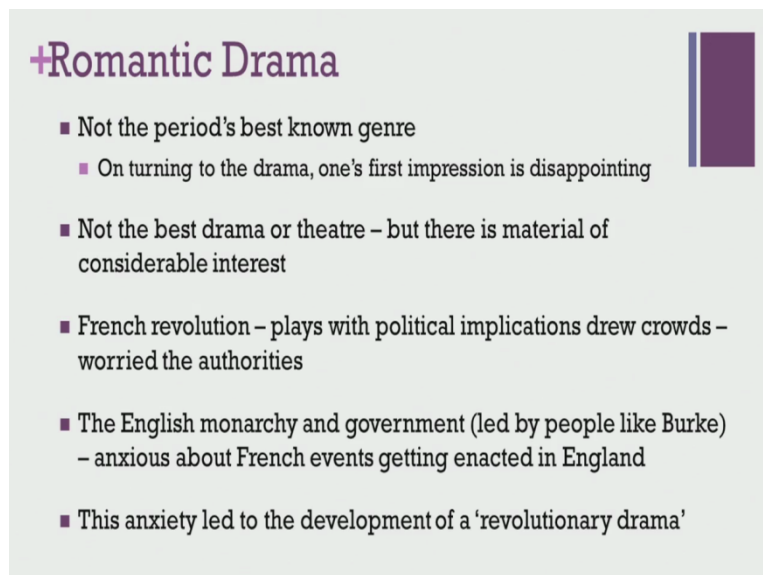


History of English Language and Literature
Doctor Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Lecture 16 a
Drama in the Age of Romanticism

Hello everyone. I am happy to welcome you to yet another session of the NPTEL course the history of English language and literature. In today's lecture we take a look at the genre of drama in the age of romanticism. You may have already figured out that this was not really the age of drama and the focus was mostly on romantic poetry. And also some bit of discussion to happen in the field of novel as well. In the case of drama it needs to be pointed out right at the outset that this was not the period's best known genre.

In fact we do not find any of the romantic tenets penetrating into this genre and revolutionizing drama like it did the other genres such as poetry or novel. But at the same time though the output in terms of drama was quite disappointing, we need not turn our faces away from the fact that there is enough material of considerable interest.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:03)



+Romantic Drama

- Not the period's best known genre
 - On turning to the drama, one's first impression is disappointing
- Not the best drama or theatre – but there is material of considerable interest
- French revolution – plays with political implications drew crowds – worried the authorities
- The English monarchy and government (led by people like Burke) – anxious about French events getting enacted in England
- This anxiety led to the development of a 'revolutionary drama'

What makes the dramatic output of this period quite significant is the fact that there is no direct impact of romanticism on this but at the same time we do find a certain kind of reflection of the social unrest and also the larger socio-political realities getting reflected in this genre. And in any age when we say that this is not an age which particularly encourages

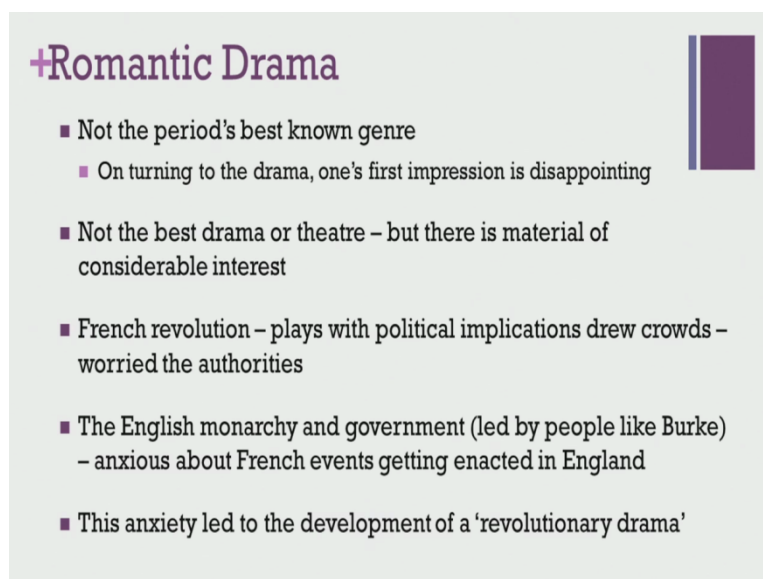
any form of genre, it does not mean that the genre was completely absent. It is the same case when drama in the romantic age.

