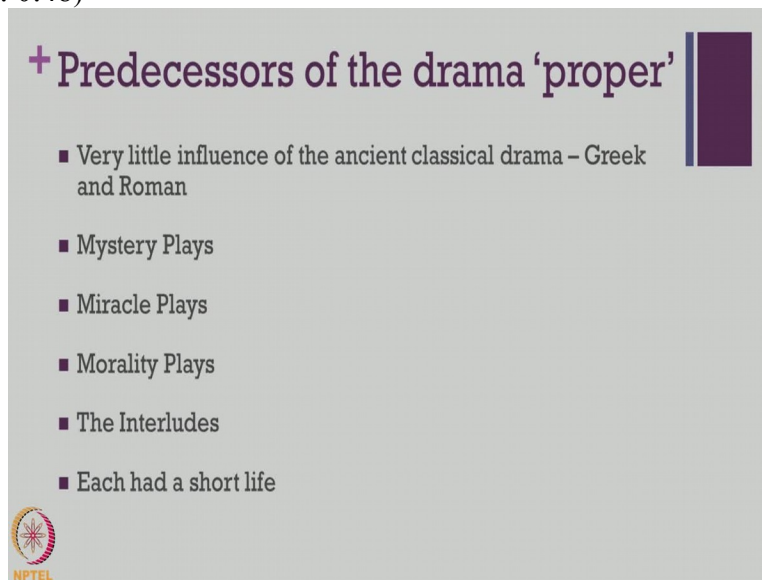


History of English Language and Literature
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Lecture No 4b
Elizabethan Age: English Drama before Shakespeare

Good morning and welcome to the course on history of English language and literature. We all know that the supreme contribution of the Elizabethan age was that of the Elizabethan drama exemplified by Shakespeare which is why the age, the golden age of Elizabethan period was also known as the age of Shakespeare. In today's session we will be taking a look at the drama before Shakespeare mapping through some of the predecessors of drama prop up.


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Predecessors of the drama 'proper'

- Very little influence of the ancient classical drama – Greek and Roman
- Mystery Plays
- Miracle Plays
- Morality Plays
- The Interludes
- Each had a short life



In fact it is very important to note at the beginning that the Greek and Roman traditions had a very thriving dramatic tradition in place but however when it comes to the middle English period in England we do not see much of an influence of any of those Greek or Roman plays taking a part over there. And in fact the English dramatic tradition which begins to emerge from the middle English period through the Elizabethan period, it has got hardly anything to do with the ancient Classical drama. In that sense we can even say that the English dramatic tradition owes very little to that of the ancient classical tradition.

So some of the predecessors of drama before Shakespeare could be named as follows like mystery plays, Miracle plays, Morality plays and the Interludes. In fact the each of these kinds of

drama they had a very short short life and they did not thrive beyond a certain particular historical period and their content was largely religious, moral as the as their titles imply as well. And however its very important to take a look at these tradition in order to be able to properly understand how and why Shakespeare wrote in particular ways and how Elizabethan drama came to be featured in certain historical ways.

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+ Mystery plays – 11th and 12th centuries

- The rebirth of drama – in Church and its liturgy – developed as part of ceremonial religious feasts such as Easter
- Liturgical dramas - A way to teach Bible to the illiterate commoners, didactic purpose, under the Church control
- Mystery = religious truth, secret
- Based on scenes and stories from the Bible
- Latin replaced by the vernacular
- Venue: Outside the Cathedral – Town square – Pageants
- Control: Church to Guilds
- Actors: Clergy to others

Edict of 1210:
forbidding clergy

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Growing secularization of drama

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So moving on we will first take a look at the mystery plays which had begun to emerge from the 11th and 12th century which is right after the Norman conquest. So it is very interesting that the drama had a past which is as early as the Norman tradition itself.

The rebirth of drama after the classical traditions of Greek and Roman plays, it had it had its rebirth and in fact within the church premises. It was the church and its liturgy who began to develop the first forms of drama. This was in fact primarily conceived as a way to teach Bible to the illiterate commoners because Bible was then written and popularised mainly in Latin and other languages which were not accessible to the commoners.

So the clergy thought of an innovative way to reach Bible to the commoners and they thought of enacting plays, enacting stories from the Bible which would be of interest to the commoners. This was also a way to teach them about the ways of the world and also introduce them to the various historical and biblical aspects as well. So these were primarily liturgical dramas, so as the

name implies the content was primarily from the Bible and the actors were also pre-dominantly from the clergy and who were part of the church.

