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# UNIT 6 DRAMA AROUND SHAKESPEARE

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## Structure

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## 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit intends to introduce you to:

- origins of English Drama;
- the Miracle plays, Mystery plays and Interludes; and
- the major dramatists influencing the growth and development of English Drama around Shakespeare.

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## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

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The English Drama which at present has become a highly developed form of entertainment had its origin in the Church. The drama of Greece and Rome had considerable influence on the English stage. In the earlier medieval centuries in England, people could not go to anything like a modern theatre - the theatre came to them in the shape of the minstrel or the gleeman who went from one home to another of whom we hear in early song and story. The minstrels gave entertainments that are termed as recitals, and into their work got frequently introduced the idea of impersonation. Towards the end of the ninth century the Church which earlier had sternly repressed drama all along the Dark Ages (the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century), gradually began to use dramatic action to enrich its liturgy and to enforce its teachings. There were tropes or additional texts to ecclesiastical music. Sometimes these tropes were written in dialogue form. Later they were separated from regular services and presented on Easter and Christmas. Gradually they took the form of liturgical plays and became more complex. The major events of Christ's life were enacted by priests in the church. These plays enjoyed great popularity.

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## 6.2 ORIGINS OF ENGLISH DRAMA

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The origins of English Drama date from the eleventh century and it had its roots in the religious instincts of humankind. In the beginning, in the Dark Ages the Church was hostile to drama. It was later that the Church brought drama into utilization to preach and teach the truth of religion to the illiterate masses. Services were held in Latin which few could understand. Hence in early times the gospel stories were performed by the actors only with action without speaking.

Later special plays were written by clerics in which the actors spoke and acted. Drama was in complete control of the church with the performances held in the church with clerics as actors. The stories of the Mystery plays were taken from scripture narrative while Miracles consisted of stories dealing with incidents in the lives of martyrs and saints. These plays known as Mysteries or Miracles were earlier written in Latin.

As the Mystery and Miracle plays grew in popularity, more audiences came to watch them. There was not enough room for the crowds to fit in the church. The stage was shifted to the porch. With the increase in the crowd the stage was again shifted to the churchyard and finally to the marketplace. Soon the laity also started performing in the play with the priests later to be overtaken completely by the laity. With the change in locale and performers, the strictly religious plays underwent change and became more secular.

In the thirteenth century with the professional troupes taking over the responsibility of performance, there was remarkable improvement in their art of performance and stage techniques. Latin was later replaced by vernacular French.

In the Mystery plays the seasons of the year, Christmas, Easter, stories from the Bible depicted the subject matter of the play while the stories from the lives of saints were subject of the Miracle plays.

In the fourteenth century the guilds were entrusted to perform the plays in the market place. They carried on their work seriously. Any incompetence or unpunctuality would require them to pay heavy fines. It was customary for each craft to represent a play according to the trade.

The Miracle and Mystery plays developed immensely in the fourteenth century. The Miracle plays were divided into four cycles. Each cycle included the major events of the biblical history from the Fall of Satan to the Day of Judgment.

The next stage in the history of English drama is the Morality plays. The Morality play developed out of Miracle and Mystery plays. These plays were different from the Miracle and Mystery plays. Their subject matter was not stories from the Bible or from the lives of saints but were personified abstractions. The personifications of various abstract qualities like Perseverance, Gluttony, Sloth, Despair, Free Will, the Seven Deadly Sins, Good and Bad Angels were common.

The Morality plays presented the serious side of things. They depicted the strife between good and evil, the continual strife of life. These plays showed that the human being has choice, and the consequences of choosing wrong moral lessons could be more easily understood than they could in normal sermons. Morality plays put special emphasis on plot. The writers of morality plays had more freedom than those of the Miracle and Mystery plays, as the latter were required to follow a particular sequence of events in the bible or popular legend. In some Miracle plays the personified abstractions already existed with the characters of the bible. These abstractions were detached from the religious setting and presented separately in the morality plays. The most amusing characters of the morality plays were Vice and Devil. Vice was depicted donning a grotesque costume and armed with a dagger while Devil was presented with horns, long beard and hairy vest. Vice was mainly employed to thrash Devil.

The well-known Morality plays are *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Everyman*. The Morality plays still flourished till the end of the sixteenth century and continued to be popular in the heyday of Shakespeare's fame.

The 'Interlude' appeared towards the end of the fifteenth century and presented the lighter side of things. It could not displace the morality plays whose popularity

continued till the end of the sixteenth century. In the interludes there was a shift from symbolism to realism. It dispensed with the allegorical figures of the Morality plays and did away with the religious drama. It is purely secular and quite realistic. The most noted creator of interludes John Heywood (1497-1580) was also a court musician and entertainer to Henry VIII. His four P's are the Pardoner, a Palmer, a Pothycary and a Pedlar who have a lying competition in which the biggest is awarded the palm. The Palmer wins the palm by saying that out of half a million women he has met no one seemed to be out of patience.