We begin to notice that though the output was very limited there is enough material for us to take a look at and also to see how this genre, though it did not go directly, it led to the indirect (goth) growth of literary criticism in general. As we have been noticing from the beginning of our discussions on romanticism, this was an age of a revolution. Particularly French Revolution began to dictate the ways in which even literary imagination was getting shaped.

And keeping in tune with the spirit of the revolution we do notice that there were a number of plays with political import which drew a lot of crowds and needless to say this was also a source of anxiety for the rulers even within Britain and English monarchy and government, particularly the kind of leaders such as Burke who also had written much against the French Revolution. They were also quite anxious about the kind of events which happened in France getting replicated in Britain.

In fact we do find that a conservative reaction had already begin to set in the early 19th century and we also noticed how there was a growing unrest about this complacency which was getting terminated by the mid 19th century. But all together it may suffice to say at this introduction that this anxiety about the French Revolution had a very positive output. It led to the development of a particular kind of drama known as the revolutionary drama.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:00)



+Romantic Drama

- Not the period's best known genre
 - On turning to the drama, one's first impression is disappointing
- Not the best drama or theatre – but there is material of considerable interest
- French revolution – plays with political implications drew crowds – worried the authorities
- The English monarchy and government (led by people like Burke) – anxious about French events getting enacted in England
- This anxiety led to the development of a 'revolutionary drama'

Even when we begin to address this particular drama as revolutionary drama, it is very useful to recall that there is no particular genre which could be identified as revolutionary drama but

however this is a convenient phrasing for us to be able to club together the various kinds of dramatic output which was happening which was mostly imitative in nature. It was also not of supreme genius but also in a certain way responding to the revolutionary spirit of the period.

Significantly most of the romantic poets they all tried their hand at drama particularly in verse but however none of them were really successful on stage. And so in that sense (dis) when we begin discussing drama during the romantic age it is in stark contrast with the kind of drama which existed in the previous ages. In the previous period particularly during the Elizabethan times and the times that followed, drama always was meant to be staged.

The playwright always wrote with an eye on the stage and with an eye on the audience. But in this period we noticed that it was mostly a game of pen and paper. We do not even find these writers trying to get any of these plays staged. And even when they could get them staged they would hardly draw any crowds because it was more literary than entertainment oriented.

So talking about some of the romantic writers who attempted their hand at drama, the foremost is Shelley whose *Cenci* was set in 16th century Rome and there is also called Coleridge's *Osario* which was a set in 16th century Spain. Shelley wrote another play *Charles the First* which was set in 17th century. It was also quite political in nature.

It in fact engaged with the tragedy of the monarchy's downfall and it was set in the civil war period. And he also focused more on the issue of taxation without the consent of the Parliament. If you remember most of these things in terms of the political and social history we had already taken a look at in one of the previous sessions.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:48)

- Many Romantic poets tried their hand at drama (in verse) – none successful on the stage
 - Shelley's *Cenci* – set in 16th century Rome
 - Coleridge's *Osario* – set in 16th century Spain
 - Shelley's *Charles the First* – set in 17th century
 - Tragedy of the monarchy's downfall, set in the civil war period – focuses on the issue of taxation without the consent of the Parliament – the audience could see the parallels with Louis XIV
 - Coleridge and Southey's – *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794)
- Byron – most successful as a playwright - among the Romantic poets
 - *Marino Faliero* – a political play set in medieval Venice – produced in 1821
 - Most of his plays reached the stage after his death in the 1830s

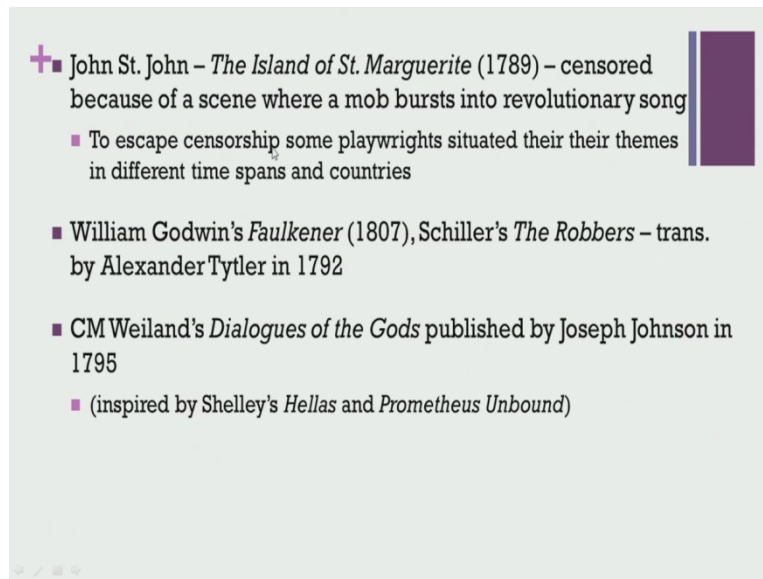
Though Shelley was not making any direct comparison or even a mention of France one could see that he was actually drawing parallels between Louis IV of France and the British monarch. So this also acted as a kind of warning to the authorities within England. And Coleridge and Southey together had produced *The Fall of Robespierre* in 1794 which also was an offshoot of the French Revolution.

