**The Development of English Drama**

1. The first plays in the vernacular were miracle plays, based on Scripture or sacred legend. Their origins and the dating of the earliest examples are subjects of controversy. The last cycle of these was not later than the end of the fifteenth century and was by that time more like # 2.
2. Morality plays were didactic religious allegories. The characters were personifications of virtues or vices or of morally weighted qualities such as worldliness. The plot was contention in a human soul between the person’s good and bad characteristics, leading either to salvation or to damnation. Earliest manuscripts are mid-15th century. They were replaced by mid-16th century by # 3.
3. Interludes were also didactic and allegorical but dealt with secular rather than religious concepts. Romantic plots occurred occasionally. Interludes became increasingly topical, localized, and interested in educating the audience, over time. The form began at Henry VIII’s court, initially valued as much for its verbal wit as for its educational potential. By the end of Elizabeth’s reign, interludes were no longer aristocratic in audience and were often satiric in tone. They were also heavily contaminated in content and form by contact with the three new dramatic genres in # 4.
4. Elizabethan innovations in drama
   1. Comedy arises out of multiple developments: Heywood’s interludes; adaptations of classical comedies by Plautus and Terence; translations of contemporary Continental plays. By Elizabeth’s time, there is a sharp distinction between private or courtly drama, acted by courtiers or choirboys at court or in domestic or educational locations, and public or popular drama, acted by common players in courtyards of inns at first and later in playhouses.

It is the private theatre which the five *University Wits* served in the 1580s and 1590s. *John Lyly* established prose as the medium of comedy and made high comedy an elegant form of drama dependent on social complications rather than unrestrained vulgarity; in short, he made it both expressive and respectable. *George Peele* wrote a little of everything, but in one play he introduces parody of romance, an important innovation. *Robert Greene* added further plot complications, verisimilitude, and simpler human feelings. *Thomas Lodge*, who was a better sonneteer than playwright, and *Thomas Nashe*, a better prose writer than playwright, complete the list.

The sharp distinction between private and public was blurred by a few great lords of Elizabeth’s court, who founded companies of players that would present their plays both at court and in a playhouse. The company to which Shakespeare belonged, for example, was the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Elizabeth’s successor, James, took over the company, which became known as the King’s Men, almost as soon as he was crowned.

* 1. Tragedy begins with imitations of Seneca: plots drawn from chronicles or classical literature; manners, wholly courtly; language, declamatory blank verse. In 1580s, popular derivatives also include Seneca’s horrors, passions, and rhetorical excesses. Private theatres continued to stress classical unities and insist on dignity in their tragedies, but eventually gave up.

Christopher Marlowe’s desertion of university theatre for public theatre both reflects and furthers the increasing popularity of tragedy, to which he gave two enormously important creative innovations: demonic heroes whose tragic doom comes from internal forces, not external fortunes, and dramatic rather than declamatory speech.

* 1. History is another gift from Marlowe to the stage; in “Edward II” he gave us the first history play. That is to say, it offers an interpretation of history upon the stage, as opposed to earlier plays in which characters had historical names and at least legendary stories; these were always examples of tragedy, whereas the history play is neither comedy nor tragedy.

Closing thoughts:

Shakespeare’s tragedies are often indebted to Marlowe’s and/or to Kyd’s “Spanish Tragedy.” His histories are likewise indebted to Marlowe’s. But his comedies range considerably; some of them owe much to Lyly and Greene, whereas others do not.

In the Elizabethan era, romantic drama – whether comedy, tragedy, or history – was more popular than non-romantic drama. By romance, in this context, I mean not the broad and diverse genre of narrative found in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period but merely what we mean by it today: a plot with a love interest in it.