

THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE AND THE RISE OF SHAKESPEARE (1558-1590)

Objectives of the module

This module will recount the conditions of Elizabethan drama prior to the rise of Shakespeare (1558-1590), focusing in detail upon the features of Elizabethan stage, dramaturgy and conventions up to 1590 and end the module by touching upon the rise of Shakespeare and the conjectural chronology of his early plays.

I. ROOTS OF ELIZABETHAN DRAMA – BEFORE SHAKESPEARE

Elizabethan drama had its roots in the drama of the Middle ages and the Renaissance brought in its wake the revival of learning along with the percolation of the European influences of Seneca and Plautus in tragedy and comedy respectively. However, the main characteristics of the drama of the Elizabethan age were of native origin, and reflected the spirit and the interests of contemporary English society. Throughout the Middle Ages the English drama, like that of other European countries, was mainly religious and didactic, its chief forms being the Miracle Plays, which presented in crude dialogue stories from the Bible and the lives of the saints, and the Moralities, which taught lessons for the guidance of life through the means of allegorical action and the personification of abstract qualities. Both forms were severely limited in their opportunities for portraying the depth and variety of human nature. Elizabethan drama drew upon these existing forms but reached a level of excellence and maturity hitherto unmatched in English Drama in terms of language and the in-depth exploration of the range of human emotions.

I.i Emergence, Nature and Features of Elizabethan Drama as a Form of Popular Culture

Even in an era when popular entertainment included public executions and cock-fighting, theatre became central to Elizabethan social life. As drama shifted from a religious to a secular function in society, playwrights and poets were among the leading artists of the day. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the popularity of plays written by scholars such as Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, John Lyly, and Thomas Lodge led to the building of theaters and to the development of companies of actors, both professional and amateur. These companies of players traveled throughout England, generally performing in London in the winter and spring, and navigating notoriously neglected roads throughout the English countryside during the summers when plague ravaged the city. By the time the earliest professional theatres were established in London there was already a very lively market for a diverse range of cultural products and services. The Globe, the Curtain, and other public playhouses were part of the technological infrastructure devised for the rapid circulation of cultural goods and services. The spectators of these performances were a heterogeneous assembly of anonymous consumers.



Elizabethan Stage

In spite of its popularity, the Elizabethan theatre attracted criticism, censorship, and scorn from some sectors of English society. The plays were often coarse and boisterous, and playwrights and actors belonged to a bohemian class. Puritan leaders and officers of the Church of England considered actors to be of questionable character, and they criticized playwrights for using the stage to disseminate their irreverent opinions. They also feared the overcrowded theater spaces might lead to the spread of disease. At times throughout the sixteenth century, Parliament censored plays for profanity, heresy, or politics. But Queen Elizabeth and later King James

offered protections that ultimately allowed the theatre to survive. To appease Puritan concerns, the Queen established rules prohibiting the construction of theatres and theatrical performances within the London city limits. The rules were loosely enforced, however, and playhouses such as the Curtain, the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan were constructed just outside of London, within easy reach of the theatre-going public. These public playhouses paved the way for the eventual emergence of professional companies as stable business organizations. Elizabethan theatres were makeshift, dirty, and loud, but nevertheless they attracted audiences as large as 3,000 from all social classes. Performances were usually given in the afternoons, lasting two to three hours. As in both ancient and contemporary theaters, each section of the theater bore a different price of admission, with the lowest prices in the pit below stage level where patrons stood to watch the play. Most performance spaces were arranged “in-the-round,” giving spectators the opportunity to watch both the play and the behavior of other spectators. Etiquette did not prohibit the audiences from freely expressing their distaste or satisfaction for the action on stage.

