



## STUDY OF VARIANTS IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

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**Abstract :** Although the instinct for histrionicism is universal, it had its origin in the classical heritage-in church liturgy of the antiquity. The dramatic writings, both comedy and tragedy originated from the religious ceremonies of Greece and was later passed on to Rome. Tragedy was born out of a religious observance as regards the service of the gods thereby uniting the temporal with the transcendental. Nietzsche grants a role to Apollo, the god of poise and harmony in the Greek tragedy but the role was subordinated to that of Dionysus, the God of music and intoxication and in which the satyr, the goat-man was integrated with the darker self and primordial unity of Nature. Such a remarkable performance could, at once, entertain and awe the audience. The comic writing was started by Aristophanes in Athens. These comedies used to depict the common errors and social manners with an implied motive to reform them.

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**Introduction :** It is notable that these ancient Greek dramas looked towards the Italian masters like Seneca and Terence as models. Their polished style, their intense dramatization of the blood and horrors of death and destruction made it possible for the later generation to come to an authentic concept of what could be tragedy for their own times. And the combined influences of Seneca, Terence and Sophocles led to a completely fresh starting of the English drama and with the practice and performance of the medieval plays in the tenth century British drama came into being on its own. The present paper is critical endeavour to explore the Elizabethan Dramas esp. those of Marlowe and Shakespeare to show the remarkable variation in both theory and practice of the genre as received from the Classical Dramas of Greek and Italy.

What is called British drama arose from the church in which the faith of the masses in the Middle Age was centred. According to Allardyce Nicoll, “The church was ready and eager to provide for people delight as well as spiritual uplifting by means of art and letters. It was ready to show to uneducated folk the Scriptural story in visible form, thus counteracting the lack of vernacular versions of the Holy Writ.” (Nicoll, 18)

Thus, the initial dramatic form of British drama owes much to liturgical developments of the Easter celebrations. Even the first play *Quem Quaeritis* appears to be modern because of its dialogic and communicative nature. Though brief, it contains an intensity of evocative dialogues between the Angel and certain people.

Gradually, the English drama started various episodes associating scenery with people-like-performer in the process of performing the priests. The dramatic representation gaining in concreteness in expression led to evolution of the genre in a specific manner. The replacement of the liturgical by the secular, the imported Latin dialogue by the vernacular was a stepping-stone towards anglicising the drama making it popular and appealing to all and sundry. It would seem that the emerging classical form and fixity. To add to the popular entertainment value of the play, piety was substituted by licence, plays like Noah’s wife, Herod were all lacking in classical ‘form’ or ‘correctness’, but the unbounded expression of their dignified suffering must have had the seed of a genuine tragedy which later blossomed into the hands of Shakespeare. The way, Herod – the slayer of infants, the murderer of murderers develops into a comic type, his roaring and ranting shows the embryonic stage of the British tragedy which was so complexly and variously developed by the University Wits and Shakespeare. By and large, the English dramas showed unclassical orientations defying the classical preoccupation with ‘form’, ‘poise’, monosemantic treatment and unities.

This spirit of originality and innovation could be marked in the English ‘Moralities’ and ‘Interludes’, too. The morality plays, *Mankynd* and *Everyman* have abstractions like vice and virtue well humanized and universalized on the stage showing a convincing realism and natural development. The dramatization of the human moral values seems to be a prelude to the emergence of the Chronicle



History Play where history, morality and imagination are so indistinguishably blended. In short, was to be a vital part of the Renaissance plays. As for the interludes – Mediwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrez*, Heywood’s *Interludes*, the British drama undergoes some radical departure from the classical tradition. The episodic form, the audience participation, the technique of disguise show the seeds of modern, sui generis British drama. The British instinct for original treatment of the classical tales/myths with the help of possible dramatic techniques like – gesture, costume, dialogue seem to inform the first English comedy proper, *Ralph Roister Doister* and tragedy *Gorboduc*. It is notable that due to Queen Elizabeth’s active suggestions, *Gorboduc* was refashioned and reproduced substituting the Senecan plot by one based on the British history and the use of costume, scene and setting all native.

“The spacious Times of great Elizabeth”, to use Tennyson’s phrase, best depicts the all round development, the exuberance and vitality of a whole new world of experience. (Tennyson, 5) John Dover Wilson writes, “It was this combination – almost unparalleled in history since the day of Pericles – of social stability with illimitable opportunity for the individual, which gave the Elizabethan age its sense of balanced flight, its unique quality of happiness and spontaneity. The whole world was in flux, and yet by some trick of magic men trod on solid ground.” Indeed, the age saw the birth of the divinely inspired and imaginative genius of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kyd and Lyly who had brought in radical breakthrough in literature, especially dramatic writings. Their profound vision of life informs their dramas where the complexity and variety of life is represented defying the classical/Neo-classical, monosemantic preoccupation with unity, form and exactness.

The Elizabethan dramatists show an essential urge for communicating the whole gamut of experience of a newly felt consciousness of the totality of human existence. Shakespeare superbly expresses this passion, “what a piece of work is a man.....”

The equality heightened consummation of the fusion of feeling of triumph, wonder and ecstasy as regards the harmony of man, nature and human imagination is shown by Marlowe when he says:

Nature, that fram’d us of four elements  
Warring within our breasts for regiment,  
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.  
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend.  
The wondrous architecture of the world  
And measure every wandering planet’s course,  
Still climbing after knowledge infinite.  
And always moving as the restless spheres,  
Will us to wear ourselves and never rest  
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,  
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,  
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown. (I, II)

This unbounded glorification of “Infinite riches in a little room” predominated the creative sensibility of the Elizabethan dramatists and, no wonder, their aesthetic love of the whole and their deliberate departure from the classical concepts of form and proportion. Quite naturally, they did not, like the neo-classicists, show a conscious endeavour to divide life into watertight, compartments and they celebrated the variety of life by ‘mixed’ genre, rather than ‘Pure’ genre.

