

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 52
A Snapshot of Western Drama

Hi there, welcome to the 11th week of our course Elements of Literature and Creative Communication. Well, we began this week with an interesting book and more than that with an interesting philosopher Aristotle. We acquainted ourselves with the genius called Aristotle and his expertise in various fields and therefore, how he qualifies to be a true polymath.

In his work on drama which we identified as *Poetics*, we see Aristotle classifying drama based on its various elements. In fact, more than that of course, he identifies the two broad genres of drama as tragedy and comedy and he defines them briefly. And he goes on to give us a structural understanding of Greek tragedy, especially in terms of its 6 elements. So, we discussed all that in the last class.

During that discussion, I said that Aristotle's discourse on tragedy is based on his familiarity with the Greek drama, especially written by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and of course, Aristophanes. So, in this class we are going to take up a closer look at Western drama or origins of Western drama. Of course, for want of time and since it is an introductory class, more than a brief history of Western drama, you can call it a kind of a snapshot of western drama.

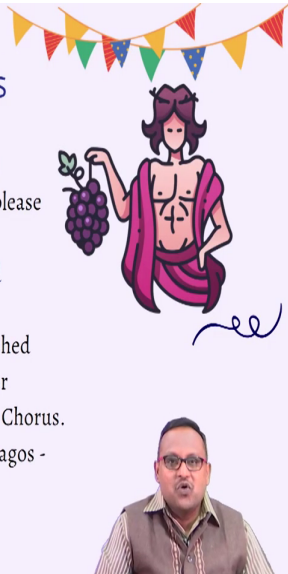
Well, ideally, we should have begun this week with a snapshot of Western drama and then come to Aristotle's *Poetics*, but I deliberately reversed the sequence because of course, we learned this technique called foreshadowing, right? What does foreshadowing do? It piques your interest by discussing briefly what is ahead, it piques the interest of the reader.

Similarly, by deliberately introducing you to a theoretical work that is based on the plays of the all these masters, I thought you would be more interested to know about these Greek masters who play a major role in founding an entire European tradition of drama, western tradition of drama. So, let us go ahead and take a look at the origins. How did exactly this western European drama begin? Of course, it has its beginnings like ancient poetry.

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Dithyramb: In Praise of Dionysus

- Western drama has its roots in the Greek liturgical tradition; in 600 BCE it began as performances to please the god of wine, fertility & vegetation: Dionysus.
- The choral songs dedicated to Dionysus were called **Dithyramb**.
- New possibilities of drama and theatre were unleashed when a single character wearing different masks for different characters was introduced along with the Chorus.
- the earliest performances were tragedies (Greek: tragos - goat; either offered as sacrifice or the prize)



It has its beginnings in liturgical tradition, various religious traditions. So, approximately speaking, in 600 BCE, drama began as some kind of performance, a poetic performance to please the god of wine, fertility and vegetation called Dionysus. In other words, drama is a genre of literature that is basically dedicated to the god of wine, fertility, and vegetation in the Greek context, called Dionysus. He is the patron god of drama.

So, it began with the choral performances. Chorus we have already identified as a group of singers who play various roles, who have an extraordinary role during their performance.




So, drama begins as a choral song dedicated to praise Dionysus and these choral songs were called Dithyrambs. In other words, you find the genesis of Western drama, Greek drama in dithyrambs, they were the primitive versions of drama. Well later of course, lot many additions went on happening to that and what we call a full-fledged drama has its genesis in Dithyramb, that is what we can know.

The earliest performances were tragedies. Remember why were they called tragedies, we touched upon that right? In Greek, 'tragedy', the root word is 'tragos' that is goat. May be, they were offered as a prize when there were competitions. Remember, Athens conducted annual drama festival and all of them performed there. Whichever playwright won the first prize was either offered goat as a prize or maybe goat referred to some kind of a sacrifice, may be to commemorate Dionysus or to celebrate Dionysus. So, tragedy has its roots there.