I.ii ELIZABETHAN/SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYHOUSES

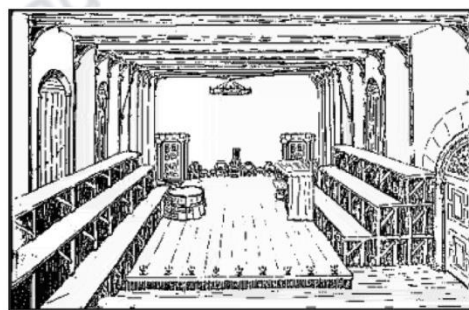
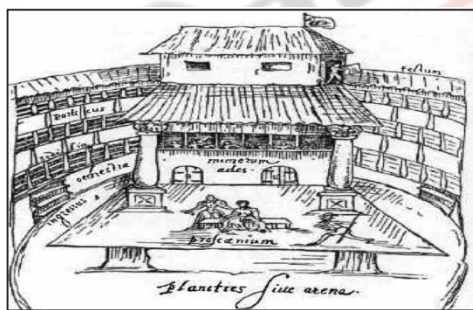
The great popularity of plays of all sorts led to the building of playhouses both public and private, to the organization of innumerable companies of players both amateur and professional. English Renaissance playhouses are often referred to as Shakespearean – they were the first commercial theatres in England and for which both Shakespeare as well as his rivals, the so-called University Wits, wrote plays. Companies of professional actors were performing plays in England from the latter half of the fifteenth century, but London, being the most populous city saw the building up of Renaissance playhouses – [the first coming up in 1567](#) (see information box below), at a time when Shakespeare was only three years old. From 1575-1578 nine playhouses were built.

Information Box:

The first commercial playhouse was built in 1567. It was a public playhouse, now called the Red Lion (based on the eponymous farmhouse in whose yard it was built) in Whitechapel. It was built by John Brayne, a grocer, in £15. It seems that Brayne quarreled with the carpenters who built the playhouse and the legal papers of the quarrels give details regarding the size of the stage—it was 30 feet in breadth, 40 feet in length and 5 feet high, had a trapdoor and a turret rising 30 feet from the ground. The construction was expected to be finished by July 1567 for the staging of a play called *The Story of Samson*.

I.ii a) PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PLAYHOUSES

The Elizabethan theatre evolved from that of travelling players performing in the yards of inns, to purpose-built theatres based on the amphitheatres of Ancient Rome and Greece, finally to the comfort of enclosed playhouses. In the England of 1575 there were two kinds of buildings, designed for functions other than the acting of plays, which were adapted by the players as temporary outdoor playhouses: the animal-baiting rings or ‘game houses’ (e.g. Bear Garden) and the yards of inns. Presumably, a booth stage was set up against a wall at one side of the yard, with the audience standing in it surrounding the stage on all three sides. Out of these open and make-shift playhouses grew two major classes of permanent Elizabethan playhouse, the ‘public’ and the ‘private’. In general, the public playhouses were large outdoor theatres, whereas the private playhouses were smaller indoor theatres. The maximum capacity of a typical public playhouse (e.g., [the Swan](#)) was about 3,000 spectators; that of a typical private playhouse (e.g., the Second Blackfriars), about 700 spectators. At the public playhouses the majority of spectators were ‘groundlings’ who stood in the dirt yard or pit for a penny; the remainder were sitting in galleries and boxes for two pence or more. At the private playhouses all spectators were seated (in pit, galleries, and boxes) and paid sixpence or more.



Originally the private playhouses were found only within the [City of London](#) (the Paul's Playhouse, the First and Second Blackfriars), the public playhouses only in the suburbs (the Theatre, the Curtain, [the Rose](#), [the Globe](#), [the Fortune](#), the Red Bull); but this distinction disappeared by 1606 with the opening of the Whitefriars Playhouse to the west of Ludgate. Public-theatre audiences, though socially heterogeneous, were drawn mainly from the lower classes—a situation that has caused modern scholars to refer to the public-theatre audiences as ‘popular’; whereas private-theatre audiences tended to consist of gentlemen (those who were university educated) and nobility.

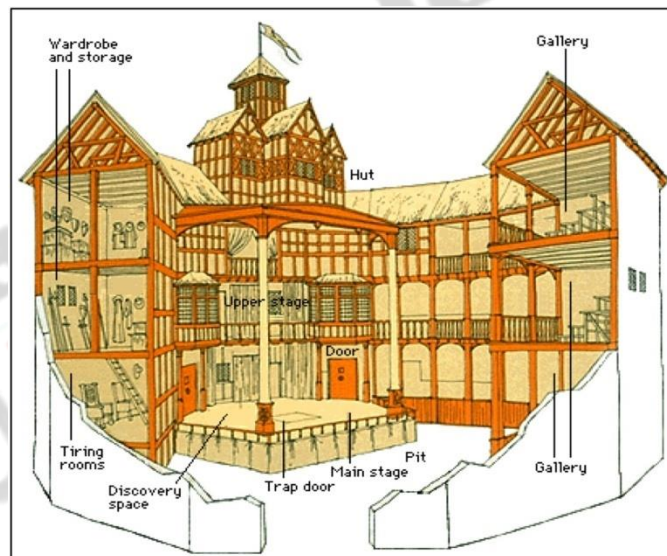
Information box:

The most famous playhouses which gradually started dotting London were:

the Rose. In 1585 Philip Henslowe leased ground called the Little Rose, about 94 square feet, on which he built a public playhouse called the Rose. He was the founder of a theatrical business which would rival James Burbage's. Henslowe was also the creator of a new theatre district, as the Rose was the first of the five public playhouses to emerge on the Bankside or the South bank of the Thames.

