impossible matter to define it. There is aptness and quotability in it: sheaves of Shakespeare's expressions have passed into common speech. To a very high degree it possesses

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sweetness, strength, and flexibility; and above all it has a certain inevitable and final felicity that is the true mark of genius. His style, sometimes moves easily into the highest flights of poetry:

*That strain again ! it had a dying fall:  
O ! it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound  
That breaths upon a bank of violets,  
Stealing and giving odour.* (From Twelfth Night)

“He was the man”, said Dryden, “who of all modern, and perhaps ancient writers, had the largest and most comprehensive soul.”

### Ben Jonson

The comedy of humours is a phrase generally used in connection with Ben Jonson (1572-1637), who was the most influential dramatist of Elizabethan age, though certainly not the best. He was an extremely productive writer not only of plays, but also of masques, poetry and criticism. His comedies include Every Man in his Humour, Every Man out of his Humour, The silent Woman, Volpone, The Alchemist and Bartholomew fair. Jonson’s idea was that comedy should not be ‘true to life’ but ‘larger than life’.

Each character should be not so much a real man or woman as a personification of some human passion or weakness. He explains something of this in the introduction to Every Man Out of his Humour:

*As when some one particular quality  
Doth so possess a man that it doth draw  
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,  
In their confluxions, all to run one way,  
This may be truly said to be a humour.* (From Every Man Out of his Humour)

The word ‘humour’ is not used in any of its modern senses, but in the sense of a dominant passion or obsession. In Every Man in his Humour the rich merchant Kiteley has a young and pretty wife of whom he is madly jealous: jealousy is his humour, the passion that rules his whole life; the young hero’s father, old Knowell, is always worried about his son’s behaviour and safety: anxiety is his humour; Captain Bobadill is the talkative but cowardly old soldier: boastfulness is his humour.

In Bartholomew Fair Jonson shows us how the humours of various types of Londoners are taken advantage of by the hard-headed and quick-witted market people. One man is tricked out of his money because he fancies himself as a smart leader of fashion, another because he is proud of being clever businessman, and so on. There was in fact little that was new in the way Jonson invented his characters and constructed his plays; characters like the boastful soldier or the jealous husband were, as we have seen, at least as old as Plautus. What was new was the name ‘comedy of humours’, and the very questionable scientific support which Jonson found for it. He borrowed it from the beliefs of medieval doctors and scientists who thought that the human body was made up of four humours which corresponded to the four elements of the physical world—earth, air, fire and water. A man’s health and indeed his whole character, was thought to depend on the balance between the four humours in his body: thus, too much of the choleric (or angry) humours (corresponding to the element of fire in nature) made a man energetic and hot tempered too much of the lymphatic (or watery) humours (corresponding to water in nature) made him cold and spiritless. This kind of science was of course out of date even in Jonson’s time, but he found it useful as a support for his theory of comedy—just as modern writers sometimes like to support their literary theories by referring to out-of-date psychology.

Jonson’s importance does not depend on his theory of comedy, but upon his success as a comic dramatist. Every man in his Humour and Volpone, like most of his other comedies, are still to be seen

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on the English stage. In some way his comedies are more acceptable to modern audiences than the romantic comedies of Shakespeare; and perhaps this is because we live at a time when romantic comedy in general is out of fashion. It is not that love, and laughter are out of favour but that many of us prefer comedy with a satirical tone, comedy based (as Jonson said in the introduction to Every man in his Humour) on

*... deeds and language such as men do use*

*And persons such comedy would choose,*

*When she would show an image of the times*

*And sport with human follies, not with crimes.* (From Every man in his Humour)

**Summing up:**

The dramatic form continued to reign in the hands of extremely talented writers during the Elizabethan age. Along with Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson, many other wonderful writers successfully tried their hand at drama. The names are: Beaumont, Fletcher, George Chapman, John Marston, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Heywood, John Webster, Cyril Tourneur. Overall every aspect of theatre flourished during the Elizabethan Age and the literary genres like Tragedy, Comedy and History plays touched the zenith of theatre art.



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