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Thespis: The First Actor & Dramatist

- During 6th century BCE, a competition used to be held in the Greek city Dionysia in honour of Dionysus. and it featured competitions in music, singing, dance and poetry.
- In 534 BC in Athens's First Drama Festival, Thespis won the award a Tragedy play; he marveled the audience by leaping on to the back of a wooden cart and reciting poetry as if he was the characters whose lines he was reading.
- In doing so he became the world's first actor, and it is from him that we get the word 'thespian' meaning 'pertaining to drama/theatre'.



Now, out of Dithyramb emerges full-fledged plays, but what is the first step? Now, here is the first step, from dithyramb you have Thespis, like we identified Enheduanna as the first known author in the history of human literature.

Thespis is the first known actor and dramatist in the history of human drama especially western drama. Because in the 6th century BCE, when there was competition, when for the first time Athens conducted a dramatic festival, Thespis won the first prize. He marvelled the audience by leaping out of the cart and then reciting poetry as if he was reciting the various characters in a particular play as they were speaking. Of course, he made use of masks in order to portray different characters.


So, we identified first you have choral songs which were called Dithyrambs and then you have one actor join the choral performances and this was the first actor who joined and stretched the scope of drama to chorus plus one actor doing very many roles.

Of course, he composed his own plays, especially tragedies, and began performing. So, we have the first actor in Thespis, that is why today, in order to refer to a great actor we call that person a 'thespian'. A 'thespian' means an exemplary actor. It is a word related to drama and theatre; you could call an extraordinary actor a thespian. From Thespis, the nature of the nature and scope of drama went on increasing. There is no looking back.


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FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN DRAMA:
AESCHYLUS

- **Structural Changes:** Reduced Chorus (from 50 - 12); introducing the 2nd character; tragic hero of noble birth
- Foundation of the aesthetic drama and its influence for 2000 years
- **Vertical Scale of Drama & 3 tier structure:**
 - Above on a Pedestal: the seat of the gods,
 - Down below: place of exile and punishment
 - Middle: a flat circle of the Earth, circular orchestra where the chorus performed
- **7 Surviving Tragedies:** The Persians (472 BC); The Suppliants (463 BC); The Oresteia Trilogy - Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers & The Eumenides (458 BC); Prometheus Bound (410 BC)



Roman bust of Aeschylus dating to 30 BCE



Because having seen Thespis add one character, then we have another genius called Aeschylus who is actually the founder of western drama, because now stretching the scope of drama from one actor to two actors he began composing his tragedies. Therefore, for most of the dramatic techniques that you and I find today, we owe a debt of gratitude to Aeschylus as such, because as I said, he brings in a lot of structural changes.

Earlier chorus had something like 50 singers, almost reciting various things. Now, for the first time he realizes that chorus could be reduced. Therefore, he reduces the number of singers in chorus from 50 to almost 12 and then the second is, apart from the first character which Thespis had introduced, Aeschylus introduces the second character.

And it is he who almost lays the foundation for the protagonist of the play to be of noble birth and having some extraordinary qualities and a complex plot. We discussed complex tragedies and simple tragedies in the previous class.

So, he was the one to add lot many twists to the plots. Therefore, you can call Aeschylus the founder of the aesthetic drama, and his influence spread for more than 2000 years. Even to this day we owe a debt of gratitude to Aeschylus as such. More than that, he introduced what can be called a vertical scale of drama.

When we say a vertical scale of drama, it has got to do with the structure of stage. In fact, he designed the stage in such that there is a 3-tier, imagine the stage is an area where actors

perform. So, it is a 3-tier stage, on the first tier above the pedestal you have seats of gods; obviously, Greek drama made use of various gods including Dionysus, Zeus, many other gods come and go.

So, whenever a character that is to depict God, they usually would go and sit on the pedestal to indicate reverence. So, that is a divine seat. Then tier 3 is a place of exile and punishment. and the middle place is a fair circle of Earth where the human characters come and act their role.

