

The Origins of Shakespeare's Theatre

Before Shakespeare's time there had been three types of theatre in the British Isles. First, at the universities, Greek or Roman dramas would be performed, usually in Latin. These conformed to the classical 'unities' of time, place and action, as described by Aristotle. This meant that the play's action should represent a single day in a single place with one important plot strand. Only university students had a chance to see or understand plays like this.

A college dining-hall, where university plays might have been performed



The second type of play was based on the Bible or religious themes. There were Mystery or Miracle plays, dramatizing Bible stories like the story of Adam and Eve or Noah's Flood. There were also Morality plays with allegorical stories about conflicts between good and evil, or the journey of the soul. The texts were usually in verse. Handed down from generation to generation since the Middle Ages, these plays were performed in cities and towns by trade guilds at Church festivals.

A Mystery play performed outside a church

A third type of play could be seen in the country, performed by the villagers themselves at Christmas, in spring, at midsummer or at harvest time. These folk plays, or mummers' plays, had very ancient origins in pagan fertility rites. They also involved improvisation and slapstick humour. For most British people this type of play would have been the most familiar.



Mummers preparing to act in a 'hero combat' play in an English village

Women did not act in plays; they were not admitted to university or the guilds, and the folk plays were regarded as 'men's business'. As a result women were not allowed on stage at all, specially as travelling actors and showmen were viewed as little better than beggars and the women with them as prostitutes. When new laws against beggars were passed, actors needed aristocratic patrons, so were organized into groups like the Admiral's Men (under Admiral Howard) or the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men).

When Shakespeare was growing up new types of drama developed, performed in inn-yards and later in purpose-built theatres. The new plays dramatized old tales or historical events, or showed the workings of revenge. At first there was considerable improvisation, particularly in the comic scenes, but poets like Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe, and later Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, quickly made them vehicles for great poetry, while still appealing to ordinary people. Marlowe's plays were performed by the Admiral's Men with their leading actor Edward Alleyn. Shakespeare became a 'sharer' in the Lord Chamberlain's Men, associated with the Burbage family.

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