

**Simonetta de Filippis**

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**The literary gaze**  
**English culture and literature from**  
**the Middle Ages to the Restoration**

*Lezioni di letteratura inglese per la formazione a distanza  
Corsi di laurea triennale*



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI  
**l'orientale**

UNIPress  
Collana e-Learning

2008 UNIPress - Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"  
ISBN: 978-88-95044-38-5

Questo volume è stato stampato presso IL TORCOLIERE - Officine Grafico-Editoriali di Ateneo con il patrocinio della Regione Campania nell'ambito del POR Campania 2000-2006, Misura 3.22, Attuazione azione i): Percorsi di formazione a distanza "e-learning", realizzati con il coinvolgimento del Sistema Universitario Campano.

L'Indirizzo internet del progetto online è [www.modem.usad.it](http://www.modem.usad.it)

Roberto D'Avascio ha collaborato ai capitoli 4, 6, 22, 23  
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In copertina: dettaglio da "Shakespeare and His Friends at the Mermaid Tavern", di John Faed, 1851 (The collection of Mr. and Mrs. Sandor Korein).

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## **Preface**

To provide a comprehensive view of the development of English literature is the aim of most literature textbooks. The present volume does not intend to draw an exhaustive picture of English literature from the Middle Ages to the Restoration, but to offer an outline of the major developments of different literary genres – poetry, prose, theatre – through its most significant voices and products observed as a result of specific historical and cultural times and events. Students are therefore enabled to interpret literature, by looking at the various literary genres in the context of their development through the centuries, or by making connections between literary works of the same period and analysing the cultural and historical reasons for literary production in England from the Middle Ages to the end of the 17th century.

Special attention has been devoted to William Shakespeare, as he represents a milestone in the whole of western culture and is still taken as a model, as a source of inspiration for re-writings, as a lively arena of debate for the understanding of our world today through ever new discussions and interpretations

of his plays. Indeed, Shakespeare was able to capture the essence of humanity and the many facets of life, remaining, after many centuries, “our contemporary”, and stimulating critical confrontation on problems and aspects which still reflect our life and our deepest feelings. Nowadays, in the multi-ethnic/post-colonial world we live in, the Shakespearean text continues to provide important and stimulating elements for debating some of the major issues characterising our society: problems of race and class, hybridity and the confrontation with otherness, the relationship between coloniser and colonised, problems of gender and sexuality, homoerotic relationships and transgressions of social conventions.

However, if Shakespeare is acknowledged as a universal artist and cannot be confined within the limits of English culture during the reign of Elizabeth I and James I, many other significant literary voices have expressed the feelings of their time in a poetical and philosophical perspective. Names such as Sidney, Spenser, Marlowe, Jonson, Bacon, Milton, Dryden, and many others, reflect the feelings and the views of their time and make literature a mirror in which the essential meanings of life can be seen.

We wish to thank the staff of the USAD centre for the technical support which has made the realisation of the present volume possible.

We are particularly grateful to Professor Roy Boardman for the general revision of this text.

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# 1. Historical context from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance

## 1.1 The Early Middle Ages: political events

Between the 14th and 15th centuries English politics and life had been dominated by the **Hundred Years' War** (1339-1459) between France and England caused by the English claim to the French throne; a war that had different phases and some very significant moments such as **Henry V's** victory at **Agincourt** (1415). At Henry's death and under the passionate drive of **Joan of Arc** with the liberation of Orléans (1429), France reacted proudly and Charles II, crowned king, freed France from the English presence.

In England **Henry VI's** reign culminated in madness and confusion, with the final act of the King's deposition and the outbreak of the civil war (1455-1485; later named **Wars of the Roses** by Sir Walter Scott in the 19th century), a dynastic conflict between the supporters of the **York** family (white rose) and the **Lancasters** (red rose) which ended with Richard III's defeat and death, and with the unification of the two families in the figure of the new **Tudor** King, **Henry VII**, a Lancaster descendant who married Elizabeth of York.

## 1.2 The Early Middle Ages: social events

The most significant literary production in the Middle Ages belongs to the second half of the 14th century, a very difficult period in which England had to face tragic events such as the violent

epidemic of bubonic plague known as the **Black Death** (1348-1349) which carried off a third of England's population; another difficult political moment was determined by the **Peasants' Revolt** in Kent (1381) led by **Wat Tyler** as a consequence of an additional unfair taxation which worsened the conditions of the rural population and the state of their exploitation.

### 1.3 The Early Middle Ages: literary production

The Church too was the target of a series of critical objections which ended with the religious schism caused by **John Wycliffe** (c.1330-1382) and the division of the population between **Lollards** (reformers) and orthodox believers. In his writings – which gave a significant contribution to the development of English prose – Wycliffe divulged new religious ideas against the ecclesiastic hierarchy and the Pope's supremacy; in fact, Wycliffe is considered the first protestant adversary of papal authority and the Catholic dogma. His ideas, spread by his Lollard preachers, developed later into strongly disruptive positions such as the attack against the Communion dogma and the opposition to the cult of the saints; Wycliffe lost many supporters as a consequence of his radical ideas and also because the aristocracy and the middle classes turned towards more conservative positions after the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.

**John Wycliffe** contributed to the development of the use of English as a literary language with his translation of the Bible; in fact, he translated the **New Testament** (the Old Testament was translated by his collaborator Hereford), in a prose which, though still largely influenced by his practice of writing Latin (he used, for instance, many typically Latin constructions), contained the first rudiments of that 'biblical dialect' which was to become an integral feature of the English language and was to be used in the famous version of the Bible authorised by James I in 1611. Above all, Wycliffe stressed the dignity of the English language as an instrument to make the Scriptures known and as a starting point for later translators.



**William Langland** (c.1330-1386) is the author of the major narrative poem in English written in the Middle Ages, ***The Vision of Piers Plowman*** (1360-1380), a poem often compared to Dante's *Commedia* for its allegoric discussion of problems connected with the social and religious life in England at that time. It is presented as a sort of spiritual pilgrimage during which the protagonist has discussions with a number of abstract personifications such as Truth, Repentance, Holy Church, Study, Mercy, Grace, etc. This work is particularly important from a linguistic perspective for its skilful and fundamentally modern combination of English dialect and Latin, the language of the church, thus presenting a sort of fusion between divine and human, Church and society, everyday life and the supernatural.

#### 1.4 The Early Middle Ages: Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower

Among the great authors of the 14th century, the name of **Geoffrey Chaucer** (c. 1343-1400) stands out; translator from French (the 13th century poem *Roman de la Rose*) and from Latin (*De Consolatione Philosophiae* by Boethius), he revealed the influence of French culture in his first period of artistic activity in ***The Book of the Duchess*** (1369), whereas in his later works he was influenced by Italian culture, particularly in ***The Canterbury Tales*** (planned around 1387) whose narrative structure drew inspiration from Boccaccio's *Decameron*; it includes twenty-two complete and two incomplete tales out of the original plan of one hundred and twenty tales. This narrative poem portrays English society in the 14th century and its different social classes through 'types' described with irony and with a satirical and critical approach, as it appears in the disruption of traditional hierarchies and in the undermining of the commonly held medieval idea of the natural inferiority of women (Chaucer's women are intelligent, educated, able to act, and they have a central role in many aspects of human life; this also appears in his ***Legend of Good***

**Women**, and in *Troilus and Criseyde*, both belonging to the period 1372-86). The “General Prologue” of the *Canterbury Tales* describes the pilgrims and their relationships before the beginning of the pilgrimage during which the tales are narrated. Chaucer stands out for his attempt to improve and elevate the literary status of the English language by writing exclusively in English, using a language made up of London dialect and the dialects of the neighbouring counties, chiefly the East Midlands.

His contemporary and rival, the poet **John Gower** (1330-1408), on the contrary, wrote the *Mirour de l’Omme* (or *Speculum Meditandis*, c. 1376-78) in French, a sharp criticism on the state of human corruption; *Vox Clamantis* (1379-81) in Latin, a series of reflections – subsequently to the Peasants’ Revolt – on the situation of English society and on the government from a moral and religious perspective; and *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1386) in English, on the concept of love seen as a sort of ‘religion’.

## 1.5 The Early Middle Ages: William Caxton and the development of printing

The works of both these two great English Medieval poets were printed by **William Caxton** (1422?-1491), printer, publisher and translator, who largely contributed to the introduction of printing in England with the establishment of the first press at Westminster in 1476. Caxton often wrote prefaces to the works he printed; in “**The Proem to the Canterbury Tales**” he celebrates the power and function of the printed books and praises Chaucer’s role in the improvement and embellishment of the English language also defining him a poet and a philosopher:

From the “Proem to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*”

Great thanks, laud, and honour ought to be given unto the clerks, poets, and historiographers that have written many noble books of wisdom of the lives, passions, and miracles of holy saints, of histories of noble and famous acts and fates, and of

the chronicles since the beginning of the creation of the world unto this present time, by which we be daily informed and have knowledge of many things of whom we should not have known if they had not left to us their monuments written. Among whom and in especial before all others, we ought to give a singular laud unto that noble and great philosopher Geoffrey Chaucer, the which for his ornate writing in our tongue may well have the name of a laureate poet. [...] he made many books and treatises of many a noble history, as well in metre as in rhyme and prose; and them so craftily made that he comprehended his matters in short, quick, and high sentences, eschewing prolixity, casting away the chaff of superfluity, and shewing the picked grain of sentence uttered by crafty and sugared eloquence; of whom among all others of his books I purpose to print, by the grace of God, the book of the tales of Canterbury, in which I find many a noble history of every state and degree; [...] which book I have diligently overseen and duly examined, to that end it be made according unto his own making. [...] I have corrected my book, as hereafter, all along by the aid of Almighty God, [...] whom I humbly beseech to give me grace and aid to achieve and accomplish to his laud, honour, and glory; and that all ye that shall in this book read or hear, will of your charity among your deeds of mercy remember the soul of the said Geoffrey Chaucer, first author and maker of this book. and also that all we that shall see and read therein may so take and understand the good and virtuous tales, that it may so profit unto the health of our souls that after this short and transitory life we may come to everlasting life in Heaven. Amen.

## 1.6 The English Language

The English language develops through three major phases:

- **Old English** (700-1100), up to the Norman conquest;
- **Middle English** (1100-1500), up to the beginning of the Tudor dynasty;
- **Modern English** (1500-) from the Renaissance up to the present day.

**Old English** was synthetic, with a grammar structure analogous to modern German and a vocabulary almost entirely German, similar to the German and Scandinavian languages.

In the change from Old to Middle English, the English language absorbed thousands of French words, partly losing its specific character as a Germanic language and developing into a mixed language. In fact, **Middle English** contained a predominance of French influences, particularly in that variety known as Anglo-Norman; besides, up to 1200 England was considered by the Normans a colony and only later was there a process of gradual Anglicising of the aristocracy of Norman origin. French was the language of culture and spoken at court, whereas the Scandinavian languages (Danish in particular) penetrated into the 'common' language from 1100 onwards.

In 1500 – at the end of the dynastic conflicts and with the establishment of the Tudor monarchy – the development of humanism, navigation and geographical discoveries, the prosperous Elizabethan period, the victory over Spain and the Spanish Armada, made England a powerful country: it was no longer a simple island but the centre of the world. It was at that time that the foundations of the British Empire were laid. England started to consider its own culture and language in a different way and to realise the importance of establishing its own national identity. It was in this period that the language developed into **Modern English**.

The period up to the Restoration in 1660 is defined **Early Modern English** and presents some peculiarities:

- "You, your, yours" were "thou, thy, thine" in the common language;
- the "s" of the third person singular in the present tense was also "eth";
- the relative pronoun "which" also referred to a person;
- the use of the auxiliary verb "do" in negative and interrogative forms was optional (both "came you?" or "did you come" were possible);
- the progressive form was hardly used;

- in the future tense, the use of “shall” with the first person and “will” with the second and third person, were defined only in 1700, whereas in 1500 they were more flexible and interchangeable;
- the double comparative and superlative were often present (“the most kindest”) as well as the double negative form (“I don’t see nothing”); they both tend to disappear from 1700 onwards.

## 1.7 The Late Middle Ages: literary production

Among the late medieval poets, **John Skelton** (1460?-1529) has an important place in the English poetic tradition and as a contributor to the enrichment of the English language. A translator and a satirist, well known for his learning and for his quick wit, he wrote satirical poems such as ***Colin Clout*** (c. 1520-22) in which, in rapid rhyming lines, he discusses material and spiritual life criticising ecclesiastical abuses.

As to prose in English, it is only at the end of the 15th century that works of high literary quality were produced. The most significant name among prose writers in English is that of Sir **Thomas Malory** (?-1471), author of a series of eight chivalric novels, or romances, in which the story of King Arthur is traced, from his birth to his court’s decay, and to which the ‘legend’ of King Arthur is due. These writings draw inspiration from French sources, were completed around 1469, and were published in 1485 by William Caxton, who chose the title – ***Le Morte Darthur*** – and edited the text itself. Imbued with courtly and chivalric ideals in an explicitly mundane perspective, this work, composed during the ‘Wars of the Roses’, tends to stress those ideals that seemed to be forgotten as a consequence of the decline of authority and of the violent conflict within military aristocracy. However, apart from the content and meanings conveyed in his work, Malory’s major contribution to the development of English prose is in the use of a simple language, close to the way English was spoken by educated people in their

real and spontaneous speech, an alternative to the excessively rhetoric style in fashion at the time; moreover, Malory simplified the structure of narration which in the continental late-medieval novel was often complicated by convoluted plots.

## 1.8 The Renaissance: historical context

With the end of the War of the Roses and the beginning of the **Tudor** monarchy which governed during the entire 16th century (1485-1603), England achieved a new internal stability and a defined political identity whereas its importance as a major economic power was reinforced thanks to the development of navigation and trade as a consequence of the discovery of the American continent. A strong sense of national identity characterised the reign of the Tudor kings and it was under their dynasty that the modern English language developed and established its literary quality thanks to a gradual detachment from the use of Latin and, more in general, from the influence of Catholic cultures, namely French and Italian cultures.

The turning point in this process is represented by **King Henry VIII**'s declaration of independence from papal authority and the advent of the English **Reformation** (1534). The archbishop of Canterbury **Thomas Cranmer** (1489-1556) was a major instrument of the King's policy for the removal of papal supremacy in England: he annulled Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon when the Pope's sanction for the King's divorce was denied; he crowned Anne Boleyn queen in 1533; he was chiefly responsible for the promulgation of the 'Ten Articles' in 1536, the first statement of faith issued by the independent English church, and for the first divulcation of the Bible in the English language (the first complete **English Bible** was printed in 1535); in fact, in this period the English language as it was spoken and written at court was imposed as the official language. On the other hand, the King was responsible for the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1539, which led not only to the extinction of traditional religious communities,

the destruction of their buildings and the loss of a number of historical libraries, but also to vast changes in the ownership of land (noblemen and gentlemen were those who benefited most from the confiscation of land belonging to the Catholic Church).

The process of internal political reinforcement dates its beginning back to the period 1536-43 when a series of Acts of Parliament brought about the union between England and Wales by changing the status of Wales from that of an occupied province to that of an English realm where the English customs and language were accepted; as to Ireland, an Act of 1537 ordered its inhabitants to speak the language of its rulers but the English 'civilisation' was imposed there by armies rather than by laws. England's attempts to establish its imperialistic power over the British Isles were also contrasted by Scotland: in 1542 Henry VIII tried to forge a Protestant alliance with Scotland by marrying his son Edward to the infant **Mary, Queen of Scots**, but had to face the opposition of the Scottish Catholics and Mary was married to Francis, the Dauphin of the Catholic France.

Henry VIII's successor at his death in 1547 (he had been crowned king in 1509), **Edward VI**, was only nine and reigned only for eight years (he died in 1553) under the influence of the Protestant aristocrats; in this period the **Act of Uniformity** (1549) was passed, imposing the English liturgy and the **Book of Common Prayer** on all parish churches and cathedrals. However, at Edward's death, his devoutly Catholic sister and successor, **Mary Tudor** (1553-1558), attempted to reconcile England to Rome and was responsible for a wave of persecution against the enemies of Catholicism, causing many victims also among prominent figures such as the Archbishop Cranmer. The cruelty of her persecutions gained her the epithet of **Bloody Mary**.

## 1.9 The Renaissance: historical context

**Elizabeth I** (1558-1603), Henry VIII's third surviving child, governed with notable political intelligence and tried

throughout her reign to shape and consolidate a national Church (the **Church of England**, or Anglican Church) which was imposed by law and generally accepted by the mass of the population, except by recusant Catholics (especially after Pope Pius V's excommunication of the queen in 1570) and by a large number of extreme Protestants. A remarkable development of English economy was made possible also by Elizabeth's intelligent support to the initiatives of the middle classes, her attention to the expansion of trade, and her drive towards colonial expansion. As to politics, Elizabeth acknowledged that she needed the Parliament's support and succeeded in making England a major European power, particularly with England's victory over the Spanish ***Invincible Armada*** (1588). When the Armada threatened the shores of England, Elizabeth appeared on horseback in a steel breastplate and attended by a page bearing a white-plumed helmet, and declared in her speech that though she knew she had "the body but of a weak and feeble Woman", she had "the heart and stomach of a King, and of a King of England too, and I think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any Prince of Europe should dare invade the Borders of my Realm". The **Elizabethan myth** and cult was asserted and stressed not only by court poets and artists, but by the queen herself who was very careful in publicizing her image in a series of portraits, in assuming popular roles such as that of the Virgin Queen married to England, in formulating brilliant political speeches as that in which, towards the end of her reign, she proclaimed that "there will never Queen sit in my seat with more zeal to my country, care to my subjects, and that will sooner with willingness yield and venture her life for your good and safety than myself. And though you have had and may have many princes more mighty and wise sitting in this seat, yet you never had or shall have any that will be more careful and loving."

During her reign, one constant concern of Parliament was the problem of her succession, a problem which had long been connected to the figure of Mary Stuart, the major Catholic claimant to the English throne as a direct descendant of Henry VII (who had married his daughter to James IV of Scotland, Mary's



father) and who was therefore seen as a danger by the childless Queen Elizabeth I and her Ministers. Mary was sentenced to death in 1587; however, it was Mary Stuart's Protestant son **James VI** who was to unite the crowns of England and Scotland as Elizabeth's successor in 1603, the first king of the Stuart dynasty who governed England during most of the 17th century.



## 2. Early sixteenth century poetry

### 2.1 General background

Religion, the English language, and all those fields of intellectual activity which made up English culture, were going through a major development and transformation in the early 16th century. The invention and expansion of printing had facilitated the circulation of European culture; however, though Latin remained the main language of educated communication, the tradition of poetry in English was increasingly viewed with nationalistic pride. Poetry, often considered the highest expression of literature, was very important in the process of construction of the new literary English language.

### 2.2 John Skelton

**John Skelton** (?1460-1529) was the most prominent and most senior of the early Tudor poets; he was, however, a fundamentally medieval poet, particularly gifted in the use of the vernacular and in the construction of irregular, quick rhyming lines (the so-called “Skeltonic metre”), well aware of the difficulty of expressing his poetic vein in his native tongue and of the disadvantages present in the language used by **Chaucer** and **Gower**. Among his satirical poetry, ***Colin Clout*** (c. 1520-22) remains one of the most significant and sharpest satires against ecclesiastical abuses. Skelton also used Latin for a number of his poems because, as a priest and former

tutor to **Prince Henry**, it was proper that he should write also in the language of learning and international communication. Though interested in problems related to the early Tudor Church and despite his appreciation of English as a literary language, Skelton remained a conservative rather resistant to extraneous influences, never fully responsive to the great poetic production of France and Italy. This can partly explain why he was not considered a model and did not create a poetic school as did the initiators of the sonnet form in England, **Thomas Wyatt** (1503-1542) and **Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey** (?1517-1547).

### 2.3 Richard Tottel and the development of the English sonnet

Few of their poems appeared in print in their lifetime because they were meant for the court elite and circulated in manuscript form; however, their works were canonised posthumously in 1557 with the publication of the anthology ***Songs and Sonnets, Written by the Right Honourable Lord Henry Howard Late Earl of Surrey***, and others known as ***Tottel's Miscellany***, which included 97 poems by **Wyatt** and 40 by **Surrey**, plus a considerable number of poems by various authors. In the "Preface" **Richard Tottel** declared that the poetic production by Surrey and Wyatt proved that English poetry could now stand comparison with the ancient Latin and modern Italian poets, and that the Miscellany had been published "to the honour of the English tongue, and for the profit of the studious of English eloquence". ***Tottel's Miscellany*** went through nine editions between 1557 and 1587, made European Renaissance poetry known outside the restricted court circles, and became a model of poetry for a generation of Elizabethan poets, particularly in the courtly expressions of love and in the structural and metric elements (the fourteen line sonnet, the ottava rima, the terza rima, the unrhymed iambic pentameter), whereas Wyatt and Surrey were considered the initiators of a new lyric tradition. Above all, they greatly

contributed to the development and the affirmation of English as a proper literary language through their free translations from Italian poetry, particularly from Petrarch and his followers. Indeed, these poets/artisans really ‘worked’ on the re-construction of the English sonnet by taking inspiration from Petrarch and by translating many of his sonnets.

## 2.4 Thomas Wyatt

**Thomas Wyatt** (1503-1542), a courtier and diplomat whose travels to Italy and France acquainted him with the High Renaissance abroad, had a good knowledge of the Italian poetic tradition deriving from **Petrarch’s** *Rime sparse* and was responsible, together with others, for the introduction of Petrarchanism in England thanks to his translations. Though, like many originators of new stylistic models, there is a kind of awkwardness and tentativeness about even his best works, Surrey acknowledged his fundamental role in the development of English poetry and said of him: “A hand that taught what might be said in rhyme”. Wyatt’s poems are of two sorts. The first sort – lyrics metrically regular in short, tight stanzas, still connected to the later fifteenth century tradition of song – represents what was defined as the poetry of “courtly makers”. These poems deal with courtly love but, at the same time, they introduce the theme of erotic and political power by presenting on the one hand a real woman with whom the poet can openly speak of his desires (thus establishing a remarkable difference with the ideal woman sung by Petrarch), and referring on the other to aspects of political life from a rather critical perspective. The second sort of poetic production, his translations and adaptations of Petrarch, introduced the sonnet form to English, trying, at the same time, to create an English equivalent.

Wyatt followed the formal model of **Petrarch’s** sonnets in order to create a structure which medieval English verse lacked, and adopted the pattern of two quatrains and two triplets (*abba abba cdd cee*) whereas Petrarch’s sonnet has

a different rhyming structure (*abab abab cde cde*). His translations from Petrarch are far from being mechanical and flat; indeed, he manages to transform Petrarch's lines, making them expressive of the English feelings and culture and respondent to a metrical structure respecting the rhythm of the English language. Here is Wyatt's translation of Petrarch's sonnet CXXXIV from *Il Canzoniere*:

**Thomas Wyatt**

'I Find No Peace'

I find no peace and all my war is done  
I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice;  
I fly above the wind, yet I cannot arise,  
And naught I have and all the world I seize on;

That looseth nor locketh holdeth me in prison,  
And holdeth me nor yet I scape nowise;  
Nor letteth me live nor die at my devise,  
And yet of death it giveth no occasion.

Without eye I see, and without tongue I plain;  
I desire to perish, and yet I ask health;  
I love another, and thus I hate myself;

I feed me in sorrow, and laugh in all my pain,  
Likewise displeaseth me both death and life,  
And my delight is causer of this strife.

**Francesco Petrarca**

"Pace non trovo"

Pace non trovo e non ò da far guerra,  
e temo e spero; ed ardo e sono un ghiaccio;  
e volo sopra 'l cielo e giaccio in terra;  
e nulla stringo e tutto 'l mondo abbraccio.

Tal m'è in pregon, che non m'apre né serra,  
né per suo mi riten né scioglie il laccio;  
e non m'ancide Amore e non mi sferra,  
né mi vuol vivo né mi trae d'impaccio.

Veggio senza occhi e non ò lingua e grido;  
 e bramo di perir e cheggio aita,  
 ed ò in odio me stesso ed amo altrui.

Pascomi di dolor, piangendo rido;  
 egualmente mi spiace morte e vita;  
 In questo stato son, Donna, per voi.

## 2.5 Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey

**Surrey** (1517-1547) was influenced by the way **Wyatt** had borrowed and changed elements of Italian poetic tradition, and was able to create sonnets which are more regular and smoother than Wyatt's, also by looking back, beyond **Petrarch**, to Latin verse and drawing inspiration particularly from the syntax and rhetoric of **Virgil**'s translation of the ***Aeneid*** (published posthumously in 1557) in which he was the first to use English blank verse (unrhyming lines). His sonnets follow that pattern of three quatrains with alternate rhyming and a final rhyming couplet which became the standard English model (*abab abab abab cc* or *abab cdcd efef gg*). The experimental nature of Wyatt's poetry therefore found a smoothness and sophistication in the form proposed by Surrey and used later by Shakespeare; Surrey can be considered a direct precursor of **Sidney** for that balance and measure of syntax and verse unit, and for the influence of classical styles and their adaptation to English. Among his translations from Petrarch's ***Canzoniere***, here is "Alas, So All Things Now Do Hold Their Peace", translation of sonnet CLXIV "Or che 'l ciel e la terra e 'l vento tace":

### **Earl of Surrey**

'Alas, So All Things Now Do Hold Their Peace' (1557)  
 Alas, so all things now do hold their peace  
 Heaven and earth disturbed in no thing;  
 The beasts, the air, the birds their song do cease,

The nightè chair the stars about to bring,

Calm is the sea: the waves work less and less;  
 So am not I, whom love, alas, doth wring,  
 Bringing before my face the great increase  
 Of my desires, whereat I weep and sing

In joy and woe as in a doubtful ease;  
 For my sweet thoughts sometime do pleasure bring,  
 But by and by the cause of my disease  
 Gives me a pang that inwardly doth sting,

When that I think what grief it is again  
 To live and lack the thing should rid my pain.