And due to its (3:18) purpose and due to this schematic structure it was entirely under the church's control. So it is very interesting to note that in the beginning church had a very important role to play in the development of drama. Just as the way church continued to control many of the social, political and economic affairs of those times. The name Mystery needs a little bit of attention. Mystery in fact means religious truth it used to mean religious truth during those times and also meant secret when it was translated from the French language.

Latin and French being the dominant languages of those times, mystery plays seems quite appropriate a name for them and they were mostly based on scenes and stories from the Bible and one interesting aspect in terms of language is that since they were adaptations from the Bible for the commoners, the Latin began to be heavily replaced by the vernacular, the English which was prevalent during that time and the venue also its quite an interesting shift that happens across a period.

The venue was initially outside right outside the cathedral because these place were staged for the commoners who came to attend the church and gradually as the numbers increase and the popularity increases we find at the venue shifts to the town's square where more people can attend and also more kinds of elaborate arrangements could be made and gradually it even shift to a form of pageants.

Pageants are very important in the history of drama because they were more like a travelling drama company. They used to have these boxes within huge vehicles which had actors and plays which also had elaborate arrangements they used to travel across the town and people used to gather at different points, different corners in order to watch the drama which is being staged. So the venue gradually shifts from the church towards the town's centre and the control also gradually we begin to see that the control of this drama, their themes, their organization everything begins to shift from the church to the other areas outside that.

So as time progresses we begin to note that church no longer supports or facilitates these dramas. It is the guilds, guilds is the mainly the group of people, the merchants who come together who form a certain, they raise the finances, they take decisions together they also end up ruling the

towns square in the name of a council. So the control gradually shifts from the church towards these these tradesmen guilds.

So we also note that just as these changes takes place the actors also begin to change. The clergy are no longer then permitted to be a part of these acting teams but then others, commoners the who are the merchants, the peasants who are part of the guilds they all replace clergy as actors also. At this context it is important to remember this Edict of 20 this Edict of 1210 which forbids clergy from participating any of these dramatic forms and this is also a moment when we witness a growing secularisation of the drama.

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+ Miracle Plays – 13th century

- About the lives of Saints
- Actors – common people, tradesmen
- Emphasizing God's will, Religious, ritualistic
- About 40 different districts in England
- Trading Guilds: The Chester cycle (25 plays), the Coventry (42), the Wakefield (31), the York (46) – a complete cycle
 - Creation of the world to the fall of man
 - Life of christ, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and Last Judgment
- The Three Maries, Shepherds' Play
- Corpus Christi plays – collective mysteries

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Shakespeare must have witnessed one of these plays in the 16th century – at Coventry

So this also leads to another kind of drama called Miracle plays. It is very important to distinguish between Mystery plays and Miracle plays at this point because many tend to confuse one with the other. Mystery plays whereas we already have noted they were largely based on stories from the Bible. So in a way that it enacted the stories exactly as they were shown in the Bible. Would miracle plays had a freedom to defer a bit from the Bible and also introduce the stories of a life of saints, their biography and how certain how certain common instances could be related to the events from the Bible, so on and so forth.

In that sense it is could be considered as a little more secular than the Mystery play though both continue to be played in England during the same time and the actors of these were not clergy at all. There were mostly common people tradesmen and whoever was interested in acting could

come in and join this. And also until Shakespeare's times it's very significant to note that female actors were not in plays. All the parts even the ones played by females were taken by male actors.

So this was more or less a show run entirely by men and in this Miracle plays through the lives of saints, through the life of certain commoners who had got (()) (07:42), so on and so forth, we found a story line emerging which had which was emphasizing God's will, this continued to be religious and ritualistic but it also focused on the practical application of the stories of the Bible and there is evidence which shows that these plays were staged, Miracle plays were staged across almost 40 districts in England during the medieval period. And these plays were organised, they were funded, they were taken care of entirely by trading guilds.

There were four major something that we call we can call as a companies which were promoting these miracle plays during that period. They also used to run these plays in a cycle, a cycle in the sense something which storyline which would have a full circle like a in the beginning there would be the creation and the play would end with the fall of man and the consequences of it. Or else it would begin with the life of Christ and would complete an entire cycle focusing through the events of his crucifixion, his resurrection, his second coming, so on and so forth.

In that sense they used to complete an entire cycle focusing on the storylines within the Bible and also connecting it with the practical application for the commoners. So there were four different cycles like this The Chester cycle, The Coventry, The Wakefield and The York and there is a lot of historical evidence to prove that they had continued to exist even during Shakespeare times.