Now, think of it as some kind of the middle stage as earth, where human mortals are there, and the downstage below is a pit, where if a character has been cursed and is exiled as a mode of punishment they are made to go stand there or sit there and perform their role, and there are gods on the above.

It is called a vertical scale in drama. And later in the hands of contemporary playwrights this vertical scale undergoes lot of transformation.

Aeschylus wrote several plays, several tragedies especially. It said about 30 of them, more than 30 plays he seems to have written. And, we have so far about 7 surviving tragedies that are attributed to Aeschylus and the greatness of Aeschylus is also this that he created what can be called a dramatic cycle.

So, a couple of plays joined together by a common thread, an extraordinary technique. Especially *The Oresteia Trilogy*, that consists of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and of course, *the Eumenides*: these are the three cycles of play related to one particular theme, *The Oresteia trilogy*. So, for the first time he introduces this and that is also another major structural change.

And you have the first play. *The Persians* by Aeschylus composed in 472 BC and followed by *The Suppliants*, and you have *Prometheus Bound* written in 410 BC. These are some of the surviving tragedies. Especially, *Agamemnon* and *The Eumenides* are widely read plays by Aeschylus.

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Sophocles (496-406 B.C.E.)

- Sophocles is considered the best of the three major tragedians. Legends have it that he won 24 contests in the Festival of Dionysus.
- Among the 120+ plays he penned, **7 plays are extant today** in their entirety. His *Oedipus the King* is arguably the best Greek tragedy of all times.
- His most **significant contributions** to the theatre were addition of the third actor, limiting the number of chorus to 15 people and introduction of scene paintings.
- *Antigone, Electra, Ajax, Oedipus at Colonus* are some of his other plays.





From Aeschylus let us go to another important figure, Sophocles. Well, in terms of quality, in terms of adding beauty and elegance to drama, the credit goes to Sophocles. Sophocles by far is considered the best of the dramatists, the best of the dramatists especially in the Greek context and is also considered the better of the three tragedians by the contemporary ones.

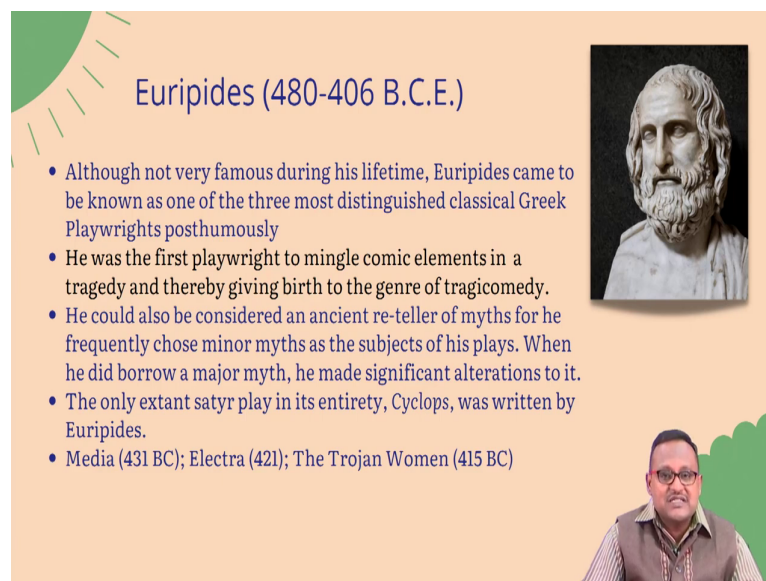
In fact, earlier Aeschylus had occupied the role during the classical Greek period, but the contemporary scholarship considers Sophocles as the best of the three. Again, very interestingly or as a strange coincidence, he seemed to have authored more than 120 plays; however, only 7 plays are available. Like Aeschylus's plays, even for Sophocles we have just 7 of his plays available to us and of them *Oedipus the King* is an extraordinary work. In fact, this particular work is also significant because it has opened a new school of thought in psychology, especially Sigmund Freud and all.