Towards the end of 1594, Francis Langley built the second playhouse on Bankside, the Swan

The old Medieval stage of ‘place-and-scaffolds’, still in use in Scotland in the early sixteenth century, had fallen into disuse; the kind of temporary stage that was dominant in England about 1575 was the booth stage of the marketplace—a small rectangular stage mounted on trestles or barrels and "open" in the sense of being surrounded by spectators on three sides. The stage proper of the booth stage generally measured from 15 to 25 ft. in width and from 10 to 15 ft. in depth; its height above the ground averaged about 5 ft. 6 in., with extremes ranging as low as 4 ft. and as high as 8 ft.; and it was backed by a cloth-covered booth, usually open at the top, which served as a tiring-house (short for ‘attiring house,’ where the actors dressed). The stage and Elizabethan plays were marked by starkness when it came to the use of props. Props were minimal and compensated by the richness of costumes and exuberance of dialogues.



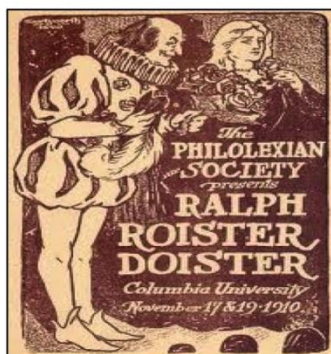
c) COMPANIES OF ACTORS

Elizabethan Acting Companies

Lady Elizabeth's Men (Princess Elizabeth)
 Leicester's Men (Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester)
 Lord Strange's Men (Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange)
 Pembroke's Men (Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke)
 Worcester's Men (William Somerset, 3rd Earl of Worcester)

A playing Company in Elizabethan England was either known by the name of its patron as in the ‘Earl of Oxford's Men’ or by its playing venue, as in ‘the Children of Paul's’. Children's companies, or boys' companies, were troupes of boy actors in Renaissance England. Records

show that the choir boys of Chapel Royal at Windsor were performing occasional plays by 1516, and the choristers of St. Paul's Cathedral by 1525. These groups, known as the Children of the Chapel and the Children of Paul's, often took part in pageants at court during the reign of Henry VIII. It was not until the reign of Elizabeth I that these groups began to form into professional companies. In 1576, Richard Farrant, then Master of the Children of the Chapel, purchased a lease on rooms at Blackfriars, intending to convert them for indoor performance. This first Blackfriars theatre was closed in 1584 because the plays were too politically daring. Meanwhile, the Children of Paul's, or St. Paul's Boys, were having great success of their own, presenting plays by John Lyly, and giving professional men's companies a run for their money. These boys' companies consisted of 8-12 boys of various ages who could be 'pressed into service, trained and regimented almost as if for military service, if their voices and looks were found appealing. The masters of the companies trained the boys in singing and acting, as well as in grammar and rhetoric, chiefly Latin. The masters also served all of the other functions required by a theatrical company; they were managers, directors, designers, and costumers—whatever a given production necessitated. The boys would play with their companies, as well as at times with adult companies, performing the parts of women. It is to be noted that many shareholders in the Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's company, for example, had been boy actors in their youth. The boys' companies fell out of favor due to their involvement in the [Martin Marprelate controversy](#) (1588-9), and they laid low during the 1590s. The boys' companies experienced a resurgence of popularity after Richard Burbage leased the second Blackfriars Theatre to the Children of the Chapel around 1597.

