

Tracing the Sovereignty and Subjection of a Wonderful Era of the Elizabethans

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The Elizabethan Age refers to one of those rare spans of time in the world wherein was witnessed the spirit of an age discovering its fittest expression in language, and is therefore universally accepted as the most glorious period in the history of English literature. The singular factor that lends glory to the age, is the Drama. It is no easy job to discover the reasons for this greatness. But one thing is certain that forces religious, intellectual, political and social, all in their confluence did create a situation that was congenial for the growth of creative literature. Humanism and the Reformation had emancipated the mind of man from medieval orthodoxy. Intellectual passion, expressed now in speculative daring and now in moral earnestness, did henceforth go hand in hand with a pagan zest for life.

For the sake of convenience Elizabethan drama could be broadly classified under four different heads: Academic Drama, the Native English Drama, Courtly Drama, and the Popular Drama. But before we dwell on the historical account, let us first analyze the impact of Senecan tragedy on Elizabethan drama which made it so unique and unrivalled in its intellectual appeal and in weaving the witchcraft of word-magic to its becoming an epoch of the Age.

When, at the onset of the sixteenth century, the English dramatists were still struggling to find form and substance to the chaotic shapelessness of things on peoples' understanding, the Senecan Drama, which today appears to us as melodramatic and often crude, appealed strongly to the taste of the robust Englishman of the contemporary times in question. While Seneca's sententious philosophy interspersed with moral maxims was appreciated by men more learned, his admirable model, with an abundance of melodrama of the horrible and sensational, along with themes of the supernatural, suited more to the delight of popular taste, and became an instant hit with the general public. Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides which were not so familiar then, were unable to make much inroads in the minds of the Elizabethan public whose animal instincts were yet to be chastised by a more mature civilized culture.

So intricate yet appealing was the tangle of the labyrinthine influence of all the ten translated Senecan tragedies with popular playwrights, especially to Kyd and other Elizabethan dramatists that it is impossible to segregate or clearly distinguish the strands as to how much debt they owed to Seneca's original and how much to their translations. As the critic J.W. Cunliffe points out, the learned dramatists would do without the help of translations while the less learned were happy to be afforded aid by a minor playwright Heywood, and his fellow-translators. The value of Seneca's influence lay primarily in the play's verses being at best, badly written doggerels, hedged with racy styles imbued with an array of vibrant characters to mask the readers from perceiving metrical

imperfections by the rhythm of a verse. Until the first half of the sixteenth century, the Englishmen had a clumsy and grotesque style of expression as against the ability of expressing in adequate language, their growing intellectual/speculative passion for a new life surging within them, rendered the intrinsic dramatic worth of the plays to a great extent, diluted and bland. In the overall assessment, therefore, the Senecan plays, with all their richness of rhetoric and epigrammatical eloquence, was utterly lacking as true dramas as there was no growth of character and the action, too little. Seneca's alterations of the story of the *Hippolytus* by Euripides was made in such a way as to a complete ruination of the aesthetic appeal of the tragedy, while in the *Medea*, his is a faithful following of the plot but not in conception, which he has tried to vulgarize and degrade by his natural proclivity towards exaggerating the scenes of violence in the original version. It will, however, be futile to rant over the dramatic weaknesses of Seneca. Ironically, these very shortcomings proved a boon for the later playwrights who modified and modelled it into a new line of creative presentation. Greek and Latin, which were now incorporated in their study replaced the Senecan plays. For, had the translated versions of the masterpieces of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were to become the role models, the uniqueness and ingenuity of the classical Elizabethan drama would have been lost forever. Thereafter, an extraordinary rapid development of the English drama was witnessed in the immediacy of mere four decades: there appeared a collection of the editions of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Faustus*, and within another fifteen years, came Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. These began to shine their effulgence on the literary firmament. Thus it was the result of such a transitional shift which became instrumental in shadowing the influence of the obscure translations of Seneca and paved way to the ageless creations of Shakespeare's plays.