### **Francesco Petrarca**

“Or che ’l ciel e la terra e ’l vento tace”  
 Or che ’l ciel e la terra e ’l vento tace  
 e le fere e gli augelli il sonno affrena,  
 notte il carro stellato in giro mena  
 e nel suo letto il mar senz’onda giace,

vecchio, penso, ardo, piango, e chi mi sface  
 sempre m’è inanzi per mia dolce pena:  
 guerra è ’l mio stato, d’ira e di duol piena,  
 e sol di lei pensando ò qualche pace.

Così sol d’una chiara fonte viva  
 move ’l dolce e l’amaro ond’io mi pasco;  
 una man sola mi risana e punge;

E perché ’l mio martir non giunga a riva,  
 mille volte il dì moro e mille nasco:  
 Tanto dalla salute mia son lunge.



## 2.6 The debate on poetry

The example of **Wyatt** and Surrey was followed by a large number of minor poets who often produced low-quality poetry and triggered an important critical debate about poetry writing; the two most relevant discussions are in ***The Art of English Poesy*** (1589) by **George Puttenham** (?1529-1591) and ***The Defence of Poesy*** (1595) by **Sir Philip Sidney** (1554-1586).

Puttenham's treatise, in three books, stresses the dignity of the modern gentleman poet who, inspired by court values, praises the court of Queen Elizabeth in flattering words, and tends to establish codes of literary production by commenting on past authors such as Chaucer, Gower and Skelton, and by attempting to define and explain concepts such as genre, form, metre, and imagery.

## 2.7 Sir Philip Sidney: *The Defence of Poesy*

**Sidney** writes his treatise in an easier and more conversational style than Puttenham's and aims at establishing the nobility and social validity of poetry. With wit and eloquence, Sydney defends poetry from Puritan attacks and underlines its ancient origins, citing Homer, Virgil and Dante, also insisting on the power of poetry to elevate readers morally. In particular, Sydney replies to Plato's critique of poetry, seen as a means to misrepresent and corrupt ideas, by exposing the virtues of this form of writing, and stressing how poetry accomplishes an important didactic and formative function, even more effective than history or philosophy, since it can elevate and inspire the mind while 'delighting' its readers. Unlike the philosopher who speaks to an educated audience, the poet, on the contrary, offers "food for the tenderest stomachs", using a visual rhetoric, which directly reaches 'the eye of mind'. This argument, taken from the classics, is further developed through an analysis of the poet-figure, which is central in the passage entitled "The Poet, Poetry":

Since the authors of most of our sciences, were the Romans, and before them the Greeks, let us a little stand upon their authorities, but even so far as to see what names they have given unto this now scorned skill.

Among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or prophet, as by his conjoynd words *vaticinium* and *vaticinari*, is manifest: so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestow upon this hart- ravishing knowledge. [...]

But now let us see how the Greeks have named it, and how they deemed of it. The Greeks called him a “poet”, which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word *poiein*, which is, to make: wherein, I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker: which name, how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences than by any partial allegation. [...]

Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture with this end, to teach and delight.

In this passage, considering that most of “our sciences” derive from Latin and Greek authors, Sydney refers to those cultures to analyse the words used to designate the poet: the Latin *vates*, “prophet”, stresses how knowledgeable the poet is, whereas the Greek *poietes*, “maker”, underlines the function of the poet as creator, through his inspired use of language. In the end Sydney explicitly maintains that the aim of poetry is “to teach and delight”.

## 2.8 Sir Philip Sidney: late sixteenth century sonnet

**Sidney** produced the first English book of poetry conceived in a similar way to Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, ***Astrophil and Stella*** (written c. 1582, published posthumously in 1591), a sonnet cycle, consisting of 108 sonnets and 11 songs and

centred on a love relationship between the two main characters: Astrophil (from Greek “*Astro-phil*”, “star-lover”; but the poet is also playing with his own name “Phil-ip”), a prototype of the chivalric hero longing for an ideal woman, and Stella (from Latin “*Stella*”, “star”), embodiment of beauty and virtue. The reference to the two different classical languages for the names of the lovers suggests the irreconcilable nature of the relationship, and seems to reproduce the idea of distance and of the lover’s frustration typical of Petrarchan tradition. However, Sidney does not imitate Petrarch’s style in a slavish way, nor is his Stella distant and unresponsive like Laura, though, like Laura, she is the inspirer and the object of his poetry. Besides, some critics suggest that Stella may represent sapience for the poet/philosopher who aspires to a superior knowledge. Sydney, however, refuses to emphasise the male protagonist’s sufferance, insisting instead on self-reflection and dialogue between the two characters. No solution is offered in the end and the distance between Astrophil and Stella is not reduced. Sidney uses his lines also to discuss poetry, as he does in sonnet 15 with his criticism of writing poetry as a fashion rather than as an expression of a real poetic gift; or as it appears in sonnet 45 in which he discusses how the power of a poetic tale can create an emotional response greater than that provoked by real feelings.

**Sonnet 15** offers a very interesting critical discussion of the low-quality poetry created by those poetasters who believe that they can deserve the name of poet by slavishly imitating Petrarch. The structure of the sonnet is very well organised and follows the pattern *abba abba ccd eed*:

You that do search for every purling spring  
Which from the ribs of old Parnassus flows,  
And every flower, not sweet perhaps, which grows  
Near thereabouts, into your poesy wring;

You that do dictionary’s method bring  
Into your rhymes, running in rattling rows;  
You that poor Petrarch’s long deceased woes  
With newborn sighs and denizen’d wit do sing:

You take wrong ways; those far-fet helps be such  
 As do bewray a want of inward touch,  
 And sure at length stolen goods do come to light;

But if, both for your love and skill, your name  
 You seek to nurse at fullest breasts of Fame,  
 Stella behold, and then begin to indite.

The first two quatrains present all the typical faults of those poets who simply put together in their lines any content which appears to be poetical (“every flower... which grows near... the old Parnassus”, the Greek mountain of inspiration), or which recalls Petrarch’s feelings (“You that poor Petrarch’s long deceased woes/With newborn sighs... do sing”), in a style which is a mechanical adaptation of formal rules of poetry (“you that do dictionary’s method bring /Into your rhymes, running in rattling rows”); the first triplet openly declares that in writing that kind of poetry the poets “take wrong ways” because they reveal “a want of inward touch”; the last triplet specifies which is the right way to create good poetry, that is the combination of a natural gift to write verses and a true source of inspiration which comes from real love.

**Sonnet 45** is structured on the pattern of three quatrains and a final rhyming couplet (*abba abba cded ff*) and is particularly interesting from a meta-poetic perspective:

Stella oft sees the very face of woe  
 Painted in my beclouded stormy face,  
 But cannot skill to pity my disgrace,  
 Not though thereof the cause herself she know;

Yet hearing late a fable, which did show  
 Of lovers never known a grievous case,  
 Pity thereof gat in her breast such place  
 That, from that sea derived, tears’ spring did flow.

Alas, if fancy, drawn by imaged things,  
 Though false, yet with free scope, more grace doth breed

Than servant's wrack, where new doubts honor brings;  
 Then think, my dear, that you in me do read  
 Of lovers' ruin some sad tragedy.  
 I am not I; pity the tale of me.

The first quatrain describes how the poet has his love-pain impressed on his face ("the very face of woe"), while the lady, though aware of being the source of his despair, is unable to pity him ("Not though thereof the cause herself she knows"). In the second quatrain the story of "lovers never known" provokes a heartfelt sorrow in the lady whose eyes get filled with tears. The third quatrain contains the poet's reflections on the power of fancy and fiction, which can be stronger than the 'reality' of his feelings; therefore, in the final couplet, he invites his beloved to consider him not as a real man but as a fictional character ("Then think, my dear, that you in me do read /Of lover's ruin some sad tragedy. /I am not I; pity the tale of me."), implicitly hoping that in this way he can get greater consideration from his beloved.

## 2.9 The development of the sonnet: William Shakespeare

The sonnet achieved its final and most effective form with **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616), whose 154 **Sonnets** can be divided into three distinct groups. The first 126 are addressed to a "fair youth"; the next 26 are connected with the "Dark Lady"; the last two sonnets play with the erotic theme by dealing with stories of Cupid and the loss of his (phallic) "brand". These general divisions contain within them subgroups such as sonnets 1-17 which encourage the youth to marry as a way of ensuring a continuity of life, or sonnets 76-86 which refer to a rival poet. Shakespeare, though inspired by Petrarchan conventions, modifies them radically by addressing his love verses to a young man rather than to a woman, or, when he refers to the Dark Lady, by describing her in realistic and unflattering terms ("My mistress' eyes are

nothing like the sun”, sonnet 130) rather than idealising her.

Shakespeare’s sonnets, written over the period 1580-1609 and published in an in-quarto edition in 1609 by **Thomas Thorpe**, are dedicated to a mysterious **Mr. W. H.**: “To the only begetter of/these insuing sonnets/ Mr. W. H. all happiness/and that eternity promised by/our ever-living poet/ wisheth the well wishing adventurer in/setting forth./T. T.” Many conjectures have been made about the identity of Mr. W. H., but it is now widely accepted that his identification is either with **Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton**, to whom Shakespeare dedicated also his narrative poems (see below), or **William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke**.

Shakespeare’s sonnets are based on a 14 line structure of three quatrains with alternate rhyming and a final rhyming couplet (*abab cdcd efef gg*). The first 126 sonnets are pervaded by the concepts of time and mortality, and by the awareness that poetry can defeat time and death ensuring immortality.

## 2.10 Sonnets to the “Fair Youth”

### Sonnet 15

When I consider every thing that grows  
Holds in perfection but a little moment,  
That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows  
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;  
When I perceive that men as plants increase,  
Cheered and cheque’d even by the self-same sky,  
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,  
And wear their brave state out of memory;  
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay  
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,  
Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay,  
To change your day of youth to sullied night;  
And all in war with Time for love of you,  
As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

The first three quatrains of **Sonnet 15** present the inevitability of the decay of youth and beauty as a consequence of the passing of “wasteful time”, whereas in the final couplet the poet promises to give back to the fair youth what time takes from him thanks to the power of poetry (“And all in war with Time for love of you, /As he takes from you, I engraft you new.”)

### **Sonnet 18**

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou growest:  
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

**Sonnet 18** expresses the same concepts underlining that the youth's “eternal summer shall not fade ... When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.”

### **Sonnet 20**

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted  
 Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;  
 A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted  
 With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;  
 An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,  
 Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;  
 A man in hue, all 'hues' in his controlling,  
 Much steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.  
 And for a woman wert thou first created;

Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,  
 And by addition me of thee defeated,  
 By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.  
 But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,  
 Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

**Sonnet 20** deals rather explicitly with the poet's passion for the Fair Youth whose "woman's face with Nature's own hand painted" inflames passion in his heart, making him "master-mistress of my passion"; the youth's virtues attract both men and women but, though initially created to be a woman, in the end Nature herself fell in love with him and added "a last touch" in order to make him a man. The explicit reference to homosexuality is softened in the final couplet by the poet's renunciation to the youth's sensual love which is meant only for "women's pleasure", but emotionally he keeps his love for himself ("Mine be thy love...").

## 2.11 Sonnets to the "Dark Lady"

### Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
 I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,  
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
 And in some perfumes is there more delight  
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:  
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
 As any she belied with false compare.



**Sonnet 130**, while underlining the physical imperfections of the Dark Lady (her eyes are “nothing like the sun”, her lips are not as red as coral, her cheeks lack a rosy colour, her breath and voice are not pleasant, her walking has no special grace), praises the power of love which renders her more beautiful to her lover than any other woman whose beauty is falsely exalted.

In the later sonnets the ambiguous relationship between the poet, the fair youth, and the Dark Lady suggests an emotional triangle in which the poet is torn between his love for the young man and his love for the woman, expressing an emotional turmoil:

### **Sonnet 144**

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,  
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:  
The better angel is a man right fair,  
The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.  
To win me soon to hell, my female evil  
Tempteth my better angel from my side,  
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,  
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.  
And whether that my angel be turn'd fiend  
Suspect I may, but not directly tell;  
But being both from me, both to each friend,  
I guess one angel in another's hell:  
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,  
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

## **2.12 Shakespeare's poems**

Shakespeare's poetic production also includes two narrative poems, both dedicated to **Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton**; they were written in those years in which the theatres were closed because of a plague, and represent the starting point of Shakespeare's artistic career though, as soon as the theatres reopened, he was totally taken up by his plays. *Venus and Adonis* (1593), in six-lined stanzas, describes

the courtship of a reluctant young man by a mature goddess, contrasting a passive male sexuality with an active female one; it is Shakespeare's first published work (he calls it "the first heir of my invention" in the dedication) and belongs to the genre of erotic narrative in verse characterised by a wittily erotic handling of the theme but also by the use of allegory. ***The Rape of Lucrece*** (1594), in seven-lined stanzas, is based on the story of the rape of a virtuous Roman noblewoman by the libidinous son of King Tarquin; composed of 1885 lines, it is a narrative tragedy, rather ambitious in its extreme schematic and rhetorical elaboration.

### 2.13 Christopher Marlowe

Shakespeare's poems are particularly interesting in that he probably meant them as a sort of challenge and a way of measuring himself against the standards set by his "rival" **Christopher Marlowe** (1564-1593), author of the unfinished poem ***Hero and Leander*** (published posthumously in 1598, only two cantos of which survive), inspired to **Ovid** and also to a Latin translation of a narrative poem by the 5th century Greek poet, **Musaeus**; the tone, the sexual ambiguities, and the erotic general atmosphere of the poem, however, are typically Marlowe's. ***Hero and Leander*** inaugurates the Elizabethan literary type of Ovidian mythological verse narrative, a tradition also present in Shakespeare's ***Venus and Adonis***, though Marlowe's university education and his knowledge of Greek and Latin literature is evidently wider than Shakespeare's. Both Marlowe and Shakespeare, however, expressed their greatness above all in the "mighty lines" of their dramatic production.

### 3. Sixteenth century poetry: Edmund Spenser

#### 3.1 Edmund Spenser and the Elizabethan cult

English poetry in the second half of the 16th century is characterised by the sonnet vogue, inspired by **Petrarch**, introduced by **Wyatt** and **Surrey**, and further developed by **Sir Philip Sidney** and **William Shakespeare**. Another important form of poetry which developed in the last decades of the century is narrative poetry with the poems by **Marlowe** (*Hero and Leander*) and **Shakespeare** (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*), a form which reached its highest expression with *The Faerie Queene* by **Edmund Spenser** (1552-1599).

Unlike Sydney, Spenser was not an aristocrat and so poetry was for him a 'professional' activity. Indeed, to write poetry was not only a literary ambition in his time, it was also a way to display one's ability, in order to be given a job or to earn the patronage of important persons. Like other poets of his time, Spenser tried to combine medieval English tradition and its chivalric values with ancient classics and Italian humanism.

Spenser is considered the greatest poet of the Elizabethan age and his work is supportive of what is generally defined as "the **Elizabethan cult**", that is the Queen-centred courtly culture which Elizabeth's propagandists presented as an ideal. For them, Elizabeth's court embodied the idea of perfection and the **Queen** could be compared to mythical figures such as the chaste moon-goddess **Diana** and **Cynthia**; she was also the virgin **Astraea** who ensured justice and peace. This kind of cultural propaganda counterbalanced the political weakness implicit in the rule of a woman who had been

declared illegitimate by the father's Parliament, and who had been formerly excommunicated by the Pope in 1570. Her name was therefore connected to a revival of the principles of medieval chivalry, her nobility and greatness was exalted by poets, and her figure was depicted in a series of hieratic paintings exhibiting the splendour of the **Virgin Queen**, eternally young, in sumptuous clothes and with precious jewels.

### 3.2 *The Faerie Queene*

The most important poetic tribute to Queen Elizabeth is in **Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*** (1596), his masterpiece and most famous work, which won him fame and a special place in the history of English literature. The original plan of ***The Faerie Queene*** included twelve books, but Spenser managed to write only the first six (the first three were published in 1589, the second three in 1596). The main characters are Gloriana, the 'faerie queene', and Prince Arthur, the most virtuous of the knights, who in the end was to marry the queen. The pattern is simple: each book was to describe the "severall adventures" undertaken by knights, representing moral virtues, and knightly dames in honour of the Queen's twelve-days annual feast. The six books that Spenser completed present the virtues of Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy.

The poem is a romantic epic, like **Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso***, full of adventures and marvels, dragons, witches, giants, enchanted trees, castles; that is all those typical elements of the romance tradition are present, with intricate plots, heroic characters, and elaborate descriptions. Moreover, the poem is also a national epic in which Spenser celebrates the Tudors, Queen Elizabeth, and the English nation.

***The Faerie Queene*** is written in the stanza invented by Spenser (and later utilised by Thomson, Keats, Shelley, and Byron), composed of eight lines of ten syllables to which a ninth line of twelve syllables is added, rhyming *ababbcbcc*.

### 3.3 The introductory letter to Sir Walter Raleigh

The opening letter to **Sir Walter Raleigh** is a sort of introduction to *The Faerie Queene*, in which the author discusses the literary models of his poem, quoting among the classics, the Greek epic poet **Homer** and the Latin epic poet **Virgil**, while among vernacular authors, he cites the Italian poets **Ludovico Ariosto** and **Torquato Tasso**, in whose works – *Orlando Furioso* and *Gerusalemme Liberata* – epic and romance appear fused together. The same happens in *The Faerie Queene*, which is presented as an epic inspired by the values of courtly love. The combination of epic and romance reflects a precise design on the part of Spenser: interested in being considered as the “new Virgil”, he aimed at creating an epic which could constitute a base for English national literature, paying homage to Queen Elisabeth I at the same time, just as Virgil’s *Aeneid* had served to flatter Augustus, by tracing a link between his lineage and the origin of Rome. Besides, epic can be considered as the genre which relates (and constructs) the deeds and origin of a people, also delineating the ideal characteristics of its hegemonic social class. National identity and political power are, in other words, the main ingredients of the epic genre, a recipe which Spenser follows and makes particularly effective through recourse to the Arthurian corpus of legends and the courtly code of behaviour: Prince Arthur has a vision of the Faerie Queene, “with whose excellent beauty ravished, he awaking resolved to seeke her out”, and is consequently brought into the adventures of the several knights. In the letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spenser explains the main intent of *The Faerie Queene*:

The general end therefore of all the book is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceived shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured with an historical fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, then for profit of the ensample: I chose the history of King Arthur as most fit for the excellency of his person, being

made famous by many men's former works, and also furthest from the danger of envy, and suspition of present time.

Prince Arthur can so measure up with the protagonists of classic and Italian epic. Moreover, in the letter Spenser explains the allegorical meaning of the Faerie Queene:

In that Faerie Queene I mean glory in my general intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our souveraine the Queene, and her kingdom in Faery land.

### 3.4 The four introductory stanzas

The perfect fusion of classic and courtly themes is present in the four Introductory Stanzas to *The Faerie Queene*:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,  
As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds,  
Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,  
For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,  
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;  
Whose prayes hauing slept in silence long,  
Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds  
To blazon broad emongst her learned throng:  
Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song.

Helpe then, holy Virgin chiefe of nine,  
Thy weaker Nouice to performe thy will,  
Lay forth out of thine euerlasting scryne  
The antique rolles, which there lye hidden still,  
Of Faerie knights and fairest Tanaquill,  
Whom that most noble Briton Prince so long  
Sought through the world, and suffered so much ill,  
That I must rue his vnderued wrong:  
O helpe thou my weake wit, and sharpen my dull tong.

And thou most dreaded impe of highest Ioue,  
Faire Venus sonne, that with thy cruell dart

At that good knight so cunningly didst roue,  
 That glorious fire it kindled in his hart,  
 Lay now thy deadly Heben bow apart,  
 And with thy mother milde come to mine ayde:  
 Come both, and with you bring triumphant Mart,  
 In louses and gentle iollities arrayd,  
 After his murderous spoiles and bloody rage allayd.

And with them eke, O Goddesses heavenly bright,  
 Mirrour of grace and Maiestie diuine,  
 Great Lady of the greatest Isle, whose light  
 Like Phoebus lampe throughout the world doth shine,  
 Shed thy faire beames into my feeble eyne,  
 And raise my thoughts too humble and too vile,  
 To thinke of that true glorious type of thine,  
 The argument of mine afflicted stile:  
 The which to heare, vouchsafe, O dearest dred a-while.

The poem opens with an invocation to the Muse of poetry while the poet introduces himself as the author who had previously produced a pastoral work (*The Shepheardes Calender*), and is now called to another, more difficult task, that of writing heroic poetry (represented by the trumpet), whereas pastoral poetry is symbolised by the shepherd's pipe (the "oaten reeds", l. 4). These initial lines openly imitate the incipit of **Virgil's** *Aeneid*; the subsequent lines, instead, recall **Ariosto's** *Orlando Furioso*, as they announce the contents of the poem: the deeds of knights and ladies. In order to praise their actions, then, the author invokes the help of the ninth muse, Clio. This stanza closes with the reference to the object of the poem: "Fierce warres and faithfull loves shall moralize my song." (l. 9)

**Stanza 2** opens with an invocation to the ninth muse, Clio, whose help is needed in order to praise the actions of "Faerie knights and fairest Tanaquill" [Gloriana, i.e. Queen Elizabeth].

After having indirectly recalled **Virgil** and **Ariosto**, and after having mentioned medieval Arthurian romance, in **Stanza 3** Spenser invokes Cupid as the god of Love ("And thou most dreaded impe of highest Jove,/ Faire Venus sonne,

that with thy cruell dart, /At that good knight so cunningly  
didst rove [...]”, ll. 19-21), Venus (“and with thy mother  
come to mine ayde”, l. 24), and Mars, classic god of war, to  
be helped in the narration of “warres” and “faithfull loves”.

The **fourth stanza** is an open invocation to **Queen Elizabeth**, whom the author flatters with a direct reference: “Goddesse heavenly bright, /Mirroure of grace and Majesty  
divine, /Great Lady of the greatest Isle” (ll. 28-30). The next  
line links the Queen to classic mythology through a reference  
to Apollo: Elizabeth’s “light” is compared with that of Phoebus  
(Apollo) and so with the sun: “...whose light /Like Phoebus lampe  
throughout the world doth shine...” (ll. 30-1). Considering that  
Apollo is often associated by Humanists to Arts and knowledge,  
the praise of Elizabeth as an enlightened queen is evident;  
besides, the words “true glorious type of thine” (l. 34) establish a  
parallelism between Elisabeth and Gloriana, the ‘faerie queene’.

### 3.5 Book 1

The plot of *The Faerie Queene* is rather complicated and full  
of characters and magical creatures. The basic story develops  
around the marvellous court of Gloriana, the Faerie Queen,  
and her twelve knights. Gloriana is fair and good and each  
knight is the champion of a virtue. For instance, Sir Guyon  
represents “Temperance”, Sir Artegall “Justice”, Sir Calidore  
“Courtesy”, and so on. The influence of **Aristotle** is evident  
in the choice of number twelve, as in Aristotle’s *Ethics* twelve  
is the number of the virtues. In *The Faerie Queene*, twelve are  
also the days of a great annual feast, during which celebrations  
the Queen cannot refuse to grant any wish she is asked for.

The first book is devoted to the adventures of the **Red Cross Knight**, who offers his aid to a young lady, **Una**, who  
has come to Gloriana’s court to plead for help: her parents (a  
king and a queen) are prisoners of a terrible dragon and the  
help of a knight is needed to defeat the monster, a request  
which is in a tradition of Arthurian romance. The name of



this lady is very significant, as Una means ‘the only one’ and may be a symbol of Truth or, in a historical perspective, she could be considered as a metaphor for the Church of England (Elizabeth I was Protestant in a period when Henry VIII’s Reformation was still at issue). The Red Cross Knight, personification of Holiness, leaves with Una and her servant to reach the lady’s land, in order to set it free from the monster.

The **first canto** tells the story and wanderings of the Red Cross Knight and Una. The presentation of the two characters is central in the first five stanzas of Canto I.

### **Stanza 1**

The first stanza introduces the figure of the knight. He is described as “A Gentle Knight” riding a wild horse (“His angry steed did chide his foaming bit”) in “...mighty arms and silver shielde”, marked by the old signs of wounds; nonetheless, it is clear that the knight is very young, as he has never used weapons before (“yet arms till that time did he never wield”):

Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,  
Y cladd in mightie armes and siluer shielde,  
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,  
The cruell markes of many’ a bloody fielde;  
Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield:  
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,  
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:  
Full iolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,  
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt.