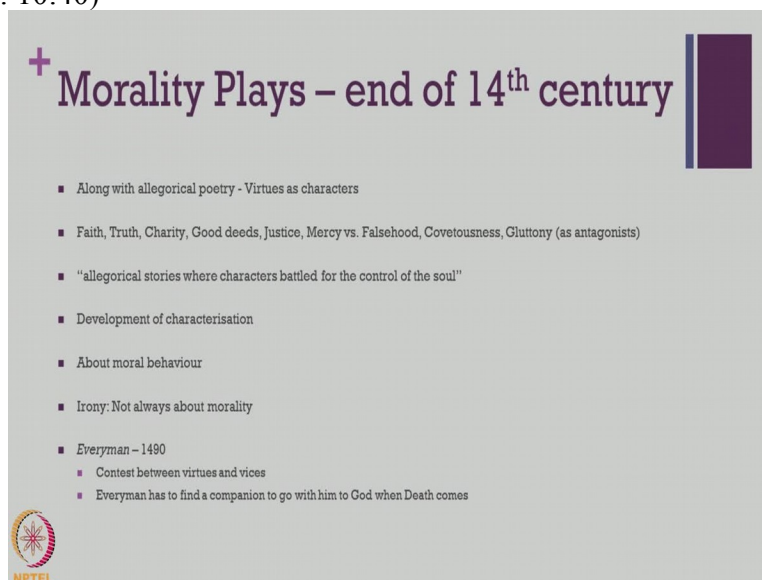
They just said that Shakespeare must have witnessed at least one of these plays which was getting staged in Coventry. These names were in fact after the names of the places where most of these place were continuing to get staged. So Shakespeare's plays when one begin to read them and analyse them, many critics and historians have felt that there is a major influence of these Miracle plays in the way he began to conceive his theatre, his idea of stage, so on and so forth.

And some of the other common plays used to be The Three Maries focusing on the different characters of Mary from the Bible, The Shepherds Play which was mostly the nativity scene

which was being put up for the commoners and also the feast of the Corpus Christy that continued to have a lot of importance. This was like one of the major feasts just like Easter.

So there used to be these different cycles which were continued to be played for almost for 12 to 14 days at a stretch. So it began to be known as collective Mysteries and importantly all the merchants, the tradesmen everyone used to take a day off from their work. So this was mostly a holiday season as well when Corpus Christy Collective Mysteries began to be staged. In that sense we do begin to see that the beginnings of this mass entertainment and collective entertainment begins from as early as the 13th century onwards.

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+ Morality Plays – end of 14th century

- Along with allegorical poetry - Virtues as characters
- Faith, Truth, Charity, Good deeds, Justice, Mercy vs. Falsehood, Covetousness, Gluttony (as antagonists)
- "allegorical stories where characters battled for the control of the soul"
- Development of characterisation
- About moral behaviour
- Irony: Not always about morality
- Everyman – 1490
 - Contest between virtues and vices
 - Everyman has to find a companion to go with him to God when Death comes

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And this had began to pave way to another kind of plays known as a Morality play. This is in the by the end of the 14th century. Here we find a very radical shift from the Biblical stories from the thematic structure which was mostly concentrating on church so and so forth. Here the theme and the treatment was mostly allegorical and later on when we begin to look at the forms of poetry which began to emerge in England from the early Elizabethan period onwards, it would be noted that allegorical poetry had began to enjoy a lot of success and fame in Elizabethan England.

So in a way Morality plays and the allegorical nature of them began to began to lead England towards a kind of poetry and a kind of (()) (11:25) that they would begin to enjoy. So this allegory was very interesting in the sense that these plays had abstract characters and virtues,

abstract emotions and virtues as real characters, like faith would be one character, truth, charity, good deeds, justice, mercy etc, were personified as characters.

This would also remind us that in the later centuries to come many of these personifications of characters have they have their roots in the early Morality plays and these fine virtues would also be contrasted against virtues against vices such as falsehood, covetousness, gluttony etc. So these positive virtues would be showcased as the protagonist and the vices as the antagonist of the play and there was also this character of the vice V I C E the vice who would also give a kind of a comic interlude to these plays.