Among all these poets it is important to note that Byron was the most successful one as a playwright and his *Marino Faliero* was a political play set in medieval Venice. It was produced in 1821. And most of Byron's plays in fact reached the stage only after his death in the 1830s. There was also this particular poet John St. John who produced a particular play *The Island of Saint Marguerite* in 1789. But however this work was censored because of a scene where a mob burst into a revolutionary song.

So this is also an indication that the censorship was quite in place and the government and the authorities always took enough care to completely erase everything that would provoke the audience to any kind of unrest. And it is also significant that most of the plays in order to escape the censorship which was prevalent during those times they used to situate their plays and their themes in different locations and also plays them in different time spans which were quite distant from their contemporary period.

Which is why we find most of these plays getting set in distant lands in places where Britain do not have anything to do with.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:18)

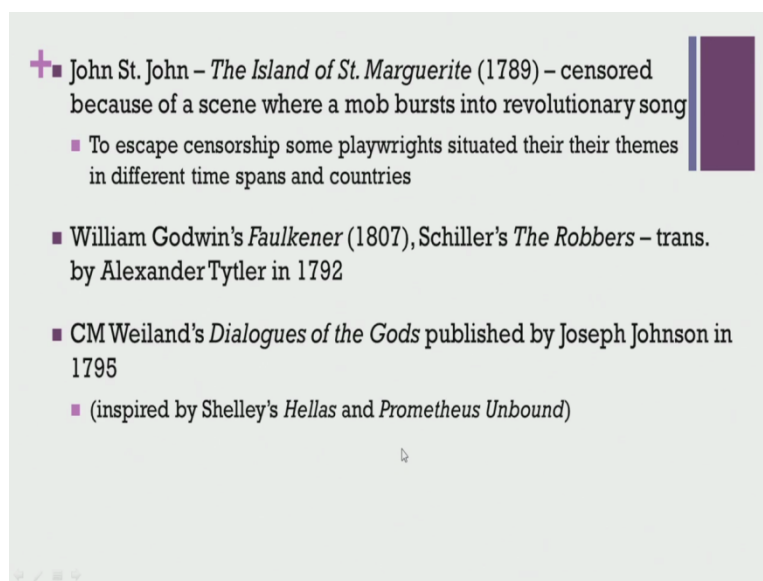


- John St. John – *The Island of St. Marguerite* (1789) – censored because of a scene where a mob bursts into revolutionary song
 - To escape censorship some playwrights situated their their themes in different time spans and countries
- William Godwin's *Faulkener* (1807), Schiller's *The Robbers* – trans. by Alexander Tytler in 1792
- CM Weiland's *Dialogues of the Gods* published by Joseph Johnson in 1795
 - (inspired by Shelley's *Hellas* and *Prometheus Unbound*)

William Godwin's *Faulkener* published in 1807 and also the translation of Schiller's *The Robbers*, the translator was Alexander Tytler in 1792. These were major influencers in bringing political discussions into the foray of drama. And CM Weiland's *Dialogues of the Gods* was published by Joseph Johnson in 1795.