### **Stanza 2**

On his breast, as on his shield, he bears a red cross, “the dear remembrance of his dying Lord”. The red cross renders the knight a solemn figure, “true [...] in deed and word”, serious and sad, brave and courageous, not scared but scaring: “But of his cheer did seem too solemn sad; /Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.”:

But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,

The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,  
 For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,  
 And dead as liuing euer him ador'd:  
 Vpon his shield the like was also scor'd,  
 For soueraine hope, which in his helpe he had:  
 Right faithfull true he was in deede and word,  
 But of his cheere did seeme too solemne sad;  
 Yet nothing did he dread, but euer was ydrad.

### Stanza 3

The Red Cross knight is bound to a great adventure, entrusted to him by Queen Gloriana. He aspires to honour and to the grace of his Queen, fighting against a terrible enemy, "a Dragon horrible and stearne.":

Vpon a great aduenture he was bond,  
 That greatest Gloriana to him gaue,  
 That greatest Glorious Queene of Faerie lond,  
 To winne him worship, and her grace to haue,  
 Which of all earthly things he most did craue;  
 And euer as he rode, his hart did earne  
 To proue his puissance in battell braue  
 Vpon his foe, and his new force to learne;  
 Vpon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne.

### Stanza 4

Beside him, a Lady is riding a white ass. The colour white, symbol of purity, also characterises the lady: "Yet she much whiter" (l. 31). At the same time, she is associated to mourning and sadness, as she hides "under a vele, that wimpled was full low,/ And over all a blacke stole she did throw,/ As one that inly mournd: so was she sad,..." (ll. 31-33), being afflicted by some secret sorrow. She also carries a white lamb.

A louely Ladie rode him faire beside,  
 Vpon a lowly Asse more white then snow,  
 Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide  
 Vnder a vele, that wimpled was full low,  
 And ouer all a blacke stole she did throw,

As one that inly mournd: so was she sad,  
 And heauie sat vpon her palfrey slow:  
 Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,  
 And by her in a line a milke white lambe she lad.

### Stanza 5

The lamb embodies her own innocence and virtue. She is of noble origins (“from Royall lynage came”), and her land is ancient and extended from “East to Westerne shore” until a terrible creature (“infernall feend”) wasted it. In the last line of the fifth stanza, it is clear that the lady has summoned the knight, whose mission is to defeat the monster (“Whom to avenge, she had this Knight from far compeld.”):

So pure and innocent, as that same lambe,  
 She was in life and euery vertuous lore,  
 And by descent from Royall lynage came  
 Of ancient Kings and Queenes, that had of yore  
 Their scepters stretcht from East to Westerne shore,  
 And all the world in their subiection held;  
 Till that infernall feend with foule prore  
 Forwasted all their land, and them expeld:  
 Whom to auenge, she had this Knight from far compeld.

## 3.6 Spenser’s works

Spenser’s poetic production also includes: *The Shepheardes Calender*, *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, *Amoretti*, *Epithalamion*.

*The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) is composed of twelve eclogues (pastoral poems), one for each month of the year, in the form of dialogues among shepherds. The model of this work is Virgil’s *Bucolice*, but the pastoral world is

only an allegory of the court; the shepherds are indeed very erudite and every eclogue consists of a sophisticated dialogue about the virtues and vices of the world. The fourth eclogue, April, is dedicated to Elysa (Queen Elisabeth), “the queen of shepherds”. The first and last eclogues are not dialogues, but are in the form complaints by **Colin Clout**, a character embodying the author himself. A meta-poetic discourse is also present, as one eclogue is a defence of poetry and a complaint for the contempt in which poetry is held, advocating at the same time the coming of a new poet able to renew English poetry, by combining the past and present cultural traditions of England with the European (above all Italian and French) cultures.

***Colin Clouts Come Home Again*** (1591) is an allegorical pastoral poem dedicated to **Sir Walter Ralegh** “in part payment of the infinite debt in which I acknowledge myself bound unto you...”. It describes in allegorical form how Ralegh visited Spenser in Ireland (where Spenser was secretary to prominent political men and about whose political state he wrote ***View of the Present State of Ireland***), and induced him to come to England “his Cynthia [Queen Elizabeth] to see”. The poem first describes the sea voyage; then it glorifies the queen and her court, attacking at the same time the court intrigues; the ending follows the love poetry tradition with a tribute to ‘Rosalind’ in spite of her cruelty to the poet.

***Amoretti*** (1595) is a collection of 89 sonnets dedicated to Spenser’s wife-to-be **Elizabeth Boyle**. The homonymy of her name with that of the Queen enables the poet to play with the two figures of women. Yet Spenser’s sonnets lack the ironic tone which characterises, for instance, **Sydney’s** ***Astrophil and Stella***, even though the love theme is analysed from an unusual perspective, which includes many

other corollary aspects. These sonnets represent the only case in the Elizabethan sonnet tradition of a collection of love poems about a joyful love happily ending in marriage.

***Epithalamion*** (1595) is a splendid hymn in which the poet celebrates his wedding with **Elizabeth Boyle** in 1594 and can be seen as a happy conclusion to the courtship of ***Amoretti*** (both *Epithalamion* and the *Amoretti* were printed together in 1595). The Greek etymology of the word *Epithalamion* (“upon the bride-chamber”) refers to a ‘marriage song’, which was sung outside the bridal chamber and which here turns into a poem made up of 24 stanzas, celebrating love and marriage. The encounter of husband and wife becomes an allegory of the ideal encounter between the philosopher and Knowledge/Truth.



## 4. English humanism and the sixteenth century religious prose.

### The New Learning

#### 4.1 Humanism and the New Learning

Humanism represented a fundamental turning point for European culture between the end of the 14th and 15th centuries, reaching England at the end of the 14th century. It was important for several reasons: the scholarly approach, which led to the recovery and the editing of accurate texts of the classics; the stylistic level, concerned with classical rhetoric and literary criticism and their application to an improved vernacular literature; the ethical drive, which tended to convey the highest ideals of Greek and Roman thought; above all, humanism allowed the replacement of a theocentric universe by one based on man and his potentialities, underlining the importance of human life and human values.

A close knowledge of classical Greek and of **Plato's** philosophy had come to be particularly esteemed as a means of countering the reductive Aristotelian scholasticism, which had dominated the curricula of medieval universities and seminaries. The study of ancient Greek literature, philosophy, and science had been introduced to England in the 1490s by the priest-scholars **William Grocyn** (1449-1519) and **Thomas Linacre** (?1460-1524), who had broadened their conventional Oxford education by studying Greek in humanist circles in Italy, under the Platonist scholar, **Angelo Poliziano** (1454-1494). When in 1516 **Richard Fox**, Bishop of Winchester, founded Corpus Christi College at Oxford, he made special provision for a lectureship in Greek as a complement to the study of Latin and Divinity. A desire to reform the youth's

secular education according to the principles of the new learning also laid behind the foundation of St Paul's School in London by the Cathedral's Dean, **John Colet** (1466-1519). The English disciples of the Florentine humanists were Platonists and saw the advance of Greek studies as a means of purging both the textual and the spiritual corruption of the Middle Ages. Moreover, the editing and translating into Latin of Greek scientific works provided the bridge between Humanism and science in the Renaissance. Linacre translated several of the Greek writings of **Galen** into polished Latin and bound his name to the foundation of the Royal College of Physicians in London. His interest in linguistic scholarship is evidenced by several monographs on Latin grammar, one of which was first written in English for the use of Princess Mary.

## 4.2 Erasmus

The well-known Dutch scholar, **Desiderius Erasmus** (1466-1536), born at Rotterdam, paid extended visits to England in 1499 and in 1509-1514, and absorbed the Platonic enthusiasm of the English humanists, for whom he had great admiration; as he writes in a letter: "When I listen to my friend Colet, I seem to be listening to Plato himself. Who does not admire in Grocyn the perfection of his training? What can be more acute, more profound, or more refined, than the judgment of Linacre? What has nature ever fashioned softer, or sweeter, or pleasanter than the disposition of Thomas More?" (5 December 1499). Erasmus was welcomed by the great scholars of the day, and was induced to lecture at Cambridge on Greek from 1511 to 1514. He was particularly taken with the mind, character and company of a younger man, Thomas More; indeed, Erasmus became a close friend of More's to whom he dedicated his most famous book, ***Praise to Folly*** (the Latin title was ***Moriae Encomium***, 1511, the word 'moriae', 'folly', being also a wordplay on More's name), a satire written at the suggestion of Sir Thomas More, principally directed against theologians and Church dignitaries.



The contrast between the public careers of Erasmus and More, both acknowledged as renowned European intellectuals in the 1520s, can partly represent and explain the crisis in humanist thought. They both chose public life (the *vita activa*), refusing the passivity of the *vita contemplativa*; however, Erasmus believed that the world could be best improved by writing, by education, and by the scholar's freedom of action, rather than by a direct involvement in state politics, whereas for More the highest duty of a learned man was to serve his king.

### 4.3 Thomas More

Sir **Thomas More** (1478-1535), born in London, was the son of a prominent lawyer, and studied at Oxford, where Linacre and Grocyn were his teachers, and at the Inns of Court. He was called to the bar, where he was brilliantly successful, and devoted his leisure to literature, becoming intimate with Colet and Erasmus. He entered Parliament in 1504, but he was deeply torn between the appeal of a life of ascetic devotion and an active role in public affairs. After having translated with his friend Erasmus a number of **Luciano's** *Dialogues* and *The Life of Johan Picus Earle of Myrandula* (1505), a biography of the leading Platonist, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), Thomas More wrote *Utopia*, published in Louvain in 1516 under Erasmus's supervision, his masterpiece and chief literary contribution as a humanist, written in Latin and translated into English by **Ralph Robinson** only in 1551.

More believed in the possibility of combining Humanism and Christianity, so he was recruited by King **Henry VIII** (1516). His rise was really spectacular: first master of requests, privy councillor, speaker of the House of Commons, he finally succeeded **Wolsey** as Lord Chancellor (1529), the most important public office under the crown, but at the same time he started to lose his strength as a reformer when **Martin Luther** attacked the principle of papal indulgences by nailing his famous **95 Theses** to the door of the church at Wittenberg (1517).

At about the same time in which he wrote *Utopia*, More undertook the writing of his historical masterpiece, *The History of King Richard III*, which exists in two versions, Latin and English, and was probably written about 1517-18. Although it was never finished, it established the major traits for the characterization of the last Yorkist king, influenced the chroniclers **Edward Hall** (1548) and **Richard Grafton** (1568-1569), and passed almost unaltered into **Holinshed's Chronicle** (planned in 1577), thus coming down to **Shakespeare**, whose *Richard III* (1597) fixed the portrait of Richard as a deformed, malicious, hypocritical villain.

Among More's later works, the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1528), his first controversial book in English, disputes Luther's ideas, defending the orthodox Roman Catholic Church doctrines, and attacking, above all, William Tyndale's theological works. England was becoming a Protestant country, but More defended the Pope's authority. When he was required to swear fidelity to the new *Act of Succession and Supremacy* (1534), to admit the justice of the king's divorce from Queen **Catherine** and his marriage with **Anne Boleyn**, and to acknowledge the king's role as the supreme Head of the English Church, he refused to take any oath that should question the Pope's supremacy, and was therefore imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he wrote his last works, *Dialogue of Comfort upon Tribulations* and *Treatise to Receive the Blessed Body of Our Lord*. Thomas More was executed for high treason in 1535.

#### 4.4 *Utopia*

*Utopia* (a word from Greek that can mean "no place" or "good place"), initially set in the semi-autonomous cities of the Netherlands, speculates about a form of government alien to the majority of European states in the early 16th century; indeed, its main interest is in its political criticism, and it is addressed to a highly educated Renaissance elite.

More was probably influenced by **Plato's *Republic***, but he was also fascinated by the accounts of **Amerigo Vespucci's** recent explorations (1501-02). The **first book** of *Utopia* was written second, when More returned to England from his embassy to Flanders (1515), and debates the classic dilemma of the humanist scholar, whether to devote oneself to public affairs and the service of one's king, or to pursue philosophic wisdom. The major aim of this book is to show the contrast between a rationally ordered state, such as the far-off island commonwealth of the Utopians described in the second book, and the Europe of More's day where the main goal was self-enrichment, from kings downwards: kings fought with each other to conquer new territories, extorted money from their subjects, who, in turn, oppressed those who were subject to them, and so on in a chain of violence and aggression. More, however, was no radical reformer as his view of society was of an ordered hierarchy; what he hoped could be improved was the keeping of that social order in its best and fairest form.

**Book 2** of *Utopia* was written first and presents the tale of a traveller, Raphael Hythlodæus, who describes the voyages that he made after he had parted with his commander Amerigo Vespucci, giving details of the laws and customs of an imagined society, the island of Utopia in some unknown ocean of the New World, where all is ordered according to the dictates of reason and of nature. The island which Hythlodæus visits and describes is a decentralized kingdom ruled by a shadowy, elected monarch who governs with the consent of a council of the great and good. Personal poverty, money, and vice have been abolished and the causes of crime, ambition, and political conflict have been eliminated. The island has several religions, all of them officially tolerated and dominated by the principle of a benevolent Supreme Being. There is a proto-Welfare State in which the old are honoured and the young are taught to be conformist and respectful; they all wear uniforms and meals are served in communal canteens. In Utopia the working day is but six hours long, and "a great multitude of every sort of people, both men and women, go to hear lectures", particularly

on Greek learning. Utopia appears as a society of improbable virtue, controlled by a self-perpetuating oligarchy; it is a place that has abolished original sin, the prospect of redemption, but also the idea of history: nothing can change because its ideology implies that it has fulfilled all human aspirations.

In the passage from **Book 1, “Utopian Communism”**, More presents a dialogue between the traveller and himself:

That is it which I meant (quoth he) when I said phylosophy had no place among kings.

Indeed (quoth I) this school phylosophy hath not, which thinketh all things meet for every place. But there is another phylosophy more civil, which knoweth, as ye would say, her own stage, and thereafter ordering and behaving herself in the play that she hath in hand, playeth her part accordingly with comeliness, uttering nothing out of due order and fashion. And this is the phylosophy that you must use. Or else whiles a comedy of Plautus is playing, and the vile bondmen scoffing and trifling among themselves, if you should suddenly come upon the stage in a phylosopher's apparel, and rehearse out of Octavia the place wherein Seneca disputeth with Nero: had it not been better for you to have played the dumb person, than by rehearsing that, which served neither for the time nor place, to have made such a tragical comedy or gillimaufry? For by bringing in other stuff that nothing appertaineth to the present matter you must needs mar and pervert the play that is in hand, though the stuff that you bring be much better. What part soever you have taken upon you, play that as well as you can and make the best of it: and do not therefore disturb and bring out of order the whole matter, because that another, which is merrier, and better, cometh to your remembrance. So the case standeth in a commonwealth, and so it is in the consultations of kings and princes. If evil opinions and naughty persuasions cannot be utterly and quite plucked out of their hearts, if you cannot, even as you wuold, remedy vices, which use and custom hath confirmed: yet for this cause you must not leave and forsake the commonwealth: you must not forsake the ship in a tempest, because you cannot rule and keep down the winds. No, nor you must not labour to drive into their heads

new and strange informations, which you know well shall be nothing regarded with them that be of clean contrary minds. But you must with a crafty wile and a subtle train study and endeavour yourself, as much as in you lieth, to handle the matter wittily and handsomely for the purpose, and that which you cannot turn to good, so to order it that it be not very bad. For it is not possible for all things to be well, unless all men were good. Which I think will not be yet this good many years. [...]

## 4.5 Religious prose

English prose developed in connection with religious debate. The Reformers of the English Church placed a consistent stress on the use of the vernacular in worship and on the importance of the Holy Scriptures in a scholarly translation which freed them from the distortions and inaccuracies of the Latin Vulgate. The twenty-fourth of Elizabeth's Articles of Religion insisted that "it is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church" that services should be conducted "in a tongue not understood of the people". Before the principle of a vernacular liturgy had been established, it was already felt that there was a need for an English Bible translated directly from its Hebrew and Greek originals.

When all parish priests were instructed to provide and display an English Bible in their churches in 1538, the text sponsored by the Archbishop **Thomas Cranmer** was the ***Great Bible***, a revision of the work of several distinct translators, the most important of whom was **William Tyndale** (?1494-1536). He studied at Oxford and Cambridge, and preached in Gloucestershire where he became involved in disputes with the clergy. He went to London in 1523 with the project of translating the Scriptures into the vernacular, but having failed to gain official support for his work, he went to Hamburg, in Germany,

as an exile (1524) in order to realise his project. He visited Martin Luther at Wittenberg, became a Lutheran follower, and commenced printing his translation of the ***New Testament*** at Cologne in 1525. When copies of his translation were introduced into England a year later, the Bishop of London, **Tunstall**, made desperate attempts both to suppress and to discredit the book as a Lutheran infection. Tyndale continued his translations in Antwerp (the ***Pentateuch***, the ***Books of Jonah, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles***), and became an active pamphleteer (Sir Thomas More entered into a pamphlet war with Tyndale with his ***Dialogue Concerning Heresies***). He defended the sole authority of the Scriptures in the Church and of the King in the State, thus earning the approval of Henry VIII, which he subsequently lost by opposing the king's divorce; indeed, he was arrested for heresy in 1535 and executed as a heretic by strangling and burning near Brussels in 1536.

Translated not from Latin, but from the original Greek, Tyndale's ***New Testament*** presents a direct, simple, and light English language; new English words were coined from Hebrew ('scapegoat', 'passover'), and key words were translated from Greek ('ekklesia' and 'presbyteros' were rendered as 'congregation' rather than 'church' and 'senior' rather than 'priest' in order to formulate a new religious terminology and distinguish the modern ecclesiastical hierarchy from the past). Tyndale expressed a steady confidence in the grace of the English language in ***The Obedience of a Christen Man*** (1528), asserting that both Hebrew and Greek agreed more with English than with Latin, and that English was a fit vehicle to communicate the word of God.

Tyndale's work was taken as a model and a base for the later English texts: the first complete ***English Bible***, based on Tyndale's translation and published by Miles Coverdale in 1535, had seven revised editions up to 1541; the so-called ***Geneva Bible*** (1557) was prepared by Protestant exiles

during the reign of Mary, Coverdale being one of them, and the entire Bible was issued in 1560 with a dedication to Queen Elizabeth; the ***Bishops' Bible*** (1568), prepared by a group of ecclesiastical dignitaries, was the official Bible for church reading during most of Queen Elizabeth's reign; James I's ***Authorized Version*** (1611) was prepared by fifty-four scholars appointed by the king and divided in six groups (two meeting in Westminster, two in Cambridge, and two in Oxford) with the instruction to be conservative. James's Bible is undoubtedly superior to the previous versions, and no later translation has seriously challenged its prestige.

#### 4.6 The second generation of English humanists

It can be observed that the Reformation and humanism meet in the translation of the English Bible, the former providing the religious impulse, the latter the philological tools. King Henry VIII was, in a self-consciously political way, a patron of literature, and he was recognized and honoured in the formal dedications to him of reprinted English classics, of geographical and topographical treatises, or works of new learning, such as Thomas Elyot's pioneer ***Latin-English Dictionary*** (1538).

#### 4.7 Thomas Elyot

Sir **Thomas Elyot** (1490-1546) belonged to the second generation of English humanists and lived at the court of Henry VIII, to whom he dedicated his most famous and influential work, ***The Book Named the Governour*** (1531), a treatise on education and politics, which displays the influence at this time of the classics, and Plato in particular, and illustrates the evolution of English prose. This volume represents an important English contribution to the abundant Renaissance literature on education for members of the ruling class, aiming

at the training of the leaders of the nation through the study particularly of ancient history and philosophy on the principle that the common good of the realm depended on the proper practical, intellectual, and aesthetic education of a male upper class. Elyot's book shows a profound belief in the importance of order or degree, and does not dispute social order and hierarchies; in fact, according to Elyot, the kingdom has to be organized around the figure of a well-educated prince who has to be guided above all by wisdom, rather than by personal will and ambition, and who represents the principle of the state and the assurance of peace and justice. Indeed, Elyot's treatise is addressed to a court and a nobility who were still influenced by Arthurian codes of chivalry and can be considered as a summary of the broad humanist ideal of aristocratic cultivation. The aristocrats placed in authority by the king should truly be "noble wits", trained for public service and capable of advancing the public good. Elyot catalogues examples of well-educated rulers of the past and describes their education: although his stress is on the importance of a modern boy's grasp of the grammar of classical languages and of rhetoric, history, cosmography, and philosophy, Elyot shows an equal interest in the acquisition of skills in drawing, sculpture, swimming, riding, hunting, music and dancing.

Elyot was aware that he was writing in and for an age which particularly appreciated scholarly novelty; he was also aware of his wide learning and of the possibility he had to enrich his native tongue; indeed, he employed English exclusively in his writing with the conscious purpose to improve the vernacular. Elyot, like Hoby and Ascham, chose to write in English for his countrymen (and not in Latin) in order to make humanism known in England in the hope that its influence would contribute to construct a higher level of culture and consequently make England a leading nation in Europe. Indeed, it is important to remember that, having achieved an internal political stability with the Tudor dynasty, as well as an external recognition in the world economy as one of the leading countries due to the great development of trade and



commerce, and having achieved also a religious autonomy after Henry VIII's reformation, England needed to establish its own cultural identity, a process which started with the re-construction of the English language as a language of art and literature. Up to that point literary works were written in Latin and no significant piece of literature in English had been produced since **Chaucer** and his *Canterbury Tales* about two centuries earlier. 'Culture' was imported from France and above all from Italy. Imitation of classic languages and above all the translation of Italian works become the major means to develop English as a literary language and to re-establish its quality, both in poetry and prose. Sir Thomas Elyot tries to give English a linguistic solidity by imitating Latin and Greek syntax in his prose works; moreover, he strengthens the expressive possibilities of English by acknowledging the need to borrow 'learned words' from Latin in order to make up for what he saw as the "insufficiency of our own language". Elyot enriched the English language, often introducing a Latin word along with an English equivalent or explanation in order to allow its gradual assimilation; a clear example of this method is in a passage from *Book I*, when he uses the word 'maturity' declaring: "I am constrained to usurp a Latin word, calling it maturity: which word, though it be strange and dark, [...] the name once brought into custom, shall be facile to understand as other words late coming out of Italy and France [...]".

#### 4.8 Thomas Hoby

Sir **Thomas Hoby** (1530-1566) contributed to the development of the English language with his translation of *Il Cortegiano* (1513) written by **Baldassarre Castiglione** (1478-1529), one of the most influential works of the Italian Renaissance which provided a model for the perfect courtier; composed of four books, in prose dialogue form, it is a record of the discussions of four successive evenings by a group of cultured men at the court of Urbino, defining all the qualifications of

the ideal courtier, ethical and intellectual, as well as military, sporting, and social: the first book is on the education of a perfect courtier; the second on his social experiences and behaviour, and on the accomplishments that he ought to cultivate; the third on the perfection of the noblewoman; the fourth book on the nature of love and its power to ennoble, a favourite topic of philosophic discourse in the Renaissance. Hoby, educated at Cambridge, completed his education travelling in Germany, France and Italy where he came across Castiglione's book, about forty years after its composition.

Hoby's translation reveals his enthusiasm for Italy as well as his learning and knowledge of languages. His translation, complete by 1554, was not published until 1561, and had much influence on the literature of England, particularly on Surrey, Wyatt, Sidney, and Spenser.

It is the first translation of a secular work which has been considered a masterpiece of English prose. It was very popular (four editions) and meant for all readers, not only princes, proposing models of behaviour. Hoby was less concerned than Elyot to naturalise words from other languages and chose 'pure English' thus using a rather simple prose style which to a certain extent became a sort of model for English prose writing.

## 4.9 Roger Ascham

A concern for the national language and the public education of the prince appears also in Roger Ascham's educational treatise, *The Schoolmaster* (written in 1563, and published posthumously in 1570). **Roger Ascham** (1515-1568) was one of the most important humanists, and in a sense the last one. Educated at Cambridge, where he distinguished himself in classics and became Greek reader in 1538, in 1548 he was appointed tutor of Princess Elizabeth and ten years later he became secretary of Queen Elizabeth I. A scholar imbued with liberal humanist concepts and with the experimental theology of the Reformation, Ascham strongly believed in the study of Greek and Latin

classics, not merely for erudition and aesthetic pleasure but for guidance in moral values and in political activity, but he also indicated a nationalistic turning point for humanist English education. His major concern was, as for his fellow humanists, to strengthen his native country in all the arts of peace and defence, providing men properly educated to serve and govern England so as to keep her at the head of European nations.

In *The Schoolmaster*, a proposal for a more humane system of education, he dealt with the education of boys of position at school, of which he criticised the over-strict discipline, advocating gentleness and patience, and asking that “goodness of nature be joined to the wisdom of the teacher, in leading young wits into a right and plain way of learning” so that “children kept up in God’s fear and governed by his grace, may most easily be brought well to serve God and their country, both by virtue and wisdom”. Indeed, *The Schoolmaster* is to be considered as a behaviour pattern for young people, in which the ideals of the Renaissance and the Reformation were combined to develop a dignified and well-ordered character, based on “truth in religion, honesty of living, and right order in learning”.