And in fact one of the critics have described this Morality plays as allegorical stories where characters battle for the control of the soul. This also reminds us briefly about (()) (12:33) doctor Fosters about which we would be discussing a couple of sessions later when we do Elizabethan drama. And these morality plays significantly they layed the foundation of characterization in drama especially in the Elizabethan drama and the English drama that followed afterwards and these were mostly about moral behaviour as the title would imply but ironically as time progressed they were not entirely about morality

In fact there was a lot of immorality which was getting celebrated within the plot structure of these Morality plays. Because of this since the earlier times of plays the Mystery plays and the Miracle plays were overly didactic, overly moralistic. Commoners in fact begin to enjoy the kind of immorality which was getting celebrated in a subtle way within these Morality plays. This also had led to a lot of immense popularity for these Morality plays because they always gave a different kind of entertainment to the English public from the 14th century onwards.

And one of the most celebrate and most common of this Morality plays is the one which is named as Everyman, the authorship is disputed its best left at being anonymous. This was in 1490 towards the end of the 15th century, in fact Everyman continues to be staged in minor ways even in the contemporary that also talks about the, the universality and relevance of the play Everyman from the 15th century and this the plot structure was mainly about the was about to contest between the virtues and the vices and it also had a subtle humour in it because there is this character whose called as Everyman who can be almost every man as the title implies and

death comes to him and gives him an invitation to reach God and then Everyman is very reluctant to leave Earth and leave along with death to reach God.

So he is looking for a companion to accompany him to God. So he goes along meeting various people his relatives, his friends and goes on asking them whether they would be interested in joining him in this journey towards God and almost everyone says no. In fact there are a couple of comic interventions in between, there is this cousin that Everyman goes to and asks him if would like to accompany him on this journey to meet God and the cousins says I would have loved to except for this tiny toe problem that I have got, so it was all a hugely entertaining for the common people and they even hear keeping him tuned with the tradition of Morality plays.

All the characters and names such as good deeds, justice, vice, gluttony, charity, truth, faith etc. So Everyman approaches all of these characters who are also his relatives and friends and towards the end we find good deed is the only character who decides to accompany him on his way to reaching God. So this also has an implied moral and it also had a continued relevance in te sense that when one is when the time comes for anyone to meet God through death it is only perhaps the good deeds which would accompany him.

So this kind of intervention through the Morality plays it had a lot of philosophical undertones, it also tried in a very different way other than the Miracle and the Morality plays to bring in a theological discussion among the commoners and also led them to ask questions about life in general, about the reality of death about the abstractions of life after death, so on and so forth.

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+ Mid 15th century

- The church outlaws performances
- The theatre to the built outside the city walls

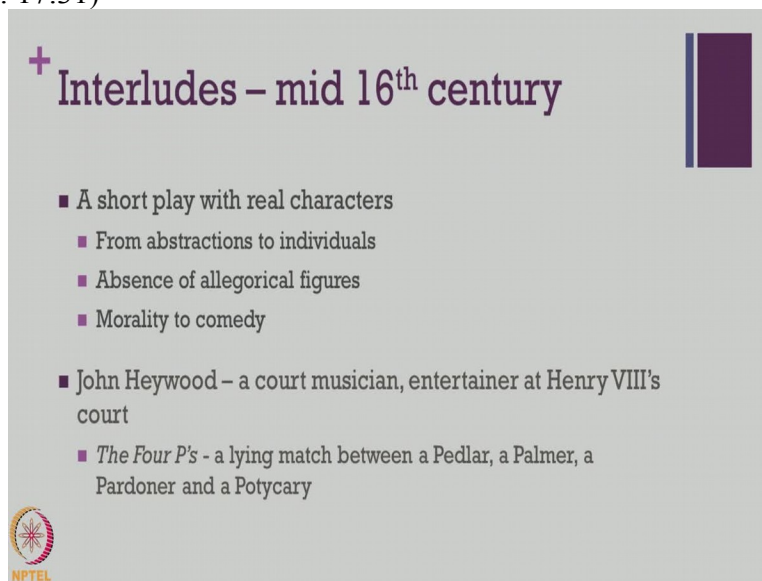
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And amidst all these things lot of things happen in the in terms of the social and historical background . In the previous lectures we have also recollected how plague continued to attack, how the fortunes of England go up and down because of the interference of the church, because of the growing corruption, because of the cosmopolitanism that is gradually setting in, because of the mass migration from the rural hinterlands to the city of London.

All of these things are happening in the background and by the mid 15th century, we find that for a brief period the church outlaws all kinds of performances because the church found it increasingly difficult to deal with the criticisms that were coming through these plays and also that commoners were getting quite so much interested in all these things that they also knew how to engage with Biblical concepts and Biblical stories from a critical angle as well.