The 'Interludes' were often acted by household servants. Most of Heywood's Interludes are farcical skits full of wit and humor and a realistic portrayal of men and manners.

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### 6.3 MAJOR DRAMATISTS AND THEIR WORKS

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Between 1530 and 1580 drama in England saw a sharp transition. With the dawn of the Renaissance the English dramatists began to get influenced by the Greek and Roman dramatists. They were influenced more by the work of Roman dramatists than by the Greeks. The tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Plautus and Terence attracted the English dramatists. These tragedies are characterized by excessive bloodshed, long rhetorical speeches and inclusion of the ghost. *Gorboduc*, is the first English drama written by Thomas Sackville (1536-1608) and Thomas Norton (1532-84). Played before Elizabeth at Whitehall in 1562 the play is on the model of Senecan tragedies. It has all the characteristics of Seneca's tragedies. There is excessive bloodshed, long rhetorical speeches, revenge as the leitmotif and the chorus between the acts. *Gorboduc* is the first English play to use blank verse. Following the Roman model, the play is divided into five acts which later became a universal feature for a tragedy.

Another important development of this period is the growth of the comedy. English Comedy was chiefly influenced by Plautus and Terence. The first English comedy was *Ralph Roster Doister* written by Nicolas Udall followed by *Grammer Gurton's Needle* written in 1553 by John Still. Both the plays are rich in humour. *Ralph Roister Doister* is divided into five acts in the Latin style and is written in rhyming couplets. The plot is laid in London and the characters and humorous dialogues represent the manners and ideas of the contemporary middle classes.

*Grammer Gurton's Needle* is inferior to *Ralph Roster Doister*. It has a loose plot which is based on a single incident. The play is crude, presenting the low country life.

Drama thus grew and developed from liturgical plays to comedy portraying the realities of life. The quarter century after the production of the play *Gorboduc* was a period of experimentation in English drama. This was a conflict between those who insisted on the classical tradition and those who wanted the strong national taste of the English public. In the end the conflict ended with more people opting for the national taste. The credit for the establishment of this romantic drama goes to John Lyly, Thomas Kyd, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nash writing in the closing years of the sixteenth century. The plays written by them mark a pronounced stage of development in the existing drama. Their works paved the way for Shakespeare who is indebted to them for bringing in and evolving Romantic drama. This group of scholars were commonly known as the 'University Wits' because they were all educated at either Oxford or Cambridge Universities. They were also members of learned societies and had liberal views about God and morality. Of these John Lyly and Christopher Marlowe directly influenced Shakespeare.

John Lyly (1554-1606) wrote plays which were very popular with the Queen and the court. His plays were not written according to the taste of the masses. John Lyly wrote eight comedies of which *Endymion* is the best. In his plays he puts more emphasis on language, wit, ingenuity and the grace of the dialogue. Plot and characterization do not hold much interest. Lyly gave a sense of sophistication and intellectual touch to comedy. His skill in puns, conceits and language was used by Shakespeare in his early comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. John Lyly amalgamates humour and romantic imagination in his plays which was followed by Shakespeare in many of his comedies.

Christopher Marlowe's (1564-93) contribution to English tragedy is vital and manifold. His plays *Tamburlaine*, *Dr. Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *Edward II* became models of tragedy and chronicle play for his immediate successors. Marlowe's plays were different from the conventional plays. His tragedy was different from Senecan tragedy which had revenge as the motive. Marlowe's tragedies had ambition as the theme. For example in *Tamburlaine* the theme is ambition for power. In his play *Dr. Faustus*, he brings in ambition for infinite knowledge as the theme. In *The Jew of Malta* ambition for gold is taken as the central issue. His concept of tragedy varied from the medieval concept of tragedy. In the medieval plays tragedy was depicted as the fall of a great man, while Marlowe revived the Aristotelian concept of the tragic hero. He portrayed flaws in the character of the tragic hero who is a superman and is over-ambitious. The heroes want to reach their ambitious destinations but perish because of the dramatic conflict between their ambition and the antagonistic forces of life. We find greater unity in his plays with greater technical and constructive skill as he matured. His use of blank verse in these plays is a great achievement.