Ascham discusses the practical details of teaching, particularly the method of teaching Latin, revealing a strictly humanist attitude in that he advocates the imitation of select classical authors for the proper moulding of style; as to the young men’s education after leaving school, he points out the dangers of idleness in life at court and of Italian travel, denouncing the immorality of the “Italianate Englishman” and the “enchantments of Circe, brought out of Italy to mar men’s manners in England”; indeed, although he admires Italian culture and the Italian language, he worries about the corruption of Roman religion and Venetian moral values:

But I am afraid that overmany of our travelers into Italy do not eschew the way to Circe’s court but go and ride and run and fly

thither; they make great haste to come to her; they make great suit to serve her; yea, I could point out some with my finger that never had gone out of England but only to serve Circe in Italy. [...] If you think we judge amiss and write too sore against you, hear what the Italian saith of the Englishman, what the master reporteth of the scholar, who uttereth plainly what is taught by him and what is learned by you, saying *Inglese italianato è un diavolo incarnato*; that is to say, "You remain man in shape and fashion but become devils in life and condition". This is not the opinion of one for some private spite but the judgment of all in a common proverb which riseth of that learning and those manners which you gather in Italy [...] And now choose you, you Italian Englishmen, whether you will be angry with us for calling you monsters, or with the Italians for calling you devils, or else with your own selves, that take so much pains and go so far to make yourselves both. If some yet do not well understand what is an Englishman Italianated, I will plainly tell him: he that by living and traveling in Italy bringeth home into England out of Italy the religion, the learning, the policy, the experience, the manners of Italy. That is to say, for religion, papistry or worse; for learning, less, commonly, than they carried out with them; for policy, a factious heart, a discoursing head, a mind to meddle in all men's matters; for experience, plenty of new mischiefs never known in England before; for manners, variety of vanities and of filthy living. These be the enchantments of Circe brought out of Italy to mar men's manners in England: much by example of ill life but more by precepts of fond books, of late translated out of Italian into English, sold in every shop in London, commended by honest titles the sooner to corrupt honest manners, dedicated overboldly to virtuous and honorable personages, the easilier to beguile simple and innocent wits. [...]

As he believed that it was no longer necessary to go to Italy, so, though a great admirer of Cicero, he did not think it was necessary to write in Latin and holds it better to "have written this English matter in the English tongue for English men". His prose style has the plainness of colloquial speech, a studied plainness deriving from his belief in the native

strength of the English language. Unlike Elyot, he was no great cultivator of Latinate neologisms and chose to discuss the advantages of a classical education in plain and simple English in order to facilitate his readers's understanding.

Ascham also wrote a treatise in English in dialogue form, ***Toxophilus*** (1545), dedicated to the "Gentlemen of England", in praise of archery with the longbow (a traditional English weapon used for the victory at Agincourt), urging the importance of physical training in education; in the dedication of this dialogue he half apologised for, and half defended, his use of the English language explaining that not all readers were familiar with Latin and Greek whereas the vernacular, although less elegant, could be a better medium. Ascham, however, tries to strengthen and enrich his language by using classical models, and along with Elyot and Hoby, he can be considered one of the major contributors to the construction and the use of English in prose writing as a language having the same literary status as the classical languages.



## 5. Sixteenth century prose fiction

### 5.1 Prose types

The second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the flourishing of a great amount of prose fiction derived from the deliberate attempt to give artistic shape and status to prose. Different trends can be distinguished in this genre: in addition to religious and pedagogical prose, translations and humanistic treatises, vernacular fiction appears in new patterns of writing, such as romances, euphuistic prose, popular fiction, and travel writing.

### 5.2 Sir Philip Sidney and pastoral romance

*The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* by **Sir Philip Sidney** (1554-1586) is the most popular text in the genre of pastoral romance in prose which exhibits the sophistication typical of much courtly Elizabethan prose fiction. Sidney meant this work as an entertainment for his sister Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, and wrote two versions: the so-called **Old Arcadia**, written around the years 1577-80 (which was not published until the twentieth century), and a version known as the **New Arcadia** (1581-84) published posthumously in 1590. This fragmentary, unfinished draft was later published in 1593 by Sidney's sister from the original manuscript.

**Arcadia**, a prose romance which includes a pastoral eclogue at the end of each book, is characterised by a blending of prose and verse. The scene is laid in Arcadia, with its flowery meads, where "shepherd boys pipe as tho' they would never

be old". The love-theme is located in a pastoral environment presented as an ideal place, whose artificiality serves to underline vices and virtues of the real world. Rural life, as usual in this genre, is opposed to the world of the Court but characters are far from being realistic portrayals of shepherds as they are all learned and erudite. Sidney's *Arcadia* is modelled on Jacopo Sannazaro's *Arcadia*, a set of Italian verse eclogues structured in a prose narrative, which suggested Sidney's conception of a pastoral setting amidst idyllic and idealised landscapes. It is also inspired by ancient and medieval sources, such as Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* which offered an account of the Greek world through adventurous tales against a pastoral background characterised by stories of tournaments, disguises, political treacheries, kidnappings, battles, and rapes. Another source was the 15<sup>th</sup> century "knight-errantry tale" of Spanish origin, *Amadis of Gaul*, which suggested to Sidney those chivalric norms typical of medieval romances.

**Old Arcadia** (1577-80), in five books, is structured on a double plot and narrates the story of Pyrocles and Musidorus, son and nephew of the king of Macedon, valiant knights and close friends, who are wrecked and, rescued by shepherds, are carried to Arcadia, whose king, Basilius, in consequence of an oracle, has retired into a forest with his young wife and his two beautiful daughters. The two young princes fall in love with Basilius' daughters, and, in order to approach the king's family, they disguise themselves as a shepherd and a shepherdess, provoking thereby a series of awkward and complex plots: the king falls in love with the seeming shepherdess, while his queen is attracted by the man whom she recognises under his disguise. The reign of Arcadia goes through a period of turmoil which is eventually solved by Evarco, the perfect king of Macedon. The ideal world of Arcadia also represents a sort of allegorical parody of Elizabeth's court and of the love code of behaviour that was followed by the Queen's courtiers.



*New Arcadia* (1581-4) is a totally different romance. Presumably, Sidney was impelled to rewrite the *Arcadia* by the classical and neo-classical studies that he made for his *Defense of Poesy* and it can therefore be seen as an attempt to turn a romance into a prose epic characterised by an elevated style; indeed, though it keeps the same characters, the humoristic tone is replaced by a more serious and philosophical one and the narrative structure is complicated by a remarkable number of characters and their different stories which interweave with those of the princes, resulting in a complex and often obscure general plot. Musidorus and Pyrocles acquire a heroic status which they do not have in the *Old Arcadia* and also the other characters as well as the action are not used to present a parody of politics and customs of Sydney's time; on the contrary, they become emblems of how that world should be, and the attempt to discuss politics seriously and offer a moral lesson is evident. The ethical and didactic dimension is further strengthened in the second version where the values of love, friendship, virtue, and loyalty triumph over corruption, frailty and deception. In a way similar to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Sidney's *Arcadia* offers a synthesis of Christian, Platonic and Renaissance ideals whose ultimate aim is to educate the perfect gentleman and courtier "through a virtuous and noble discipline".

### 5.3 John Lyly and Euphuistic narrative

A very different display of narrative sophistication is evident in *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and its sequel *Euphues and his England* (1580) written by John Lyly (1554-1606). Both works reflect the vogue of much Renaissance prose fiction to provide a courtly, learned and rhetorical "divertissement fit for all gentlemen to read, and most necessary to remember". The word Euphues, the name of the book's hero, is Greek and means "well-endowed with natural gifts, both physical and intellectual". The title was probably suggested to Lyly by Roger Ascham, who, in his *Schoolmaster*, glosses the

term as follows: “*Euphues* is he that is apt by goodness of wit, and appliable by readiness of will, to learning, having all other qualities of the mind and parts of the body that must another day serve learning [...] excellence in learning [...] joined with a comely personage is a marvellous jewel in the world”. *Euphues*, then, is the model of a young man attractive in appearance, and possessing the mental qualities most calculated to please. The subtitle, *Anatomy of Wit*, stands for something like “analysis of the mental faculties”, and accounts for the fact that the term “anatomy” was very common in titles during the last decades of 16<sup>th</sup> century prose, becoming a keyword in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Examples are: Stubbes’ *The Anatomie of Abuses*, 1583; Greene’s *Arbasto: The Anatomie of Fortune*, 1584; Nashe’s *The Anatomie of Absurditie*, 1588; Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621. Lyly’s use of the word “wit” in the book refers mainly to intellectual capacity, but also it becomes equivalent to worldly curiosity and an unholy desire of knowledge, standing for the dangerous and insidious tendencies of the Renaissance to contrast the strict religious ideas of the Reformation.

However, it was the manner rather than the matter which gave to *Euphues* its prominence and popularity; indeed, Lyly was more interested in the formal aspect of a highly artificial and elaborate style than in content. Lyly’s prose style came to be defined Euphuism, indicating a peculiar mode of speaking and writing that became a vogue in 16th century fiction. Euphuistic style is characterised by an elaborate sentence structure based on parallel figures from the ancient rhetorics and a wealth of ornament including proverbs, incidents from history and poetry, proverbs, and similes. The euphuistic sentence is based on balanced antithesis and follows three major structural principles: phrases of equal length that appear in succession; key verbal elements used in successive sentences; the correspondence of sounds and syllables.

Unlike the bombastic and complex style, the plot of *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* is extremely simple: the hero, *Euphues*, is an affluent young man of outstanding intellectual

ability who arrives in Naples from the university of Athens and there he makes friends with a wealthy Italian, Philautus, who introduces him to his fiancée Lucilla. Euphues falls in love with her and his passion leads him to betray his friendship. The two young men exchange sarcastic letters but when after a short time Euphues is forsaken for a more attractive suitor, their friendship is recovered; in the end Euphues returns to Athens to follow a pious life, while Philautus remains in Naples to lead a life of pleasures. The narrative is but half the work and is followed by various pieces of writing: a long epistolary essay against love, a paraphrase of Plutarch's tract on the education of children, a controversial dialogue between Euphues and a converted atheist, and finally a set of rhetorical letters written by Euphues to his friends.

The second part, *Euphues and his England*, has a little more coherence and a still more artful style. Euphues and Philautus embark at Naples, and after eight weeks land at Dover. They visit Canterbury and London, meeting a number of characters who on the one hand allow the development of a love story concerning Philautus, on the other discuss Queen Elizabeth's court, illustrating the laws of monarchy. The reference to high-society characters and to contemporary London explains the enthusiasm with which this second volume was met.

The introductory passage of *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* opens with the presentation of Euphues, an educated young Athenian "of so comely a personage [...] of more wit than wealth, and yet of more wealth than wisdom", endowed with "a sharp capacity of mind" who, wishing to see the world, visits Naples. The representation of the Neapolitan setting as a frivolous and dissolute place, as "a place of more pleasure than profit, and yet more profit than pity", tends to express a sharp criticism of the moral state of Italian society; indeed, one main object of the book is to warn young men against possible risks in travelling in Italy:

There dwelt in Athens a young gentleman of great patrimony, and of so comely a personage, that it was doubted whether he were more bound to Nature for the lineaments of his

person, or to Fortune for the increase of his possessions. But Nature impatient of comparisons, and as it were disdaining a companion or copartner in her working, added to this comeliness of his body such a sharp capacity of mind, that not only she proved Fortune counterfeit, but was half of that opinion that she herself was only current. [...] this Euphues, whose wit being like wax apt to receive any impression, and having the bridle in his own hands, either to use the rein or the spur, disdaining counsel, leaving his country, loathing his old acquaintance, thought either by wit to obtain some conquest, or by shame to abide some conflict, and leaving the rule of reason, rashly ran unto destruction. [...]

It happened this young imp to arrive at *Naples* (a place of more pleasure than profit, and yet of more profit than piety) the very walls and windows whereof shewed it rather to be the Tabernacle of *Venus*, than the Temple of *Vesta*. There was all things necessary and in readiness that might either allure the mind to lust, or entice the heart to folly, a court more meet for an *Atheist*, than for one of *Athens*, for *Ovid* than for *Aristotle*, for a graceless lover than for a godly liver: more fitter for *Paris* than *Hector*, and meeter for *Flora* than *Diana*.

## 5.4 Robert Greene

The popularity of Lyly's *Euphues* in the ten years that followed its publication greatly influenced prose narrative and the euphuistic style is particularly evident in the first narrative prose works by **Robert Greene** (1558-1592) who can be considered one of the most representative authors in the genre of pastoral romance. Greene's works, *Pandosto* (1588) and *Menaphon* (1589), show the influence, if not of Sidney's yet unprinted *Arcadia*, of the Greek romances from which the *Arcadia* drew, successfully blending elements of adventure, riddles, intrigue, disguise, bad fortune and happy ending; both romances contrast tragic and comic elements, the courtly and the bucolic. *Pandosto* holds a special interest in that it provided Shakespeare with the plot of *The Winter's Tale*, one of his

dramatic romances. Later Greene distanced himself from the euphuistic fashion, turning towards more realistic writings and was one of the first to exploit in writing the social unrest of the time in his well-known ***Cony-Catching Pamphlets*** (1591-92) in three parts, dedicated “to the young gentlemen, merchants, apprentices, farmers, and plain countrymen”, warning them against tricksters, and prostitutes in a vivid, often comic, and at times moving style. While describing the methods of rogues and impostors, Greene throws light on the low life of the time.

## 5.5 Thomas Lodge

The most successful of Greene’s imitators in the romantic tale was **Thomas Lodge** (1558-1625). His best pastoral romance ***Rosalynde. Euphues Golden Legacy*** (1590), though referring to Lyly in the title, shows a greater debt to Greene’s romance style; it also shows the traces of Sidney’s influence: Arden, the place where the characters withdraw, is an idealised refuge, an untroubled Arcadia peopled by shepherds and untouched by the cruelties and conflicts of the external world.

From the formal point of view, prose is enriched by songs, sonnets and eclogues as is usual in this genre. Like Greene’s *Pandosto*, also *Rosalynde* was chosen by Shakespeare as a source of one of his best comedies, *As You Like It*.

## 5.6 Thomas Nashe and picaresque narrative

The fiction of **Thomas Nashe** (1567-1601) radically breaks with the Euphuistic tradition which was mainly the expression of an aristocratic elite. Nashe writes in plain prose, and indeed, he looked at the stylistic artifices of the period with a critical and scornful eye. His major narrative work, ***The Unfortunate Traveller, or the Life of Jack Wilton*** (1594, dedicated in its first edition to the Earl of Southampton), is quite different

from the excessively poetic character of Sidney's prose, as well as from the affected and over-elaborate mannerism of Lyly's. It is the earliest picaresque romance in English and can be considered as the first example of realistic popular fiction. The term "picaresque" derives from Spanish (*pícaro* = rogue) and defines a kind of realistic fiction in which the hero is usually a scoundrel of low birth who faces a lot of adventures and misfortunes. Though still primitive in its structure, its polemical prose style explores the potential of lexical novelty using different ways of expression according to the different social conditions and circumstances in which the various characters find themselves; as in many other prose works and pamphlets, here Nashe conveys his social and political criticism, presenting the limits and weaknesses of the ruling class.

Inspired by the Spanish rogue-novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* (published anonymously, in 1554), *The Unfortunate Traveller* relates the lively adventures of the rogue-hero Jack Wilton, an English page who lives by his wits, playing tricks, and often getting whipped; he wanders abroad where he comes into contact with many levels of society, meets a number of well-known historical characters, and witnesses some major historical events. Wilton's account of his adventures portrays the period of Henry VIII's reign during the wars against the French. The protagonist travels around Europe visiting Münster, which the anabaptists are holding against the emperor, and sees John of Leyden hanged. Then, in the service of the earl of Surrey, the lover of the Fair Geraldine, he moves to Italy; during their travels they meet Erasmus and Sir Thomas More, and Pietro Aretino, and they also hear Luther disputing at Wittenberg. In Venice, Jack passes himself off as the Earl of Surrey and runs away with an Italian courtesan; he is discovered by the true earl in Florence, where the latter defeats all comers in a tournament in honour of the Fair Geraldine. The page then moves on alone to Rome, where he remains for a short period during an outbreak of the plague. Here, turning from lighter themes, he depicts scenes of violence and tragedy, rapes, murders, tortures, and executions. Depressed by the macabre horrors he

has seen, he finally leaves the “Sodom of Italy” converted to a better way of life, returns to his own country, and marries his courtesan. The whole story is told with much spirit and wit, and presents a vivid pictorial quality, a good deal of humour, and a sometimes excessive concern for detail in its descriptions of both fictitious/realistic events and pseudo-historical ones. As Jack is the narrator, events are told not as objective facts that he relates, but through his subjective perspective and feelings.

The scene opens in the camp before Tournay and Térouanne, besieged by Henry VIII, in 1513, where Jack introduces himself as “a certain kind of appendix or page, belonging or appertaining in or unto the confines of the English court,” with more creditors than money; Jack, in short, is like a picaro of Spanish extraction, and lives to enjoy himself, as he declares: “Amongst this chaff was I winnowing my wits to live merrily.”

Nashe’s prose production also includes:

***The Anatomy of Absurdity*** (1589): Nashe’s first work, a witty pamphlet against the empty superstition of English society and the foolish affectations of bad poets, Euphuistic writers, and women.

***Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil*** (1592): a prose satire against the public’s neglect of worthy writers, a complaint of an impoverished professional writer in search of patronage. The author, in the form of a humorous complaint to the Devil, discourses on the vices of the day, throwing light on the customs of his time.

***Christ’s Tears over Jerusalem*** (1593): a pamphlet dealing with the vices and abuses of contemporary society in which Nashe figures as a religious reformer. He applies Christ’s prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem to sinful London, warning Londoners that they risk to suffer the fate of Jerusalem.

## 5.7 Thomas Deloney and popular fiction

In the field of realistic prose fiction, the work of **Thomas Deloney** (?1560-1600) is noteworthy. He is the author of three tales (composed between 1590 and 1600) devoted to the representation of the life of craftsmen: ***Jack of Newbury*** (1598) depicts the life of the clothworkers in the town of Newbury, and celebrates the generosity and the qualities of the English clothiers; ***Thomas of Reading*** (1599) is also designed to portray the clothiers' craft; ***The Gentle Craft*** (1600), in two parts, is in praise of the shoemakers. Deloney's prose narrative is quite different from the existing prose types of the period, since it offers a representation of events, values and manners far removed from those of the courtly, pastoral or picaresque world. His popularity at the time indicates that the readers were reacting against the fantastic aristocratic prose of Lyly and Greene, turning towards a narrative closer to reality. The close sympathy with crafts and craftsmen allowed him to provide a broad and lively description of ordinary folk reflecting, as did no other of his contemporaries, certain changes which were taking place in Elizabethan society and art. Deloney in fact portrays the life of the recent emerging trading classes, throwing light on a new social picture of contemporary Elizabethan England.

## 5.8 Travel narrative

The English explorations towards the Western hemisphere and to part of the Orient started only in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the expeditions of **Sir Francis Drake** (?1540- 1596) and of other navigators and explorers took place, and when the first colonial settlements were realised (**Sir Richard Grenville** in Virginia in 1585, and **Sir Walter Raleigh** in Guiana in 1595). Accounts of all these voyages documenting geographical explorations, colonial aspirations, quixotic voyages, and mercantile ventures were published during the course of the century and met with great



popularity. The written record of the great number of early travels, represented in Thomas Hariot's, Richard Hakluyt's, and later in Samuel Purchas's collections, attests to the rise of England's colonial and commercial power, as well as to the significance of travel writing in English literary history.

**Richard Hakluyt** (1552-1616), geographer, clergyman and promoter of colonization, devoted himself to collecting and publishing the accounts of English explorations, and, among other volumes, he edited and published *Divers Voyages touching the Discovery of America* (1582). He wrote *The Principal Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598-1600), a three-volume collection which, in addition to his accounts of some important expeditions such as those of the Venetian John Cabot and of Francis Drake, also contained Hariot's reports, Raleigh's description of Guiana, and many other reports by explorers, adventurers, and travellers. He thus brought to light the achievements of English navigators, and gave a great impetus to discovery and colonisation. His work was continued and expanded by **Samuel Purchas** (?1575-1626) in several books, including his *Hakluyt's Posthumous, or Purchas his Pilgrimes, containing a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Land Travell by Englishmen and others* (1625).

**Thomas Hariot** (1560-1621), an important and talented mathematician and astronomer, a friend of Marlowe, Drake, and Raleigh, accompanied Sir Richard Grenville on the 1585 Virginia adventure and wrote a detailed account of that expedition in *A Brief and True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia* (1588).

## 5.9 Sir Walter Raleigh

The most sophisticated author in this genre is undoubtedly **Sir Walter Raleigh** (1552-1618), explorer, colonist, philosopher, writer, and one of Queen Elizabeth's most talented and arrogantly self-confident courtiers as well. Known for his

violent temper, his extravagant dress (an anticipation of the dandy figure), his hatred of Spain, he enjoyed the queen's favour, and to her he wrote a long poem, ***The Ocean to Cynthia***, which, though unfinished, remains his longest extant poem. His fame as a writer, however, is due to the prose works related to his travel experiences. Indeed, Raleigh himself conducted the colonization of Virginia and directed expeditions to Guiana driven by the unsuccessful desire to find gold.

In ***A Report of the Fight about the Isles of the Azores*** (1591), Raleigh tells with great simplicity and in forcible and vigorous prose the story of what actually happened in the defeat of the English fleet "Revenge" in a naval clash with the Spanish forces. Raleigh harshly denounces the Spaniards, at all times the object of his bitterest hatred. He speaks of "their frivolouse vain glorious taunts" as opposed to the "honourable actions" characteristic of the English. It seems to have been this kind of language which counted as patriotism in Elizabethan age, and helped to give Raleigh his high reputation as a lover of his country.

The promotion of the civilizing mission of the English nation, as well as the fervent glorification of the virtues of his Virgin Queen, are equally present in his ***The Discovery of Guiana*** (1595). The simple account of his exciting adventures, the detailed descriptions of that wonderful land of which Raleigh assumed to be a liberator, are told in pure and vigorous English, and the advantages of colonising Guiana are stressed in glowing and eloquent words.

As an intellectual, his association with Chapman, Hariot, and Marlowe in a group known as the "School of Night" earned him a reputation for atheism; besides, Raleigh had never hidden his scepticism in religious matters. The courtly favour Raleigh had enjoyed came to an end with Queen Elizabeth's death and the succession of James I who suspected him of treason and imprisoned him in the Tower of London for thirteen years. In 1616 he was allowed to undertake an expedition to the Orinoco in search of gold, but on the failure of the expedition and at the demand of the Spanish ambassador, he was arrested, and executed at Westminster in 1618. During his prison years

Raleigh produced many writings, and above all his monumental, yet unfinished *The History of the World* (1607-1614), an ambitious prose work written in a rigorous and commanding style which consisted of five books, from the Creation only to 168 B.C., when Macedon became a Roman province. The first volume, which alone was completed, deals with the history of the Jews, early Egyptian history and Greek mythology, and Greek and Roman times down to 130 B.C. His object, according to his preface, is to show God's judgement on the wicked. He projected two other folio volumes, but he probably never began them. After the publication of the first volume, his mind was diverted to other schemes, in the hope of regaining his liberty and accomplishing a second voyage to Guiana. The death of prince Henry, to whom the book was dedicated, in 1612, also deprived him of one of his chief motives for writing the history. *The History* is a long elegiac reflection on disenchantment and regret; Raleigh reflects upon the empires of the ancient world, on English politics, and on the mutability and inexorability of the human condition as well. The first two editions appeared anonymously without any title-page, but with an elaborate allegorical frontispiece image, representing *Magister Vitae*, standing on Death represented by a skeleton, and Oblivion as a man asleep; Experience, as an old woman, and Truth as a young woman, hold a globe, on either side of which *fama bona* and *fama mala* are blowing trumpets.