1st Comedy play

Ralph Roister Doister
by
Nicholas Udall in 1552

1st Tragedy Play

GORBODVC
by
Thomas Norton & Thomas Sack Ville in 1561

The adult companies with a significant presence at court in the 1570s and early 1580s included the Earl of Leicester's Men, the Earl of Warwick's Men, and the Earl of Sussex's Men. Repertory evidence for the early men's companies also comes primarily from the titles of plays in the revels accounts at court. Most of these adult companies started off as touring companies and later obtaining licenses. A significant event in the history of English playing companies occurred in March 1583 when Sir Francis Walsingham authorized Edmund Tilney, master of revels, to form a company under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth. It came to be called the Queen's Men, with Tilney choosing players from Leicester's Men, Sussex's Men and Warwick's Men, and for the next five years dominated theatrical activity at court, in the provinces and even in London. However, despite their significance and hegemony, the Queen's Men faded as a court and city presence after 1588. More is known about their players and repertory than about any company until the formation of the Admiral's Men and the Chamberlain's Men – with which Shakespeare was associated professionally.

Information Box:

Martin Marprelate Controversy (1588-90): The Martin Marprelate controversy was an Elizabethan religious and literary argument, which stemmed from the strict censorship policies enforced by Archbishop Whitgift. In 1586, Whitgift procured from the Court of Star Chamber, a decree forbidding the publication of books, pamphlets, or tracts not authorized by himself or the Bishop of London. This gave Whitgift control over the Stationers' company, control of the printing presses, and thus the ability to repress literature he considered slanderous or seditious. In effect, this decree allowed Whitgift to repress Puritan writings, which he considered heretical. In response, numerous Puritan pamphlets criticizing Whitgift, the bishops, and the Church of England, appeared under the pseudonym Martin Marprelate (1588-1589). The quality of satire in the Marprelate tracts is among the best in Elizabethan England.

d) LICENSING AND CENSORSHIP

The London Stage was the glory of the Elizabethan era, but its power was as feared as it was admired. The Queen and the Privy Council were concerned with possible displays of heresy and sedition, and wary of any political matter in the plays. More concerned were the City authorities, the Corporation and its magistrates, whose mandate was the maintenance of public order. Most concerned of all was the Church, as is seen in the many documents pressuring the government to close or curtail the theaters, ostensibly because two o'clock performances conflicted with religious ceremonies, also scheduled for two o'clock (Gurr 33), but also because they feared the effects on their flock of staged displays of sinful behavior and of opportunities for illicit assignations offered by a mixed crowd of men and women. The history of play-licensing in London really turns upon the attempt of the [City] Corporation, goaded by the preachers, to convert their power of regulating plays into a power of suppressing plays, as the ultimate result of which even the power of regulation was lost to them, and the central government, acting through the Privy Council and the system of patents, with the Master of Revels as a licenser, took the supervision of the stage into its own hands. (Chambers 277) It is no fiction or exaggeration that the Court official, called the master of revels, exercised a strict and careful control over the theatre of his day. The Master of Revels, deputy to the Lord Chamberlain, headed the Revels Office, the department of the royal household responsible for the coordination of theatrical entertainment at court. To perform at court was the ultimate goal of every Elizabethan theatre company and, even if certain renegade companies did not desire to gain a royal audience, they had little choice but to pretend to shape their every action to this end. 'Practising to perform at court for the monarch's entertainment was the only officially accepted excuse the playing companies could give for playing regularly in London' (Gurr 19). And, without the London audiences, it was unlikely that a troupe would survive. When the Master of Revels organized an upcoming season of performances he would summon the acting troupes so that they could audition before him and his three subordinate officers. The Master would then choose which companies would perform and which plays they were allowed to produce. If the Master saw fit, he would delete lines or passages and even request that entire scenes be inserted into the original material. Once the Master selected the plays to be produced before the royal court, he arranged for all the required costumes and scenery to be created by his own

seamstresses and workmen. In 1579 Edmund Tilney was appointed to this office, which before his accession was in disarray. The Master of the Revels was supposed to review plays for performance before the Monarch. In 1581 he was given a [Special Commission](#) (see information box below) by the Queen which authorized his role as licenser and censor of Professional theatre in London. Some have seen this as a step towards absolute state control of players and playmaking, as part of the concerted efforts to eradicate the Mystery Cycles and other religious drama which had close associations with Roman Catholicism. The nature of the office of the Master of Revels, its toleration and control go into revealing the kinds of pressure which fostered the work of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, Heywood, Webster, Massinger, Middleton Ford and their compeers. The kind of issues which were addressed by Tilney and his successors was to determine the development of theatre in the last twenty years of Elizabeth's rule and up to the Civil War. The Commission gave Tilney the power to force the troupes of Professional actors to rehearse their play repertoires before him, which alone would earn them license to perform in Court.

