



Chapter 7

The History of Western Drama

This is closely related to the history of humanity!

Anytime a storyteller gets involved in the story and acts out what happened, it is drama.

Era 1 - Prehistory

We don't know much about this era as nothing is written!

Only Conjecture and "educated" Guesses as to what stories were told

This era has only left artifacts.

Nothing is really defiantly known except there were places to tell stories,
Or initiate individuals

Spaces with the same actor / performer relationship that we use now

Items to tell stories with

Formal spaces exist – theatrons that exist

Western Drama Era -2 “Classic”

Greek Drama

- 6th century BCE – was worship of the Greek god Dionysus
 - Dionysus – God of wine (pleasure god)
 - Had two sides to him good and bad (comedy and tragedy)



- Chorus – group of chanters – danced around an altar to commemorate his death
- Song they sang was called the goat-song or tragos (the Greek word for tragedy)

- These performances evolved into dramatic contests
 - Lasted 5-6 days.
 - Last three days four plays were performed
 - 3 tragedies (trilogy) and a comedy (satyr)
 - Thespis (the first actor) won the first competition by stepping out from the chorus and engaging in dialogue
 - Thespian – the name given to actors ever since



Greek Theatre

- Held in the open on hillsides surrounding a circular area called the orchestra
- Wooden seats were added, then stone
- Some theaters seated more than 17,000 people!!



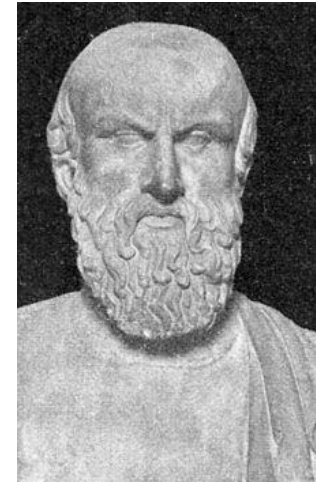
The Role of the Chorus

- Explain the situation
 - Bring the audience up-to-date
 - Make a commentary on the action
 - Engage in dialogue with the actors
- ★ Eventually role diminished as actors' roles expanded. The chorus is still used to increase realism of scenes and to engage in scenes with the main characters.

Authors of Greek Drama

- **Aeschylus**

- Expanded number of actors, reduced the size of the chorus
- Only surviving trilogy – the *Oresteia*



- **Sophocles**

- Ranked with Shakespeare as one of the best playwrights of all time.
- Refined plot structure to create unified works
- Author of *Oedipus* and *Antigone*



- Euripides

- o Emphasized human relationships
- o Master of pathos – human sorrow and compassion
- o Author of *The Trojan Women* and *Medea*



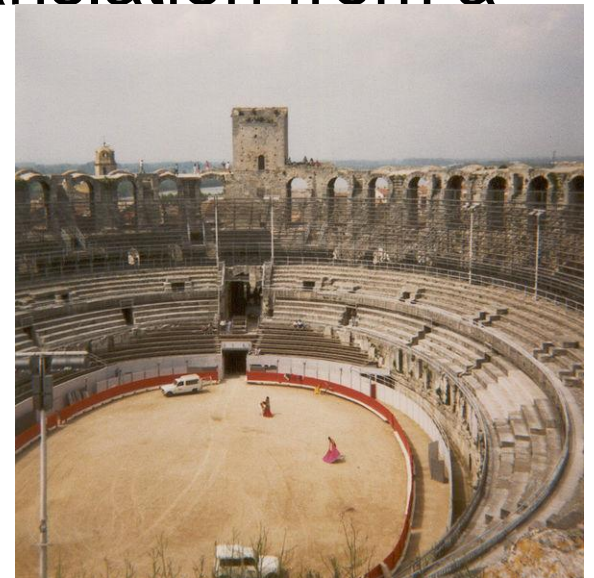
- Aristophanes

- o Author of Greek comedy
- o Considered nothing sacred
- o Skilled satirist and observer of humanity
- o Author of *The Frogs*, *The Clouds*, and *Lysistrata*



Roman Drama

- Most plays were just copies of Greek Drama
- Andronicus – first “Roman” playwright, an author from a Greek colony
 - First Roman tragedy was a translation from a Greek play
- Roman Theater
 - Amphitheaters – large circular arenas surrounded by tiers of seats.