The first book contains a complex disquisition about the main theories of creation, and the Elizabethan conception of man as a microcosm. According to these theories, man is considered to be the ultimate and most excellent of God's creatures endowed with intellectual, sensual and rational nature (the three living natures associated to angels, beasts, and men). As Raleigh argues: "because in the little frame of man's body there is a representation of the universal, and (by allusion) a kind of participation of all the parts thereof, therefore was man called microcosm, or the little world". By means of symbolical likeness Raleigh illustrates a set of relations between microcosm and macrocosm comparing each part of the human body with an element existing in nature: for instance, the human flesh

is compared with earth and dust, the bones with rocks and stones, the blood with rivers, the breath with the air, and so on. In this chapter there is a reference to the theory of humours according to which “the four complexions” (that is, sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic) “resemble the four elements” (air, fire, water, and earth); moreover it gives a clear description of the cosmic affinities of the seven ages of man: according to this theory, each age of man’s life from infancy to old age corresponds to one of the seven planets. The chapter closes with a vein of disappointment conveyed by a reflection on human mutability, the “tide of man’s life” which “after it turneth and declineth, ever runneth, with a perpetuall ebbe and falling stream, but never floweth again”; in this tragic conclusion only the inevitability of death finds its right place:

*That man is, as it were, a little world: with a digression touching our mortality.*

MAN, thus compounded and formed by God, was an abstract or model, or brief story of the universal: in whom God concluded the creation and work of the world, and whom he made the last and most excellent of his creatures, being internally endued with a divine understanding, by which he might contemplate and serve his Creator, after whose image he was formed, and endued with the powers and faculties of reason and other abilities, that thereby also he might govern and rule the world, and all other God’s creatures therein. And whereas God created three sorts of living natures, to wit, angelical, rational, and brutal; giving to angels an intellectual, and to beasts a sensual nature, he vouchsafed unto man both the intellectual of angels, the sensitive of beasts, and the proper rational belonging unto man, and therefore, saith Gregory Nazianzene, *V Homo est utriusque naturæ vinculum*; “Man is the bond” and chain which tieth together both natures:” and because in the little frame of man’s body there is a representation of the universal, and (by allusion) a kind of participation of all the parts thereof, therefore was man called microcosmos, or the little world. God therefore placed in the earth the man whom he had made, as it were another world, the great and large world in the small and

little “world”; for out of earth and dust was formed the flesh of man, and therefore heavy and lumpish; the bones of his body we may compare to the hard rocks and stones, and therefore strong and durable. [...] His blood, which disperseth itself by the branches of veins through all the body, may be resembled to those waters which are carried by brooks and rivers over all the earth; his breath to the air; his natural heat to the enclosed warmth which the earth hath in itself, which, stirred up by the heat of the sun, assisteth nature in the speedier procreation of those varieties which the earth bringeth forth; our radical moisture, oil, or balsamum, (whereon the natural heat feedeth and is maintained) is resembled to the fat and fertility of the earth; the hairs of man’s body, which adorns, or overshadows it, to the grass, which covereth the upper face and skin of the earth; our generative power, to nature, which produceth all things; [...] and, lastly, our immortal souls (while they are righteous) are by God himself beautified with the title of his own image and similitude. [...] In this also is the little world of man compared, and made more like the universal (man being the measure of all things; *Homo est mensura omnium rerum*, saith Aristotle and Pythagoras) that the four complexions resemble the four elements, and the seven ages of man the seven planets; [...] In this time it is, when (as aforesaid) we, for the most part, and never before, prepare for our eternal habitation, which we pass on unto with many sighs, groans, and sad thoughts, and in the end, by the workmanship of death, finish the sorrowful business of a wretched life; towards which we always travel both sleeping and waking; neither have those beloved companions of honour and riches any power at all to hold us any one day by the glorious promise of entertainments; but by what crooked path soever we walk, the same leadeth on directly to the house of death, whose doors lie open at all hours, and to all persons. For this tide of man’s life, after it once turneth and declineth, ever runneth with a perpetual ebb and falling stream, but never floweth again: our leaf once fallen, springeth no more; neither doth the sun or the summer adorn us again, with the garments of new leaves and flowers.

*(from Book I, chapter 2, section 5)*



## 6. The development of English theatre from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance

### 6.1 Theatre in the Middle Ages

The origins of English theatre coincide with the spread of the dramatisation and acting of some crucial moments of religious liturgy during the most important festivities (Christmas, Palm Sunday, Easter, etc.) in the churches. These performances gradually moved outside: in front of the churches, in the market squares, and in the streets.

Religious dramaturgy developed particularly in connection with the celebration of **Corpus Christi** (a festivity introduced in 1264 and falling in May or June); indeed, from 1318 on, the Host was carried in procession along the streets in the presence of members of the various **Guilds** in livery and with the emblems of their different professions. The preparations of this festivity progressively grew into a proper theatrical event since the guilds commissioned and saved the texts of the works performed, prepared costumes, and above all built the mobile wooden platforms on wheels, known as **pageants**, which moved in procession from one station to another, each presenting a different scene of a religious event. The scenes were initially only *tableaux vivants*, or static representations, but they gradually developed first into dialogues and later into proper texts derived from liturgical drama, from which they differed in being wholly or partly in the vernacular and not chanted but spoken.

## 6.2 Mystery plays

The earlier English name for these plays was **miracle plays** but they were later defined **mystery plays**; since each play was really a cycle of plays based on the **Bible**. They are also known as cycles and they are named after the places where they were performed.

A large number of cycles was produced by the trade guilds of the different towns of England; however, the surviving complete cycles are those of **York** (48 texts), **Chester** (24), **Wakefield** (32 plays known as the “**Towneley Cycle**” because the manuscript was once owned by the Towneley family), and the “**N-Town cycle**” composed of 42 works related to an anonymous city of the Midlands.

The contents are fundamentally religious (from the Fall of Lucifer and the Creation to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac and the life of Christ) but there are also secular references to the geography and social life of the places where they were performed (for example, the most popular text – the ***Secunda Pastorum*** or ***Second Shepherd's Play*** belonging to the **Wakefield cycle** – deals with the hard life of shepherds and peasants in that region); moreover, these plays were characterised by the use of local dialect and by that mixture of serious and playful elements which was typical of the popular approach to performance and oral narration.

## 6.3 Morality plays

Medieval religious drama further developed into plays which presented moralistic contents and an explicit didactic aim. **Morality plays**, the most typical form of medieval drama, differ from miracle plays because they do not deal with biblical or pseudo-biblical histories but with personified abstractions of Virtues and Vices, performing an allegorical conflict between Good and Evil fighting to conquer the soul of the protagonist, who embodies all Humankind. This *psychomachia*, the battle for the soul, was a common medieval theme and is present



in ***The Pride of Life*** (c.1350), considered the most ancient extant religious drama and the first example of a morality play.

The surviving morality plays are: ***The Castle of Perseverance*** (c. 1425), ***Wisdom*** (c. 1460), ***Mankind*** (c. 1470), and ***Everyman*** (c. 1490). While the first play presents 34 characters and the fight between Mankind's Good Angel and his Bad Angel supported by the Seven Deadly Sins, the plot of the last one, which is the most famous, is structured on the pilgrimage metaphor: Everyman is summoned by Death to undertake a long journey from which there is no return. During his journey, a symbolic quest, Everyman finds that no one of his friends – all abstract personifications such as Good Company, Knowledge, Fellowship, etc. – will accompany him, and therefore he comes to embody the tragic solitude of man facing his own destiny. In the end only Good Deeds supports him and offers to justify him before the throne of God.

#### 6.4 John Skelton

The *cycle plays* and the *morality plays* were very popular and were performed well into the following century (the last performance of these texts is dated around 1580).

The poet **John Skelton** is believed to have written three morality plays of which only ***Magnificence*** (c. 1515) survives. Dedicated to **Henry VIII**, and acted probably between 1515 and 1523, it is about Magnificence, a benevolent ruler, who is corrupted by bad counsellors (Folly, Mischief, etc.), but restored by good ones (Good Hope, Perseverance, etc.). Through the struggle between vice and virtue fighting for the conquest of the king's soul, this play connects the typical themes of a morality play to the politics of the time.

## 6.5 Interludes

Towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century a different type of secular morality play developed. It dealt with moral problems in the same allegorical way, though with more pronounced realistic and comic elements, and gradually came to include scenes far removed from the theme and atmosphere of the medieval morality. These plays, known as **Interludes**, mark the transition from medieval plays to the comedy of Elizabethan times; they initially consisted in very short theatrical scenes performed by few actors during aristocratic feasts, ceremonies or banquets, and were usually performed on an elevated platform in the banquet hall of aristocratic houses. Indeed, the development of the Interludes was associated with the spread of professional actors in England. If in the Middle Ages actors were called **jesters** for their public entertainments in the streets (acting, dancing, singing), in the 15<sup>th</sup> century professional actors were appointed by aristocrats and also by rich merchants to work for their celebrations. Later the interludes, by extension, came to indicate short pieces played for light relief between the acts of a longer and more serious play (the *intermezzo* in Renaissance Italy).

The most ancient extant interlude is **Henry Medwall's** (?1490-1514) ***Fulgens and Lucrece***, a short dramatic piece in two parts performed as an entertainment at a banquet probably in 1497. This interlude, derived from a Latin tale by the Italian humanist Bonaccorso, presents the wooing of Lucretia, daughter of a Roman senator, and a comic subplot of the wooing of her maid, with the purpose both to instruct and to amuse, as is explained in the epilogue. Above all, Medwall foreshadows the mingling of romantic and comic elements which was to be a feature of later Elizabethan drama.

The first English playwright to make the *interlude* an independent dramatic form was **John Heywood** (c. 1497-1580). His interludes were often written as part of an evening's entertainment at a nobleman's house, with an emphasis on amusement rather than instruction. His best known work is

***The Play called the four PP*** (c.1520), in which a palmer (a pilgrim), a pardoner, a potycary (an apothecary), and a pedlar have a competition for the best lie; the palmer wins saying that in all his travels he never knew a woman out of patience.

## 6.6 English theatre after the Reformation

The most important effect of **Tudor Reformation** on contemporary writing was its increasingly secular emphasis which is particularly evident in the development of vernacular drama during the 16<sup>th</sup> century; indeed, after the Reformation, censorship and religious intolerance against those plays conflicting with authorised religion induced playwrights to shift away from dramas based on sacred subjects. However, plays became also a vehicle to discuss politics as well as religion which was treated in the spirit of the Reformation.

An important example of this kind of ideological drama is offered by **John Bale** (1495-1563) whose plays become a vehicle for Protestant polemics. His most important play, ***King John*** (1536), was the first English drama based on national history, though it uses that history in an explicit propagandist way: King John, the victim of papal displeasure in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, is treated as a Christian hero defying the Pope in the interest of an independent Bible-reading England. Bale still follows the morality play tradition in the use of abstract characters (Usurped Power, Sedition, Dissimulation, etc.) but he curiously mingles them with historical figures.

## 6.7 The development of the English comedy

Allegorical, biblical, and historical *morality plays* and *interludes* existed side by side in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, a time when classical influences were making themselves felt, providing new themes and introducing a proper formal

theatrical structure. **Nicholas Udall** (1506-1556), headmaster of Westminster, wrote a play which can be considered the first English comedy, ***Ralph Roister Doister*** (1553), much influenced by the Roman dramatists **Plautus** and **Terence**; indeed, its theme is derived from Plautus's ***Miles Gloriosus*** as it presents the story of a vainglorious fool, Roister Doister, and his efforts to win the heart and hand of a wealthy London widow. The play reproduces the formal structure of the Latin comedy being divided, on the ancient model, into acts and scenes, and following the verse form.

It was not until **George Gascoigne** (?1542-1577) wrote ***The Supposes*** (1566), performed at Gray's Inn in the same year, that **prose** made its appearance in English drama. Gascoigne's comedy is a translation of **Ludovico Ariosto's *Suppositi*** (1509), a text concerning a student who, with the help of his servant and through disguise and intrigue, manages to win over the older generation and finally to get his young lady (***The Supposes*** provided Shakespeare with the sub-plot of Bianca and her suitors in ***The Taming of the Shrew***). This comedy was meant for the more sophisticated audiences at the Inns of Court, the universities, the country houses of noble patrons, and the Court of Queen Elizabeth, all sharing the vogue for reviving and performing classical plays.

## 6.8 The development of the English tragedy

The revival of interest in classical tragedy contributed to the evolution of a distinctive national mode, a new kind of **English tragedy** largely marked by the influence of **Seneca**, the Roman dramatist and philosopher, rather than by the Greek tragedians **Aeschylus**, **Sophocles** and **Euripides**. Seneca's nine tragedies (translated into English by **Jasper Heywood** in 1559-1561), adapted the old Greek myths to the representation of the atmosphere of horror, treachery and brutality which pervades his plays and reflects the atmosphere of contemporary life in universally understandable plots and with a rhetoric

which appealed to the taste of the time. His Latin was easily understood, and his tyrants, ghosts, witches, and bloody corpses covering the stage, all reappear in Elizabethan drama.

Seneca's influence is already apparent in the earliest English tragedy ***Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex*** (1562), by **Thomas Norton** (1536-1608) and **Thomas Sackville** (1532-84); it was acted in the Inner Temple and before the Queen at Whitehall (1561-62), and it is divided into five acts (Norton is believed to have contributed the first three acts, Sackville the last two) on the model of the Senecan tragedy. Written in blank verse, it resumes the legend of Gorboduc related by **Geoffrey of Monmouth** (?1100-1154) in his ***Historia Regum Britanniae***, and presents the end of a royal dynasty brought about by the follies of the old and the jealousies of the young: old Gorboduc decides to divide his kingdom between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex, causing a bloody quarrel between the two brothers; in the end Ferrex is killed by Porrex, and Porrex is killed in revenge by his own mother. There is no action on the stage, the events being narrated in blank verse.

Senecan tragedy became popular at the time, but it also attracted fierce criticism as is seen in ***The Defence of Poesie***, where Sir **Philip Sidney** objected strongly to these violent new tragedies, finding only *Gorboduc* an acceptable text.

## 6.9 The Battle of the Theatre

Theatre became a popular source of entertainment and had a remarkable development from the early medieval period to Tudor times, involving significant progress in the writing of plays which turned ever more towards secular subjects, and allowing the consequential affirmation of acting and playwriting as proper professions. Groups of actors formed independent companies, whereas others put themselves under the protection of wealthy noblemen. Schools, the Inns of Court, the universities, houses of noblemen, and the Queen's Court provided more suitable places than town inn-yards

or village greens for the staging of plays. However, the need for appropriate places for performance was increasingly felt.

Queen **Elizabeth I** established her power and control over the theatre when she granted the responsibility of licences for texts and companies to the *Master of Revels* (1574), thus silencing the claims of the Corporations of the City of London to control plays and players in the area under their jurisdiction. Indeed, the Corporations were preoccupied by amateurish acting of employees and apprentices who neglected their work for their acting activity, whereas Puritans objected to theatre entertainment on moral grounds: playhouses were seen as a source of moral and physical infection as they gathered together a large audience composed of all sorts of people belonging to different social classes, and consequentially favoured the proliferation of illegal trades, robberies, and prostitution; moreover, a source of offence was the playing of female parts by young boys because in Elizabethan times women were not allowed to appear on stage as actresses, and the presence of **boy actors** was considered as an encouragement of homosexuality. Theatre became therefore a vivacious arena for critical debate generally known as “the **Battle of the Theatre**”: **Stephen Gosson** (1554-1624), a strongly Puritan censor, attacked poets and players in *The School of Abuse* (1579) which was answered back by **Thomas Lodge** (1557-1625) in *A Defence of Plays* (1580), and which provoked a new pamphlet by Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), where drama was criticised because as a whole it was based upon the principles of lying, pretence and deception, elevating these sins into a commercially rewarding practice. One of the most intelligent and penetrating defences of the theatre appears in a few paragraphs near the end of the prose satire *Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Devil* (1592) by **Thomas Nashe** (1567-1601) (both Nashe and Lodge wrote for the theatre, though they are known more for their prose works).

### 6.10 Acting companies and playhouses

The earliest organised company of Elizabethan actors, the **Leicester's Men**, was founded in 1559 and played at Court a year later. Being in the service of a nobleman, the Earl of Leicester, its actors were free of the legal penalties of vagrancy. **James Burbage**, the leading actor of this company since 1572, realised that royal and aristocratic favour could allow major developments in the theatre and built the first permanent playhouse in London, **The Theatre** (1576), erecting it outside the city boundaries in order to be outside the control of City magistrates and avoid the penalties fixed by the London Council against vagrancy (actors were considered as vagrants). The Theatre was followed by **The Curtain** (1577), also founded by Burbage, and by the more celebrated structures on the south bank of the Thames, **The Rose** (1587), **The Swan** (1595), **The Globe** (1599), and **The Hope** (1613).

The structure of these public theatres, though echoing the principles of theatre design established by Greek and Roman architects, derived from the inn-yards where actors played previously: it was round or octagonal, and unroofed; covered galleries ran all around the structure and were meant for richer spectators; the stage was a large platform divided into a front stage – the **forestage** – and an **inner** (or rear) **stage** which could be curtained off for the provision of simple scenic effects; above the inner stage was the **upper stage**, a gallery with a thatched roof, supported by columns on the main stage. Though costumes were rather elaborate, scenography was simple and essential; indeed, the Elizabethan stage was a bare platform which could symbolically represent any place and the illusion of the various scenes was created by the dramatist with the introduction of references to both stage objects and atmospheres in the text itself, using what has been defined a 'scenic language'.

Private theatres were also built in London at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the first being the **Blackfriars** (1576). They were roofed, smaller and more expensive than public theatres, thus addressing a more selected audience and staging more sophisticated

plays. Private theatres were originally used by companies of children from the choirs of St. Paul's and the Chapel Royal.

### 6.11 Elizabethan tragedy

The evolution of theatre buildings and companies in the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign was to some degree paralleled by the rapid development of a new **blank-verse tragedy**, produced by playwrights belonging to a group of artists known as the **University Wits**, young men who had graduated at Oxford or Cambridge, including names such as Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, John Lyly, Robert Greene, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, and Thomas Nashe; it can be claimed that they were the first to associate English drama permanently with literature.

**Thomas Kyd** (1558-94) is believed to be the author of ***The Spanish Tragedy*** (c. 1589), one of the most popular and influential productions of its day and the forerunner of many similar revenge tragedies. Mingling the themes of love, conspiracy, murder, and revenge, Kyd adopted some of the main elements of Senecan tragedy. The play opens with a prologue, in which the ghost of Andrea, a Spanish nobleman slain in battle against Portugal by the Portuguese Prince Balthazar, tells how Proserpine in Hades has promised him revenge against his murderer. In spite of this prologue, the plot develops around Hieronimo, marshal of Spain, and his determination to revenge the death of his son, Horatio, killed by Bathazar's conspiracy. He eventually achieves his aim by arranging a play as part of the festivities celebrating the reconciliation between Spain and Portugal; after the violent death of many characters involved in the plot, he finally bites off his tongue and stabs himself to death. The play established a dramatic model characterised by a series of elements drawn from the Senecan tragic tradition but adapted to English cultural sensibility: the revenge theme, the play within the play device, the madness real and feigned, the Machiavellian villain, the ghost, violent actions, exaggerated gestures, and a highly rhetorical use of the blank verse.



## 6.12 Christopher Marlowe

**Christopher Marlowe** (1564-1593) was the most striking personality and the most impressive dramatist among the University Wits, particularly skilled in the use of an eloquent and musical blank verse ('Marlow's mighty line', as Ben Jonson defined it later in his poem dedicated to Shakespeare). He was often in danger of arrest for his outspoken and atheistic opinions, and died young in a tavern brawl, probably assassinated because of his secret-service activities.

His first successful play was *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587), a tragedy in two parts presenting the story of the Schyrtian shepherd, his rise to power, and his boundless ambition which leads him to try the conquest of many lands and kingdoms. Tamburlaine is characterized by power, strength, pride, bravery, but also by cruelty and ferocity as a result of his intoxication with power. His conquests have no material objective in view, but they respond to the hero's perpetual and restless desire for power which can cease only in death.

Like *Tamburlaine*, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1590) is full of the spirit of Renaissance culture. Doctor Faustus is a Tamburlaine on the intellectual level: weary of the sciences, Faustus turns to magic and calls up Mephistopheles, with whom he makes a pact to surrender his soul to the Devil in return for twenty-four years of life; during these Mephistopheles shall attend on him and give him whatsoever he demands. Indeed, Faustus's ambition is for ultimate knowledge rather than for material power, and he therefore comes to symbolise the story of the fall of man for having eaten of the tree of knowledge and represents an *exemplum* of the soul that yields to the last temptation of Satan, the temptation of knowledge. The debate about licit and illicit knowledge according to religious dictates was of great interest at the time, and Marlowe uses his tragedy to make his point in favour of learning. Faustus is a scholar who prizes knowledge above his own damnation, making his intellectual curiosity an impediment to proper repentance; in this respect, Faustus's

intellectual world represents the freedom of humanist new learning from the limits imposed by religion and morality.

The tragedy opens with a classic prologue spoken by Chorus but it immediately reveals an intent of disrupting the traditional elements of tragedy with its series of negative forms which reject the usual tragic themes of battles, loves, and heroes ("Not marching... Intends our muse to vaunt his heavenly verse", ll. 1-6) and propose a new kind of hero, a scholar and his "fortunes, good or bad" (l. 8), that is a common man who excelled in all sorts of learning, whose "self-conceit" led him to "mount above his reach" indulging in "cursed necromancy", and therefore causing "his overthrow" (ll. 18-27). The final line – "And this the man that in his study sits" (l. 28) – suggests that Chorus, with an arm gesture, indicates the inner stage where the curtain is drawn, revealing Faustus in the alcove at the back of the stage:

## PROLOGUE

### *Enter Chorus.*

Not marching in the fields of Thrasimene,  
Where Mars did mate the warlike Carthagens,  
Nor sporting in the dalliance of love  
In courts of kings, where state is overturned,  
Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds,  
Intends our Muse to vaunt his heavenly verse.  
Only this, gentles: we must now perform  
The form of Faustus' fortunes, good or bad.  
And now to patient judgments we appeal,

And speak for Faustus in his infancy.  
Now is he born, of parents base of stock,  
In Germany, within a town called Rhodes.  
At riper years to Wittenberg he went,  
Whereas his kinsmen chiefly brought him up.  
So much he profits in divinity,  
The fruitfull plot of Scholerisme graced,  
That shortly he was graced with Doctor's name,  
Excelling all, whose sweete delight's dispute

In th' heavenly matters of *theology*.  
 Till swoll'n with cunning, of a self conceit,  
 His waxen wings did mount above his reach  
 And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow,  
 For falling to a devilish exercise,  
 And glutt'd now with learning's golden gifts,  
 He surfeits upon cursed necromancy.  
 Nothing so sweet as magic is to him;  
 Which he prefers before his chieftest bliss,  
 And this the man that in his study sits.

**Scene I** opens with Faustus's monologue surveying the various disciplines in which he has reached knowledge and excellence: philosophy ("Sweet Analytics", ll. 6-12), medicine ("Galen", ll. 12-27), law ("Justinian", ll. 27-37), religion ("Divinity", ll. 38-46). Realising that his knowledge cannot improve further in those subjects, he decides to turn to magic which promises "a world of profit and delight, / Of power, of honour, of omnipotence", as "A sound magician is a demi-god" (ll. 47-61).

After a short appearance of Good Angel, who tries to stop Faustus from falling into temptation, and Bad Angel, who encourages him to pursue his desire to resemble a god (ll. 68-75), and after another brief monologue in which Faustus imagines aspects of his future power (ll. 75-97), Faustus speaks to two scholars, Cornelius and Valdes, who had previously drawn his attention to necromancy and magic, and who confirm the importance of these studies to enlarge the limits of knowledge (ll. 98-164):

### SCENE I

#### *Faustus in his study.*

**FAUSTUS.** Settle thy studies Faustus, and begin  
 to sound the depth of that thou wilt profess.  
 Having commenced, be a divine in show,  
 Yet level at the end of every art,  
 And live and die in Aristotle's works.

Sweet Analytics, 'tis thou hast ravished me.  
*Bene disserere est finis logices.*  
 Is to dispute well logic's chiefest end?  
 Affords this art no greater miracle?  
 Then read no more; thou hast attained that end.  
 A greater subject fitteth Faustus' wit.  
 Bid *on kai me on* farewell, and Galen come:  
 Seeing *ubi desinit philosophus, ibi incipit medicus.*  
 Be a physician, Faustus; heap up gold,  
 And be eternized for some wondrous cure.  
*Summum bonum, medicinae sanitas:*  
 The end of physic is our body's health:  
 Why, Faustus, hast thou not attained that end?  
 Is not thy common talke sound Aphorismes?  
 Are not thy bills hung up as monuments,  
 Whereby whole cities have escaped the plague  
 And thousand desperate maladies been cured?  
 Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man.  
 Could'st thou make men to live eternally,  
 Or being dead, raise them to life again,  
 Then this profession were to be esteemed.  
 Physic farewell. Where is Justinian?  
*Si una eademque res legatur duobus,*  
*Alter rem, alter valorem rei, etc.*  
 A petty case of paltry legacies!  
*Exhaereditare filium non potest pater, nisi--*  
 Such is the subject of the institute,  
 And universal body of the law.  
 This study fits a mercenary drudge,  
 Who aims at nothing but external trash,  
 Too servile and illiberal for me.  
 When all is done, *divinity* is best;  
 Jerome's Bible, Faustus, view it well.  
*Stipendium peccati, mors est.* "Ha! *Stipendium*, &c:  
 The reward of sin is death? That's hard.  
*Si peccasse, negamus, fallimur, et nulla est in nobis veritas.*  
 If we say that we have no sin  
 We deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us.  
 Why then belike we must sin,

And so consequently die.  
 I, we must die, an everlasting death.  
 What doctrine call you this: *Che sera, sera*,  
 What will be, shall be? *Divinity*, adieu.  
 These metaphysics of magicians,  
 And necromantic books are heavenly;  
 Lines, circles, signs, letters, characters.  
 I, these are those that Faustus most desires.  
 O what a world of profit and delight,  
 Of power, of honour, and omnipotence,  
 Is promised to the studious artisan?  
 All things that move between the quiet poles  
 Shall be at my command. Emperors and Kings,  
 Are but obeyed in their several provinces,  
 Nor can they rise the winde, or rend the cloudes:  
 But his dominion that exceeds in this,  
 Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:  
 A sound magician is a demi-god.  
 Here, tire my brains to get a Deity.  
 [...]

***Enter the Good Angel and Evil Angel.***

**GOOD ANGEL.** O Faustus, lay that damned book aside,  
 And gaze not on it least it tempt thy soul,  
 And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head.  
 Read, read the scriptures: that is blasphemy.

**EVIL ANGEL.** Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art  
 Wherein all nature's treasure is contained.  
 Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,  
 Lord and Commander of these elements.

