

Tikrit University

College of Education for Humanities

English Department



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Drama

(English Renaissance Theatre)

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English Renaissance Theatre

English Renaissance theatre is English drama written between the Reformation (**Protestantism** encompasses forms of Christian faith and practice that originated with doctrines and religious, political, and ecclesiological impulses of the Protestant Reformation.) and the closure of the theaters in 1642, after the Puritan revolution. It may also be called **early modern English theatre**. It includes the drama of William Shakespeare, along with many other famous dramatists.

The Renaissance was a period of cultural rebirth that swept across Europe after the end of the **Middle Ages***. Starting in Italy, it made its way north over the course of centuries, reaching England in the 1500s. It was during this time that the great masterpieces of English theater were first composed and performed.

Art historians date **English Renaissance** theater rather precisely, between 1558 and 1642. **Queen Elizabeth I** took the throne in 1558, and her reign is often called England's "golden age." Along with producing the works of Shakespeare, England claimed victory over the Spanish Armada under Queen Elizabeth. The English Renaissance, and theater production with it, continued after Elizabeth's death, when England was ruled by James I and Charles I. However, it came to a sharp halt in 1642 with the outbreak of the English Civil War.

English Renaissance Theater: Background and Context

Theater looked very different before the Renaissance. In England, there were no established theater venues, and it was illegal to perform within the City of London. Instead, travelling troupes of performers took the stage at inns and in the

courtyards of court buildings. However, people did enjoy the theater, and there was high demand for more elaborate productions. This signaled the presence of cultural and intellectual developments that would prove essential for theater's success, due in part to the English Renaissance and the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

The Reign of Queen Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth is widely regarded as one of the greatest English monarchs. Elizabeth I is remembered for navigating a number of tensions that threatened to pull England apart. Instead of falling prey to these divisions, a united England stepped forth onto the world stage, winning major battles and commanding the respect of formerly superior rivals.

As a result of the peace that Elizabeth ensured within England, her reign was characterized by intense commercial activity. It is at this time that English ships started to sail the seven seas, reaching the newly discovered continents of North and South America. Newfound wealth and confidence left an indelible mark on English society under her leadership.

In addition to ensuring the peace required for trade, Elizabeth I had the good sense to remove some government obstruction in the realm of arts and culture. Elizabeth was a great fan of the theater, and asked numerous companies to perform in her court. It was under her reign that the first permanent theaters were established, and they continued to thrive under her successor, James I.

Elizabethan Theater: Facts and Development

Early playwrights built on the tradition of performances they had inherited from the Middle Ages. ***The Middle Ages** started with the fall of the Roman Empire. Most of Classical learning was lost in medieval times. The Middle Ages were dominated by religion and the study of theological matters. The Christian doctrine and Christian values were the measure of everything. During the Middle Ages, drama was looked down upon as evil and a means of corruption. The three main types of medieval drama are **mystery plays**, about Bible stories, **miracle plays** about the lives of saints and the miracles they performed, and **morality plays**, in which the characters personify moral qualities and in which moral lessons are taught.

Before Formal Theaters

Before 1576 performances were held at the informal locations such as:

- Inns
- Inns of Court
- Churches
- Schools

What are the characteristics of Renaissance theater?

Renaissance theater often took up themes and subjects from medieval times. Theater companies performed a different show every night of the week.

What was the purpose of Renaissance theater?

Renaissance theater was entertainment, but in its highest forms, it elevated the human spirit and provided insight into the nature of love and conflict. Renaissance playwrights are remembered as the greatest to ever walk the earth.

What happened to English Renaissance theater in 1642?

The rise of the Puritans* and the outbreak of civil war brought theater grounding to a halt. It wasn't until after the Restoration* that performances launched once again.

What was a famous theater during the Renaissance?

The Theatre was the name of the first successful theater venue in England. It hosted many of the nation's greatest playwrights.

Notes:

***The Puritans** were English Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries who sought to rid the Church of England of Roman Catholic practices, maintaining that the Church of England had not been fully reformed and should become more Protestant. The Puritans believed God had chosen a few people, "the elect," for salvation. The rest of humanity was condemned to eternal damnation. The Puritans are in power. The theatres are closed. Festivals are banned. Christmas is cancelled.

***Restoration** means the restoration of the monarchy in England in 1660. It is marked by the return of Charles II to reclaim the throne after his long exile in Europe. The theatres have returned after an 18-year ban. Though the monarchy was restored, most of the power was held by Parliament. This period of time is sometimes known as the Age of Neoclassicism.