Forms of Roman Entertainment

- Battles (naval and land) The colosseum could be flooded!
- Public Theater
- Gladiatorial contests
- Blood sport #1 form of entertainment
- No Tragedy was performed – only written as “Closest Dramas.”
- Purpose of entertainment was to keep the populace from thinking!

Late Rome entertainment is banned

Several reasons:

1. Rome Became Tolerant of all religions including Christianity.
2. As Rome split east and west – different rules were applied.
3. In the west all forms of entertainment was banned by the Roman or Latin church
4. The church banned entertainment including the theaters as they sponsored public Orgies.
5. Latin or Roman church consolidates power in Europe

Middle Ages

Roman Catholic church is unifying Entity of Europe

Monastic centers become places of learning

Copyists take all texts and copy them and distribute them all over
“Christendom”

“Secular” texts can be used to educate nonreligious students

University's spring up from monastic centers

They study Classical texts in Greek Latin and Aramaic / Arabic

Education separates from the church setting up our next following
era

Era 3 – The Middle ages

Attempted to reverse the problem that Latin was the official rule of the land and that most “vernaculars” were ignored leaving a gap in understanding.

- Liturgical drama – question-answer song performed by monks on Easter
- Saint plays – based on legends of saints
- Mystery plays – based on biblical history
- Passion plays – address the last week of Christ’s life
- Morality plays – taught the difference between right and wrong (context of devil and God battling for souls).

- Performed on platforms called mansions.
 - Three mansions represented Heaven, Hell and the Sea of Galilee

- Medieval craft guilds took over the presentation of drama
 - Pageant wagons – stages on wheels
 - Divided into two levels (upper = stage, lower = dressing area)

- Folk Drama – secular drama (non-religious)
 - Discouraged by the church
 - Took place around planting and harvest time and presented outdoors
 - Most pagan religions gave thanks to an earth goddess, hence celebration around planting and harvest.
 - Example: *Robin Hood*

Era 4 -The Renaissance – roughly starting in Italy

- Came about as a reaction to middle ages.
- Weak imitations of classical plays
- Opera – an attempt to revive Greek Drama
- Commedia Dell'arte – “comedy of the profession”
 - Professional improvised comedy
 - Plot outlines posted before performance
 - No scripts
 - Stock characters which represented two classes



Harlequin (Arlecchino in [Italian](#)) is the most popular of the [zanni](#) or comic servant characters from the [Italian Commedia dell'Arte](#).



Pantalone (French: Pantaloon) is a stock character that is classified as one of the [vecchi](#) (old men) in [Commedia dell'arte](#). He is a miserly and often lustful character who is portrayed as a [Venetian](#) and often speaks in the [Venetian dialect](#).

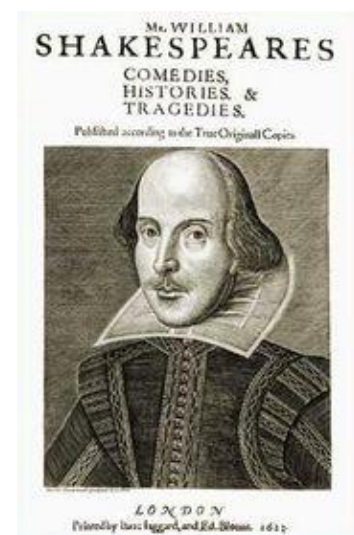
The Renaissance England

- Climax came during the Elizabethan Age
 - Queen Elizabeth supported the arts more than any other ruler of the time
 - Threats of closing the theatre due to the plague were often stopped because of her
 - Financially assisted some troupes and theaters