***Exeunt Angels.***

**FAUSTUS.** How am I glutt with concept of this!  
 Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,  
 Resolve me of all ambiguities,  
 Perform what desperate enterprise I will?  
 I'll have them fly to India for gold,  
 Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,  
 And search all corners of the new-found world  
 For pleasant fruits, and princely delicates.  
 I'll have them read me strange philosophy,

And tell the secrets of all foreign Kings.  
 I'll have them wall all Germany with brass,  
 And make swift Rhine, circle faire Wittenberg.  
 I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,  
 Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad.  
 I'll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,  
 And chase the Prince of Parma from our land,  
 And reign sole king of all the provinces.  
 Yea, stranger engines for the brunt of war,  
 Than was the fiery keel at Antwerp's bridge,  
 I'll make my servile spirits to invent.  
 Come, *German* Valdes and Cornelius,  
 And make me blest with your sage conference.

***Enter Valdes and Cornelius.***

Valdes, sweet Valdes and Cornelius!  
 Know that your words have won me at the last.  
 To practice magic and concealed arts.  
 Yet not your words onely, but mine owne fantasie,  
 That wil receive no object, for my head  
 But ruminates on Negromantique skill.  
 Philosophy is odious and obscure.  
 Both law and physic are for petty wits:  
 Divinitie is basest of the three,  
 Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vilde:  
 'Tis magic, magic, that hath ravished me.  
 Then gentle friends aid me in this attempt,  
 And I, that have with subtle syllogisms  
 Gravelled the pastors of the German Church,  
 And made the flowering pride of Wittenberg  
 Sworn to my problems, as th'infernal spirits  
 On sweet Musaes when he came to hell,  
 Will be as cunning as Agrippa was,  
 Whose shadow made all Europe honour him.  
**VALDES.** Faustus, these books, thy wit, and our experience,  
 Shall make all nations to canonize us,  
 As Indian moors, obey their Spanish lords.  
 So shall the spirits of every element,  
 Be always serviceable to us three.

Like lions shall they guard us when we please,  
 Like *Almaine* rutters with their horsemen's staves,  
 Or Lapland giants trotting by our sides.  
 Sometimes like women or unwedded maids,  
 Shadowing more beauty in their airy brows,  
 Than has the white breasts of the queen of love.  
 From Venice shall they drag huge *argosies*,  
 And from America the golden fleece,  
 That yearly stuffed old Phillip's treasury,  
 If learned Faustus will be resolute.

**FAUSTUS.** Valdes, as resolute am I in this,  
 As thou to live, therefore object it not.

**CORNELIUS.** The miracles that magic will perform,  
 Will make thee vow to study nothing else.  
 [...]

**Scene XVIII** opens with the appearance of Lucifer, Belzebub, and Mephistophilis, who descend on stage from “*above*” – as the stage direction specifies, thus indicating the use of the upper stage – and Lucifer informs the audience that the time of Faustus’ damnation has come. The following cue spoken by Mephistophilis is a perfect example of “scenic language” with its reference to the atmosphere (“this gloomy night”) and with its announcement that soon Faustus, aware that the final moment has arrived and mad with his desperation, will be on stage (“Here in this room will wretched Faustus be... in desperate lunacy”, ll. 8-11).

The scene proceeds with a dialogue between Faustus and three scholars to whom Faustus confesses that he has given away “my soul for my cunning”; he then curses his love of knowledge (“O would I never seen Wittenberg, never read a book!”), and admits that the devil has always been stronger than his attempts to repentance. After the scholars leave, there is a new appearance first of the devils and then of Good Angel and Bad Angel after the morality play tradition (ll. 80-125). Faustus is finally left alone and a dramatic monologue

concludes his life and scene XVIII (ll. 126-188):

### SCENE XVIII

Thunder. Enter Lucifer, Belzebub, and Mephistophilis.

**LUCIFER.** Thus from infernal Dis do we ascend  
To view the subjects of our monarchy,  
Those souls which sin seals the black sons of hell;  
'Mong which, as chief, Faustus, we come to thee,  
Bringing with us lasting damnation  
To wait upon thy soul: the time is come  
Which makes it forfeit.

**MEPHIST.** And, this gloomy night,  
Here, in this room, will wretched Faustus be.

**BELZEBUB.** And here we'll stay,  
To mark him how he doth demean himself.

**MEPHIST.** How should he but in desperate lunacy?  
Fond worldling, now his heart-blood dries with grief;  
His conscience kills it; and his labouring brain  
Begets a world of idle fantasies  
To over-reach the devil; but all in vain;  
His store of pleasures must be sauc'd with pain.  
He and his servant Wagner are at hand;  
Both come from drawing Faustus' latest will.  
See, where they come!

*Enter Faustus [...]*

[...]

*Enter Scholars.*

**FIRST SCHOLAR.** Now, worthy Faustus,  
methinks your looks are chang'd.

**FAUSTUS.** O, gentlemen!

**SECOND SCHOLAR.** What ails Faustus?

**FAUSTUS.** Ah, my sweet chamber-fellow, had I lived with thee,  
then had I lived still! but now must die eternally. Look, sirs,  
comes he not? comes he not?

**FIRST SCHOLAR.** O my dear Faustus,  
what imports this fear?



**SECOND SCHOLAR.** Is all our  
pleasure turn'd to melancholy?

**THIRD SCHOLAR.** He is not well with being over-solitary.

**SECOND SCHOLAR.** If it be so, we'll have  
physicians, and Faustus shall be cur'd.

**THIRD SCHOLAR.** 'Tis but a surfeit, sir; fear nothing.

**FAUSTUS.** A surfeit of deadly sin, that  
hath damned both body and soul.

**SECOND SCHOLAR.** Yet, Faustus, look up to  
heaven, and remember mercy is infinite.

**FAUSTUS.** But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned: the  
serpent that tempted Eve may be saved, but not Faustus. O  
gentlemen, hear me with patience, and tremble not at my  
speeches! Though my heart pant and quiver to remember  
that I have been a student here these thirty years, O, would  
I had never seen Wittenberg, never read book! and what  
wonders I have done, all Germany can witness, yea, all  
the world; for which Faustus hath lost both Germany and  
the world, yea, heaven itself, heaven, the seat of God, the  
throne of the blessed, the kingdom of joy; and must remain  
in hell for ever, hell. O, hell, for ever! Sweet friends,  
what shall become of Faustus, being in hell for ever?

**SECOND SCHOLAR.** Yet, Faustus, call on God.

**FAUSTUS.** On God, whom Faustus hath abjured! on God,  
whom Faustus hath blasphemed! O my God, I would weep!  
but the devil draws in my tears. Gush forth blood, instead  
of tears! yea, life and soul! O, he stays my tongue! I would  
lift up my hands; but see, they hold 'em, they hold 'em?

**ALL.** Who, Faustus?

**FAUSTUS.**

Why, Lucifer and Mephistophilis. O gentlemen,  
I gave them my soul for my cunning!

**ALL.** O, God forbid!

**FAUSTUS.** God forbade it, indeed; but Faustus  
hath done it: for the vain pleasure of four-  
and-twenty years hath Faustus lost

eternal joy and felicity. I writ them a bill with mine own blood:  
the date is expired; this is the time, and he will fetch me.

[...]

***Exeunt Scholars.***

**MEPHIST.** Ay, Faustus, now thou hast no hope of heaven;  
Therefore despair; think only upon hell,  
For that must be thy mansion, there to dwell.

**FAUSTUS.** O thou bewitching fiend, 'twas thy temptation  
Hath robb'd me of eternal happiness!

**MEPHIST.** I do confess it, Faustus, and rejoice:  
'Twas I that, when thou wert i' the way to heaven,  
Damm'd up thy passage; when thou took'st the book  
To view the Scriptures, then I turn'd the leaves,  
And led thine eye.

What, weep'st thou? 'tis too late; despair! Farewell:  
Fools that will laugh on earth must weep in hell.

***Exit.******Enter Good Angel and Evil Angel at several doors.***

**GOOD ANGEL.** O Faustus, if thou hadst given ear to me,  
Innumerable joys had follow'd thee!  
But thou didst love the world.

**EVIL ANGEL.** Gave ear to me,  
And now must taste hell-pains perpetually.

**GOOD ANGEL.** O, what will all thy riches, pleasures, pomps,  
Avail thee now?

**EVIL ANGEL.** Nothing, but vex thee more,  
To want in hell, that had on earth such store.  
[...]

Now, Faustus, let thine eyes with horror stare

***Hell is discovered.***

Into that vast perpetual torture-house:  
There are the Furies tossing damned souls  
On burning forks; there bodies boil in lead;  
There are live quarters broiling on the coals,  
That ne'er can die; this ever-burning chair  
Is for o'er-tortur'd souls to rest them in;  
These that are fed with sops of flaming fire,  
Were gluttons, and lov'd only delicacies,  
And laugh'd to see the poor starve at their gates:  
But yet all these are nothing; thou shalt see  
Ten thousand tortures that more horrid be.

**FAUSTUS.** O, I have seen enough to torture me!

**EVIL ANGEL.** Nay, thou must feel  
them, taste the smart of all:  
He that loves pleasure must for pleasure fall:  
And so I leave thee, Faustus, till anon;  
Then wilt thou tumble in confusion.

***Exit. Hell disappears. The clock strikes eleven.***

**FAUSTUS.** O Faustus,  
Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,  
And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!  
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,  
That time may cease, and midnight never come;  
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make  
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but  
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,  
That Faustus may repent and save his soul!  
*O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!*  
The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,  
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.  
O, I'll leap up to heaven!--Who pulls me down?  
See, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!  
One drop of blood will save me: O my Christ!  
Rend not my heart for naming of my Christ;  
Yet will I call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer!  
Where is it now? 'tis gone:  
And, see, a threatening arm, an angry brow!  
Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,  
And hide me from the heavy wrath of heaven!  
No!

Then will I headlong run into the earth:  
Gape, earth! O, no, it will not harbour me!  
You stars that reign'd at my nativity,  
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,  
Now draw up Faustus, like a foggy mist,  
Into the entrails of yon labouring cloud,  
That, when you vomit forth into the air,  
My limbs may issue from your smoky mouths;  
But let my soul mount and ascend to heaven!

***The clock strikes the half-hour.***

O, half the hour is past! 'twill all be past anon.

O, if my soul must suffer for my sin,  
 Impose some end to my incessant pain;  
 Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,  
 A hundred thousand, and at last be sav'd!  
 No end is limited to damned souls.  
 Why wert thou not a creature wanting soul?  
 Or why is this immortal that thou hast?  
 O, Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were that true,  
 This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd  
 Into some brutish beast! all beasts are happy,  
 For, when they die,  
 Their souls are soon dissolv'd in elements;  
 But mine must live still to be plagu'd in hell.  
 Curs'd be the parents that engender'd me!  
 No, Faustus, curse thyself, curse Lucifer  
 That hath depriv'd thee of the joys of heaven.

***The clock strikes twelve.***

It strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,  
 Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!  
 O soul, be chang'd into small water-drops,  
 And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found!

***Thunder. Enter Devils.***

O, mercy, heaven! look not so fierce on me!  
 Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!  
 Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!  
 I'll burn my books! O Mephistophilis!

***Exeunt Devils with Faustus.***

The tragedy, however, continues with another short scene and a short epilogue. Scene XIX shows the scholars mourning over Faustus' body all torn to pieces by the devils' fury and, though they lament Faustus' un-Christian end, yet they decide to give "his mangled limbs due burial" in honour of his intellectual excellence ("for he was a scholar once admired / For wondrous knowledge in our German schools"). In a way, this scene can be considered as a sort of epilogue in which Marlowe stresses the importance of knowledge even in such an extreme disruption of religious principles.

## SCENE XIX

Enter Scholars.

**FIRST SCHOLAR.** Come, gentlemen, let us go visit Faustus,  
For such a dreadful night was never seen;  
Since first the world's creation did begin,  
Such fearful shrieks and cries were never heard:  
Pray heaven the doctor have escap'd the danger.

**SECOND SCHOLAR.**

O, help us, heaven! see, here are Faustus' limbs,  
All torn asunder by the hand of death!

**THIRD SCHOLAR.**

The devils whom Faustus serv'd have torn him thus;  
For, twixt the hours of twelve and one, methought,  
I heard him shriek and call aloud for help;  
At which self time the house seem'd all on fire  
With dreadful horror of these damned fiends.

**SECOND SCHOLAR.**

Well, gentlemen, though Faustus' end be such  
As every Christian heart laments to think on,  
Yet, for he was a scholar once admir'd  
For wondrous knowledge in our German schools,  
We'll give his mangled limbs due burial;  
And all the students, cloth'd in mourning black,  
Shall wait upon his heavy funeral.

***Exeunt.***

But, even for a rebellious soul like Marlowe was, such an ending would have been too revolutionary, and therefore, in the epilogue, Chorus draws the proper moral conclusion of the story of Faustus who has been punished with a "hellish fall" for having practised "more than heavenly power permits".

## EPILOGUE

Enter Chorus.

**CHORUS.** Cut is the branch that might  
have grown full straight,  
And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,

That sometime grew within this learned man.  
 Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,  
 Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise,  
 Only to wonder at unlawful things,  
 Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits  
 To practise more than heavenly power permits.  
**Exit.**

### 6.12.1 Marlowe's other tragedies

***The Jew of Malta*** (c. 1592) opens with a prologue spoken by Machiavel who defies the criticism which his books attracted and defends the importance of intellectual freedom ("I count religion but a childish toy / and hold there is no sin but ignorance"). The protagonist of the tragedy is a Machiavellian character, Barabbas, a Jew and a rich merchant of Malta, full of greed and cunning, who is deprived of all his possessions as a consequence of an edict promulgated by the governor of the island. His revenge for this humiliation involves the killing of a shocking number of characters, including his own daughter Abigail.

Marlowe's great tragedies present unforgettable and powerful characters whose tragic destiny does not depend on Fate and Gods as in classic tragedy, nor is it provoked by external circumstances, intrigues, and inter-actions with other characters as in Shakespearean tragedies: Marlowe's heroes are totally isolated and create their own tragedy within themselves. ***Edward II*** (1592) differs from Marlowe's other tragedies because it shows a greater equilibrium between its central character and those surrounding him; moreover, the play is a study of weakness rather than of strength. It is a history play exploring the problem of moral conflict within an established society: unlike the megalomaniac seekers after military, political, or intellectual power, Edward is born into an inheritance of royal government but effectively throws it away in favour of a homosexual love unacceptable to the historical world in which he is obliged to move.

### 6.13 Elizabethan comedy

**John Lyly** (1554-1606) turned to drama after the success of his prose romance *Euphues* (1579), adapting his courtly artificial prose to the stage to produce a new kind of court comedy; in fact Lyly as a dramatist is important as the first English writer of what is essentially high comedy, and as having adopted prose as a medium for its expression, though his texts contain attractive lyrics. His plays were mostly acted by the Children of St. Paul's and performed at Court before the Queen, and were written mainly for a courtly audience, which delighted in Lyly's grace and artificiality, and in his many allegorical allusions to current scandals. For his plots Lyly turned to Greek legend, not simply dramatizing classical myths, but using characters and themes from mythology in a wholly original way. *Endymion* (1591) was one of his most successful plays, an allegorical prose play relating to the rivalry between Elizabeth I (Cynthia) and Mary Queen of Scots.

**Robert Greene** (1558-1592) is better known for his prose works and romance narratives than for his plays, but he turned to drama as a way of earning a living, writing for the public stage and aiming at popular success rather than Court favour. Of his eight plays, characterised by a skilful mixture of a realistic background and an atmosphere of romance, the most successful seem to have been *The Honorable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1591), a study of white magic probably intended as a firm reply to Marlowe's black magic in *Dr Faustus*. It is structured on a double plot presenting on the one hand the story of Bacon's magical powers, on the other the opposed love story between Lacy, Earl of Lincoln, and Margaret; the two plots are neatly fitted together by magical mirrors, apparitions and supernatural visions.

Shortly before his early death, Greene published his famous autobiographical prose tract *A Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance*, which ends with the curious "Address" to his fellow playwrights, Marlowe, Lodge, and Peele, urging them to spend their wits to better

purpose than the making of plays. This tract also contains the first known reference to the emergence of Shakespeare as a playwright (“an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers ... in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country”).

**George Peele** (1558-1596), who worked mainly for **Philip Henslowe**, the owner of the Fortune, Hope and Rose playhouses, often in collaboration with other playwrights of the time, began his career as a dramatist with a courtly mythological pastoral play, ***The Arraignment of Paris*** (c. 1581), played by the Children of the Chapel before the Queen. One of the earliest examples of the pastoral in English drama, the play turns the familiar story of the judgement of Paris and the golden apple into a homage to Elizabeth I. Peele’s best-known work is ***The Old Wives’ Tale*** (c. 1595), a mixture of high romance and English folklore, now considered a landmark in the development of English comedy. Its structure is rather unusual since the play begins as a story narrated by old Madge to three fellows who have lost their way in the wood, but soon the characters of her story appear to act it out.



## 7. William Shakespeare

### 7.1 William Shakespeare's life

All that is known with any degree of certainty concerning Shakespeare, is: that he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon; married and had children there; went to London, where he commenced actor, and wrote poems and plays; returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried.

As the 18<sup>th</sup> century Shakespearean scholar and editor **George Steevens** clearly specifies in these words, very little is known about Shakespeare's life and only a rather limited number of original documents (birth, marriage, and death certificates) survives. Eldest and third son of **John Shakespeare**, a husbandman (also variously described as a yeoman, a wool-dealer, a butcher, a glover, that is a member of the trading middle class) and **Mary Arden, William Shakespeare** (23 April 1564-23 April 1616) was born at **Stratford upon Avon** where he attended the free grammar school. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway and they had three children: **Susannah** (baptised in 1583) and the twins **Hamnet** and **Judith** (1585). A gap of about ten years follows (the so-called lost years), and it is not until 1592 that his name is mentioned in **Robert Greene's** pamphlet ***A Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance*** ("an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers... in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country"), which shows Shakespeare evidently well established in London as actor and dramatist. In 1593 and 1594 there was a plague epidemic in London, and the theatres were closed:

it was in those years that Shakespeare produced many of his sonnets and his poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* dedicated to the Earl of Southampton in terms that suggest familiarity, thus confirming the achievement of a certain popularity by that time. By the beginning of 1595 he had become a sharer in the theatre company known as the **Chamberlain's Men**, another proof of his increasing success in the London theatre environment. Evidence of his rise in the world appears in his father's successful application in 1596 for a coat of arms, and by Shakespeare's purchase in 1597 of the large house known as **New Place** in Stratford, to which he was to retire in 1610. He signed his will on 25 March 1616, a month before his death.

## 7.2 Shakespeare's canon

If there are many doubts about Shakespeare's life, also the facts concerning his plays are not certain as to their dating, staging and possible co-authoring. An endless debate about his canon has been going on since the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; indeed, scholars have tried to date the plays from documents such as the **Stationers' Register**, where proposals for publication of texts were annotated, or *Palladis Tamia, Wit's Traesury* (1598) by **Francis Meres**, a sort of literary diary containing references to plays he had seen staged, besides quotations from various writers from the time of **Chaucer** to his own day and comments on their artistic quality (very flattering are his comments on Shakespeare whom he compared to **Ovid** for the quality of his poetry, and to **Plautus** and **Seneca** for his artistic ability as a dramatist). References to contemporary events and to the various literary sources that Shakespeare used for his plays also helped scholars establish the date of their composition. However, generally an *a quo* and an *ad quem* period of composition is suggested, that is a time before or after which the play could not have been written (a reference to a contemporary event or to a literary source used by Shakespeare, for instance, gives evidence that the play

could not have been written before that event had taken place or before that literary work had been composed; the reference to a specific staging of a play indicates clearly that the play could not have been written after the date of that staging).

As to possible collaborators in the writing of the plays, one has to remember that at that time theatre was not considered a “literary art” and texts were not written for publication but for a successful staging; therefore, authorship was not that important and it was not unusual for a text to be the result of the contribution of other members of the company both to the general idea and structure of the play, and to its actual writing. Shakespeare was writing for his company, not for himself, and anything he composed had to be acceptable to them: he had to keep in mind the needs of the company (their productions had to be competitive and commercially viable), the demands of the actors (the roles had to be written in order to suit the various and different talents), the needs of the audience in order to be successful, and the acting space in which the play was to be performed; it is therefore likely that the text changed during rehearsals in order to adjust to these needs and came to include suggestions from members of the company.

Shakespeare did not simply “invent” his plots but took inspiration from various other sources (works of history, verse and prose fiction, other plays, both classical and contemporary, documents), and, though sometimes there are passages in which sources are simply paraphrased, he transformed them into a new artistic creation and cannot be accused of plagiarism.

### 7.3 The First Folio

Shakespeare’s artistic greatness was officially acknowledged with the publication of his works in the **First Folio** edition of 1623, published on the initiative of **John Heminges** (1556-1630) and **Henry Condell** (?-1627), actors and collaborators of Shakespeare (a ‘folio’ was a large sheet of paper printed on both sides and folded once so as to form four pages; a ‘quarto’

was a sheet of the same size but folded twice so as to form eight pages; the ‘folio’ was a much more accurate and also more expensive edition). The volume contained 36 of the 37 plays written by Shakespeare (*Pericles* at the time was not attributed to Shakespeare). The two editors have been criticised on several accounts, including some omissions and their arbitrary division of each play into five acts, on the classic model favoured by **Ben Jonson**; however, they have the great merit of having preserved texts that Shakespeare himself had never done anything to save.

In their **Preface** they defined Shakespeare “a happy imitator of nature”, an aspect which was much discussed by later critics; a commendatory poem by **Ben Jonson** was also prefixed to the First Folio, in which Shakespeare was praised as one of the greatest dramatists of all times (“...Britain, thou hast one to show, / To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe. / He was not of an age, but for all time!”), a poet who had been much appreciated by Queen Elizabeth I and King James I (“Sweet Swan of Avon! What a sight it were / To see thee in our waters yet appear, / And make those flights upon the banks of Thames, / That so did take Eliza and our James!”); in the final lines Jonson laments the decadence of contemporary theatre and sees in Shakespeare’s volume a reviving hope (“Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage / or influence, chide or cheer the drooping stage; / Which, since thy flight from thence, hath mourned like night, / And despairs day, but for thy volume’s light.”).

## 7.4 Shakespeare’s theatre and the 16<sup>th</sup> century

Shakespeare reflected, in his plays, the complex reality of his age, an age of great changes and transformations; it was, in fact, a new world in which man was confronting new responsibilities and the necessity to build a totally new system of values once the old values and rules of the feudal world were irretrievably fading away.

The exciting scientific and geographic discoveries between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries greatly modified the vision of the world and the sense of man’s centrality in the universe:

**Copernicus**, in his *De revolutionibus Orbium* (1543), proposed a totally new vision of the universe with the sun as the central and fixed celestial body and the earth moving around it along with other planets, in opposition to the older theory of **Ptolemy** that the sun and planets move round the earth; **Christopher Columbus** revealed new worlds beyond Europe with his discovery of the American continent in 1492; trade and commerce greatly developed, gradually demolishing the entire economic and social organisation of the feudal system and replacing it with a more dynamic system based above all on the opening towards new worlds; explorations towards the Western hemisphere and to part of the Orient were carried out in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the first colonial settlements were founded (**Sir Richard Grenville** in Virginia in 1585, and **Sir Walter Raleigh** in Guiana in 1595).

Political and religious beliefs and their solidity were disrupted by a variety of new models: **Niccolò Machiavelli** in his *Prince* (1513) defined a new model of a governor who confronted political action from the point of view of effectiveness rather than morality; **Martin Luther**, the leader of the Reformation in Germany, attacked papal authority by nailing his famous 95 *Theses* to the door of the church at Wittenberg, putting into question religious dogmas that had always been accepted as undeniable truth.

These major changes in economy, politics, religion, science in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, created a feeling of confusion and disturbance, while the loss of certainties and dogmas made man aware that life and reality could be considered from many perspectives and interpreted in different ways. This new modern conscience found a theoretical justification in **Montaigne's Essays** (1571-1592) and in his philosophy of Skepticism: the general conclusion of the essays, embodied in his famous question, "*Que sais-je?*", represents the recognition of the fallibility of human reason and the relativity of human science.

In this new intellectual atmosphere, the social function of literature changed as well, as it tended to bring into question those values on which the mediaeval ideology had been based

– ***Don Quixote*** (1605) by **Cervantes** questions the old feudal principles showing a totally different reality in which chivalric values have become anachronistic and unacceptable – at the same time representing the new reality of Renaissance in which nothing is fixed or totally dependent on divine projects and everything can be recreated according to new criteria and a new sensibility. ***Hamlet*** (1600) is the highest emblem of the modern tragic hero who cannot act as a feudal hero fighting for revenge or to conquer a land or a woman, but needs to understand and looks into his own conscience in search for the truth.

