
M.A. English

SEMESTER I

Course IV

BRITISH DRAMA

BLOCK

I

Renaissance English Drama
(Other than Shakespeare)



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BRITISH DRAMA

BLOCK I

Renaissance English Drama (Other than Shakespeare)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK

This Block is called “Renaissance English Drama (Other than Shakespeare)” and it deals with four major dramatists of the period roughly from the middle of the 16th century to the first quarter of the 17th century. We have said “Other than Shakespeare” because we shall study the dramatic works of Shakespeare in the next Block separately. William Shakespeare is of course the most famous writer of the age in question but his fame should not obscure, as it has quite often unfortunately done, the other writers of the age, which is also called the age of early Modern English Literature. These writers, the dramatists in particular, represent the spirit of the age as much as Shakespeare does, and some of them preceded Shakespeare chronologically and wrote plays which were to influence Shakespeare and later contemporaries.

Unit 1 provides a general introduction to the times, the political, social and cultural conditions, relating them to the larger event called Renaissance. The Unit specifically shows what the Renaissance meant to England in terms of literary production. The theatre of the times, with its own limitations as well as conventions, was quite different from the present-day theatre. The Unit concludes by naming and briefly introducing the popular dramatists of the age, four of whom are discussed in detail in the next four Units. Each of these Units examines the characters and themes of a representative play by the author, relating them to the concerns of the age.

Unit 2 deals with one of the classics of English comedy, *Volpone, or the Fox* by Ben Jonson, a writer in the classical tradition. Ben Jonson was a unique dramatist of the age in the sense no other writer combined wit with satire so effectively as he did. He was also known for a particular type of comedy known as the Comedy of Humours, which presented characters as types rather than as individuals. The Unit discusses these characteristic features of the play as well as its language.

Unit 3 is a study of Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*. Historical plays were a major genre of drama of the age, with Shakespeare of course having written the largest number. This being a historical play, the focus is on its treatment of history, on issues of contemporary importance such as kingship and nobility. The Unit also briefly touches upon the theme of homosexuality which the play has, in recent times, been seen as presenting.

In **Unit 4** we study Thomas Kyd’s play *The Spanish Tragedy*, one of the earliest tragedies in English literature and certainly the first major specimen of the type called Revenge Tragedy. The Revenge Tragedy turned out to be a popular genre among the Elizabethans and Jacobeans and another example of it, viz. *The Duchess of Malfi* is dealt with in Unit 5. (Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is of course a far more complex and sophisticated play which belongs to the type and tradition of Revenge Tragedies.) The present Unit mentions the literary and historical influences on *The Spanish Tragedy*, discusses its characters and dwells in detail upon the themes of the play, especially personal vengeance as a form of justice and retribution. The Unit concludes by looking at the question of women’s individuality and agency in a male-dominated world with reference to the play’s heroine Bel-Imperia.

The theme of women's freedom figures also in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, which is the subject of **Unit 5**. But here it is also tied up with the issue of class structure as the Duchess of Malfi dares to defy her brothers, though she does it secretly, in marrying her steward. The Unit, after introducing the sources of the play and the characters, examines in detail the clash between the public and the personal, especially in relation to the Duchess' role in the play. The concluding section of the Unit explores the class angle of the play, the way violation of hierarchic codes leads to conflict and tragedy.

Unit I

Introduction to English Renaissance Theatre and Drama

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Unit I

Introduction to English Renaissance Theatre and Drama

1.0 Objectives

This Unit provides an introduction to English Renaissance Theatre and Drama. It prepares you for the study of the four individual dramatists and plays that will be discussed in the next four Units. We start by defining the term “Renaissance” and indicating the period during which the Renaissance took place in England. The drama of the period cannot be understood without a knowledge of its socio-political and cultural contexts and so we study these contexts in a sub-section. We go on to give a general idea of the literature of the age, We then give an account of the theatre of the times which was quite different from, and far less advanced, than the theatre of present times. Renaissance drama is today studied as high and serious literature but in its own times it was a major form of popular entertainment. So the Unit concludes with brief statements about the popular dramatists of the age and the genres of drama produced.