It is useful to recall again that Joseph Johnson was a radical publisher who encouraged a lot of taboo material to be published and he was also associated with Mary Wollstonecraft and encouraged the publication of a lot of women writers. It is said that CM Weiland's *Dialogues of the Gods* was inspired majorly by Shelley's *Hellas* and *Prometheus Unbound*.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:04)



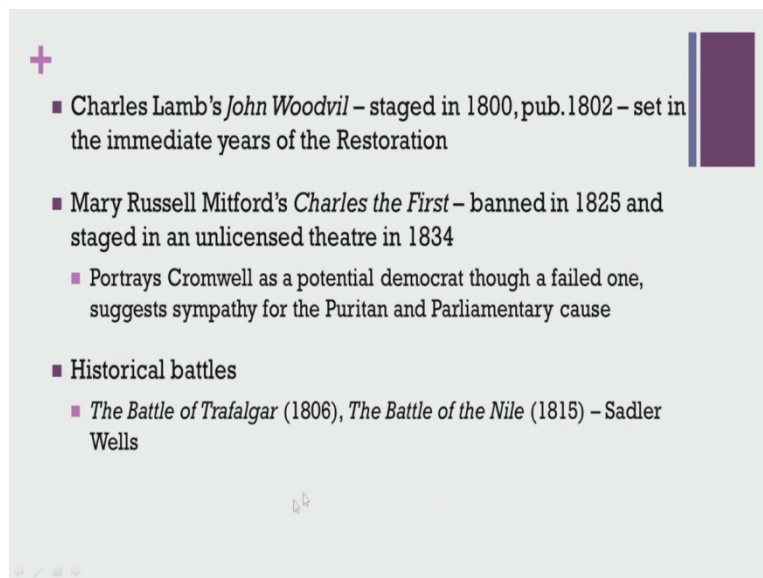
- John St. John – *The Island of St. Marguerite* (1789) – censored because of a scene where a mob bursts into revolutionary song
 - To escape censorship some playwrights situated their their themes in different time spans and countries
- William Godwin's *Faulkener* (1807), Schiller's *The Robbers* – trans. by Alexander Tytler in 1792
- CM Weiland's *Dialogues of the Gods* published by Joseph Johnson in 1795
 - (inspired by Shelley's *Hellas* and *Prometheus Unbound*)

So, though introductorily we do find a certain kind of a romantic tenancy seeping into these dramatic outputs as well. Charles Lamb's though he was mostly an essays and though his claim to fame also rest on the kind of humorous essays that he wrote, his *John Woodvil* was staged in 1800 and it was published in 1802. His play was set in the immediate years after restoration.

We do see that Lamb also take sufficient care to distant himself from the immediate political realities. *Charles the First* was a play written by Mary Russell Mitford. It was initially banned in 1825 but eventually she could stage it but in an unlicensed theatre in 1834. It is useful also to remember that there were only two proper licensed theatres in London during that time. And this work *Charles the First* by Mary Russell Mitford it portrays Oliver Cromwell as a potential democrat though a failed one.

And her work also suggests sympathy for the Puritan and Parliamentary cause. So it did not go really go down well with the authorities and it had mixed responses as far as its audience reaction was concerned. The writer name Sadler Wells engaged with lot of historical battles in his place. Two of the prominent ones where *The Battle of Trafalgar* published in 1806 and *The battle of the Nile* published in 1815.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:25)



- Charles Lamb's *John Woodvil* – staged in 1800, pub.1802 – set in the immediate years of the Restoration
- Mary Russell Mitford's *Charles the First* – banned in 1825 and staged in an unlicensed theatre in 1834
 - Portrays Cromwell as a potential democrat though a failed one, suggests sympathy for the Puritan and Parliamentary cause
- Historical battles
 - *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1806), *The Battle of the Nile* (1815) – Sadler Wells

Since certainly we begin to notice again and again that the playwrights while writing not for the stage but for an audience who were reading them. So in that sense we also see a transition of the genre of drama from a performance oriented genre towards a more literary genre.

Amidst all this censorship and amidst all the anxiety of an impending revolution we do find that number of them wrote direct political satires as well.

When we say direct we also need to remember that it was in some way or the other safely located so as not to come under any kind of violent censorship. One of the most important plays of this time which employed the method of direct censorship was published in 1817 by RS. It was titled *The Bugaboo*. Because of the initials RS it was mistakenly and also deliberately attributed to Robert Southey so that he would also perhaps run into some kind of political tussle with the reigning authorities.