## 7.5 The elements of Shakespeare's theatre

English theatre flourishes in this particular historical moment as, more than any other art, it catches and expresses the core of Elizabethan society with its sense of plurality, flexibility, and fluidity. Shakespeare's theatre perfectly expresses that sense of indefiniteness not only by presenting the complexity of man's soul and actions in many unforgettable characters and plots, but also through a flexible dramatic form, mixing comedy and tragedy, farce and drama, history and romance. Moreover, a number of theatrical devices which are characteristic of Shakespearean theatre contribute to reflect the sense of fluidity in society as it appears, for example, in the extended use of disguise which allows characters to cross the borders of class and gender; on the other hand, Shakespeare makes the artificial nature of the performance explicit by using meta-theatrical language and metaphors, by inserting puns and popular sayings in upper-class discourse, by interrupting a 'realistic' action with an *aside* or a musical element, and so on. All these devices aim to remind the audience of the great distance between the imaginary world of theatre and the reality of life, and, at the same time, of the basic identity between life and theatre.

The experimental nature of Shakespearean theatre emerges in many ways, in its explicit challenges of fixed rules, and in the many transgressions of theatrical conventions; indeed, Shakespeare

proposed his own rules and created a vital theatre which, after many centuries, still speaks our own language, that is the language of life and literature which cannot be defined in rigid terms.

## 7.6 Shakespeare's theatre and the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its sense of destabilisation and fragmentation provoked by the First World War and the consequential deep change in society, experienced a very similar crisis to that of Shakespeare's time, and Shakespeare's plays were successfully revived in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as they expressed a similar way of feeling and suggested an immediate identification between the characters created by Shakespeare in his time and 20<sup>th</sup> century man. Moreover, whereas the two previous centuries had considered Shakespeare's theatre mainly for its contents and the philosophy of life they expressed, 20<sup>th</sup> century audiences could appreciate the dramatic quality of his plays and the use of elements which better represented the new reality, such as Shakespeare's non-naturalistic language, the freedom from the classic Aristotelian rules (the unities of time, place and action were hardly ever respected), and the meta-theatrical dimension so important in major 20<sup>th</sup> century dramatists such as Pirandello.

Above all, most Shakespearean plays – the tragedies in particular but also comedies and romances – propose a new dramatic open form, with no proper solutions and conclusions; the problems are left fundamentally unresolved, according to a new, revolutionary idea of the theatre that only 20<sup>th</sup> century sensitivity could understand and accept. This new form does not try to imitate life in a naturalistic manner, but it catches its essence in a symbolic way, and does not attempt to recompose the order of society and of the universe. Theatre follows the movement of life and becomes a major means for knowledge and understanding, inviting the audience to make a personal effort of interpretation. **Luigi Pirandello** in Italy and **Bertolt Brecht** in Germany follow the Shakespearean lesson and use the

stage not only to entertain their audience but as an instrument of knowledge, never offering a clear presentation or solution of the problems discussed in their plays and therefore encouraging the spectators to look into their own mind and soul to find their own answers and interpretations of a changeable reality.

## 7.7 Shakespeare's production

**Shakespeare's** production develops along two decades: the last decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in which he writes above all histories and comedies, and the first decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in which his great tragedies and tragic-comedies (or romances) are written. Shakespeare's plays represent therefore a variety of theatrical genres even though they never respect genre conventions fully; in fact, Shakespeare adapted each genre to his own creations which are thus widely experimental.

The **First Folio** divided Shakespeare's plays into three kinds: **comedies**, **tragedies**, and **histories**. These categories, however, are too general and cannot represent fully the variety and complexity of Shakespeare's dramatic creations; critics have therefore attempted to define them in a more accurate way. 'Romance', for instance, was only a narrative form of writing in the Renaissance and did not exist as a dramatic classification; it was defined as dramatic genre only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The historical plays cannot be grouped all together as the texts referring to Roman history are rather different from the English histories. Comedies can also be differentiated according to the period of their composition and to the nature of their comic writing (early comedies, romantic comedies, bitter comedies). Tragedies too represent very different styles of tragic writing, from the Senecan tragedy (*Titus Andronicus*), to the lyric tragedy (*Romeo and Juliet*), to the great modern tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*).

A presentation of groups of plays belonging to different genres can convey a general idea of the experimental nature of Shakespeare theatre.



## 8. William Shakespeare's Histories

### 8.1 Shakespeare's Histories

Between 1592 and 1599 Shakespeare wrote a series of plays about English kings, which examined such issues as the nature of leadership and especially the sanctity and duties of kingship, the value of nationalism, the causes of civil unrest and the dangers of rebellion. These plays fall into two groups of four, called **tetralogies**.

The first tetralogy, probably written between 1592 and 1594, consists of the three parts of **Henry VI** and **Richard III**, dealing with the period between the death of Henry V in 1422 and the defeat of Richard III by the future Henry Tudor in 1485; the second tetralogy, probably written between 1595 and 1599, includes **Richard II**, the two parts of **Henry IV** and **Henry V**, that is the historical period from 1377 to 1422. There is also a play called **King John** probably written between the two tetralogies (1594-1596), which refers to the much earlier events of King John's reign (1199-1216). **Henry VIII** was written much later, at the end of Shakespeare's career (1613), in collaboration with John Fletcher, an interesting combination of the historical genre with romance, the genre of Shakespeare's last plays.

### 8.2 The tradition of historical writing

In Shakespeare's time history books were mainly about the lives of the powerful, kings and queens, emperors and tyrants, and presented history in cyclical form and fundamentally tragic, following the model established by Giovanni Boccaccio's **De**

***Casibus Virorum Illustrium*** (1363-1364), a collection of stories about great men falling from power and happiness to misfortune and tragedy. The influence of this work was felt in Elizabethan England and inspired such popular compilations as ***The Mirror for Magistrates*** (1559), where tragic stories of historical figures were presented as a lesson (“a mirror”) for contemporary rulers. History was an important means for propaganda and the first Tudor kings, Henry VII and Henry VIII, had employed historians to write books that made English history prove the right of the Tudors to the English throne. Among the most famous historical works of the time is **Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*** (1577-1586) which is the source of most of Shakespeare’s historical material; Shakespeare’s history plays became in turn a source of historical knowledge for many spectators, as a remark by Thomas Heywood, a dramatist contemporary with Shakespeare, shows: “...plays have made the ignorant more apprehensive, taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as cannot read in the discovery of all our English chronicles” (*An Apology for Actors*, 1612, one of the many writings in “the battle of the theatres”). Shakespeare’s history plays also contributed to the reinforcement of the Tudor myth. The final speech in *Richard III*, for instance, seems to support the view of Tudor divine right, as Richmond, after defeating the monstrous Richard and wearing the crown, foresees the country reunited through his marriage to Elizabeth of York, and their descendants ruling over an ordered land:

O now let Richmond and Elizabeth,  
 The true succeeders of each royal house,  
 By God’s fair ordinance conjoin together,  
 And let their heirs, God, if thy will be so,  
 Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,  
 With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days  
(V.5.29-34)

Another important model for Shakespeare’s history plays was

the English political-morality play, such as **John Bale's *King John*** (c. 1530), and the English tragedy such as **Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *Gorbuduc*** (c. 1562), in which the subject was tyranny or insurrection and the emphasis was on the body politic.

### 8.3 Shakespeare and the historical genre

However, though the historical genre is strictly connected to historical events, making historical plays consequentially rather fixed in their content and form, yet Shakespeare's history plays were to some extent dramatic experiments, narrative plays in which the use of history suggests comparisons with contemporary reality. Indeed, history plays were rather popular at that time as political texts which dealt obliquely with contemporary issues by displacing them into the past; moreover, they offered rich material for the theatre: pageants and spectacles, scenes of fights and violence, heroes' rhetorical speeches.

Shakespeare's histories, in particular, contain devices such as an extended use of meta-theatrical discourse, which tend to remind the audience of the 'reality of theatrical fiction', that is the reality of life, thus creating a strong political impact and presenting the historical genre in an innovative and experimental way. Moreover, what makes Shakespeare's history plays dramatically universal in spite of being connected with a specific historical time and with the English nation, is the presentation of the royal protagonists in their double nature as political figures of governors and as human beings with whose tragic life and sorrowful feelings spectators can identify at any time.

### 8.4 The first tetralogy

The three parts of ***Henry VI*** (king of England, 1422-1461, restored for six months, 1470-1471, and then murdered

in the Tower of London in 1471) move from the initial disorder generated by the quarrel between Gloucester and Winchester over control of the infant-king Henry VI, into increasing chaos due to ambition and betrayal that leads to the loss of English possessions in France and to the internal struggle between the houses of Lancaster and York.

More in detail, **part I** deals with the wars in France during the early years of Henry VI's reign, the relief of **Orleans** by the French, guided and inspired by **Joan of Arc**, and the gradual expulsion of the English from a large part of France. The beginning of the strife of **York** and **Lancaster** is presented in this first play.

**Part II** is about the marriage of Henry to Margaret of Anjou, the intrigues of the Yorkist faction, and other historical events including the rebellion of the common people in Kent led by **Jack Cade**.

In **part III** Henry surrenders to the Duke of York for the succession of the crown, causing Queen Margaret's revolt against the disinheriting of her son. The violence of the political contrast between the Houses of York and Lancaster is dramatically presented in Part III in an emblematic scene in which Henry VI meets a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father, a tragic symbol of the collapse of all natural human ties which prepares the way for the monster-tyrant Richard III. Indeed, the play ends with the murder of Henry VI by **Richard**, Duke of Gloucester, whose ambitious and unscrupulous character – subsequently developed in *Richard III* – is here first indicated.

*Henry VI*, rather than a historical play, is the tragedy of a man, king Henry VI, who is a clear example of the theory of the "king's double body", a 'humanised' royal character painfully torn between his public role and his private and deep human feelings. Mild and gentle, at his first appearance (III.1.) he tries to reconcile his uncles through prayers and with "sighs and tears"; his weakness, in the end, proves to be a disaster for the country. Indeed, Henry VI shows his human weakness more than any other royal character, and often behaves in a way inappropriate for a king. He appears

unable to take decisions and rather hesitant and irresolute, even envious of the life of humble shepherds ("...Methinks it were a happy life / To be no better than a homely swain, / To sit upon a hill as I do now,..." 3 *Henry VI*, II.5.21-23) and unprepared to lead his army in uncertain battles.

Parts II and III of *Henry VI* are both dominated by the image of heads severed from the body (an element that recalls Senecan tragedies) as a symbol of the savagery due to aristocratic irresponsibility and failure of authority. Henry, as head of State, is a head who is not there as Edward, claiming the crown, points out to reject Warwick's insistence that Henry is truly king at the end of Part III: "What is the body when the head is off?" (V.1.41) The void of power produces a number of player-kings, such as Jack Cade, who in part II claims to be "rightful heir unto the crown" (IV.2.128), gets supported by other characters, is made into a player-king, is crowned with a paper crown, and is finally beheaded. In this respect, these histories contribute to the assessment of the Tudor myth and their divine right to the English throne by presenting the weakness (Henry VI), the unrighteousness (Jack Cade), the ferocity (Richard) of kings who are not such by divine right.

***Richard III*** (king of England, 1483-85) gets the crown thanks to his ambition and intelligent, though wicked, machinations, thus representing the perfect Machiavellian politician who knows perfectly well that he can trust no one but himself. In *Richard III* he is continuously plotting in order to destroy his enemies and strengthen his own power; indeed, he is taken by the sheer pleasure of exercising his manipulative wit and often his immoral actions lack proper political motivations. Among Richard's many abominable direct and indirect actions are the imprisonment and murder of his brother Clarence, the machinations to get the crown after the death of Edward IV (Henry VI's son), the imprisonment of the two young princes in the Tower of London and their murder.

Richard's incredible intelligence and rhetorical capacity of persuasion, made even greater by his deformed and unpleasant body, is what makes him an unforgettable hero, a great character that the audience admires in spite of his unnatural wickedness. His opening soliloquy, in which he defines his character and states his intentions ("I that am rudely stamped [...] / Deformed, unfinished [...] / Have no delight to pass away the time, / Unless to spy my shadow in the sun / And descant on my own deformity. / And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain,/[...]" I.1.16-30), tends to involve the audience in his plots and to persuade them to side with him; indeed, the frequent asides and soliloquies are in effect a request to applaud his genius (a very similar theatrical character in this respect will be Iago in *Othello*, who also continuously informs the audience of his actions with soliloquies and asides, asking to be admired for his devilish intelligence). More than the other history plays, *Richard III* is a tragedy, the drama of an evil soul who is totally isolated ("I am myself alone") as a consequence of his uncontrollable drive to power and violence. Once he has achieved the throne, he has nothing left to do but to look into his own emptiness and loneliness:

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;  
And if I die, no soul will pity me.  
And wherefore should they, since that I myself  
Find in myself no pity to myself?

(V.4.179-182)

This history is a tragedy also in the medieval sense, portraying as it does a fall from a high position determined by the tragic figure's own errors and crimes. The play ends with an assertion of the **Tudor myth** through the glorification of Richmond, the future Henry VII Tudor, but the last unforgettable image is that of Richard who fights to the very end uttering the famous last desperate words: "A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!" (V.6.13)

## 8.5 The second tetralogy

**Richard II** (king of England, 1377-1399) had unquestionable title to the throne, but he was a weak and indecisive king. His arbitrary acts provoked the rebellion of his cousin **Henry Bolingbroke** that led to Richard's forced abdication. Bolingbroke, though a better king than Richard, was nevertheless a usurper and his reign as Henry IV was plagued by rebellion and civil disorder, which were interpreted by orthodox Tudor doctrine of divine right as divine punishments for Henry's act of usurpation and as a warning against rebellion. Shakespeare's **Richard II**, the first play of the second tetralogy, however, underlines how the idea of divine right has to be combined with military and popular strength and with a deep concern for the good of the State.

In the first half of the play Richard appears intoxicated by his power as a king and believes he is allowed to do anything he likes. He surrounds himself with flatterers and dispossesses his cousin Bolingbroke, thus creating a degree of sympathy for him and justifying his resentment. As the play progresses, however, questions arise about whether Bolingbroke is motivated by a desire for justice or whether he is driven by personal ambition. In the second part of the play, after Richard's loss of the crown, we see him begin to change. He is matured by suffering and reveals a genuine sensitivity. Deprived of the title of 'king', he seeks for the meaning of that title and appears essentially as a man who suffers, 'king of his own griefs' ("You may my glories and my state depose, / But not my griefs. Still am I king of those." IV.1.191-192) Richard looks within himself in search of his own essential being, thus representing the tragedy of modern man who is faced with the need to change in a different world, aware that life makes people play a number of roles which end up by hiding man's real essence:

Thus play I in one person many people,  
And none contented. Sometimes am I king;  
Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar;

And so am I. Then crushing penury  
 Persuades me I was better when a king.  
 [...] But whate'er I be,  
 Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
 With nothing shall be pleased till he be eas'd  
 With being nothing. [...] (V.4.31-41)

In this play Shakespeare makes use of metatheatrical discourses showing how, even in dealing with history, he never forgets the value of theatre and its resemblance to life. Another well known passage in that sense is a speech by Bolingbroke in which he draws comparisons between life and theatre and presents man as an actor:

As in the theatre the eyes of men,  
 After a well-grac'd actor leaves the stage,  
 Are idly bent on him that enters next,  
 Thinking his prattle to be tedious:  
 Even so, or with much more contempt, men's eyes  
 Did scowl on gentle Richard [...]

(V.2.23-28)

The remaining plays of the second tetralogy are about the growth and education of Henry V (king of England, 1413-1422), a mythical figure considered by Elizabethans as the greatest king previous to the Tudor monarchs.

In the two parts of **Henry IV** (king of England, 1399-1413), Prince Hal, the future Henry V, is the pivotal character, moving (often in alternating scenes) between the world of history and duty in the court and the world of comedy and license in the scenes with Falstaff and his companions.

In **Part I**, king Henry IV has to face several rebellions; the most prominent of the rebels is Harry Percy, or **Hotspur**, who seems to have all the princely qualities that **Prince Hal** apparently lacks. As the play progresses, however, Hotspur shows to have



a narrow concept of honour and weak political judgement. Falstaff, on the other hand, embodies for Prince Hal carnival and the comic spirit, and a temptation to illicit behaviour. The audience, however, is reassured at the very beginning of the play of Hal's essential goodness; in fact, like other later Shakespearean characters, Prince Hal soon informs the audience in a soliloquy that he is going to play a part in order to hide his real self and disguise his true nature by acting as an irresponsible young man inclined to pleasures, lies, and robberies, but in the end he will reveal himself a better person when no one would expect it:

Yet herein will I imitate the sun,  
 Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
 To smother up his beauty from the world,  
 That, when he please again to be himself,  
 Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at  
 By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
 Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.[...]  
 So, when this loose behaviour I throw off [...]  
 My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,  
 Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
 Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
 I'll so offend to make offense a skill,  
 Redeeming time when men think least I will.  
 (1HIV, I.2.187-207)

Evidence of his final transformation as new king at the death of Henry IV is his condemnation of **Falstaff**, his companions of previous times, who is banished from his presence and thrown into prison.

In Part II, Prince Hal becomes the victim of his own false appearances, as his father is convinced that he is anxious for his death in order to get the crown; in the end, however, Henry sees his son's true nature and frees himself from the guilt of his usurpation of Richard II's throne by passing on the crown. In Part II Falstaff continues to be the protagonist of a comic subplot. He is now older and is associated with images of disease and decay, providing a parallel to the King. In the end there

is a painfully moving moment when Prince Hal as new king distances himself from his old companion speaking the terrible words “I know thee not, old man” (V.5.47), taking both Falstaff and the spectators by surprise. Hal is aware of his duties as a king but in dismissing Falstaff he is also dismissing a part of himself.

The presence of such a great comic character as Falstaff in these two plays shows how Shakespeare was able to combine **history** with **fiction** and **comedy**: Falstaff represents a sort of clown in his appearance and behaviour, and, with Prince Hal, he becomes the protagonist of tricks and disguises, two typical elements of comedy. Moreover, Falstaff allows Shakespeare to experiment an innovating trait as to the linguistic dimension with the insertion of the language of the common people: Falstaff frequents taverns and mixes with vulgar people whose speech is obviously rather different from the language spoken by aristocrats. Indeed, *Henry IV* has rightly been discussed by some critics as a pioneer work both in its structure (as it develops along an episodic path presenting a sequence of scenes related to country life and city life) and as to language and characters.

**Henry V** (king of England, 1413-1422) is centred on this hero-king who deals firmly with domestic rebellion, unites his country behind him by choosing symbolically English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish captains, and leads his army to victory against France. The play ends happily according to the comic structure model with the marriage of Henry with Katherine of France, a political (and sentimental) union which will bring French territory under English control.

This play has an unusual theatrical structure as each act is introduced by the figure of **Chorus**, pointing out the epic nature of the play's events, but also assuming a meta-theatrical function as he discusses the problems connected to the staging of complex events (such as large battle fields on which two entire armies face each other) and invites the audience to fill the gaps in the performance

by imagining what cannot be realistically put on stage:

O, for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
 The brightest heaven of invention;  
 A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
 And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
 [...] But pardon, gentles all,  
 The flat unraisèd spirits that hath dar'd  
 On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
 So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
 The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram  
 Within this wooden O the very casques  
 That did affright the air of Agincourt? [...]
 And let us, ciphers to this great account,  
 On your imaginary forces work. [...]
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
 Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times,  
 Turning the accomplishments of many years  
 Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
 Admit me Chorus to this history; [...]

*(Prologue, 1-32)*

The Prologue thus stresses the fictional nature of performance involving the audience in an imaginative effort and establishing a sort of 'theatrical pact/agreement' which makes explicit a number of conventions to be accepted, however unrealistic they may be.

In a way, Shakespeare is here discussing drama theories, defending the dramatist's freedom of using a non-naturalistic scene for his artistic creation, his freedom from rules towards innovation and experiment.

Chorus moves freely between past and present, drawing comparisons between them and even foreseeing future events; indeed, in Chorus five, the king's return is celebrated in a speech comparing Henry V to Caesar on the one hand, and, on the other, to the Earl of Essex imagining his equally triumphant return from Ireland where he had been sent by the Queen to crush an attempt of rebellion: "[...] But now behold, / In the quick forge and working-house of thought, /

How London doth pour out her citizens. / The Mayor and all his brethren in best sort, / Like to the senators of th' antique Rome, / With the plebeians swarming at their heels, / Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in: / As, by a lower but loving likelihood, / Were now the general of our gracious Empress, / As in good time he may from Ireland coming, / Bringing rebellion broached on his sword, / How many would the peaceful city quit / To welcome him! [...]" (ll. 22-34) In fact, the Earl of Essex failed and his return to London was far from being triumphant. This reference to events of the time, 1599, makes it possible to date this play unusually precisely.

## 8.6 *Henry VIII*

A similar anticipation of future events (well-known events to the audience of the time) concludes *Henry VIII*, with the christening of new-born Elizabeth I and with the Archbishop of Canterbury's prophecy of her future greatness and of the greatness of her successor James I:

This royal infant [...]  
 [...] shall be [...]  
 A pattern to all princes living with her,  
 And all that shall succeed [...]  
 Her ashes new-create another heir  
 As great in admiration as herself,  
 [...]  
 His honour and the greatness of his name  
 Shall be, and make new nations...  
 [...] our children's children  
 Shall see this, and bless heaven.

(V.4.17-55)

This play deals with the accusations and execution of the Duke of Buckingham; the question of the royal divorce and the coronation of **Anne Boleyn** as Queen of England; the

triumph of **Cranmer**, Archbishop of Canterbury over his enemies, and the final christening of **Princess Elizabeth**.

*Henry VIII* does not belong to the two groups of histories, as it was written at a much later time (1613), after Shakespeare had retired to Stratford, and it is particularly interesting as an example of experiment and genre combination as it can be placed on a subtle border between *history* and *romance*. In the last period of his career Shakespeare had composed his romances (*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*) and *Henry VIII* was produced a few years later in collaboration with John Fletcher, author of some of the most popular romances. The historical events relating to Henry VIII (king of England, 1509-1547) are therefore enriched by romance elements such as dreams, apparitions, prophecies; moreover, unlike the other endings of the history plays, the concluding scene of Elizabeth's christening emphasises a sense of renaissance and positivity. Finally, in *Henry VIII* there are highly spectacular moments such as processions, trains and official ceremonies, which responded to the theatre fashion and taste of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and to the development of more sophisticated sceneries.

## 8.7 Conclusion

Shakespeare's histories are very important for their historical and political contents, as an unforgettable picture of those events from which originated a nation, 16<sup>th</sup> century England, strictly identifiable with the Tudor myth; yet these plays are also very important in a theatrical perspective as they are characterised by a number of experimental traits (combination of different genres, introduction of comic characters and popular language, meta-theatrical discourse, etc.), thus contributing to an interesting reassessment of historical genre.

Above all, Shakespeare read history through the feeling of a man of theatre and of a great connoisseur of the human soul, and produced a theatrical creation in which human nature and man's mind and soul are the true protagonists, therefore reflecting contemporary life and the new ways of feeling of his own time, but also depicting essential aspects of humanity and making these plays immortal.

## 9. William Shakespeare's Early Comedies

### 9.1 Comic genre

Comedy is generally defined as opposed to tragedy and as aiming at generating laughter. Laughter is an aspect of comedy, but not necessary to it. Indeed, comedy refers to a literary structure that moves toward a happy ending and implies a positive understanding of human experience. **Dante's *The Divine Comedy***, though not amusing, is comic in form and in outlook, and it is so called as it depicts the movement of the human soul toward a final union with God. In most comedy the happy ending involves a marriage or at least some kind of union or re-union that resolves the conflicts and brings the characters into a state of harmony, moving from confusion to order, from ignorance to understanding, from separation to union.

### 9.2 Shakespeare's comedies

**William Shakespeare** wrote his comedies at the same time as **Ben Jonson**, who was more appreciated by his contemporaries also for his greater education and respect of classic rules. In fact, Shakespeare and Jonson represent two different traditions of comedy. Jonson's comedy, usually defined as satirical comedy, has a didactic purpose and creates a world that pretends to be real in which characters deviate from social and moral norms and are therefore exposed to mocking laughter. Shakespeare's comic world, on the other hand, does not pretend to be real; in fact, it explicitly underlines its theatrical nature. It appears closer

to the fairy-tale world with the presence of magic and fairies, with the uniting of lovers or re-uniting of broken families, with improbable coincidences and deceptions developed around identical twins, lost children, women in disguise; however, it also contains characters who are the target of satire (Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) and problematic aspects which are sometimes closer to tragedy (characters threatened by death or banishment such as Egeon in *The Comedy of Errors*, Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, Rosalind and Orlando in *As You Like It*, Claudio in *Measure for Measure*). The presence of potential for tragedy is an important element which makes Shakespeare's comedies true to life as they deal with human relationships and feelings, reflecting also the bitterness and darkness of reality and always stimulating the audience to further thinking about essential issues of human existence.

Shakespeare's comic writings are generally divided into four groups: early/euphuistic comedies, romantic comedies, problem plays (bitter/dark comedies), romances. Only the first two groups, therefore, even in their definition, can be considered proper comedies, all composed in the last decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (a sort of parallel writing to the histories, all written in the same period with the exception of *Henry VIII*). Comedy, more than any other theatrical form, is the genre in which Shakespeare tries to experiment new possibilities, new ways, partly as a consequence of drawing inspiration from a number of different sources: Plautine comedy, Italian short-story tradition, mediaeval folklore, courtly comedy, romantic comedy, all of them combined by the artist's creative imagination.

### 9.3 Early comedies

The group of the early comedies includes *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *A Midsummer*



***Night's Dream***, all written in the years 1593-95. They are also defined euphuistic comedies because, though rather different from each other, they show a similarity in style as their elaborate language evokes that fashionable style initiated by **John Lyly** with his prose romance ***Euphues*** (1578).