It was the function of the master to ensure, if not the absolute innocence of a play, but that its fictional veiling was adequate and that the members of the court or foreign visitants would not be seriously offended by its content. He also had to be alert to the issues which threatened public order and the only play which seems to have been censored by Tilney was Sir Thomas More, about a man seen as a Catholic martyr to Henry VIII, where the master's markings suggest his concern was by its implications upon public order and not its broader ideological implications. This is quite identical to the censorship of the 1597 quarto of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, with the abdication scene probably cut by Tilney as it showed the authority of the Parliament, which sanctioned the abdication, to be greater than that of the Monarch's. The Master's power extended beyond control of court entertainment to include censoring publicly performed plays, and issuing licenses to provincial acting troupes. This led to a gradual corruption of the office, and by 1603 it was common for the Master of Revels to earn ten times his yearly salary through bribes.

Information Box:

The 1581 Commission authorized Edmund Tilney to:

Warne commande and appointe in all places within this our Realme of England, as well within franchises and liberties as without, all and every plaier or plaiers with their playmakers, either belonging to any noble man or otherwise, bearing the name or names or using the facultie of playmakers or plaiers of Comedies, Tragedies, Enterludes or whatever other shows soever, from tyme to tyme and at all tymes to appeare or meane to set forth, and them to recite before our said Servant or his sufficient deputie, whom he ordeyne appointe and aucthorise by these presents of all such shows, plaies plaiers and playmakers, together with their playing places, to order and reforme, aucthorise and put downe, as shalbe thought meete or unmeete unto himself or his said deputie in that behalf. (Chambers, 1923, IV, 285-7)

e) PERFORMANCE AND CONVENTIONS

The evidence shows that a performance at court was very different from a performance in a public or private playhouse. It was for this honour, ostensibly, that the company worked all the year, and, when the master of the revels had selected, after competition, the companies and the plays they should perform, the author was often called upon to revise his play; and the performance ended with prayers for the queen. Elizabeth's accounts show an annual outlay for airing and furbishing up the court stock of costumes and appliances, besides considerable expense for wires, lights, properties and mechanical contrivances.

Acting in Elizabeth's England was frowned upon by many in society as a profession unsuitable for women, as it was rough and rowdy instead of genteel. As a result, women were not legally permitted to act on the English stage until King Charles II was crowned in the year 1660 (even though women were already acting in various European countries in Commedia dell'Arte plays for some years). Shakespeare and his contemporaries therefore had no choice but to cast young boys in the roles of women on stage.

In terms of stagecraft, Elizabethan drama used elaborate costumes, yet quite the opposite for scenery. Acting spaces were largely empty (bare stage) with isolated set pieces representing many of the same and minimal use of props (a single tree equaled a forest, a throne for a King's palace). This explains the use of rich dialogue full of imagery, as there was no set on stage to designate the scene's location. However, Elizabethan costumes were often rich and colorful, with a character's status in society being denoted by their costume, alone. There were no stage lights of any kind, with plays strictly performed during daylight hours. A simple balcony at the rear of the stage could be used for scenes involving fantastical beings, Gods or Heaven, while a trap door in the stage floor could also be used to drop characters into Hell or raise characters up from beneath. Entrances and exits were at two doors at the rear (tiring house) and not the side wings, as is the case in modern theatre. An Elizabethan actor exiting side stage may well have landed among the groundings after falling off the edge of the (three-sided) thrust stage that jutted out into the audience. To compensate for the barrenness of the stage props the language of the plays were rich in imagery and allusion. This can be well understood from the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

f) Transvestism

Few theatrical conventions intrigue modern readers as much as the concept of the boy actor who performed female roles. Women were not allowed to appear on stage until 1660. Before this time, acting for women was considered inappropriate and actually illegal. For one thing, the acting troops traveled around, sleeping in odd places. The proximity and lack of privacy certainly contributed to the prohibition of women becoming such itinerant actors. Because of the prohibition of women in theatre, young men-- usually prepubescent--played the female roles and dressed in women's clothing. In reaction to this condition, there was a condemnation of the Elizabethan theatre by some clergymen who contended that it was sacrilegious for men to dress as men, envisioning it as though it were "cross-dressing," a sexual aberration. The roles of women who were not young or so very womanly were played by the older male actors.