Dramatists

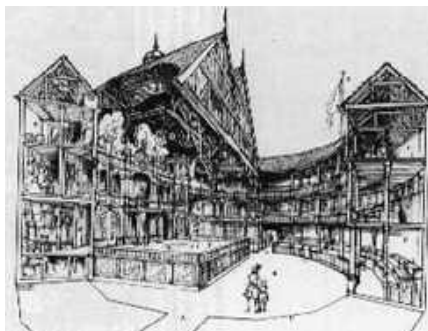
- Christopher Marlowe
 - Introduced important use of blank verse
 - Shakespeare's main competition
 - Author of *Doctor Faustus* (story of a man who sells his soul)
- Ben Johnson
 - Master of English comedy
 - Author of *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* and *Every Man in His Humour*

- William Shakespeare
 - Considered as the greatest dramatist of all time!!
 - The characters form the center of interest in Shakespeare's plays
 - Iambic pentameter/blank verse
 - Author of *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and 35 others!
 - Also wrote 154 sonnets!!



The Elizabethan Playhouse

- The Globe and The Rose two most famous
- Platform (thrust) stage with courtyard around on three sides
- Three tiers of seating – the higher the tier the more expensive the seat (opposite of today's theatre)
- Open air – if it rained, the groundlings got wet





Restoration Drama

- English Royal Patent of 1662 – women appeared as players for the first time
- Raked stages – sloped upward so audience could see the performance

Eighteenth Century – Start of “isms”

- Clever comic operas
 - Gilbert and Sullivan – *The Mikado, H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance*
- Oscar Wilde – *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- Bernard Shaw – Ranked with Shakespeare
 - *Candida, Pygmalion*

Era 5 – “isms” - Other Drama From late renaissance to “modern age.”

- Goethe – Germany in 1770s to early 1800s – *Faust*
- Edmond Rostand – France – *Cyrano de Bergerac*
- Samuel Becket – France – *Waiting for Godot*
- Chekov – Russia – greatest Russian Dramatist
- Steven Sondheim – father of the “Modern Musical story.”

Drama in Asia

China

- Dates to 200 AD
- Rituals that combined song, dance, gestures and costumes
- Peking Opera
 - Developed in the nineteenth century (still performed today)
 - Five main types of drama in China
 - Historical drama
 - Spoken drama
 - Song drama
 - Dance drama
 - Ballet

Japan

- Three forms of drama – No, Bunraku and Kabuki

- No

- Suitable for the Japanese nobility
- Fourteenth century
- Used classical Japanese literature
- Combines words, dance and music



➤ Bunraku

- “Doll theater”
- Combination of puppets, chanting and music
- Four-foot tall marionettes
- Three puppeteers dressed in black hold the puppet close to their bodies as they move around the stage.



Avenue Q, a current Broadway musical, is an Americanized form of Bunraku.

- Kabuki

- Seventeenth century
- Meant for the general population
- Only male performers
- Combines aspects of many Japanese drama styles



The [Kabukiza](#) in Ginza is one of Tokyo's leading *kabuki* theaters



Kabuki founder [Izumo no Okuni](#), wearing a [Katana](#) and a [Christian cross](#).

Drama in the United States

The American Company

- The first professional company to produce in the colonies
- Managed by David Douglass
- *The Prince of Parthia* – performed April 24, 1767 in Philadelphia
- American theater eventually became more innovative and experimental
- Privacy of a darkened theatre helped to hide feelings
- Topics often controversial in society are easily covered in theatre

American Actors

- English professional troupes presented popular London plays
- Barrymores link early American stage with the modern (Drew Barrymore)

American Playwrights

- Eugene O'Neill
 - Issues range from interpersonal relationships to faith
 - *Long Day's Journey into Night*
- Clifford Odets
 - Social protest in 1930s
 - *Waiting for Lefty*
- Arthur Miller
 - Moral and political tragedies
 - *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*
- Thornton Wilder
 - Life in a small town
 - *Our Town*