1.1 Introduction to the Times

1.1.1 Significant Questions

When exactly did the Renaissance take place in England? What does the term “renaissance” signify? What were the sociopolitical circumstances of the age? These are the major queries that this section will attempt to answer.

“Renaissance” is a term meaning a revival or rebirth. Traditionally the term is associated with the revival of learning, art, literature, music and architecture that began in Italy in the 14th century and spread through the European countries. It also marks the rise of humanist thought and endeavour and the advancement of all learning, specially in the fields of navigation and travel. This revival lasted till the late 16th century and it marked the transition from the medieval to the modern in historical periodisation. Though the Renaissance began in the 14th century in Italy it arrived in England only by the 16th century by which time it had passed its peak in the European nations. Traditionally the English Renaissance is held to have taken place in the times of the later Tudors (Henry VIII and Elizabeth I) and the reign of James I, that is from approximately 1500 to the first decades of the 17th century. Usually the English Renaissance is said to have taken place in the age of Shakespeare but that is an oversimplification as it had begun before the advent of Shakespeare’s plays and continued for a few years after his death.

The English renaissance, unlike its European counterpart, was more in the realm of literature, specially drama and poetry, than in the fine arts such as painting

and sculpture which was what the European countries showcased. The rise of humanist thought and its effects in the socio-political arena were also felt in England. A supreme example of the entire range of Renaissance concerns is said to be the English drama of the age.

1.1.2 Socio-political Background

This section will provide a brief introduction to the times. The ordered nature of society and the changing nature of religion and its influence on the everyday life of the people will be studied in some detail.

1.1.2.1 The Crown and the Church

The Elizabethans inherited a world view which was strictly hierarchical and ordered. This hierarchy was seen as the basis for a well ordered and orderly life, one which would run smoothly for the individual and thus also for the other units of society. At the top of this order was the King/monarch. The taking over of the rights of the Church during the English reformation by Henry VIII (1509-47) gave the English monarch unparalleled power over his country and its people. Prior to this the Church and the clergy were outside the jurisdiction of the King's powers and though several kings did try to enforce their will in individual cases, overall it was the will of the Pope that prevailed. In addition, the monasteries and abbeys were almost parallel power structures as they held lands over which the secular government had no control and the officials of the Church were also outside the control of the King and his government. This structure of society and governance changed when Henry VIII broke away from the Holy Catholic church and established himself as the Head of the Church in England. After this move (made gradually between 1531 and 1534) the King of England was the sole power centre in the country, all archbishops and other clergy were inferior in power to him and he was possessed of much of the revenue that earlier used to go to Rome. The King also determined appointments to the Church thus making certain that his power was undisputed.

On the secular side the King had under him the aristocracy, the gentry, the yeomen and tradesmen and merchants and at the lowest rung the landless labourers and finally, the vagrants and beggars. Though the hierarchy was more or less fixed there was some mobility between the ranks. Some of this mobility was seen in the lives of the Kings themselves as they made alliances with the lesser nobility in return for other favours. Thus Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife was not of the first rung of the aristocracy and in fact was seen as too upwardly mobile to be seemly. The mobility between ranks and orders was particularly in evidence in the drama of the times which often commented upon the older notion of a set hierarchy which was upset by stewards who married widowed mistresses or who tried to inherit their master's property. Thus *The Duchess of Malfi* demonstrates the rigidity of class structures and the tragic

effect of trying to move up in society while *Volpone* focuses on mobility via the acquisition of wealth and turns it to comic and comedic effect.

(For a detailed discussion of the nature of kingship see the introduction to the Shakespeare Block)

Though all power, religious as well as secular, was concentrated in the hands of the monarch there were various checks and balances that kept the King from enjoying unhindered dictatorial power. The houses of Parliament were one such measure but far more influential in the daily life of governance were the king's advisors and ministers, many of whom were able to influence the monarch to great effect. As an example consider the activities of Cardinal Wolsey, Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell, all of whom played major roles in helping Henry VIII disassociate himself and his country from the power of Rome.