The taking of female roles by boy actors led to severe contemporary comment, controversy and moral unease even among the patrons of the theatre. Among the chief points of

opposition of the theatre was transvestism on stage. “The appareil of wemen is a great provocation of men to lust and lecherie”, wrote Dr John Rainoldes, an Oxford divine, in *The Overthrow of Stage Playes* (1599). The entire pamphlet is infused with the dangers of such cross-dressing and its threat to sexuality and morality.

g) PLAYWRIGHTS AND PLAYS (1558-1590)

It is important to realize that Shakespeare was not the only writer during the Elizabethan period. Elizabethan drama and its early practitioners were men such as Marlowe, Kyd, Greene, Peele, and Shakespeare, born in the decade 1555-66 and maturing in the 1580's, had demonstrated that playwriting could be a viable, even successful, career. They may not be as well-remembered as Shakespeare's but they have as much to do with the development of the Elizabethan Era and the development of theatre as Shakespeare did. Younger authors like Thomas Heywood, Ben Jonson, John Marston or Thomas Dekker, coming to London in the early 1590's and hoping to make a reputation with their pens found in the public theatres a unique opportunity. Not only did writing for the stage provide the first real possibility of literary professionalism but the increasing support of the theatre by the Court meant that the profession was beginning to acquire a moderate respectability. And indeed, writing for the theatre as a profession began long before Shakespeare was established in London. The first comedy of the Elizabethan age is attributed to *Ralph Roister Doister* by Nicholas Udall in 1552. As for drama, *Gorboduc* written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville in 1561 is often cited as the first tragedy in blank verse. It's also the first play in blank verse. It was performed for Queen Elizabeth in 1562. In the 1580's the craft of playwriting started to take off when a group of university educated young men (Oxford and Cambridge) decided to write for the stage. They were called the “University Wits.” Some of the writers in this group were Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, and John Lyly. It is worthwhile to know something about Shakespeare's closest contender Christopher Marlowe.

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury, England in 1564 and was the foremost Elizabethan tragedian next to William Shakespeare. Born into a temperamental and sometimes violent family, Marlowe was often in trouble with the law and this violent nature was later reflected in many of his plays. Despite this Marlowe showed a high level of intellectual capabilities and would attend Cambridge, graduating as a Master of Arts. He left for London in

1587 and his first play *Tamburlaine* was debuted later that year. His most well known plays include *Tamburlaine*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *the Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Marlowe's life was cut short when he was stabbed to death for unknown reasons in 1593, adding further mystery to this brilliant playwright's short life.

Thomas Kyd---There is little known about Kyd, (1558-1594) though he was thought to be a respected dramatist. His work *The Spanish Tragedy* was often performed and set the stage for revenge plays. Unfortunately, due to his association with Christopher Marlowe (the two were roommates) he was arrested and accused of heresy in 1593. Under intense torture he broke and declared that the atheist papers found in his place were Marlowe's. Though released, his career was ruined. He died broke in 1594.

I.iii SHAKESPEARE: THE BRIGHTEST COMET IN THE ELIZABETHAN ZENITH

William Shakespeare: Life Facts

- Parents were John and Mary Shakespeare.
- Born in 1564 and he died in 1616.
- Went to school at the King's New School in Stratford.
- Married Anne Hathaway when he was 18 and she was 26 in 1582. First child was born six months later.
- There is no documentation that Shakespeare went to university.
- His daughter Susanna was born in 1583 and twins Hamnet and Judith were born in 1585. Hamnet died in 1596.
- 1585 to 1592 are often called "the Lost Years" as there is little known about what Shakespeare did during this time.
- He spent time as an actor. There is evidence he acted in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* in 1598 and was still acting by 1605.
- The first known play produced in London was *Henry VI Part II* perhaps in 1590-1591.
- Quatro of *Titus Andronicus* appears in 1594.
- In 1596 he applied for a Coat of Arms.
- In 1597 he bought the largest house in Stratford and bought three more properties over the next eight years.
- Quatros of his plays with his name on the title page start cropping up in 1598.
- Became a shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1599.
- He probably returned to Stratford in either 1610 or 1611.
- Died in April 1616.