Modern psychology has its genesis in this particular play, *Oedipus the King*. You have the Oedipus complex and later Electra complex under the complexes. Think of Sigmund Freud, Jung and others. Well, they have their roots in this particular play, *Oedipus the King*. One of the best tragedies that you can ever come face to face with is *Oedipus the King*.

And again here, like Aeschylus added the second character, Sophocles adds the third character and makes characters the strength to 3. And maybe gradually that is how you have as many characters as you can see in today's drama. So, that is his credit adding the third character.


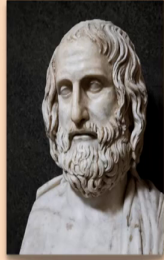
Again, some of his well-known plays include *Antigone*, a remarkable play. Almost as back as a 5th century, it talks of a conflict between an individual and state. The contemporary subject, a conflict between an individual and the state and how sometimes an individual prevails over the state. Because those state is majoritarian and an individual is solitary, how the sanity of an individual can prevail over the state albeit a little late. So, it is a tragedy of course. So, that revelation happens a little later. *Antigone* is an extraordinary play, *Electra*, *Oedipus at Colonus* these are some of his remarkable plays.

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Euripides (480-406 B.C.E.)

- Although not very famous during his lifetime, Euripides came to be known as one of the three most distinguished classical Greek Playwrights posthumously
- He was the first playwright to mingle comic elements in a tragedy and thereby giving birth to the genre of tragicomedy.
- He could also be considered an ancient re-teller of myths for he frequently chose minor myths as the subjects of his plays. When he did borrow a major myth, he made significant alterations to it.
- The only extant satyr play in its entirety, *Cyclops*, was written by Euripides.
- *Media* (431 BC); *Electra* (421); *The Trojan Women* (415 BC)



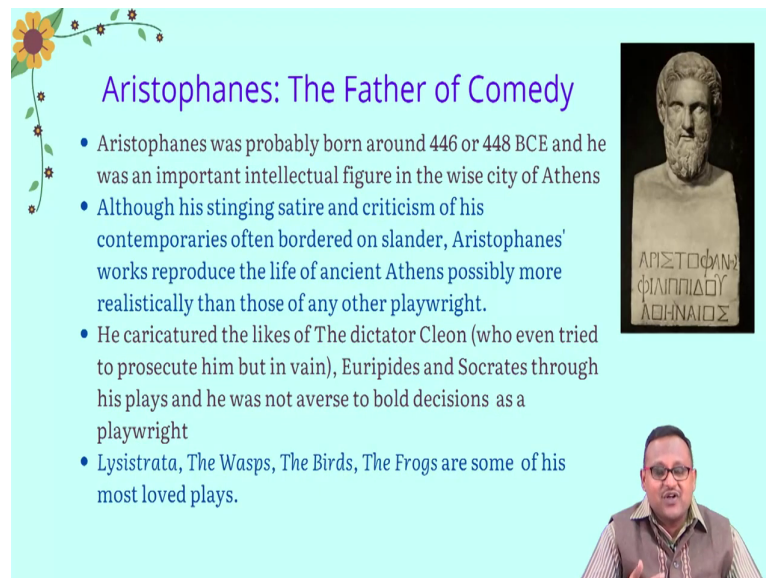
We have the third greatest Hellenic classical Greek playwright Euripides. So, together Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are called the triumvirate of classical Greek drama. Well, he was not as well-known as the previous two playwrights during his lifetime; however, later scholarship also attributes some greatness to his plays.

And in fact, the greatness of Euripides is that he introduced the element of comedy into his tragedy and therefore, inaugurating a new genre of drama called tragicomedy. Therefore, you have a trailblazer in Euripides because he introduced the tragicomedy in his plays.

Some of his well-known plays are *Media*, again an extraordinary play. And in fact, it is also said that contemporary feminism is born out of this particular play. *Media* talks of autonomy of the female agency and how she renounces the very concept of family and how she seeks out revenge even on her own husband and all that; an exemplary play. So, therefore, you can say that contemporary feminism is also born out of this particular play *Media*.