Though the Catholic Church was no longer the powerful edifice it had once been during the time of Henry VIII it was still possible to practise one's religion in relative peace. It was during the reigns of Edward VI (1547-53) and Mary I (1553-58) that religion became a fraught issue for the English people. Edward VI, only nine years old at the time of his coronation, ruled in name more than actuality. His uncle held the reins firmly and being Protestant changed the daily religious life of England in no small measure during this time. The dissolution of chantries, allowing priests to marry, the introduction of a new prayer book to replace the Latin rituals and forms of prayer were some of the changes introduced in this period. After Edward's death, when Mary I ascended the throne, matters changed around once again. A devout Catholic, she attempted to return England to Catholicism and in this attempt she sacrificed the lives of those of her countrymen and women who were not willing to renounce their Protestantism. She also restored the old forms of religion which had prevailed prior to Edward VI's time and reiterated England's loyalty to Rome and the Pope. It was only with the accession of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) that this see-sawing between Catholicism and Protestantism finally stopped. Catholicism was frowned upon, there was some persecution of Catholics but there were other stresses and tensions which took centre stage and thus the religious life of England, now firmly Protestant, finally got a chance to settle down.

Prior to the changes in the Church in England the daily lives of the people were inextricably intertwined with the Church. Not only were the major life events marked by church rituals but the pattern of the year was also set by church festivals and events. However it was in the day-to-day life that the Church contributed the most: the monks provided basic medical assistance, higher education and even opportunities for employment. In addition the parish priests were the primary providers of education in the villages. The monasteries and abbeys also doubled as inns and places of shelter for travelers and those seeking refuge. With the abolishing of the monasteries and the seizing of Church lands by the Crown all these patterns were disrupted, with no substitute in sight. However the move from Catholicism to Protestantism changed the religious life

of the people with church services being conducted in English, the introduction of the Prayer book and above all the English version of the Bible which became increasingly more freely available.

1.1.2.2 Exploration, Travel and Relationships with other Nations

From the mid-1400s many European nations began to encourage their countrymen to set out on explorations and travels. Some of these were with no known destination in mind, but were an effort to discover new lands and new peoples while others were interested in finding new, shorter routes to already known countries which would then facilitate trade. England joined these explorations during Elizabeth I's reign and by the last quarter of the 16th century the English had made up for lost time: many of their sea-faring men were seeking out new lands and settling new colonies.

Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Richard Grenville, Sir John Hawkins, Sir Martin Frobisher and Sir Richard Hawkins were among the most well known explorers and navigators of the time. Between them they had circumnavigated the globe, discovered Guiana, established the colony at Roanoke, Virginia, voyaged to Africa, South America, Labrador and Greenland. England had also sent out travellers who found overland routes across Europe and into Asia. There were many reasons why these travellers set out: scientific curiosity regarding other races, cultures and civilisations, impelled by the Renaissance; a desire to prosper via trade; the competitive urge specially as Spain and Portugal had begun earlier than the English and had brought home enormous wealth; the desire to propagate the Christian faith; etc.

The English seamen were regarded with some skepticism by the other nations as in addition to seafaring they were not averse to some pirating and some buccaneering. In fact Elizabeth I used to smile upon her seamen when they came before her bearing gifts and no questions were asked as to where those riches had come from. These activities brought the English into some disrepute but the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 was the final feather in the cap of the English navy. The complete rout of the Spanish forces, the sinking of some of the ships and the total defeat handed to them shored up the reputation of the English seafarers as the best in the business.

In addition to becoming skilled naval men the explorers and travellers of the age also performed another service for England. They introduced new articles, objects and people to the stay-at-home population and made it possible for the English to gain some acquaintance with the world. (For a discussion of what was brought home to England from abroad and the reaction of the English to "other" nations and peoples see the introduction to the Shakespeare Block).

As their acquaintance with the world increased the English also began to define themselves in opposition to their neighbours on the European mainland. The

French traditionally seen as the enemy continued to be so. But during Elizabeth I's reign the Spanish became the foremost public enemy. This was most obviously so during the year of the Spanish Armada but even in the preceding and succeeding years the Spaniards began to be imaged as the undesirable other. Variations on this theme can be seen in plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, wherein the Spaniards are portrayed as prone to evil, yes, but also prone to an over-emotional state of mind, a lack of rationality, etc.