So due to this and due to the various others reasons and since with the Morality play, the play also had moved far away from the church settings and also from the theological themes, the church outlaws the performances and the theatres were then built outside the city walls and for a brief period this was also to contain the spread of the plague which was becoming quite a quite a prevalent thing during that time.

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+ Interludes – mid 16th century

- A short play with real characters
 - From abstractions to individuals
 - Absence of allegorical figures
 - Morality to comedy
- John Heywood – a court musician, entertainer at Henry VIII's court
 - *The Four P's* - a lying match between a Pedlar, a Palmer, a Pardoner and a Potycary



And then by mid-16th century there is again a revival and we find that the interludes become more common during this period. So by this time England had left behind the Miracle plays, the Mystery plays and the interludes were could be considered as a higher and advanced kind of Morality plays. This was in fact structured in such a way that this had dual characters, no more abstract notions or abstract virtues.

This had dual characters and the play used to be very short, there was always a sense of humour which was woven into this as well. So we find a radical shift from abstract qualities to individuals and most of these individuals were also real, so much so that the commoners could even relate to the characters were being represented on stage. They could be from the court, they could be one of the council members, they could be one of the tradesmen that they knew around the corner.

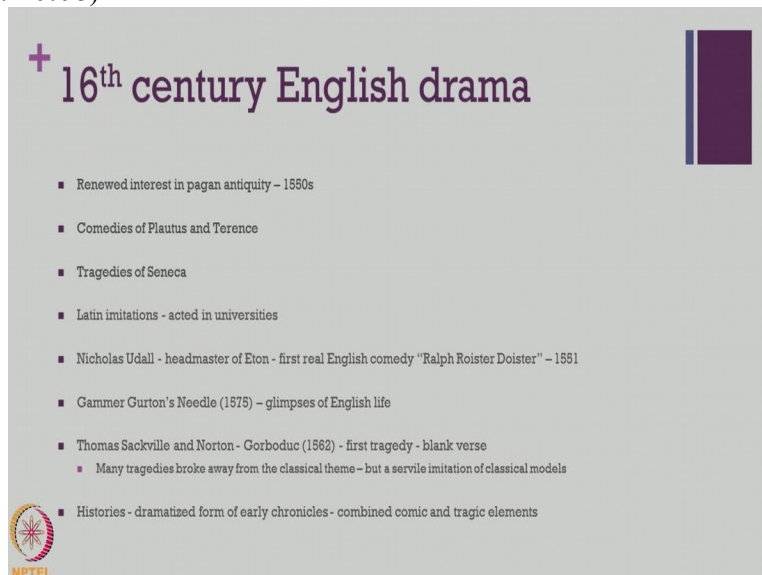
So it had a very different kind of appeal to the common commoners then. In this interludes we also see the beginning of social satire as well and we also find a complete absence of allegorical figures over there. There is a sense of very real representations coming in so things are no longer subtle because but they are on the contrary right on one's face and we also find radical shift from morality to that of comedy.

This is also the time when the foundations of the subtle England humour are being laid in medieval England. And one of the most prominent writers, playwrights of this time was John

Heywood. John Heywood was a court musician. He was also one of the prominent entertainers at Henry VIII's court. Henry VIII if you remember is the king who broke away from Roman catholic church and had his own church of England and John Heywood's play, the Four P's was immensely popular during the mid-16th century.

It continued to have a lasting appeal even in the Elizabethan later Elizabethan period. The Four P's in fact signifies a Peddler, a Palmer, a Pardoner and a Potycary, people from different walks of life and this the plot of the play was about a lying match between all of these four people. So this had a lot of humour built into it lot of satire built into it. It is said that the commoners could even identify who these four real characters were. So in that sense it also enjoyed immense popularity during this time.

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The slide features a title '+ 16th century English drama' in a purple serif font. Below the title is a bulleted list of key events and works in 16th-century English drama. The list includes: renewed interest in pagan antiquity in the 1550s; comedies of Plautus and Terence; tragedies of Seneca; Latin imitations acted in universities; Nicholas Udall's 'Ralph Roister Doister' (1551); Gammer Gurton's Needle (1575); Thomas Sackville and Norton's 'Gorboduc' (1562); and histories. A small NPTEL logo is in the bottom left corner.