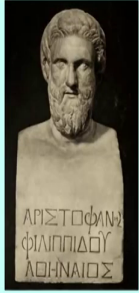
And again, he also writes *Electra*, *The Trojan Women*. Of course, some of these themes find repetition in subsequent playwrights. So, this is Euripides for us.

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Aristophanes: The Father of Comedy

- Aristophanes was probably born around 446 or 448 BCE and he was an important intellectual figure in the wise city of Athens
- Although his stinging satire and criticism of his contemporaries often bordered on slander, Aristophanes' works reproduce the life of ancient Athens possibly more realistically than those of any other playwright.
- He caricatured the likes of The dictator Cleon (who even tried to prosecute him but in vain), Euripides and Socrates through his plays and he was not averse to bold decisions as a playwright
- *Lysistrata*, *The Wasps*, *The Birds*, *The Frogs* are some of his most loved plays.



From here we go to the first known comedy playwright called Aristophanes. We have already discussed Aristophanes and how comedy was born, because during the classical times the populace was divided between the greatness of Aeschylus and Euripides.

And Aristophanes did not see eye to eye with Euripides. Therefore, satirizing the pseudo significance of Euripides he composes *Frogs*. So, that is one of his plays. *The Wasps*, *The Birds*, *The Frogs*, these are some of his very well-known and most loved plays. That is why you have Euripides and these are some things that we can keep in mind.

So, you have a trailblazer in Aristophanes because he can be called “The Father of Comedy”. So, these four figures play a major role in founding Western drama or European drama as we know it, which later has a significant influence on Roman drama and theatre tradition and of course, even in other parts of the globe as well. So, these four are very important people as far as Greek drama is concerned, as far as the European drama is concerned.


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From here, let us go to Roman drama, but before that, this is actually an image of Greek amphitheatre. Now, look at it; you can see the stage there and look how beautifully its covered. This type of theatre is called amphitheatre.



Here the audience is surrounded on all three sides. Therefore, kind of a thrust stage, but built in a grand scale. Look at the background there. This is where most of the tragedies that you and I have read or are going to read happened, were performed. You can understand the grandeur of the stage by looking at it. And our contemporary concept of theatres is born out of these kinds of amphitheatres.

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Ancient Roman Drama

- Ancient Roman Drama was mostly a loose imitation of Greek drama and was often rather gory, vulgar and unoriginal
- Massive amphitheatres, such as Rome's Colosseum, were built around the empire to demonstrate Rome's power and grandeur, but the general populace favoured boxers, gladiators, and mock sea wars over theatre.
- **Seneca** (4 BC - 65 CE) could be considered as the one significant playwright Rome produced. His contribution is also immense in that it is through him the Renaissance writers became familiar with the Greek tragedies. He also began the five-act divisions of drama.
- After Seneca, Rome primarily showed some promise in mimes and pantomimes



Yeah, from Greek plays let us go to ancient Roman drama. Well, not as significantly as Greece, Rome also worshipped drama, but Rome's preoccupation was somewhere else. In fact, remember the moment you think of Rome, you think of gladiators, boxers, mock sea wars and all that.

Therefore, the Roman populace preferred all these things over theatre. Therefore, you do not find any significant contribution as significant as the Greek drama. Nevertheless, because of its extraordinary architectural grandeur, something like massive amphitheatres such as Rome's Colosseum, were basically built to demonstrate Rome's power and architectural grandeur.

You find some reminiscence of classical drama even here. Especially you have Seneca, who was greatly influenced by these four great Greek playwrights. Therefore, modelled after them he also writes tragedies. So, the Senecan tragedies and all that. So, after Seneca Rome primarily prioritized something like a performance of mimes and pantomimes.