Self-check Exercise I:

1. What was the Renaissance and when did it take place in England?
 2. What was the effect of the change from Catholicism to Protestantism upon the daily life of the English people?
 3. Name a few of the chief English explorers and travellers.
-

1.2 Literature of the English Renaissance

During the latter half of the sixteenth century England witnessed a burst of literary and cultural activity which has rarely been replicated in the centuries since. This is what is now called the English Renaissance and it was significant in that it was across literary genres. Thus poetry, prose and drama all flourished during this period, in addition to song and music.

The literary flowering of the second half of the century was fuelled to a great extent by the changes that had come about in the educational system in the 1530s and 1540s. Where earlier education in England was focused upon logic, theology and metaphysics the changes that were introduced in these decades meant that students studied Latin classics in the original and thus classical Roman literature became the basis for a new system of education and knowledge. Not only did the content change but the system of education itself changed: grammar schools were started so that it was not only the sons of the landed gentry who were taught by private tutors but as many boys as possible, belonging to different classes. (Girls were not part of the revolutionary new educational system, whatever education they received was at their homes, from tutors or family members.) These students learnt poetry by Ovid, Horace and Virgil; history by Livy and Tacitus; plays by Seneca, Plautus and Terence; etc.

The outpouring of literature in the English Renaissance is partially the result of these modifications in the educational system. The boys who learnt the classics understood the major literary forms and their features and they gained knowledge of Greek and Roman history. The knowledge of genres such as the epic, comedy, tragedy, etc showed in the writings produced in the last few decades of the sixteenth century: Edmund Spenser wrote the first of the English epics, *The Faerie Queene*; John Lyly wrote some of the earliest prose fiction

including *Euphues*, Philip Sidney wrote *Arcadia*, another prose romance while the sonnet form was used and transformed by authors as diverse as Spenser, Shakespeare, Drayton and Mary Wroth. Essays and non-fictional prose were also produced during this time and writers included Roger Ascham, Hugh Latimer, Richard Hooker, John Foxe, Thomas Hariot, etc. These writers produced work as diverse as travel writing, biographies of the saints, treatises on education as also writings on ecclesiastical and religious concepts. The playwrights included the University wits (known as such because of their education in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge): Marlowe, Nashe, Peele, Greene and Lyly in addition to Shakespeare and others. In the seventeenth century English literature continued to flourish: drama was produced by writers such as John Webster and Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher and John Ford, there was an outpouring of love poetry and religious poetry: John Donne wrote both, George Herbert wrote only religious poetry, the Cavalier poets wrote only love poetry and then there was John Milton who set out to “justify the ways of God to men” by means of epic poetry. Prose was practised by James I as also writers such as Milton, Overbury, Thomas Browne and Francis Bacon. The literature of the 16th and 17th centuries is unparalleled in its quantity and quality as also its diversity. It is an unfortunate accident that usually the literature of the English renaissance remains a closed book to students because the focus is primarily on the drama of the period and even within that on Shakespeare’s work.

Self-check Exercise II

1. Name three sonneteers of Elizabethan England.
 2. Who were the University Wits?
 3. What kind of poetry was written in the seventeenth century?
-

1.3 The Theatre of the Time

For a discussion of the history of drama and the theatre in the Renaissance consult Unit I of the Shakespeare Block.

Given the fact that playhouses and theatres were still in the early stages of development renaissance drama was played out in a ritualized manner rather than a realistic mode, depending upon the audience recognizing certain cues and set effects and using those to suggest scenes, backgrounds, etc. This section will focus on staging conventions during Renaissance times.

The most obvious convention of the drama of the times was that it was in blank verse rather than ordinary speech. The introduction of ordinary conversational English was done gradually and initially in a minimal fashion, it being restricted to the least important characters, or used for comic effect. Other practices

included the aside and the soliloquy, as also the technique of eavesdropping where in the full gaze of the audience and one of the characters another eavesdropped upon him/her but was 'not seen' by him/her. The soliloquy as a means of airing the angst of the characters, baring their deepest thoughts was also a stylized device which was used best by Shakespeare in his tragedies.

