

The English Drama

- ✦ From the Beginnings to the Jacobean Period
- ✦ (from the 12th century to 1625)



The Drama in the 12th Century and 13th Century .

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- ✠ The first forms of dramatic performance **took place in the Churches during the Mass** and they represented **Old Testament stories, Christ's nativity the Crucifixion ...**
 - ✠ In 1240 the **Pope** ordered that the 'plays' had to be performed **outside the church.**
 - ✠ Many theatrical forms developed:
 - Mystery plays**
 - Miracle plays**
 - Cycle plays**
 - Corpus Christi plays.**

The plays were:

✦ **dramatisations of the Bible**



✦ performed first in the **churchyard** and then on the **market square**

✦ presented at **Christmas, Easter** and on other public holidays

✦ organized by the **guilds** of carpenters, tailors ... who cooperated to produce the play and chose a play according to their craft or skills (e.g.: Bakers: The Last Supper/ Winemakers: The Wedding of Cana) .

The Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

Influences:

- ✦ **Henry VIII 's Schism** from Rome and **Reformation** put an end to Medieval religious drama.
- ✦ **Humanism** revived interest in classical drama and plays of Plautus, Terence and Seneca were translated into English.
- ✦ An example of Seneca's influence on English drama can be seen in the works of **Thomas Kid**. His most popular play was ***The Spanish Tragedy*** and it includes **many Senecan elements**.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama

Senecan elements

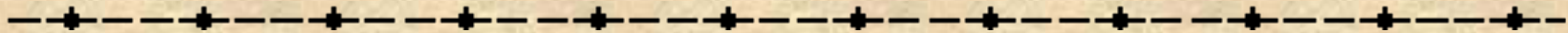
- **Horror /Violence/Bloodshed**
- **Villains/Corruption/Intrigue**
- **Supernatural**
- The human motive of **revenge** to substitute the religious idea that divine justice and fate would punish those who broke the moral law.
- The division of the play into **five acts**.
- The soliloquy and psychologically **morbid characters**

Why Drama Flourished

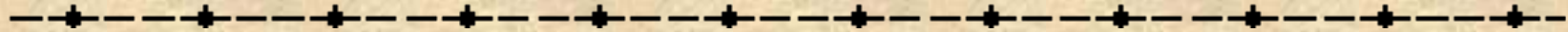


- ✦ Theatre **appealed to all social classes** and plays could be understood both by the illiterate and by the intellectuals
- ✦ There had been a **strong theatre-going tradition** since the Middle Ages.
- ✦ The theatre was **patronised by the Court and by the aristocracy.**
- ✦ The **language** of the drama was **less artificial** than that of poetry.
- ✦ The **prosperity of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods** meant that people had both time and money to go to the theatre.

The Principle of Order and Drama.



The Principle of Order and Drama



- ✦ Drama was linked to the **Elizabethan** world which was based on **the Principle of Order**.
- ✦ Early Elizabethan pictured the universal order as having **three main forms**:
 - A chain
 - A series of corresponding planes
 - A cosmic dance
- ✦ Early Elizabethans found comfort in the existence of a **great chain of being** stretching down **from God to** angels, men, animals and **to inanimate objects** (vertical level) and everything was contained and harmonized in corresponding several **classes of being** (horizontal planes).

The Principle of Order and Drama

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- ✦ **Each class had its leader;** e.g. :gold, lion, eagle, the sun and King. Everything in the universe contributed towards the development and **well-being of other species.**
 - ✦ **Man was the central link:**
 - his body** linked him to the animal world below him
 - his soul** linked him to the spiritual world above him.
 - ✦ **Man was at the centre of the universe** because the moon, the sun, all planets and stars revolved in orbit around the earth.
 - ✦ **The king** was a man who derived his power from God and **held together the social and political fabric established by God and Nature.**