The contemporary mimes and pantomimes have their genesis in Rome. So, this is something that we can keep in mind, especially Rome's contribution to the theatres, amphitheatres, Rome's Colosseum and all that. Seneca is an important classical Roman playwright, a very significant name.


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Remains of the legendary Colosseum in Rome


This is the remains of a legendary Colosseum in Rome.

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Medieval English Drama and The Morality Plays

- Drama in England, despite also being born in the cradle of liturgy, developed independently of Greek drama.
- The medieval drama scene in England is interesting due to the Mystery, Miracle and Morality plays.
- The Morality Plays were meant to impart Biblical lessons to the laity, but the elite also took interest in them.
- These allegorical plays dealt with good vs evil, pride vs humility etc. and the virtues and vices were often personified.
- Written in 15th century, *Everyman* is one of the best known Morality play.



From here let us go to medieval English drama and the morality plays. So, we are skipping almost about 2000 years, we have come to the medieval English drama; something like late 15th century, early 16th century. It is said that drama in England though is influenced by Greek and Roman drama, developed in a different direction.

Of course, you can spot the influences. Nevertheless, it is also known for its deviations from the Greek drama, again like the Greek drama you also find origins of drama in England in its liturgical traditions. Therefore, to a certain extent you find influence of church, influence of *The Bible* on this. Therefore, you find a lot of Biblical plays, not Biblical plays, rather around Bible.

So, based on the readings of *Bible*, that is when, remember, King James' *Bible* had just come out at that point of time or maybe was in the offing. So, therefore, you have the morality plays that were meant to enlighten the elite and the laity alike. Laity is the common mass.

So, morality plays held the sway over both the commoners and of course, the aristocrats alike. So, typically some of the well-known themes in these morality plays, *Everyman* was one such play, a very remarkable play, where you find a playing of good versus evil, pride versus humility, and virtues versus vices; where virtue after undergoing lot of suffering wins finally.

So, *Everyman* is one of the exemplary morality plays. So, this is something that can be kept in mind. Well, from here we move on to what can be called the golden period in European drama or especially in England, the golden period.

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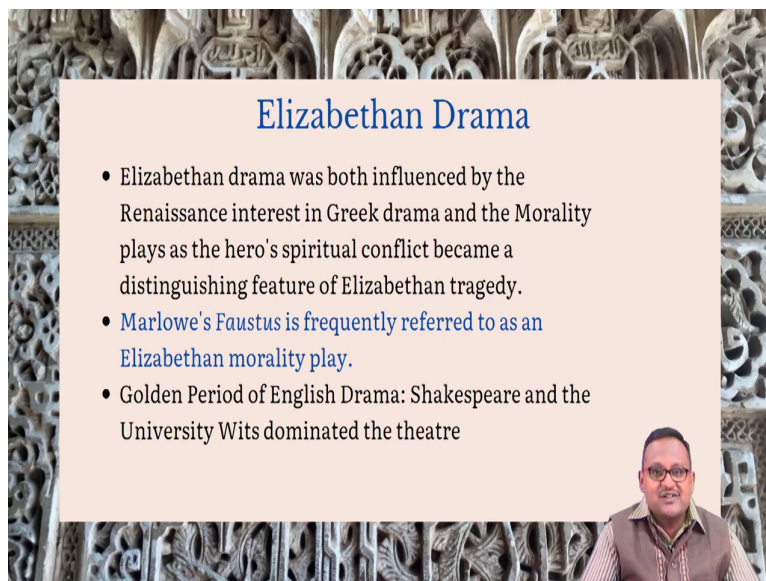
Mystery and Miracle Plays

- Mystery and Miracle Plays were used to enact Christian events such as the Easter .
- These made use of extensive props and were performed in a carriage called Pageants.
- The plays became part of cycles (Coventry Cycle, Chester Cycle) and statesmen viewed them in several installments.
- These plays also showed the struggle between good and evil and the final triumph of good over bad.

Remember we said that these plays have their tradition in liturgical traditions. Therefore, they were basically performed during several pageants, especially Christian festivals such as Easter and Christmas.