Other practices of the time included the fact that all roles were played by men and boys, the latter being used for women's roles; there was use of minimal scenery and stage props, thus a branch or a tree or two could indicate either a forest or a garden; battles featuring many thousands of soldiers might be represented by a handful of actors; etc. Many of these were augmented or just indicated merely by the lines: specially in matters of stage setting and scenery the initial lines in any scene would indicate the setting and set the stage. Colour and display on stage depended upon the costumes which were used by the actors, gorgeous and expensive these were among the most valuable of the theatre companies' property. Scene and act breaks are again a convention, often contributed to in significant ways by the editors rather than integral to the playwright's vision of his play. The stage of the time had no curtains to be drawn after each scene and act and thus changes were indicated by the (emptying of the stage and the re-populating of the space indicated the beginning of a new act/scene). There were also intervals during which music was played and sometimes jigs were danced. The theatre companies usually had a clown each, if not more, who were among the most valued of the actors. These clowns, in addition to playing roles in the plays also provided brief comic entertainments before and after the plays and sometimes during the plays as well.

The theatre-goers of the time were drawn from all classes, a majority from the lower classes and these were the groundlings who stood for 2-4 hours to watch a play in the 'yard' before the stage, subjected to rain and hail, even snow on occasion as the yard which they occupied was open to the skies. These groundlings were noisy and disruptive: if the play did not hold their attention they were capable of throwing things as well as making their displeasure clear in other ways. The more affluent section of the audience also was as intolerant of a play that failed to hold their interest. Having paid to attend these performances they expected their money's worth and ensured that they got it.

This desire for constant entertainment made certain things incumbent upon the theatre companies. For one they needed to have a large repertoire of plays which were constantly being added to as well. This meant that the actors had to memorise the words for many roles and be ready to play them as and when necessary. They performed six days a week and also toured neighbouring towns if necessary. Though the life of an actor was not easy it did involve constant action.

The plays that were performed were often published in quarto editions. These were not published by the playwrights nor did they result in additional income for them. The playwrights wrote the plays and sold them to the theatre companies, after which the play belonged to the company rather than the playwright. Shakespeare was an exception in that he was an actor and shareholder in the theatre and the Company for which he wrote. But most of the others had far more limited roles, writing plays and selling them to companies and having no further say in the life of their product. The company could if they desired publish the play and so too could individuals who were certain of the lines. These conventions meant that there was no authoritative edition which was the definitive version: the faulty memories of the actors, the decisions to play certain scenes in certain ways, the fact that plays often evolved as they were acted: all these contributed to various versions being in circulation simultaneously. It is uncertain who the readers were who bought and read the plays that were published during this period, as it is uncertain whether these were widely read and commercially successful.

1.4 Popular Dramatists, Genres and Themes

Though the best known playwright of the Renaissance is, of course, William Shakespeare, it cannot be disputed that several others of have an eminent place in the history of English drama and theatre. These include Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe among the earlier writers and Ben Jonson and John Webster among the Jacobean. But it also has to be kept in mind that there were many more playwrights working and making a living by writing plays for the stage. It is quite easy to lose sight of this fact given the towering preeminence of William Shakespeare. The problem is compounded because when speaking of Renaissance playwrights it is automatic that having mentioned Shakespeare most attention is paid to Christopher Marlowe and it is a popular perception that if he had lived he would well have surpassed Shakespeare in both numbers range and style. Ben Jonson comes in for some appreciation as the first playwright to publish his own 'collected works', as well as for his meticulous adherence to the rules of classical drama. However this way of understanding the era's playwrights is flawed as it remembers selectively and hierarchically. Though hierarchies are inevitable, even necessary, they are also only one part of the picture and this section will try to foreground the dramatists living and working in the Renaissance, focusing on their writing and work rather than their place in an imagined hierarchy.

Chronologically speaking, if Shakespeare is set at the centre of English Renaissance drama, he had two sets of contemporaries or "fellow dramatists": the first included the University Wits who were all dead or had abandoned the theatre by around 1600. The second set of colleagues included Chapman, Jonson, Marston, Middleton, Heywood, etc., and towards the end Beaumont, Fletcher and Webster. Thus Renaissance drama can be neatly, if artificially divided into two segments, Shakespeare bridging them and uniting them. The

closure of the theatres in 1642 by order of Parliament brought about an end to Renaissance English drama as it is known and understood today and when the theatres re-opened in 1660 it was a new era that dawned.