Today, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), is thought to be the luminary around whom the other celestials of the Golden Age of Queen Elizabeth I revolved. However, the assumption is quite far from the truth as, in an age of never-before boom of political and economic power, literature and culture too attained the peak of excellence, with literary figures abounding and dominating the cultural stage; where Shakespeare's rise and achieving excellence was not a smooth path without hurdles. However it is within this environment of literary rivalry, where he was ridiculed for his lack of University education and referred to as 'an upstart crow' that Shakespeare's art thrived and he reached the pinnacle of success and wealth. There is no simple explanation for Shakespeare's unrivaled popularity in the Elizabethan period, but he remains the greatest entertainer and perhaps the most profound thinker, with hundreds of editions of his plays being published, including translations in all major languages and his plays have probably been performed more times than those of any other dramatist. He had a remarkable knowledge of human behavior, which he was able to communicate through his portrayal of a wide variety of characters. His mastery of poetic language and of the techniques of drama enabled him to combine these multiple viewpoints, human motives, and actions to produce a uniquely compelling theatrical experience. Shakespearean drama, if it has to be understood in totality, has to be treated as the product of a culture which nurtured it and gave it its distinctive features.

Though lacking in a University education unlike many of his compeers and rivals – such as Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Robert Peele et al – his rising popularity and dramatic excellence elicited from them the snide epithets. The first reference to Shakespeare in the literary world of London comes in 1592, when a fellow dramatist, Robert Greene, declared in a pamphlet written on his deathbed:

There is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers heart wrapt in a Players hide* supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and, being an absolute *Johannes Factotum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.

What these words mean is difficult to determine, but clearly they are insulting, and clearly Shakespeare is the object of the sarcasms. Although the puritanical city of London was generally hostile to the theatre, many of the nobility were good patrons of the drama and friends of the

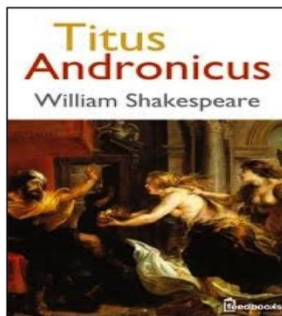
actors. Shakespeare seems to have attracted the attention of the young Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd earl of Southampton, and to this nobleman were dedicated his first published poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. How his career in the theatre began is unclear, but from roughly 1594 onward he was an important member of the Lord Chamberlain's company of players (called the King's Men after the accession of James I in 1603). They had the best actor, Richard Burbage; they had the best theatre, the Globe (finished by the autumn of 1599); they had the best dramatist, Shakespeare. It is no wonder that the company prospered. Shakespeare became a full-time professional man of his own theatre, sharing in a cooperative enterprise and intimately concerned with the financial success of the plays he wrote.

The scope of this module prevents a detailed commentary on the growth and development of Shakespearean oeuvre but needs to nevertheless mention some of his early plays written during the late 1580s and early decade of the 90s. There is little consensus among Shakespeare scholars and critics regarding the chronology of his plays prior to 1600 and different writes have given differing chronological lists of his plays. It is interesting to note that in the 1580s and early 1590s, Shakespeare wrote influential history plays revealing the ways in which they knowingly combine historical representation with self-conscious awareness of theatrical artifice and the transience of live performance. Shakespeare played an important role in creating and developing this genre, because other than comedy and tragedy, the history play did not have its origins in antiquity. *Richard III* is one of Shakespeare's history plays. These plays are all set in the history of England (roughly 1250-1500) and the actions and character of the king are central to these plays. *Richard III* was first performed in 1592 or 1593. Also important is *Henry VI Part I* written also during the early 1590s (for a Chronology of Shakespeare's Plays see information box):

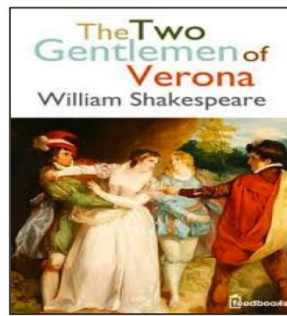
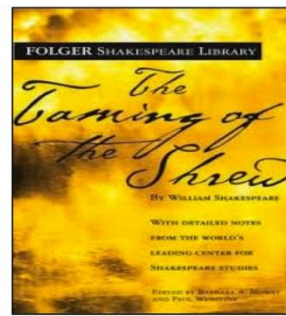
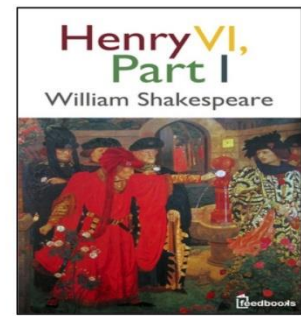
TITUS ANDRONICUS: Believed by many to be Shakespeare's earliest work, *Titus Andronicus* was probably written in the 1580s or early 90s. The play is Shakespeare's bloodiest, with rape, mutilation and fourteen killings, nine of them on stage. Yet the violence and spectacle of the play never overshadows the verse – Shakespeare's command of language and his vivid characters provide a fascinating foretaste of the great tragedies.