Therefore, you can also call them Chester Cycles, Coventry Cycles, where morality plays were seen. These plays also show, like all morality plays, good fighting evil and finally, though evil tries to prevail over good in the beginning towards the end, good prevails. A kind of a common structure that you find across all these miracle plays.

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Elizabethan Drama

- Elizabethan drama was both influenced by the Renaissance interest in Greek drama and the Morality plays as the hero's spiritual conflict became a distinguishing feature of Elizabethan tragedy.
- Marlowe's *Faustus* is frequently referred to as an Elizabethan morality play.
- Golden Period of English Drama: Shakespeare and the University Wits dominated the theatre

Now, having discussed miracle plays let us go to what is generally called the Golden Period of English Drama because here comes Shakespeare. As I said, in the world of drama, Shakespeare is an uncrowned king for various reasons.

It was influenced definitely by Greek drama and of course, Roman drama and also by the morality plays that were developed back in the ground. So, you find that kind of spiritual conflict even in the Elizabethan plays. Just before Shakespeare began writing or before his arrival on to the stage, you have University Wits. They began writing plays and prominent among them was Christopher Marlowe.

And we have *Faustus*. Goethe bases his *Faust* on Marlowe of course. So, you have *Faustus*. The theme of *Faustus* is very familiar to us. He is an extraordinary scholar, but he is not very



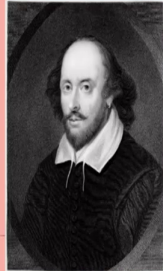
happy. In fact, Faust is the first great hero that you can find, because he wages a war against gods, because he wants to know more. He is a true Bibliophile, he wants more.

So, he wants to expand the scope of knowledge and though he has been warned that probably there is a reason why God must have put limitation on our ability to understand, he does not believe in that. He creates a pact with the devil and wants to know more and because of that hubris he sees a great fall. Marlowe discusses all that in *Faustus*, an extraordinary play. You can find shades of morality play there, nevertheless an exemplary tragedy. From here comes Shakespeare during this background.

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Shakespeare: "not of an age but for all time"!

- He excelled in all four sub-genres of play: comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy and history
- 37 plays: 17 comedies, 10 history plays; 10 tragedies
- Four best tragedies are: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*
- *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As you Like It* are some of his finest comedies
- He was inspired by the chronicles from Holinshed and Ptolemaic history and geography.
- Along with many other conventions, dividing a play into 5 acts in England was popularized by him
- Shakespeare made brilliant use of comic relief in his tragedies, and he is also credited with coinages of more than 2000 words and inflections in English



Shakespeare is a remarkable playwright, we discussed Shakespeare during our discussion of sonnets, and as I said, Shakespeare is an ingenious playwright, an extraordinary playwright. And that is why one of his later contemporaries, Ben Jonson, who is a successor to the legacy of Shakespeare, says that Shakespeare is not actually of a particular age.

When we read a writer or when we watch the performance of a playwright or a dramatist, they are just for maybe that particular period or maybe for an age, but Shakespeare is “not for an age but for all time”, highlighting the classic nature of his writing. It is a canonical work.

And it is to the credit of Shakespeare that he almost practiced in all genres of drama. He wrote exemplary comedies, extraordinary tragedies, and beautiful tragicomedies, beautiful history plays. Of course, there is again a kind of a dispute as far as the number of plays are

concerned. But generally, they say about 40, to be precise 37 plays. So far we have about 37 plays out of which 17 are said to be comedies, 10 history plays and 10 tragedies.