Coming back to the subject of classifications of Elizabethan Drama, the Academic Drama of the age comprises plays primarily meant for performance in seats of learning, that is, in schools, colleges and Inns of Court. Since Latin had an important place in their curriculum, all these plays bore the influence of Latin plays – of Seneca in tragedy and of Plautus and Terence in comedy. Monstrous crime, cruelty, bloodshed and horror, the avenging ghosts, rhetorical speeches punctuated with stoic moralizing and the absence of action – these form the stock-in-trade for a Senecan play. Among Elizabethan Senecan *Tragedies of Gorboduc*, also titled *Ferrex and Porrex* (named after the sons of the legendary king Gorboduc, of Britain), deserves special mention. Amongst the earliest of English tragedies in blank verse, this play was first premiered before Queen Elizabeth at the Christmas celebration hosted by the Inner Temple in 1561. Gorboduc had unwittingly given away his kingdom to his sons during his lifetime which led to a bloodshed between the brothers, with the younger slaughtering his elder, Ferrex. Queen Videna their mother, avenged the death of Ferrex by getting Porrex murdered. The King and the Queen were then in a wave of reaction killed by their horrified former subjects. The five-play act used the Classical elements of Chorus and Messenger in addition to the non-Classical, such as pantomimes, slapstick comedy or dumb shows based on fairy tales, before each

act. The classical comedy of the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence too, deserves notice for love-intrigue, stock characters and well-structured plots. Gammer Gurton's *Needle* have some most amusing characters ever created: Gammer, a widow, is the proud owner of a needle which she loses. Her maidservant, Tyb, is the world's only person who could leave the dirtiest of garbage dump dirtier just by walking over it. Hodge is exceptionally brave when there is no danger and is terribly clever when there is no problem. Gascoigne's *Supposes*, perverts a type of drama of the characteristic Italian comedy of intrigue by exaggerating its didactic element. These popular short plays, were in varying degrees influenced by the two classical dramatists.

Running parallel to the classically-oriented Academic Drama there was the Native English Drama which drew sustenance from the same indigenous impulse that engendered the *Miracles And Moralities*. It grew its plot material from various sources – classical history, medieval legends, Italian romance and tales of English domestic life. These plays introduce rant where Seneca gave us sententious rhetoric, they present on the stage scenes of bloodshed and horror where Seneca had only conveyed them in speech, and they ignored classical correctness by intermingling somewhat coarse and indecent, broad comedy, with the serious stuff of tragedy. Plays like *Cambyses*, with its proverbial bombastic grandiloquence is a 'departure', and George Whetstone's play *Promos and Cassandra* with its comic underplot of a courtesan, illicit bawdy lust and unscrupulous corrupt magistrates, belong to this category. Unlike the classical Academic plays, the Native English plays were not written by scholars, nor acted by learned societies: they were performed by professional actors.

It was, however, in the fifteen eighties that Elizabethan Drama did for the first time give unmistakable promise of greatness. In this decade we notice a group of young writers who, having graduated from Oxford or Cambridge turned to playwriting as a profession. This group, known as the "University Wits," consisted of John Lyly, Robert Greene, George Peele, Thomas Lodge and Thomas Mash. Lyly originated a new type of comedy – the high comedy. In his comedies, in which he flattered and complimented Queen Elizabeth in allegory, are suffused with a courtly atmosphere: Here, he cultivated the qualities of delicacy, grace and charm, qualities unknown to the extravagant comedy of the time. And he used a polished prose marked by antithesis, parallelism, alliteration and other euphuistic devices to match the sophisticated tone of his comedies. Peele, whose works are of a varied character, wrote one courtly comedy, but, unlike Lyly, he here chose lyric poetry instead of mannered prose and also introduced realistic scenes in his fancifully treated theme. Greene's contribution was more considerable than that of Peele. He showed skill in blending different stories into a complicated plot and in the faithful portrayal of country life.