And this work had several attacks on the government in comical verse which it remains quite anonymous who this RS really was. And Robert Southey himself he wrote a play titled *Wat Tyler*. It was a drama praising republican ideals and the revolutions. The play instantly was republished in 1817.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:45)



+ Direct political satires

- *The Bugaboo* – by RS, 1817
 - Mistakenly and deliberately attributed the Robert Southey
 - Had several attacks on the government in comical verse
- Southey's *Wat Tyler* – a drama praising republican ideals and revolution – republished in 1817 (by then he had changed his opinions and political stance)
- Joanna Baillies *Constantile Paleologus* (1804) – about a besieged monarch in ancient times
- *The Massacre* by Elizabeth Inchbald – based on the September massacres of 1792 – an extremely violent play with murdering mobs and streets strewn with bodies of dead children – the play was suppressed
- George Watson's *England Preserved*, 1795 – set in the 15th century
- Samuel Birch's *The Adopted Child*, 1795 – a play about the attempt to kill the heir to a castle
- Wordsworth's *Borderers*, *Baillie's De Montfort* – about political themes of revolution

But much to Southey's embarrassment by then his personal choices and his opinions and his political stances had changed much. It was a cause of much political disappointment and embarrassment for him. There was yet another work which was located in a distant land published in 1804 by Joanna Baillies. It was titled *Constantile Paleologus* and it was about a besieged monarch in ancient times.

This sort of not giving a particular location or a particular live time also gave more freedom for the playwright to express ideas that could otherwise be considered more problematic as far as the ruling monarch or the ruling authorities were concerned. Elizabeth Inchbald's *The*

Massacre was another significant work. This was actually based on the September massacres of 1792.

This is also an offshoot of the French Revolution and the events that led to it. This play was considered extremely violent. There were a lot of scenes related to murdering mobs, streets strewn with bodies and dead children and the play obviously was suppressed due to the kind of violent reactions that it may have provoked had this been staged.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:56)



+ Direct political satires

- *The Bugaboo* – by RS, 1817
 - Mistakenly and deliberately attributed the Robert Southey
 - Had several attacks on the government in comical verse
- Southey's *Wat Tyler* – a drama praising republican ideals and revolution – republished in 1817 (by then he had changed his opinions and political stance)
- Joanna Baillies *Constantine Paleologus* (1804) – about a besieged monarch in ancient times
- *The Massacre* by Elizabeth Inchbald – based on the September massacres of 1792 – an extremely violent play with murdering mobs and streets strewn with bodies of dead children – the play was suppressed
- George Watson's *England Preserved*, 1795 – set in the 15th century
- Samuel Birch's *The Adopted Child*, 1795 – a play about the attempt to kill the heir to a castle
- Wordsworth's *Borderers*, Baille's *De Monfort* – about political themes of revolution

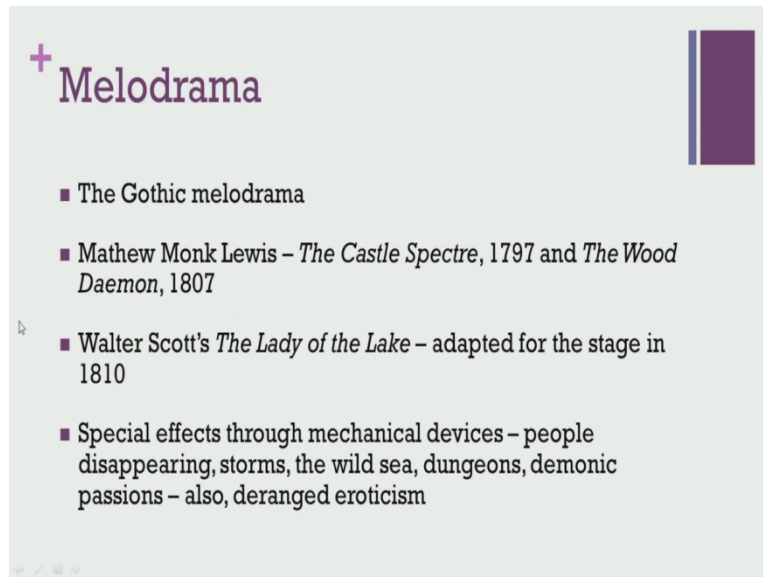
So we do see that in some of the cases the authorities do intervene in order to prevent any kind of mob reaction to a particular event or even to a particular staged event. George Watson's *England Preserved* published in 1795 was set in the 15th century. Similarly Samuel Birch's *The Adopted Child* again published in 1795 was a play about the attempt to kill an heir to a castle. Wordsworth, the master poet of the romantic age, he also wrote a couple of plays titled *Borderers* and Baille's *De Monfort*.

It was also about the political themes of the revolution. And this incidentally was also during the early time of his career when he was really impressed and delighted about the prospects of the French Revolution. Taking off from the influence given by the Gothic fiction we find a melodramatic kind of drama also dominating around this period. It was known as the Gothic melodrama.

