The Elizabethan Drama

The spirit of the Renaissance brought widespread interest in the classics, notably Latin and Italian. Influence on the drama was inevitable. Terence and Plautus were the models for comedy, while Seneca was the main reference point for tragedy.

Seneca followed the models of Greek drama, and also provided the division of the play into five acts, but on the whole he was a dangerous example: his tragedies, rhetorical and sensational, were meant to be declaimed rather than performed, because there was very little action. He introduced the human motive of revenge to substitute the religious idea that divine justice and fate (nemesis) would punish those who broke moral law. His subjects were characterized by atrocity and monstrous crimes, and bloody action was usually shown on the stage. The appearance of ghosts was also frequent.

Seneca appealed to the Elizabethans, who were used to violence and bloodshed. We must not forget that this ‘golden’ period witnessed terrible cruelty in the religious persecutions, in the witch hunts, in the pitiless repression of political plots.

The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus, by Christopher Marlowe, became extremely popular throughout Europe.

The drama was the main achievement of the century, and a national theatre was founded, thanks to the new appearance of public companies of players. The players were at first hunted by the authorities because they were considered vagrants. They found a solution placing themselves under the protection of some powerful noblemen; in this way they came to be considered his servants, wore his livery and had their own position in society. The most famous courtiers became patrons of actors and the drama became the main Court entertainment.
A public company was very much live a commercial enterprise, in which all the partners were sharers. Each company had its own dramatist, and the plays had to suit the actors, both physically and in particular aspects of their personalities. This is why the main character in Shakespeare’s plays becomes gradually older—first Romeo, then Hamlet, Othello, King Lear; the main actor (Richard Burbage) remained with the company, and he was getting older. In the 16th century women did not appear on the stage (women were allowed to act in 1662), and female parts were performed by boys. This was only possible until their voices changed, so there were not many boy actors available; as a result there were not many women among the characters.

Richard Burbage (1567-1619) was the first to play many of the major roles in Shakespeare’s plays.

Highly popular and influential in its time, The Spanish Tragedy, written by Thomas Kyd around 1590, established a new genre in English theatre, the revenge play.

The plot contains several violent murders and includes as one of its characters a personification of revenge.

The plays were the property of each company, and the company which had the best playwright was the most successful. Obviously, the plays were not published, but ‘pirate’ versions were written shorthand during the performances. This is what often happened with Shakespeare’s plays, which were by far the most admired; the circulation of these illegal versions, not completely faithful to the original, made the editing of his works very difficult.