But it is in the Popular Drama of Marlowe and Kyd that the Elizabethan drama showed the first signs of its greatness. The University Wits showed their power in comedy, Marlowe and Kyd in tragedy. Kyd's Spanish Tragedy is a melodramatic tragedy of both Senecan and English extraction. But the action is presented dramatically, not rhetorically as in Seneca. There is motivation in the evolution of the plot. The development of the story is the outcome of both

character and action working upon each other. In this respect Kyd comes nearer to Shakespeare than does Marlowe.

Marlowe, a bold innovator, opposed the craze for Senecan tragedy with its dumb show, chorus, ghosts declamation and absence of action. He infused blood, vitality and passion into tragedy. He also rejected the medieval concepts that tragedy is a thing of princes only and that the near fall from prosperity and happiness into adversity constitute tragedy. His tragic heroes are an average necromancer, a commonplace moneylender, a mere shepherd who rose to be a world conqueror. He also deepened the concept of tragedy by treating it not merely as a matter of life and death but as the heroic struggle of an individual doomed to defeat and death. It is the heroic struggle, not the fact of death that is of central importance. Further, he unlocked the potentiality of blank verse. The blank verse of the English-Senecan tragedy was stiff, stilted and monotonous. But Marlowe's blank verse has a flexibility, sweep and resonance that made it natural and also aesthetically pleasing. And the rolling reverberating music that he obtained by stringing together a number of sounding proper names was something new to English poetry.

Shakespeare was not a daring innovator like Marlowe. In Shakespeare, the first thing that strikes our attention is his amazing versatility. Other dramatists of the age, including Marlowe, usually showed their power and skill in specialized fields of drama. But, be it tragedy, comedy, historical play or romance, Shakespeare tried his hand in all of them with equal mastery. It is equally remarkable that none of Shakespeare's plays show any repetition in respect of theme or manner, and this imparts a pleasing singularity to each one of his plays. The reason for all this is to be sought in the quality of his mind. He has been called the 'myriad-minded Shakespeare', and, indeed, in the capaciousness of his mind he is unrivalled. And he is equally unrivalled in his grasp of human nature. He probed into and comprehended human nature in all its variety and complexity and laid it bare in his plays. Shakespeare's characters are thus three-dimensional individuals, not types of humanity. And the profound human interest of his plays infuses in them a universal and timeless quality. It is significant that Shakespeare was not interested in self-revelation in his plays.

A true dramatist as he was, he exercised his negative capability of creating characters that could live their own lives. But Shakespeare's greatness is to be traced not merely to his 'humanism' but to his poetry. His superb powers as poet enabled him to evoke any mood or atmosphere at will, to transmute things earthly into 'fire and air' where necessary, and to depict human passions in their heights and depths. As playwright, Shakespeare allowed himself to be guided by his dramatic instinct, rather than by any rules.

Unlike Shakespeare, Ben Jonson composed plays usually in conformity with certain prescriptions. Classical-biased as he was he frowned upon comedy that concerned itself with either romantic love or with buffoonery. He proclaimed that the business of comedy was to ridicule the follies of human beings in the familiar world of men, the purpose being both to amuse and to correct. The main interest thus lies in the characters, not in the incident, the 'humours' – that is, the

eccentricities – of the characters serving as the targets of satire. Jonson naturally chose characters that are “types”, unlike the rounded characters of Shakespeare, and since they do not develop they remain extremely simple. His characters lack the psychological complexity and lifelikeness of Shakespeare’s characters.

Among the other playwrights of the time there are two who deserve a passing mention – Dekker who is remembered for the open air charm and realism of his English scenes, and Heywood for having written a fine domestic tragedy.

The drama started showing symptoms of decline from about 1610. It was now the Jacobean age where the dramatist catered less for the populace than for gentlemen spectators. Drama now came to tackle situations of particular rather than of universal interest, and it became morally less serious and psychologically more intricate. The shallowness of the Jacobean court favoured romantic tragicomedy which, with its store of thrills and surprises, made less serious appeal to the intellect than did tragedy. The world of Webster’s tragic plays is cynical and bitter, ruthless and irrational. Moral perversity usually furnishes the theme of plays by Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger and Ford. The drama continued in its decadent course until, at the closing of the theatres in 1642, it died a natural death, marking the end of a great epoch

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