Shakespeare’s plays, the epitome of the Elizabethan drama express complex experiences as they embody God’s plenty coming out of the heart of life, its mysteries. That is why, while writing pure romances or romantic comedy he could not dissociate his unified experience of multitudinous life. Johnson aptly remarks, “Shakespeare’s play are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another..... Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition. Almost all his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters, and in the successive evolutions of the design, sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter.” In *The Tempest* Shakespeare’s complex vision perceiving the pervasive variety of life is expressed. We come across atmosphere of tension, sadness and seriousness in the beginning of the play itself when the wicked younger brother conspires against his elder brother Prospero and sends him and



his only daughter, Miranda to sea uncared and unsafe in order to get rid of them. Prospero's magical management of a terrible storm also disturbs us. We feel equally disgusted by the ugly and uncouth Caliban speaking insolently to Prospero. But then, amidst these frets and fevers we feel an aura of wonder and enthusiasm. Miranda's wonderful feel of the beauty and goodness of the world cannot but enkindle our spirit of optimism:

O, wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O, brave new world,  
That has such people in't! (V, I)

As Shakespeare's genius was essentially romantic, his transcendental imagination could look into the heart of the matter and reproduce life as a delicate clash of joy and sorrow. He creates marvellous variety of mirth and melancholy in *As You Like It* which Dowden called "the sweetest and happiest of all Shakespeare's comedies." Herein, we come across a beautiful blend of optimistic and pessimistic moods of life. The characters of Duke Senior and Amiens visualize silver linings even in clouds and perceive rosy joy within thorny surfaces. Duke Senior expresses his powerfully positive mood to accept life in its totality enjoying supreme edenic joy in the Forest of Arden:

Sweet are the uses of adversity;  
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything..... (II, I)

The same gaiety and enthusiasm is expressed in the songs of Amiens:

Under the green wood trees,  
Who loves to lie with me,  
And turn his merry note.  
Unto the sweet bird's throat,  
Come hither, come hither, come hither.... (II, V)

But then, for the weeping philosopher, Jaques life is a temporary play in the world and ends with the loss of everything and one

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans  
everything. (II, V)

So, Shakespeare's perfect blend of tragedy and comedy enriches the dramatic texture thereby making it complex enough to remain immune from the observation of the stringent classicist like Sidney who condemned tragicomedy saying that there should be no mingling of kind and clown, of "horn pipes and funerals." Having followed immediately in *The Spanish Tragedy* written in Senecan model, Shakespeare's philosophical understanding of the problem of evil and the endless reflection on resolution, if any, transform the immediate crisis of Denmark into an existential dilemma of every man being puzzled by "to be or not to be." "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right" (I, IV).

Really, Shakespeare's imaginative insight into the metaphysical dimension of the evil remains on open-ending crisis defying all sorts of human attempts at resolution and the result is utter helplessness and "the rest is silence" (V, V). The dramatist's poetic gifts of apt images, pregnant symbols and marvellous mastery of the blank verse led to a varied use of the medium to dramatic purpose.

The imaginative transformation of the classical/legendary tale by consummate use of the "mighty line" in verse is the hallmark of Marlowe's tragic genius too. Although Marlowe draws upon the German legend of Faust-the ambitious scholar for supreme knowledge and his consequent eternal damnation due to his inordinate passion. Marlowe's magnificent handling of blank verse dramatizing the irremediable suffering of the hero becomes universally touching and aesthetically admirable. Marlowe's magical depiction of the protagonist's suffering is heart-rending:

Ah! Faustus  
Now has thou but one bare hour to live,  
And then thou must be damned perpetually:  
Stand still you ever moving spheres of heaven,



That time may cease, and midnight never come:  
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make  
Perpetual day, or let this hour be but  
A year, a month, a week, or natural day,  
That Faustus may repent, and save his soul. (Marlowe, 265)

Thus, the Elizabethan Age because of its preoccupation with empyrean imagination and vitality turned out to be the epitome of the Renaissance and established its creative superiority over the previous ages as well as the classical and neo-classical drama by its essential spirit of originality in thought and communication. Bacon said:

Reason doth buckle and bowe the mind unto the  
Nature of things”, poetry “doth raise and erect the  
minde, by submitting the shewes of things to the  
desires of the mind.

Therefore it was ever thought to have some  
participation of divinesse. (Bacon, 105)

There is an unmistakable predominance of freedom and intensity of passion pervading the whole range of the Elizabethan literature. Even in aesthetics we come across the critics' greater emphasis on inspired and exalted transformation of the mundane, the ugly facades of the world, a variation which challenges the classical concept of order or reason. Admiring the vital gifts of poets Sidney writes:

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry  
as diverse poets have done; neither with pleasant  
rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor  
whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved  
earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets  
only deliver a golden. (Sidney, 20)

To sum up , the Elizabethan dramatists depart from the classical models in tragedy by their having embodied herein the human elements thereby lending them “local habitation and name”. Truly, Shakespeare and Marlowe follow the classical Model of Seneca in tragic plays, but in spirit they transform them by the transcendental power of their creative imagination.

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