Perhaps the most important work in this genre was Matthew Monk Lewis - *The Castle Spectre* published in 1797 and *The Wood Daemon* in 1807. So we do find that this is also

getting published around this transition phrase from the late 18th century towards the romantic period.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:14)

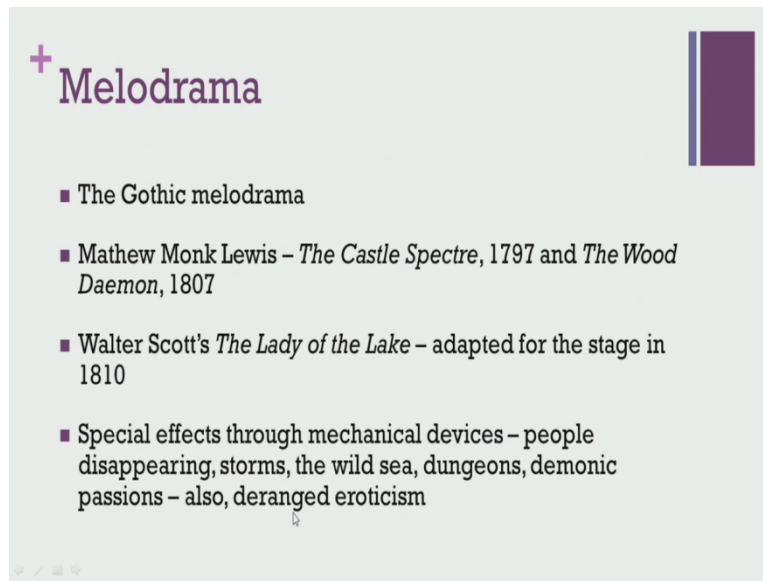


And similarly Walter Scott's one of the master story tells us the romantic age also contributes to the development of this Gothic melodrama through his *The Lady of the Lake*. It was adapted for stage in 1810. Scott, though he was a novelist, many of his plays were adapted for stage and also all of them had a big successful run as well.

And when it came to the staging of the Gothic melodrama it is useful to remember that they used to employ a lot of innovative stage techniques and they also tried to bring in special effects through the mechanical devices which could be employed at that time. And in that sense it is also in stark contrast to the earlier kinds of stages which were comparatively less colourful and less eventful.

So in the Gothic melodrama we also find various kinds of special effects such as people disappearing, storms appearing, the wild sea raging, the scenes with dungeons and demons and also there was a lot of room for deranged erotic passion to be displayed.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:12)



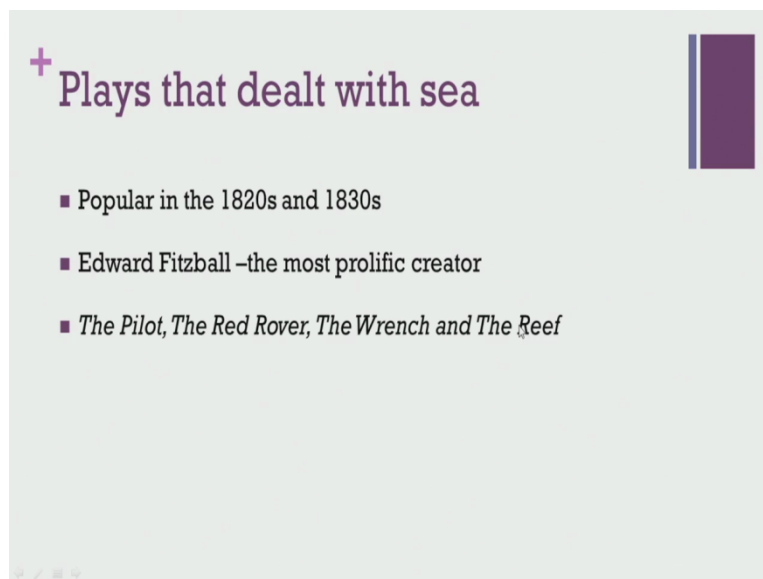
+ Melodrama

- The Gothic melodrama
- Mathew Monk Lewis – *The Castle Spectre*, 1797 and *The Wood Daemon*, 1807
- Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* – adapted for the stage in 1810
- Special effects through mechanical devices – people disappearing, storms, the wild sea, dungeons, demonic passions – also, deranged eroticism

So in that sense it was also discredited by some of the leading critics of those times and many also thought could be very misleading influence on the play going public. Edward Fitzball was one of the leading playwrights who wrote plays that dealt with sea and his works were popular in the 1820s and in the 1830s.