Factors which Undermined Elizabethan Beliefs

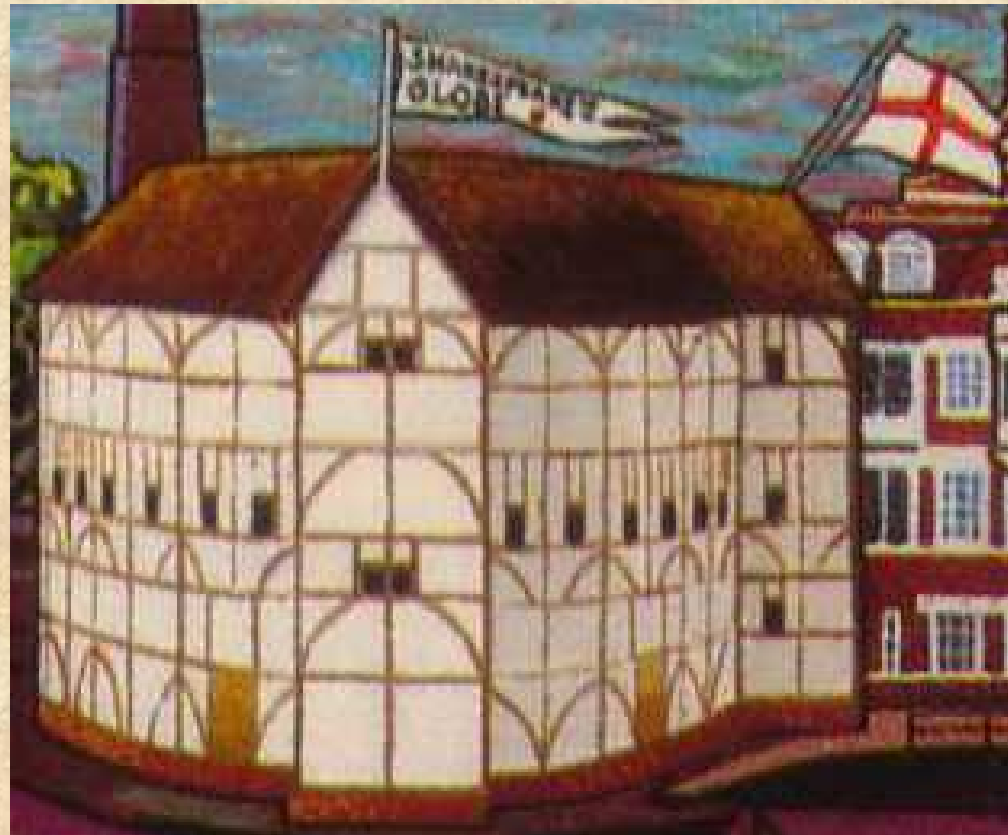
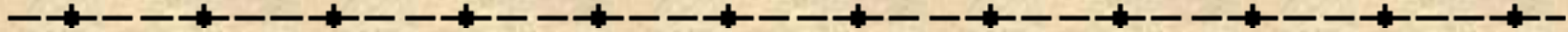


- ✦ A number of factors weakened late Elizabethan and Jacobean beliefs in the principle of universal order:
- ✦ The development of **modern experimental science** which displaced man from the centre of creation.
- ✦ The **Prince by Machiavelli** which rejected the notions of a divinely ordained political hierarchy.
- ✦ Fears of wars for succession.

Effects of the Disruption of Traditional Beliefs.

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- ✦ Many **Elizabethan dramatists** were concerned with the hierarchical **order** of the universe and what could occur **if it was broken**.
 - ✦ In particular **Shakespeare** highlighted in some of his plays some **causes** which could **lead to the loss of the traditional order**:
 - unrest** and civil strife;
 - appetite** for power/lust/...
 - kings relinquishing their responsibilities;
 - disobedience**
 - ✦ He explored their **disastrous effects**:
disharmony, **chaos**, **subversion** of natural world and cosmic **disorder**; insanity and **tragedy**; characters are full of **passions** and **doubts** and question the world around them constantly.