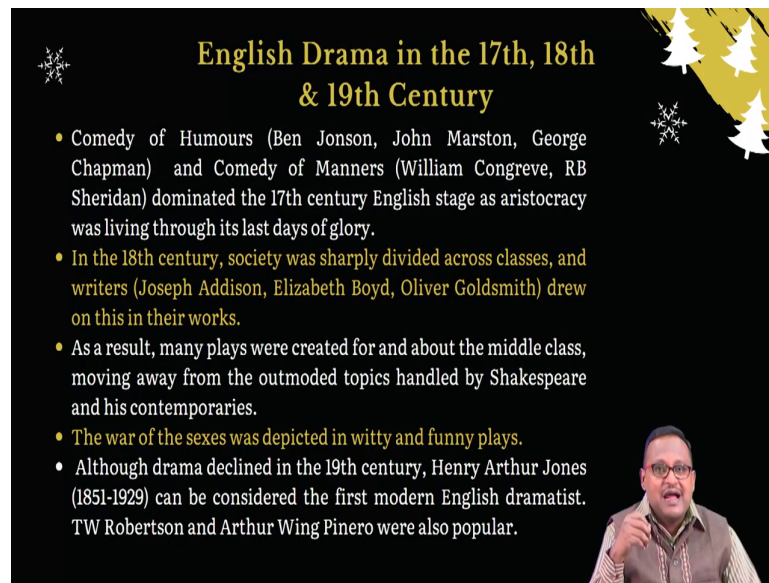
You have heard of his well-known tragedy, such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, remarkable tragedies in their own right. And when it comes to comedies, you have *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* and all that. In tragicomedy we have *The Merchant of Venice* a best example for tragicomedies.

And in history you have *Julius Caesar* and other well-known plays in history. Well, Shakespeare is an untutored genius, because he did not have any university education as that, probably all that he had was a basic education. So, he was an untutored genius; all that he could read and borrow was unlike Christopher Marlowe and others who had access to Greek and Latin.

He did not direct access to the plays of all those dramatists. All that he had access was through the history is written by Ptolemy and Holinshed's *Chronicles*. He borrowed his plots from there and constructed beautiful plots around them and created extraordinary plays that the world marvels at even to this day.

So, these are some things that can be kept in mind and his contribution to English literature too is very immense. Remember, he single-handedly seems to have contributed more than 2000 words and inflections to English language. That is a very brief snapshot into the genius called Shakespeare. There was a period of lull after Shakespeare's time though Ben Jonson began writing, again there was a ban on drama.

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English Drama in the 17th, 18th & 19th Century

- Comedy of Humours (Ben Jonson, John Marston, George Chapman) and Comedy of Manners (William Congreve, RB Sheridan) dominated the 17th century English stage as aristocracy was living through its last days of glory.
- In the 18th century, society was sharply divided across classes, and writers (Joseph Addison, Elizabeth Boyd, Oliver Goldsmith) drew on this in their works.
- As a result, many plays were created for and about the middle class, moving away from the outmoded topics handled by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.
- The war of the sexes was depicted in witty and funny plays.
- Although drama declined in the 19th century, Henry Arthur Jones (1851-1929) can be considered the first modern English dramatist. TW Robertson and Arthur Wing Pinero were also popular.

A small video inset in the bottom right corner shows a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a patterned shirt, speaking and gesturing with his hands.

And by the time it was lifted in 17th century, drama had almost moved away from its days of glory. Therefore, you have some kind of parodies, such as Comedy of Humour, Comedy of Manners, especially in the writings of Ben Jonson. Think of *Volpone*. You have John Marston and George Chapman.

And when it comes to Comedy of Manners, you have two well-known writers. William Congreve and Sheridan. So, Comedy of Manners, *School of Scandal* and all that, you must have heard of it. And then when it comes to 18th century, not much of production, you have very minor playwrights in Joseph Addison, Oliver Goldsmith and others.

And of course, when it comes to slightly later, maybe when you slightly go out of England and look at Europe, you find Goethe. So, this is in general Western play, and European drama, and drama in England.

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Yeah, probably in the next class what we can think of is some wonderful modern drama, an overview of modern drama. I hope you enjoyed this snapshot or peek-a-boo into western drama, especially classical Greek drama and its influence on Roman drama, and proper Elizabethan drama. Let us discuss modern drama in the next class.

Thank you.