Marlowe's use of blank verse was effective and a great dramatic medium essential in all tragedies that were put into use by his successors including Shakespeare for serious drama. His blank verse brought life and throbbing energy into the plays that were otherwise mechanical and lifeless. Shakespeare's narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* is inspired to some extent by Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. Marlowe's *Edward II* set an example for Shakespeare's plays *Richard III* and *Richard II*. Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is also inspired by Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*.

It was during the reign of Elizabeth I in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century that Shakespeare wrote plays, acted and was involved in running of the theatre company that performed his plays. Other important playwrights of the period were Ben Jonson and John Webster.

Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was a dramatist, poet and actor. All his writings were deeply moralistic and yet remarkably innovative. He is best known for his plays *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. Produced in 1606 *Volpone* is a dark comedy a sub-genre of comedy and satire where serious topics and events like death, mass murder, sickness, madness, terror etc. are treated in a humorous or satirical manner. A merciless satire of greed and lust, *Volpone* is among the finest Jacobean comedies.

*The Alchemist* is a comedy first performed in 1610 by the King's men (William Shakespeare's playing company, led by Richard Burbage). The locale of the play is Ben Jonson's contemporary London. The play *The Alchemist* is a powerful play and has a comical satire on greed and works through the exposure of that gullibility that is engendered by greed. The story of the play *The Alchemist* is built around the nefarious activities of three swindlers, Subtle, Face and the courtesan Dol Common.

The three types of plays that are studied today are histories, comedies and tragedies. Most playwrights specialized in one of these. Shakespeare was remarkable in that he excelled in all of these three types of plays. He had written tragedies such as *Hamlet* (1603), *Othello* (1604) and *King Lear* (1605); his comedies include *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* (1594-96) and *Twelfth Night* (1602) whereas history plays are *Henry IV* (Part I and II), *Henry VI*, *Richard II* and *Julius Caesar*.

During the years 1649 to 1660, the period of interregnum, English theaters were closed by the Puritans for religious and ideological reasons. With the Restoration of Monarchy in 1660, they flourished under the support of Charles II. The introduction of the first professional actresses and topical writing in this period attracted a large audience from among the rich and the poor. The new genres of the Restoration include heroic drama, pathos-oriented drama and Restoration Comedy. Some well known tragedies of pathos of this period were John Dryden's *All for Love* (1677) and *Aurengzeb* (1675) and Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682).

John Dryden (1631-1700) was a well-acclaimed English poet, literary critic, translator and playwright. He dominated the literary life of Restoration England to such an extent that the period was also known as the Age of Dryden.

Dryden's play *All for love*, a heroic drama, was written in 1673. It is a tragedy written in blank verse which is an imitation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and focuses on the last hours of the hero and the heroine. Thomas Otway (1652-1685) was an English dramatist of the Restoration period. Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, an English Restoration play is the most significant tragedy of the English stage of 1680s.

Among the Restoration plays there are some comedies that are popular even today such as George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1676) John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696) and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). Aphra Behn, the first woman playwright belonging to the period, wrote a number of comedies including *The Rover* (1677).

Sir George Etherege (1635-1692) was an English dramatist and his play *The Man of Mode* was considered the best comedy of manners written in England before the days of Congreve and published in 1676. William Wycherley (1640-1716) an English dramatist of the Restoration period, wrote *The Country Wife*, a Restoration Comedy. Printed in 1676, it reflects an aristocratic and anti-Puritan ideology and was controversial for its sexual explicitness.

Sir John Vanbrugh, another English dramatist, wrote *The Relapse*, an argumentative and outspoken comedy. William Congreve (1670-1729) wrote some of the most popular English plays of the Restoration period. *The Way of the World* (1700) is his best known work.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Restoration Comedy lost its popularity, to be taken over by sentimental comedy, domestic tragedy (such as George Lillo's *The London Merchant*, 1731) and also an interest in Italian opera. Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century drama went through a period of decline and in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, drama was no longer represented by stage play but by closet drama, a play written to be privately read in a 'closet'.

The Restoration period was followed by the writing of successful plays by Oliver Goldsmith (*She Stoops to Conquer*) and Sheridan who wrote *School for Scandal* and *The Rivals*.

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## **6.4 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit we have discussed the growth and development of English Drama during the time of Shakespeare. This unit has also discussed the major dramatists of this period who influenced the growth and development of English Drama. The work of some later dramatists has also been given a quick glance.

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## **6.5 EXERCISE**

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1. Discuss Mystery and Miracle plays.
2. Explain Morality plays.
3. Write a note on Christopher Marlowe's contribution to English drama.

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## **6.6 SUGGESTED READINGS**

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1. Beadle, Richard. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, U.K. 1994.
2. Arthur, Crompton, and Rickett. *A History of the English Literature*. UBS. Publishers Distribution Ltd. New Delhi. 1998.