The fact that so many plays survive from the Elizabethan and Jacobean times is itself an indication of the popularity of both, the theatre and the plays written for the theatre. We know that there were many more plays written than just the ones to have survived till today: this knowledge is based upon direct and indirect references to these now-missing plays in the writings of the period. Thus we can be more or less sure that there were prior versions of *Hamlet*, the most popular likely to have been written by Kyd, but these did not survive. It is also to be noted that there are plays that have survived for which the authorship question is vexed: *The Revenger's Tragedy* draws upon a knowledge of *Hamlet* which itself draws upon a knowledge of *The Spanish Tragedy* but there is uncertainty as to who is the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, though it is generally believed to have been written by Middleton. There are also collaborations among playwrights, announced as well as guessed at. Thus Beaumont and Fletcher wrote a series of plays together, among them *The Maid's Tragedy* and *A King and No King*. Later others such as Philip Massinger revised several of these plays. Even Shakespeare is believed to have collaborated with Fletcher in the writing of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The question of authorship in Renaissance drama is thus a complex one, having various layers to it. It is hardly possible to ignore the longstanding dispute regarding the authorship of Shakespeare's works: that it was not Shakespeare who wrote the plays that now are called his but that they might have been written by various others including Christopher Marlowe and Francis Bacon!

In the last decades of the 16th century two of the most popular plays were *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*: among the bloodiest, most violent plays ever written or produced on any stage. Alongside these were ranged plays such as Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and *Doctor Faustus* as well as comedic and satiric plays such as Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* and Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. The demand for fresh new entertainment (as in new plays) ensured that few plays survived which did not continue to entertain the audiences. Though definitive statements regarding the popularity of one play as against another cannot be made it is reasonably safe to assume that each of these plays enjoyed some popularity.

The playwrights of the period were a small and close-knit community, all acquainted with each other and each other's work as well. Thus it is documented that Kyd and Marlowe shared a room, that Greene wrote deprecatingly of Shakespeare, that Shakespeare and Jonson were friends and that several of them collaborated with each other in writing plays. This close association led to not just friendships but also to influences that can be seen in each other's work. Thus Marlowe's use of iambic pentameter, the use of polysyllabic and bombastic words (as exemplified in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*)

sparked off a trend in the way in which characters spoke, specially in the tragedies and histories. Genres which achieved popularity initially were immediately used and re-used by other dramatists hoping to cash in on the initial success. Stock characters and scenes were replicated when they were seen as successful. Similarly certain themes can be seen running through much of English Renaissance drama.

Interestingly enough the genres which were most popular in the 1580s were tragedies and histories. Romantic comedies achieved popularity later on, in the next decade. The triumph of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* sparked off a series of tragedies with revenge as their significant theme. These were not necessarily only focused on revenge: there were other themes, but they were powered by the revenge motif. These revenge tragedies demonstrated a struggle waged by a single, relatively powerless, individual against a powerful and corrupt system. The final defeat of the systemized corruption involved the defeat and destruction of the individual also, often after prolonged suffering and, usually, some incidence of madness. The bloodbath that ends plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* is the culmination of a bloody, ferocious and extended exploration of systematized and often state co-ordinated brutality against individuals who threaten the order of things. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* owes much to the revenge tragedy tradition. Many of the tragedies of these early years combined history with tragedy. Thus history was dramatized, not just English history but also that of Scottish, Roman, French, Spanish and even Asian lands. These history plays were not necessarily accurate representations of historical events and individuals: rather they were imaginative, even romanticised reconstructions of particular cultures, the legends and stories associated with historical figures. Among the most well known of these today is, of course, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. The newly discovered worlds entered into these plays: geographical worlds with ethnic and racial differences but also the worlds of knowledge and philosophy as in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

In the sixteenth century comedies were more of the romantic type, best exemplified by Shakespeare's contributions to the genre: *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, etc. In the first few years of the next century satire gained the upper hand. Wit, satire and irony became central to the comic vision and these were also urban or city comedies: often showing the seamy underside of cities of the era, the cheating and humiliating that was endemic to everyone, being gulled even as they gulled others, etc. Jonson's comedies are the best examples of this genre, amusing and comic while being simultaneously savagely cynical and ironic. These comedies worked on the basis of traits such as crassness, ambition, greed which lead to deception and the need to cheat others in order to set up oneself.

