

# Elizabethan Drama

# Sources of Inspiration

- Great demand: public theatres put on a different show every day. Novelty, variety and diversity were requested for a high number of new plays every year.
- The author pillages any possible source: romances, Italian novellas (Boccaccio, Bandello, Giraldi Cinzio, translated by William Painter in *Palace of Pleasures*, 1566-67), mythical and legendary heritage of the classical world (*Plutarch's Lives*, translated in 1579), English history (second edition of *Holinshed's Chronicles*, 1587), contemporary events, criminal or shady ones in England or on the Continent.

# University Wits

Men of Letters, educated at Oxford and Cambridge. They had no desire to be in holy orders (as the medieval scholar was bound to be). → a class of secular professional playwrights rose.

- John Lily, Robert Greene, George Peele, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Nash, Thomas Lodge, Christopher Marlowe.
- Greene referred to Shakespeare as “an upstart\* crow, beautified with our feathers”. He therefore accused him of copying their works. \*(parvenu, ultimo arrivato, arrampicatore)

# No interest in publication (especially for Shakespeare)

- Texts were **not often published** because they could be used by rival companies. No copyrights.
- **Pirate copies** based on reconstruction from memory by actors or **legitimate copies based on “foul papers”** (unrevised drafts of the author) were frequent.
- Author = first the supplier of a script, then little by little becomes a real writer.

# Importance of the classics and humanist influence

- New Learning, interest in the classics, **translations into English of many classical plays** by University scholars (especially Seneca's tragedies, Terence's and Plautus's comedies).
- Latin plays were recited or learnt by heart by students.
- **Comedy**: based on stock ingredients: mistaken identities, misunderstandings, plots motivated by love.
- **Tragedy**: the model was Seneca (his idea of fate), but re-interpreted in a bloodthirsty way. The "revenge-tragedy" comes from Seneca. Its prototype is Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy (1592)* and its most distinguished example is *Hamlet*.

# Theatrical Genres in the Elizabethan Period

- Comedy
- Tragedy
- Tragicomedy
- History Play

# Comedies

- *Ralph Roister Doister* = first English comedy, by **Nicolas Udall** (1552), inspired by Plautus and Terence, whose plays Udall, headmaster at Eton, translated into English. Theme of “Braggart Soldier”, *Miles Gloriosus*.
- This genre owes much to **John Lily**. He turned to Greek legends for his plays. (*Midas, Endimion, Sapho and Phao*)
- Shakespeare: romantic comedy, from Italian *novellas*
- Jonson: satirical comedy, shift from love to money, setting London

# Tragedies

- *Gorboduc* (1562) = first tragedy of Senecan inspiration, by **Thomas Sackville** and **Thomas Norton**. Strong didactic purpose (as for the interlude), but political not moral. A tale of a divided kingdom, civil war, split authority. Reference to early English history (*King Lear* drew on it).

# History Plays (or Histories)

- First **history play** is John Bale's *King John* (1538), followed by *Gorboduc* (both tragedy and history play).
- The history of England and its rulers was widely used and appreciated. History plays present events from the past in the guise of "a mirror for magistrates", **a mirror which contained a lesson for the present**. Exemplary narration.
- Past events sanction the full legitimacy of the present. They allowed dramatists to strengthen Elizabeth's role as guarantor of the unity and prosperity of the nation.

# Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

- One of the University Wits and spy in the service of the Queen. Mortally wounded by the secret services in a tavern, because he probably was not reliable any more.
- Son of a shoemaker, he attended Cambridge University on a scholarship.
- Wrote mainly for the theatre. One narrative poem: *Hero and Leander*

# Monolithic characters, grandiose in their wickedness, overreachers

- Tamburlaine: ambition, power.
- Barabas, the Jew: vengeance.
- Faustus: knowledge.
- Repertoire of shocking and extreme actions
- Such qualities fascinated the public of the time. Taste for sensationalism and excess.

# Tamburlaine the Great (1587)

- Rise to power, decline and death of a Scythian shepherd driven by unbound ambition, who becomes emperor. He seems to carry a religious force: his vigour is the god within him. Scythian /'sɪðɪən/; Scythia = area above the Black and Caspian Seas
- Tamburlaine is the famous conqueror Timur, who ruled in Samarkand in the 14<sup>th</sup> cent, subduing Persians, Tartars, Syrians and Turks. Pronunciation: Timur /ti:'mʊə/
- He destroys whoever stands in the way of his march to power. He is the only figure with a great stature in the play, but his grandeur lies only in his wickedness.
- Famous quotations: “And shall I die and this unconquered?”
- “Accursed be he who invented war” (King of Persia)

# The Jew of Malta (1590)

The governor of Malta decides that the taxes due to the Turks would “all be levied amongst the Jews”. Each of them has to pay one half of his estate. But he confiscates all of Barabas’s estate.

- Wickedness and brutality of the crimes he commits to achieve vengeance
- Barabas’s reaction makes him a grotesque villain.
- Denunciation of the hypocrisy and greed of the Christians and their prejudice against the Jews.

# Tragical History of Doctor Faustus (1590)

- The same protagonist immortalized by Goethe.
- He makes a bargain with the devil to obtain power, riches, pleasures (Helen of Troy) and boundless knowledge in exchange for his soul.
- A Morality Play? Among the Dramatis Personae (= characters) are the «Seven Deadly Sins»
- A character torn between sin and repentance.

# Edward II (1592)

Pronunciation /'ɛdwəd/

- From history play to historical tragedy.
- Four characters: Edward, his favourite Gaveston, his wife Queen Isabella, and her lover Mortimer.
- The precise nature of the relationship between the king and Gaveston is uncertain; they may have been friends, lovers, or sworn brothers.
- Clash between private and public. Their quest for power and sexual desire leads the nation to the verge of catastrophe.
- Revolt of the barons, murder of Gaveston, confinement of Edward and, later, his murder.
- Legitimacy of royal power: has a king with limited political and military capacities the right to rule? → (Shakespeare's *Richard II*)