- Renewed interest in pagan antiquity - 1550s
- Comedies of Plautus and Terence
- Tragedies of Seneca
- Latin imitations - acted in universities
- Nicholas Udall - headmaster of Eton - first real English comedy "Ralph Roister Doister" - 1551
- Gammer Gurton's Needle (1575) - glimpses of English life
- Thomas Sackville and Norton - Gorboduc (1562) - first tragedy - blank verse
 - Many tragedies broke away from the classical theme - but a servile imitation of classical models
- Histories - dramatized form of early chronicles - combined comic and tragic elements

So with these sort of settings we find English drama achieving a foundational stage from the 16th century onwards and in the 16th century especially from the 1550s onwards we find a renewed interest in pagan antiquity. If you remember at the beginning we noted that the Miracle plays and the Morality plays had very little do with the ancient classical traditions. They had moved away from the Roman and Greek plays and they had their own standards, their own kinds of stages so on and so forth.

By mid-1550s there is a revival in pagan antiquity and this is also the time when renaissance is running high in Europe and also in England. So because of these reasons, the comedy of Plautus

and Terence, the tragedies of Seneca, all of these have a huge influence in shaping English drama from the 16th century. At the same time, very important to note that they also had a lot of native elements, in the sense Elizabethan stage becomes a very native kind of thing a native structure which the play rights within Britain had begun within England had begun to conceive and begun to popularise.

So from the 16th century onwards through the age of Shakespeare through the age of Elizabeth we see that there are these classical influences coming in but also a native tradition begins to be forged. So we will also see in detail in one of the latest sessions about how the Elizabethan drama, how the English drama was different from that of the classical dramas of the ancient times and there were also lot of Latin imitations which were getting enacted in the universities of that period.

As you remember from the previous sessions, the universities centres of Oxford and Cambridge had by now become the centres of intellectual excellence and many of these universities began to encourage the staging of plays in Latin by imitating from the earlier stalwarts from Greek and Latin. And this is the time when English comedy begins to emerge in this in its full being. Nicholas Udall who was also the headmaster of Eton one of the most famous ancient public schools in Britain, his comedy Ralph Roister Doister this was published in stage then published in 1551.

This was considered as the first real English comedy from the 16th century and this continues there are a lot of disputes about whether this qualifies itself as the first comedy or not but in literary history it continues to hold the distinction of being the first real English comedy. There was also another comic play which was hugely popular during those times its called Gammer Gurton's Needle in 1575. Apart from the humour that it had this play was also important for the latter periods for the latter historians and for the critics because it showed a glimpses of English life of English 16th century English life through the play.

And tragedy was also quite significant and important during this time. We also find different genres getting formed in terms of their keeping in tune with the dramatic traditions. The Thomas Sackville and Norton together had produced this tragedy called Gorboduc in 1562. This was also in a blank verse which had a continuing impact on the way English drama was getting framed.

And at this point it is important to note that the classical antiquities had excelled itself in the presentation of tragedies and when Sackville and Norton had their first tragedy *Goboduc*, this had classical elements in it but they had also broken away significantly from the classical theme.

So there was a lot of ways in which the English drama was trying to project itself as distinct as more native and freer from foreign influences but at the same time a servile imitation of classical models continued to exist at least for a while because there were a lot of poor imitations of works from Greek and Roman history. There were also people who had merely translated the works from the classical antiquities and tried to pass it on as an original work.

And there were also history which began to take historical place which began to dominate this time. There were in fact more dramatized form of the early chronicles. They featured the lives of kings, the lives of great warriors, the lives of knights, so on and so forth. And these kinds of plays in fact combined comic and tragic elements. Some of these we would be seeing in a later session, these kind of combination of tragedy and comedy was very important because in the classical sense a play could either be entirely tragic or it could be entirely based on comedy.

But this the history plays gave a new forum where the Elizabethan where the English dramatists and English playwrights could experiment by bringing in the elements of comedy and tragedy within a single play. With this we begin to see that a proper foundation is laid for the Elizabethan drama, the stage is being set for great stalwarts like Shakespeare and others to emerge from the Elizabethan period onwards.

So in the next session we would begin to take a look at how this foundational elements were very significant in shaping the kind of drama that Elizabethan England began to witness, this this influence was exemplified not just in this structure and theme of drama but also in the way the idea of the theatre began to be conceived, the way theatre begins to be commercialized, so on and so forth.

So we look forward to the next session where we will be talking in a greater detail about what exactly paved the way towards the emergence of Elizabethan drama as exemplified in the age of Shakespeare. Thank you for listening and this is all we have for today.