And his major works includes *The Pilot*, *The Red Rover*, *The Wrench* and *The Reef*. Given that it was a time of colonial expansion and many were responding to their passion to go for adventures in the sea, this sort of play about the sea could only become more successful than ever.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:37)



+ Plays that dealt with sea

- Popular in the 1820s and 1830s
- Edward Fitzball –the most prolific creator
- *The Pilot*, *The Red Rover*, *The Wrench* and *The Reef*

There is also the appropriate time to take the look at how the theatre was evolving and developing within London. And though the development of drama was not very promising and though it did not result in any kind of delightful or entertaining response we find that in terms of theatre this was a very exciting period in London. We find most of the theatres staging classical and popular plays of the past and mostly Shakespeare was the favourite of all these theatre goers.

London theatre at this point of time was dominated by two houses operating under patent, Drury Lane and Covent Garden and both were also rebuilt in the 19th century with increased capacity. So this also had made theatre going as one of the favourite pastimes of people during that time. There were also some famous actors who also became celebrities during that time namely John Philip Kemble, Sara Siddons who was the sister of Kemble, Edmund Kean and William Charles Macready.

Misses Siddons or Sara Siddons in fact she gave thrilling performances of tragic women characters. The character that she played of Lady Macbeth was much renowned and many periodicals and the magazines of those times wrote delightfully about it.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:01)



+The theatres in London

- An exciting period in the theatre – popular, classics of the past – mostly Shakespeare
- London theatre – dominated by 2 houses operating under patent – Drury Lane and Covent Garden
 - Both rebuilt with increased capacity
- Many famous actors – John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready
 - Mrs Siddons – thrilling performances in tragic roles
 - “Mr. Kean’s Hamlet is as much too splenetic and rash as Mr. Kemble’s is too deliberate and formal” – Hazlitt
 - ‘Watching Edmund Kean was “like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning” - Coleridge
- New plays – sentimental comedy and farce – dismissed as ‘sickly and stupid German tragedies’ – Wordsworth
- The shortage of new plays – dramatization of Scott’s novels as soon as they appeared

And Hazlitt who was one of the leading critics of those times and one of the critics who also laid the foundation of the genre of literary criticism was one of the regular contributors of the reviews of the dramas which were getting staged in either of these theatres at that point of time. And most of these plays being adaptations or reworked versions of Shakespeare, they

all had an immense delight to talk about these dramas and give critical and also rave reviews about them.

Hazlitt is said to have written at one point, Mr. Kean's Hamlet is as much too splenetic and rash as Mr. Kemble's is too deliberate and formal. So we find these critics responding not just to the plays but also to the actors who were giving life to these characters on stage. Coleridge at another point is said to have remarked that, Watching Edmund Kean was like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning.

So by the 19th century it was no longer a spectacle to watch men and women on stage and it also became one of the common place kind of pastimes and it was no longer important to highlight that both men and women could share a stage in the London theatre.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:10)



+The theatres in London

- An exciting period in the theatre – popular, classics of the past – mostly Shakespeare
- London theatre – dominated by 2 houses operating under patent – Drury Lane and Covent Garden
 - Both rebuilt with increased capacity
- Many famous actors – John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready
 - Mrs Siddons – thrilling performances in tragic roles
 - “Mr. Kean's Hamlet is as much too splenetic and rash as Mr. Kemble's is too deliberate and formal” – Hazlitt
 - “Watching Edmund Kean was “like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning” - Coleridge
- New plays – sentimental comedy and farce – dismissed as 'sickly and stupid German tragedies' – Wordsworth
- The shortage of new plays – dramatization of Scott's novels as soon as they appeared

There was also the emergence of a new kind of play such as the sentimental comedy and farce. But we do find most of them looking down upon it and especially Wordsworth is said to have remarked that they were sickly and stupid German tragedies and they need to be dismissed all together from the London scene. As most of these theatres were focusing on the earlier plays of Shakespeare and also the classic and the past plays, we find that there is an acute shortage of new plays.