Theatres and Acting Companies



The Actors

The actors

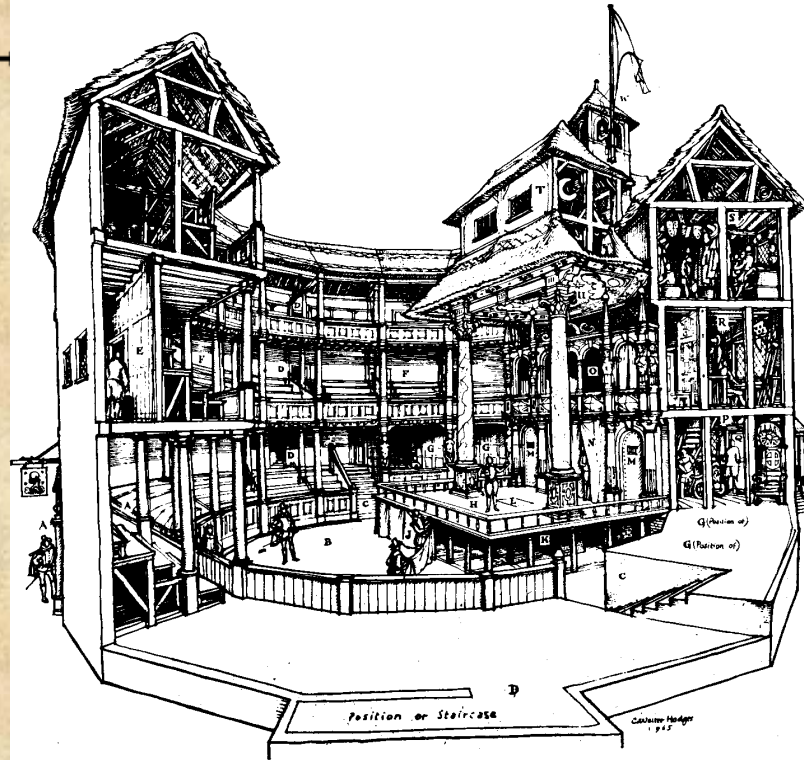
- ✦ Actors were **descendants** of Medieval **street performers**.
- ✦ In 1572 a law classified actors as **vagabonds** putting them at risk of being imprisoned. To overcome the problem **actors started working in companies patronized by noblemen**.
- ✦ These noblemen granted the actors a letter of **permission** which allowed them to **travel around the country**.
- ✦ The company took the name after their **patrons: The Earl of Leicester's Men, The Lord Chamberlain's Men ...**



The Companies

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- ✦ A theatre company was a **commercial enterprise** in which all partners were sharers.
 - ✦ At Shakespeare's time there were **about 20 companies in London** .
 - ✦ The **plays were property of each company** and obviously were **not published**.
 - ✦ However **'pirate'** versions were written shorthand during the performances; eg. the circulation of these illegal versions made the editing of Shakespeare's works very difficult.
 - ✦ As acting was considered immoral **there were no women** in the companies and female parts were played by boys.
 - ✦ An average play had a **cast of about 20 people**:
 - Main actors
 - Three or four boys for women's roles
 - Six or more men played minor roles, worked as musicians, stage managers, wardrobe keepers, prompters .
 - ✦ Companies **played in London in the winter** and spring and travelled around the country in summer.

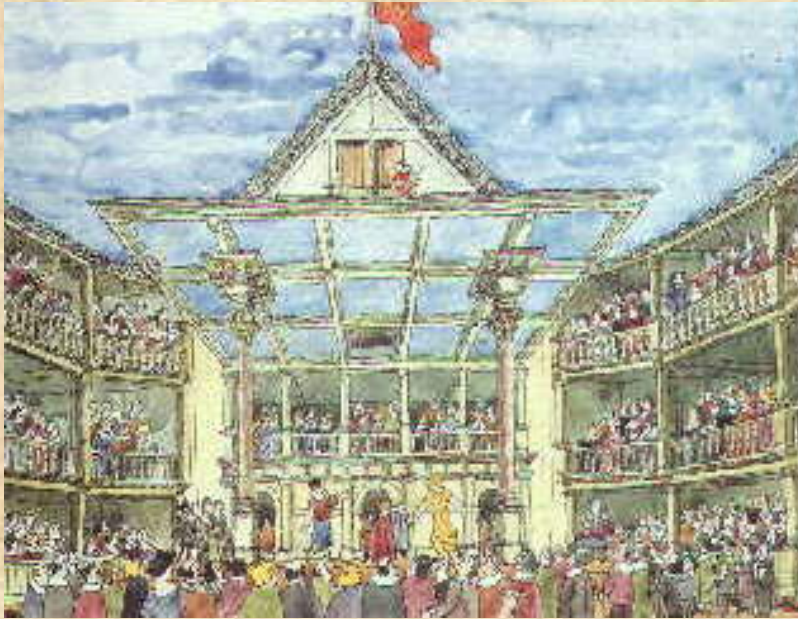
An Elizabethan Theatre



A CONJECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE INTERIOR OF
THE GLOBE PLAYHOUSE