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a comedy by William Shakespeare, believed to have been written between 1589 and 1592. It is considered by some Scholars to be Shakespeare's first play, and is often regarded as displaying his first tentative steps in delineating some of the themes and motifs with which he would later deal in more detail; for example, it is the first of his plays in which shows transvestism – a heroine dressing as a boy. The play deals with the themes of friendship and infidelity, the conflict between friendship and love, and the passionate follies of young people in love.

HENRY VI PART I: *Henry VI, Part 1* is a history play by William Shakespeare, and his collaborator possibly Thomas Nashe, believed to have been written in 1591, and set during the lifetime of King Henry VI of England. *1 Henry VI* deals with the loss of England's French territories and the political machinations leading up to the Wars of the Roses, as the English political system is torn apart by personal squabbles and petty jealousies. Although the *Henry VI* trilogy may not have been written in chronological order, the three plays are often grouped together with *Richard III* to form a tetralogy covering the entire Wars of the Roses saga, from the death of Henry V in 1422 to the rise to power of Henry VII in 1485. The decade of 1580-90s was an important period for Shakespeare's composition of his History plays.



Titus Andronicus

The Two Gentlemen
of VeronaThe Taming of
the Shrew

Henry VI Part I

Early Plays

William Shakespeare's Plays:

Upto 1590s

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 Two Gentlemen of Verona | 2 Taming of the Shrew |
| 3 Henry VI part 1 | |

After 1590s

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 4 Henry VI, part 3 | 6 Henry VI, part 2 |
| 5 Titus Andronicus | 8 The Comedy of Errors |
| 7 Richard III | 10 A Midsummer Night's Dream |
| 9 Love's Labours Lost | 12 Richard II |
| 11 Romeo and Juliet | 14 The Merchant of Venice |
| 13 King John | 16 The Merry Wives of Windsor |
| 15 Henry IV, part 1 | 18 Much Ado About Nothing |
| 17 Henry IV, part 2 | 20 Julius Caesar |
| 19 Henry V | 22 Hamlet |
| 21 As You Like It | 24 Troilus and Cressida |
| 23 Twelfth Night | 26 Othello |
| 25 Measure for Measure | 28 Timon of Athens |
| 27 All's Well That Ends Well | 30 Macbeth |
| 29 The Tragedy of King Lear | 32 Pericles, Prince of Tyre |
| 31 Anthony and Cleopatra | 34 Winter's Tale |
| 33 Coriolanus | 36 The Tempest |
| 35 Cymbeline | |
| 37 Henry VIII | |

QUESTIONS-ESSAY TYPE (15 MARKS)

1. Write an essay on the rise and growth of Elizabethan Drama, tracing its sources from earlier English Drama.
2. Examine the nature of Elizabethan Drama and the reasons for its emergence as a form of Popular entertainment.
3. Write an essay on the features of Elizabethan Playhouses, audience and stage conventions.
4. Critically analyze the place of Censorship and the role of The Master of Revels.
5. If the seating arrangement in the different sections of the Elizabethan gallery defined the socio-economical differences, do you think that the 'difference' was in a way obliterated when the groundlings had a clearer view than the paying gentry who sat at a rearer position?

6. The lack of stage props was perhaps a boon in disguise. The dialogues evoked a better and more perfect imagination for the audience about the stage setting which the props could not. Would you agree?

WRITE SHORT NOTES ON (7 marks)

- A) The Boys' Companies B) James Burbage C) the Theatre D) Christopher Marlowe E) Martin Marprelate Controversy F) Lord Chamberlain's Men

OBJECTIVES

7. Name five important early Elizabethan dramatists and their important plays.
8. What was transvestism or cross-dressing?
9. What were the main charges of immorality against the theatre in the Elizabethan age?
10. What was the Stationer's Register? Why was it so important?
11. What are the roots of Elizabethan Drama?
12. Briefly discuss the performance conditions of Elizabethan drama.

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