Themes which repeat across plays, irrespective of genre, include ambition and class mobility, greed for wealth connected to overt acquisitiveness and consumption, religion and love, sex and gender. Most of the plays of the English Renaissance depict one or more of these themes, sometimes repeating

them with variations within the same play in the main plot and the sub plots. Interestingly the same theme could be played out with tragic effects or end as a comedy. Thus the greed that powers plays such as Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* leads the audience/ reader through comic situations to a resolution that is humorous and satisfying. On the other hand a similar greed for wealth and position leads Edmund in *King Lear* to death and destruction. Class mobility is seen as problematic in plays such as Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* in which the marriage of the steward Antonio to the Duchess leads to their deaths. Similarly Bosola, in the same play, is also a victim of class prejudices and it is his desire to move up in the world that proves his undoing. Questions of gender and appropriate roles for women are central to many of the plays of the period. Chastity, a major preoccupation for many of the playwrights of the time, is seen in a wide spectrum of plays including Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, George Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* and others. Chastity was only one of the realms within which women were held accountable. Others included obedience and submission to the men of the family, whether husbands, fathers or brothers. Thus the comic "taming" of Katherine in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is one extreme at the other end of which is the disobedience of the Duchess of Malfi or the intransigence of Bel-Imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy* which leads to not only their deaths but also the deaths of their husbands/lovers. The divinely ordained role of individuals within relationships and in their social standings is another concern of several plays of the time. Thus what might be seen as virtue in an individual is transformed into deviance and disruptive behaviour when it is a king who behaves thus: Marlowe's Edward II, in the eponymous play, is loyal to his friends, loving and kind but as a king these personal virtues become frailties which lead to his destruction whereas Shakespeare's Henry V demonstrates how it is necessary to be *not* overly loyal to friends and how it is necessary to sacrifice friends and erstwhile loved ones in the attempt to be a good ruler. English renaissance drama constantly reinforces the idea that it is roles that determine behaviour, that there are no hard and fast rules that stand across time and social status, that the way in which one performs oneself will be determined by the role (s)he is performing at any given time.

Self-check Exercise III

1. Name two playwrights who collaborated with Fletcher.
 2. Which are the two types of comedies that were popular in the English Renaissance?
 3. Name two themes common to both comedies and tragedies in this period.
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1.5 Summing up

In this Unit we have had a general introduction to the theatre and drama of the English Renaissance which took place in the 16th and early 17th centuries. After familiarizing ourselves with the socio-political conditions of the age (which stretched during the reigns of Henry VIII, Elizabeth and James I), we briefly considered the literature of the age (which included important works of prose, poetry and drama). We proceeded to discuss the features of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre (as an institution and a place of popular entertainment). We concluded with short accounts of the popular dramatists of the age.

1.6 Answers to Self-check Exercises

- I.**
1. The Renaissance is a revival of learning and culture that took place across Europe from the 14th century. In England it took place in the 16th and 17th centuries.
 2. The change from Catholicism to Protestantism affected educational patterns as well as changed the way in which health care was provided to the common people. It also deprived the ordinary people of inns and places of rest in their infrequent travels. But it also made religion more immediate and real to them.
 3. Some of the English travellers were Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir John Hawkins, Sir Richard Hawkins, etc.
- II.**
1. Shakespeare, Spenser and Drayton
 2. The University Wits was the term used for a group of playwrights who had all been educated in either Oxford or Cambridge. They included Marlowe, Lyly, Greene, Nashe, Peele, etc.
 3. The main themes of the poetry of the 17th Century were love and religion.
- III**
1. Shakespeare and Beaumont both collaborated with Fletcher.
 2. Romantic comedies and satiric comedies were both popular during the Renaissance in England.
 3. Class mobility and appropriate gender roles for women were two themes that featured in both comedies and tragedies in Renaissance England.

1.7 References and Suggested Reading

- Bevington, David M., et al. Ed. Introduction. *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*. W W Norton 2002.
- Braunmuller, A R and M Hattaway. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*. Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Sullivan Jr., Garrett A. et al. Ed. *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*. OUP 2005.