- | | |
|--|--|
| AA Main entrance | N Curtained 'place behind the stage' |
| B The Yard | O Gallery above the stage, used as required
sometimes by musicians, sometimes by
spectators, and often as part of the play |
| CC Entrances to lowest gallery | P Back-stage area (the tiring-house) |
| D Entrance to staircase and upper galleries | Q Tiring-house door |
| E Corridor serving the different sections of the
middle gallery | R Dressing-rooms |
| F Middle gallery ('Twopenny Rooms') | S Wardrobe and storage |
| G 'Gentlemen's Rooms or Lords Rooms' | T The hut housing the machine for lowering
enthroned gods, etc., to the stage |
| H The stage | U The 'Heavens' |
| J The hanging being put up round the stage | w Hoisting the playhouse flag |
| K The 'Hell' under the stage | |
| L The stage trap, leading down to the Hell | |
| MM Stage doors | |

The Theatres and Conventions



✦ **Before** building permanent playhouses plays were performed in the **yards of the inns.**

✦ Playhouses were built **outside the city** because they were considered immoral **centres of corruption.**

✦ The first playhouse was **The Theatre** (1576) followed by **The Rose, The Swan and the Globe.**

Elizabethan theatres

✦ **Circular or polygonal**

✦ With **three tiers** of galleries around a pit .

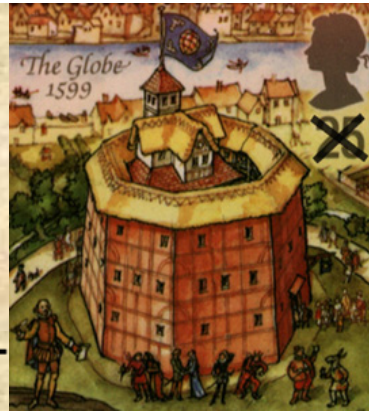
✦ The pit had **no roof, no seats** and was occupied by spectators who paid **the basic one penny ticket** and stood throughout the performance.

✦ The stage projected out into the courtyard and had two parts:

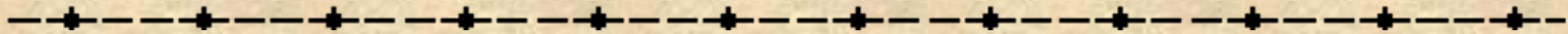
✦ **The outer stage:** the main action of the play took place here

✦ **The inner stage:** used when a scene took place in a more confined place (e.g.: the tomb scene in Romeo and Juliet).

✦ **Below** the stage there was a cellar called '**the Hell**':



- ✦ Through the stage trap actors in 'the Hell' playing the parts of ghosts or fairies made dramatic appearances.
- ✦ **Over** the main stage there was a place called '**the Heavens**'.
- ✦ 'In the Heavens' there was a place for the musicians and a hut housing the machine for lowering gods, angels...
- ✦ **At the back** of the stage there was a **tiring house** where the actors changed.
- ✦ If a **flag** flew from the top of the playhouse it meant that a show **was in progress**.



- ✦ The performance took place in **daylight**.
- ✦ The plays **lacked intervals**.
- ✦ Elizabethan plays used **no painted scenery** and only **a few properties** (props): a chair, a throne ...
- ✦ The **setting** was usually indicated in the characters' **speeches**.
- ✦ **Death scenes** were very gory and **realistic** and animal organs and blood were often used to make battle scenes more realistic
- ✦ There being **no front curtain** 'dead bodies' had to be carried off the stage at the end of the scene.
- ✦ The elaborate sixteenth century costumes of the **actors did not respect historical accuracy**.