So because of this very often the dramatization of Scott's novels took place as soon as they appeared on print. And we find Scott also in that sense becoming one of the most favourite of the theatre goers as well as the novel readers of those times. Perhaps the most influential and the foundational influence on drama of the romantic period was on the (())(16:56) of the

dramatic criticism. One of the important works of this time was Thomas de Quincey's *On the knocking at the Gate in Macbeth*.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:04)



+ Dramatic criticism

- *On the knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* – Thomas de Quincey
- Hazlitt on *Hamlet* – “there is no play that suffers so much in being transferred to the stage’
- Lamb – doubtful about *King Lear* – “But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted”
- *Hamlet* – the chief object of meditation for the Romantics
- Coleridge – “I have a smack on Hamlet myself, if I may say so”

So this period also in that sense sees the beginning of Shakespeare criticism becoming a more academic and a more literary pursued. Hazlitt is said to have remarked about Hamlet that there is no play that suffer so much in being transferred to the stage. And around this time similar to Hazlitt many other critics also they begin to attempt comparisons between the same play when it is written and also when it gets translated into the stage. Even Charles Lamb was quite doubtful about the performance of King Lear and he feared that the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted.

The character of Hamlet he continued to be the chief object of meditation for the romantics primarily because they could relate in many ways to the kind of dilemma that Hamlet also went through during his lifetime. And they could directly transport all the kind of anxieties and dilemma on to this character as well. And Coleridge himself is said to have remarked that he had a smack on Hamlet myself if I may say so.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:58)



+ Dramatic criticism

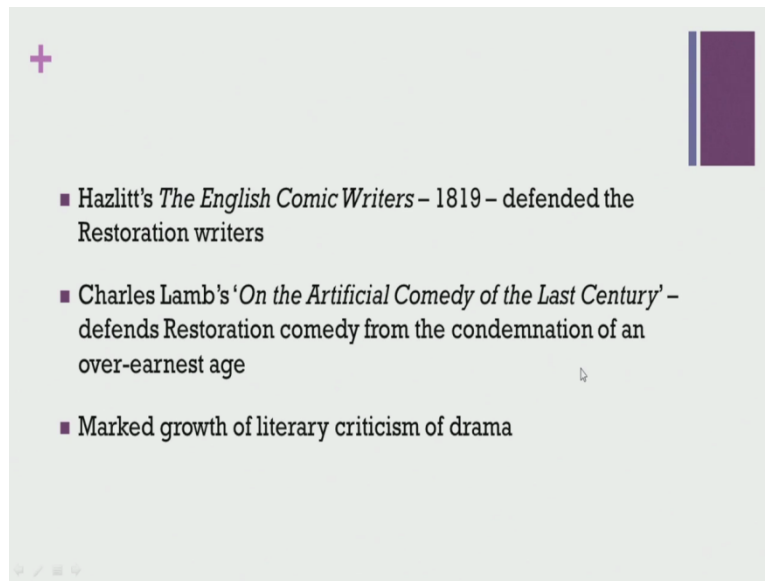
- *On the knocking at the Gate in Macbeth* – Thomas de Quincey
- Hazlitt on *Hamlet* – “there is no play that suffers so much in being transferred to the stage’
- Lamb – doubtful about *King Lear* – “But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted”
- *Hamlet* – the chief object of meditation for the Romantics
- Coleridge – “I have a smack on Hamlet myself, if I may say so”

Hazlitt’s *The English Comic Writers* published in 1819, it defended the Restoration writers. So in that sense we do begin to notice that the form of criticism of drama begins to develop in a more advanced pace. They also began to take a look at not just contemporary drama but also began a study of the earlier writers and the earlier dramatic performances as well. Charles Lamb also wrote an influential piece titled *On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century*.

Here also we find him defending the Restoration comedy from the condemnation of an over earnest age. It is also useful here to remember that Restoration commonly and Restoration drama in general when it was staged was considered as a source of immorality and also was forced to close down because of the licensing act which came at a later point of time.

And at this point of time it becomes almost important for all of these writers to take a look at whatever has passed before them and also they find it quite important to highlight these past kind of performances and also talk about them in a critical and a more insightful manner. So overall it would perhaps suffice to say that though there is no significant direct relation that we can find between the growth of romanticism and the growth of drama, this period certainly laid a marked foundation on the growth of the literary criticism of drama.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:20)



- Hazlitt's *The English Comic Writers* – 1819 – defended the Restoration writers
- Charles Lamb's '*On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century*' – defends Restoration comedy from the condemnation of an over-earnest age
- Marked growth of literary criticism of drama

So with this we begin to wrap up this lecture. Thank you for listening and look forward to seeing you in the next session.