These comedies, though the first products of Shakespeare's dramatic work, contain many aspects which characterise his more mature plays and prove how Shakespeare, since the very beginning of his activity as a dramatist, tried to experiment innovative solutions, with his combination of diverse sources, an extended use of meta-dramatic language, suspended endings, the "play-within-the-play" device, dramatic developments structured in different ways.

#### 9.4 *The Comedy of Errors*

***The Comedy of Errors*** is the typical Plautine comedy based on **Plautus's *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo*** (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.) but Shakespeare adds to it a non-theatrical source, the story of Apollonius of Tyrus narrated in **John Gower's** narrative poem ***Confessio Amantis*** (1390). The ancient Latin and the mediaeval English sources are perfectly fused in a new dramatic structure in which tragic and comic are juxtaposed: the story of **Egeon** (Apollonius) becomes the romance/tragic frame embracing the comic plot of the Plautine twins and their 'comedy of errors'. In fact, the play opens with Egeon of **Syracuse**, who, arriving at **Ephesus**, is sentenced to death as a consequence of a law against merchants coming from Syracuse; however, he can save his life if he finds some source of rescue by 5.00 p.m. (time is an interesting element, often referred to as if to stress the formal respect of the Aristotelian unities in this comedy). The old man, who is in search of his son Antipholus, narrates his past and present misfortunes, a tragic tale of a terrible storm during which his wife and one of his twin sons with his twin servant had been driven away from him by the fury of the waves (at their birth the two **Antipholus** had been given the twins

**Dromio** as servants, so that, in doubling the couple of twins with respect to the Plautine source, Shakespeare multiplies the possibilities of comic confusion).

The main characters of the ensuing ‘comedy of errors’, based on the confusion of the twins’ identities, are thus introduced by Egeon’s narration, and a formal link between the tragic opening and the following comic events is established. It is interesting to notice how gradually and subtly Shakespeare moves from the **tragic** mode of the first scene to the **comic** atmosphere of the main text. Indeed, after Egeon has received his sentence and leaves the stage, scene 2 shows Antipholus of Syracuse pronouncing a moving monologue, in a pre-Hamletic tone, meditating on his own confusion and on his split identity after the loss of his brother:

He that commends me to my own content  
 Commends me to the thing I cannot get.  
 I to the world am like a drop of water  
 That in the ocean seeks another drop,  
 Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,  
 Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.  
 So I, to find a mother and a brother,  
 In quest of them unhappy, lose myself.

*(I.2.33-40)*

Right after this speech, the servant Dromio of Ephesus enters presenting the first of the many errors on which the comedy is based, shifting the tone to the comic note; Antipholus of Syracuse is therefore forced to give up the traits of a tragic hero and becomes the protagonist of a witty comedy. However, the sense of confusion and bewilderment in an unknown world in which identities are continuously doubted pervades the atmosphere and Antipholus of Syracuse, often mistaken for his brother Antipholus of Ephesus, questions his own identity – “Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell? / Sleeping or waking; mad or well advis’d? / Known unto these, and to myself disguis’d.” (II.2.212-214) – thus inviting his audience,

even in the most comic moments, to reflect on serious problems concerning humanity in a new changing world.

The romance frame (and its literary source) is resumed in the last scene when Egeon is taken to the place of his execution; the encounter with his sons and the final reunion of the family saves his life also thanks to an unexpected *coup de théâtre*: the **Abbess** explains the confusion of identities by revealing herself as Egeon's wife and the twins' mother separated from the rest of the family in a violent tempest many years earlier. Egeon's narration at the opening of the play is here resumed and completed while the general agnition marks the happy ending of the comedy. In the romance mode, the Abbess, in her final speech, invites all the characters to retreat into the abbey in order to narrate to each other those past events already known to the audience ("... go with us into the abbey here, / And hear at large discoursed all our fortunes, ..." V.1.395-396) while the last lines are left to the two proper comic characters, the twin clowns/servants, in order to underline the proper belonging of this text to the genre of comedy and also to stress again the major problematic issue of the play, that is the search of identity: "We came into the world like brother and brother, / And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another." (V.1.424-425)

## 9.5 *The Taming of the Shrew*

*The Taming of the Shrew* combines three different sources: the ancient Oriental narrative tradition (the story of Sly in the **Induction**), the oral tradition related to wives as shrews, the Italian tradition of comedy with the story of **Bianca**, **Lucentio**, **Tranio** and the game of disguises inspired to **Ludovico Ariosto's** *Suppositi* (1509; translated by **George Gascoigne** as *The Supposes* in 1566).

Also in this comedy, the new dramatic structure is perfectly organised with the story of the two sisters – Bianca with her several suitors who disguise themselves as private tutors in order to court her, and **Katherina**, the shrew who has to be tamed by

**Petruchio** – proceeding in a parallel way, with an alternation of scenes and places (**Padova** and **Verona**), till they come together for the ending.

The **Induction**, though with a completely separate plot, anticipates the main themes of the comedy, particularly as to the metatheatrical nature of this text, presenting the story of **Sly**, a drunkard who falls asleep and, waking up, is made to believe he is a rich gentleman for whose entertainment a company of actors will perform a comedy entitled “**The Taming of the Shrew**”. The theatrical fiction is then central to this play and its mechanisms are openly revealed, thus setting the whole play on a metatheatrical plane while the artificial nature of the performance is emphasised by an over-extended representation of disguises and confusion of identities. The metatheatrical discourse of the **Induction** is particularly explicit in the speeches of the Lord who gives indications to his own servants on how to act the various roles at Sly’s waking up. Very interesting is what he suggests for his young page who is to act the part of Sly’s wife:

**LORD** [...] go you to Barthol’ mew my page,  
 And see him dress’d in all suits like a lady.  
 That done, conduct him to the drunkerd’s chamber,  
 And call him ‘madam’, do him obeisance.  
 Tell him from me, as he will win my love,  
 He bear himself with honourable action,  
 Such as he hath observ’d in noble ladies  
 Unto their lords, by them accomplished.  
 Such duty to the drunkard let him do,  
 With soft low tongue and lowly courtesy,  
 And say ‘What is’t your honour will command,  
 Wherein your lady and your humble wife  
 May show her duty, and make known her love?’  
 And then with kind embracements, tempting kisses,  
 And with declining head into his bosom,  
 Bid him shed tears, as being overjoy’d  
 To see her noble lord restor’d to health, [...]  
 And if the boy have not a woman’s gift  
 To rain a shower of commanded tears,

An onion will do well for such a shift,  
 Which in a napkin being close convey'd,  
 Shall in despite enforce a watery eye.  
 (*Induction, 1.101-124*)

Here the Lord is giving suggestions for costumes, speeches, gestures, and is also revealing some of the devices used at the time in order to make acting more convincing as it appears in his reference to the use of onions to produce tears. Moreover, this seems to be the only example in Shakespeare's theatre of a boy-actor who disguises himself as a woman on stage (usually boy actors play women characters from the beginning, and often disguise themselves as men during the development of the plot).

The implicit suggestion contained in the *Induction* that everything has to be read as 'a play' is particularly important when it comes to the interpretation of Kate's last speech which has often provoked outraged reactions on the part of feminist critics:

Fie, fie! Unknit that threatening unkind brow  
 And dart not scornful glances from those eyes,  
 To wound thy lord, thy king, thy governor.  
 / [...] /  
 A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled,  
 Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty,  
 And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty  
 Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it.  
 Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
 Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee,  
 And for thy maintenance; commits his body  
 To painful labour both by sea and land,  
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,  
 Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;  
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands  
 But love, fair looks, and true obedience;  
 Too little payment for so great a debt.  
 Such duty as the subject owes the prince  
 Even such a woman oweth to her husband.  
 (*V.2.137-157*)

A literal reading of Kate's words and her complete change from a fighting independent woman to an obedient and subjugated wife is difficult to accept (the husband is defined as the woman's 'lord, keeper, head, sovereign' to whom wives owe total obedience); a theatrical reading of this conclusion indicates, on the other hand, that Katherina is only playing a part that Petruchio has written for her to perform in front of the audience (on stage and in the theatre house). Moreover, the use of the progressive tense *taming* in the title stresses that the attention is on something in progress rather than already completed, that there is no conclusion, that Kate's story remains unresolved (as the *Induction* does, since Sly's story is not resumed at the end of the performance of "*The Taming of the Shrew*"). The comedy, with realistic and essentially anti-romantic elements, questions the possibility of transforming identity and underlines the fundamental contiguity between life and theatre; in short, the problems discussed in the text tend only to create a response and further meditation in the spectators, who leave the theatre and return to 'real' life aware that they are going to 'perform' their own stories.

## 9.6 Euphuistic comedies

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labour's Lost* are the two proper euphuistic comedies as most of their characters are aristocratic (the protagonists of the first two comedies are merchants and city middle class members) and their language is consequentially more refined.

## 9.7 *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is interesting for its use of a sort of 'mirror plot' in which two comic characters (the

clowns), servants to the gentlemen, repeat the scenes of their masters in a parodistic and grotesque way, staging the farce genre and implicitly mocking the typical romantic comedy. The other aspect worthy of note is that this is the first comedy in which disguise is used, in the character of **Julia** who wears men's clothes in order to follow her lover **Proteus** from **Verona** to **Milan**. Disguise was common enough in the prose literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but this is the first of Shakespeare's many theatrical experiments with the device of female cross-dressing as a boy while playing the role of a woman.

This comedy discusses very serious issues such as split personalities, the betrayal of friendship and love, loyalty and deceitfulness, presenting them in a strongly controversial and ambiguous way and bringing the conflicts to an unsatisfactory 'happy' ending which, once more, leaves the audience with the feeling that no real solution is proposed. The modernity of Shakespeare's theatre, as the expression of the uncertainties of the time, the lack of absolute values, and the awareness that reality can be interpreted from different perspectives, is stressed particularly in its open-ended plays, an element which does not belong exclusively to his great tragedies and his mature production but appears already in his early comedies.

## 9.8 *Love's Labour's Lost*

*Love's Labour's Lost* also proposes a rather unexpected ending, thus confirming the experimental nature of Shakespeare's comedies. If Shakespeare's endings are often ambiguous, not totally 'happy' and joyful, in this comedy one of the major comic rules is broken as there is no happy ending, or, rather, no proper ending. Indeed, whereas the comedy develops along the lines of a perfect comic model – it is witty, amusing, and the comic conflicts and complications seem to point to the typical happy ending with a multiple wedding ceremony for the four young aristocratic couples – the happiness of the dance in Act V is suddenly broken by the shadow of death which invades

the scene, disrupting the natural model of comic genre and preventing the realisation of the expected ending which, thus, remains suspended; as a matter of fact, the joyful atmosphere is suddenly interrupted by news of death and the comedy ends with the beginning of a new action/non-action marked by the colours of mourning and penitence; the couples separate on the agreement that they might get together again after a year of mourning and the comedy thus remains unconcluded as the final lines spoken by **Berowne** underline:

Our wooing doth not end like an old play;  
 Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesies  
 Might well have made our sport a comedy.  
 (V.2.860-862)

Shakespeare, as has been mentioned, often proposes open-ended plays; however, ***Love's Labour's Lost*** remains a unique example of a comedy in which there is no ending at all, a form of courageous transgression of basic rules and a bold attempt at a new experiment.

## 9.9 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Four different theatrical traditions can be traced in ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** (1595): **classic** comedy (the wedding of Theseus and Hyppolita), **romantic/romance** tradition (the two young couples fleeing into the enchanted woods and the magic exchange of identities with the consequential misunderstandings and complications), the **Plautine**-realistic farce (the artisans' performance), and **masque** (the magic creatures of the enchanted woods). Love is the main theme but it is presented as an illusion and an irrational force which can be manipulated and cause disorder. This comedy also presents an unusual and unexpected ending; in fact, the main plot concerning the young couples and their love ends in Act IV with the triumph of love according to the



comic conventions, but the theatrical action continues for the whole of Act V stressing the centrality of meta-theatre with the celebration of the theatre world and the artisans' performance, one of Shakespeare's most successful examples of the "**play-within-the-play**" device. The short epilogue spoken by Puck reminds the audience of the evanescent nature of theatre which, in this respect, resembles dreams and life:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended,  
That you have but slumber'd here  
While these visions did appear.

*(V.1.414-417)*



## 10. William Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies

### 10.1 Romantic Comedies

The conventional definition of romantic comedies applies to a group of comedies including *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, written in the period 1596-1600. Love games are central to these plays; however, they are often rather un-romantic as they present very serious issues, often close to tragedy.

### 10.2 *The Merchant of Venice*

*The Merchant of Venice* presents the hatred between **Christians** and **Jews** in the characters of **Antonio**, the merchant, and **Shylock**, the usurer. Shylock hates Antonio on religious and economic grounds because Antonio is Christian and lends his money without interest, thus spoiling Shylock's business. In his first appearance he explains the reasons for his resentment towards Antonio, showing himself as a malevolent creature thirsty for blood and money; however, later he is given the most moving speech in the play in which he criticises Antonio's racist attitude and asserts the fundamental humanity of his own race:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same

diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? – if you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

(III.1.46-53)

Characteristically, Shakespeare does not create dehumanised stereotypes but complete human beings, with negative and positive feelings and attitudes, so that even a Jew can attract the favour of the audience in a time marked by a violent anti-semitic campaign as a consequence of an attempt on the queen's life of which her Jewish doctor was believed responsible.

The dramatic structure of ***The Merchant of Venice*** develops along an alternation of scenes taking place in Venice (the story of Antonio and Shylock) and Belmont (the story of Portia and Bassanio), apparently two totally different worlds as **Venice** is the new society of money and trade whereas **Belmont** still represents the feudal world with its chivalric and romance elements. After all, however, the two worlds are much closer and interchanging than one would think as the characters move from one world to the other and their values and ideals often coincide. Indeed, the 'romantic' characters in Belmont tend to behave and speak according to the values and styles of the new world and, on the whole, the play demystifies the genre of romantic comedy itself by reversing a series of stereotypes: **Bassanio** wants to marry **Portia** because she is "a lady richly left, / And she is fair, and – fairer than that word – / Of wondrous virtues" (I.1.160-162), showing that his attraction is determined by interest in the first place, then beauty, and only in the end he refers to what had always been the main value in a lady; similarly, the couple **Lorenzo-Jessica** who represent the classic model of young romantic lovers who have to flee in order to realise their love against the father's will, reveal themselves as superficial and untrustworthy young people as is evident in their dialogue opening act V, when, in a typical romantic setting (night-time in a garden with the moon

shining), they refer to a number of tragic myths of unfaithful love:

**LORENZO** The moon shines bright. In such a night as this,  
[...]

Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls  
And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents,  
Where Cressid lay that night,  
[...]

**JESSICA** In such a night  
Medea gathered the enchanted herbs  
That did renew old Aeson.

**LORENZO** In such a night  
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew  
And with an unthrift love did run from Venice  
As far as Belmont.

**JESSICA** In such a night  
Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,  
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,  
And ne'er a true one

*(V.1.1-19)*

Disguise of female characters in men's clothes is another important dramatic element as it allows **Jessica**, Shylock's daughter, to flee from her father's house in order to be with her Christian lover Lorenzo, whereas **Portia**, in lawyer's clothes, goes to Venice and saves Antonio's life at his trial. The speeches accompanying the disguise moment of these two characters are very significant. Jessica is ashamed of her disguise:

Here, catch this casket, it is worth the pains.  
I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me,  
For I am much ashamed of my exchange.  
But love is blind, and lovers cannot see  
The pretty follies that themselves commit;  
For if they could, Cupid himself would blush  
To see me thus transformed to a boy.

*(II.6.34-40)*

Indeed, in her flight Jessica feels ashamed as she is proving disloyal to her religion, is challenging her father's authority and is also stealing his jewels and gold. Portia, on the contrary, has a determined attitude and is aware that her disguise will allow her to enter the man's world for the noble reason of saving Antonio's life; moreover, she makes fun of men who are often less brave and strong than they try to appear, as she says to her waiting-gentlewoman **Nerissa** who will accompany her in the enterprise:

When we are both accoutred like young men  
 I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two,  
 And wear my dagger with the braver grace,  
 And speak between the change of man and boy  
 With a reed voice, and turn two mincing steps  
 Into a manly stride; and speak of 'frays  
 Like a fine bragging youth; and tell quaint lies  
 How honourable ladies sought my love,  
 Which I denying, hey fell sick and died –  
 I could not withal. Then I'll repent,  
 And wish for all that that I had not killed them;  
 And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell,  
 That men shall swear I have discontinued school  
 Above a twelvemonth. I have within my mind  
 A thousand raw tricks of these bragging jacks,  
 Which I will practise.

(III.4.63-78)

### 10.3 Disguise in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*

A similar attitude is shown by **Rosalind** in *As You Like It* when she is forced to leave the court of her uncle, and flies to the forest of Arden dressed in men's clothes as **Ganymede** (the mythical beautiful youth, and an evident implication of homosexuality), while her cousin **Celia** disguises herself as a poor girl named **Aliena**, thus stressing that she is going to

estrangle herself from her own self (another presentation of a split identity):

**CELIA** I'll put myself in poor and mean attire,  
And with a kind of umber smirch my face;  
The like do you. So shall we pass along  
And never stir assailants.

**ROSALIND** Were it not better,  
Because that I am more than common tall,  
That I did suit me all points like a man?  
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,  
A boar-spear in my hand, and in my heart,  
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will,  
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside,  
As many other mannish cowards have  
That do outface it with their semblances.

**CELIA** What shall I call thee when thou art a man?

**ROSALIND** I'll have no worse a name than Jove's own page,  
And therefore look you call me Ganymede.  
But what will you be call'd?

**CELIA** Something that hath a reference to my state.  
No longer Celia, but Aliena

(I.3.107-124)

A disguise moment takes place also in *Twelfth Night* when, after the initial storm, **Viola** finds herself in an unknown country and has to conceal her female identity in order to be safer:

**VIOLA** I prithee [...]  
Conceal me what I am, and be my aid  
For such disguise as haply shall become  
The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke.  
Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him [...]

(I.2.52-56)

The reference to an ambiguous sexual identity is evident in the word 'eunuch'; however, in both cases the disguise of a woman in man's clothes creates confusion and provokes

homosexual feelings; moreover, the omo-erotic ambiguities of gender crossing are made particularly evident by the constant presence of boy actors.

#### 10.4 Sexual ambiguities in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*

In *As You Like It* the shepherdess **Phoebe** falls in love with Ganymede while **Ganymede/Rosalind** plays a love game with **Orlando** who has not recognised her: she asks him to court Ganymede as if he were Rosalind so that the audience sees a man wooing another man (who is, in fact, a boy actor!). The sexual ambiguity is explicitly expressed and made fun of in the **Epilogue**, which is unusually entrusted to a female character, though it is in fact the boy actor who speaks while still wearing Rosalind's clothes: "It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue [...] If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not [...]."

In *Twelfth Night* **Orsino** asks **Cesario/Viola** to woo **Olivia** in his place; Olivia falls in love with Cesario not realising that he is a woman, while in the end Orsino asks Viola/Cesario, still wearing men's clothes, to marry him, so that again the audience sees a man proposing another man (who is, in fact, a boy actor).

A proper homosexual love is presented in the character of Antonio, in love with Viola's twin brother **Sebastian** (who in the end will marry Olivia), as is evident in a speech in which **Antonio** gives his reasons for following Sebastian:

I could not stay behind you. My desire,  
More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth;  
And not all love to see you (Though so much  
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage),  
But jealousy what might befall your travel,  
Being skillless in these parts which to a stranger,  
Unguided, and unfriended, often prove



Rough and unhospitable. My willing love,  
The rather by these arguments of fear,  
Set forth in your pursuit.

(III.3.4-13)

The appearance of Sebastian on stage, beside resuming the problem of split identities in separated twins, allows a typical romance ending with the final agnition and reunion of a family after a separation provoked by a tempest.

### 10.5 Metadramatic discourse

The metadramatic discourse in these two plays is particularly important and extended as characters consciously play different roles by assuming different identities and wearing different clothes/costumes; moreover, in Shakespearean theatre Rosalind and Viola are the most extended parts played by female characters disguised as men.

Metatheatrical language is also widely used and *As You Like It* contains one of the most famous speeches in Shakespeare's theatre on the comparison between life and theatre:

**JAQUES** All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts, [...]

(II.7.140-143)

### 10.6 *As you Like It*: from the clown to the fool

*As You like It* represents an important moment in the development of Shakespeare's comic writing. **William Kempe**, an actor whose comic qualities were rather direct and unrefined and who had always played the **clown** roles (the twins Dromio in *The Comedy of Errors*, the servants in *The*

*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, etc.), left Shakespeare's company and **Robert Armin** became the new comic actor. In order to enhance his more sophisticated and intellectual comic vein, Shakespeare created a new comic role, the **fool**, an intelligent and witty character, who can speak his mind freely and tell the truth just because he is a fool. **Touchstone** in *As You like It* is the first example of this kind of character whose most mature representation will appear in *King Lear*.

### 10.7 *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

The definition of occasional play has been suggested for ***The Merry Wives of Windsor***, as it was probably written in order to exploit the favour that the character of **Falstaff** had encountered with the audience; indeed, there is a legend that Shakespeare wrote this play on the orders of Queen Elizabeth, who wanted to see Sir John Falstaff in love. This comedy differs from the other romantic comedies in its being more a play of its time, showing Shakespeare's ability to appeal to the audience, as it employs a whole range of theatrical strategies designed to ensure its success particularly with an aristocratic audience towards the close of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, the irony and sarcasm with which themes such as love and marriage, jealousy and revenge, class and wealth are dealt with, make this play rather modern.

Shakespeare transported the characters of the comic subplot of the *Henry IV* plays into the bourgeois Windsor world and set them into an intrigue involving jealousy. Falstaff is the play's comic centre, but he is presented in a pathetic perspective: self-opinionated, without irony, and involved in a complicated attempt at seduction that turns him into a clown. Much of the comic effect of the play is derived from misunderstandings between characters. At the play's end Falstaff is punished for his ludicrous excesses but is not excluded from the final feast.

### 10.8 *Much Ado About Nothing, or, What You Will*

In spite of comic plots and characters, the action of the romantic comedies takes place against a background of darkness and injustice, particularly strong in *As You Like It*, which opens with the violent conflict of two pairs of brothers; moreover, in both *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* there are prominent figures whose unhappiness and sense of disillusionment with the world disturbs the joy and the pastoral idyll. Also ***Much Ado About Nothing, or, What You Will*** proclaims itself by its title as a light comedy, but it offers a disturbing experience. A young woman, **Hero**, is wrongly accused of betrayal, and at her wedding she is publicly rejected by **Claudio** in a speech revealing his male materialist valuation of virginity (loss of virginity means loss of worth):

There, Leonato [Hero's father], take her back again,  
 Give not this rotten orange to your friend,  
 She's but the sign and semblance of her honour:  
 Behold how like a maid she blushes here!  
 [...] Would you not swear  
 All you that see her, that she were a maid,  
 By these exterior shows? But she is none:  
 She knows the heat of a luxurious bed:  
 Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.

(IV.1.26-37)

At these words Hero faints, and her friends make everybody believe that she is dead in order to have the time to prove her innocence.

The lightness of the play is entrusted to the characters of **Beatrice** and **Benedick** with their enjoyable verbal fencing and a more positive presentation of the concept of love, based on friendship and genuine reciprocal respect. Though the play obviously moves towards a comic resolution of the situation, the unfair accusation of an innocent young lady by her lover is a dark and disquieting element of this comedy which remains unresolved.

The disturbing elements, already present in the early comedies, are even more evident in this later group of romantic

comedies as they reflect the anxiety of the time, thus creating a more direct link with Shakespeare's problematic and tragic writing of the following period.

## 11. William Shakespeare's Problem Plays

### 11.1 Shakespeare's problem plays

*Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, all written between 1600 and 1605, raise further questions about comic form and tone. They have been variously termed “dark” and “bitter” comedies, “problem comedies”, and even “problem plays”, avoiding the word “comedy” altogether.

In the First Folio *Troilus and Cressida* appears included in the tragedies whereas the other two problem plays are grouped with the comedies. Indeed, *Troilus and Cressida* has no “comic” ending whatsoever, neither has it tragic elements or characters presenting a tragic stature. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century critics have noticed that *Troilus and Cressida* shares many elements with *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*: they all present unpleasant characters, corrupted and morally weak; the comic elements derive from intrigue and from the exhibition of cowardice, shame and meanness rather than from the playful trickeries and deceptions and from the amused observation of the little daily follies; they all develop on the debate around some of the most fundamental values of the old world – faithfulness, honour, justice – and show how these values are questioned in modern times.

In his previous comic production Shakespeare had already shown his dissatisfaction with the manner in which romantic comedy resolved the tensions and issues that it raised and his endings tend to raise ever new questions: in *The Two Gentle men of Verona* Julia still wants to marry Proteus who had

attempted to betray her; in *Twelfth Night* Viola accepts to marry Orsino who a few minutes before had threatened to kill her and had proclaimed his “constant” love for another woman all the way through; in *All’s Well That Ends Well* Hero forgives Claudio’s outrageous treatment of her; and many other essential questions on love, faithfulness, religion, money, class, power, are raised in all Shakespeare’s comedies where romantic resolution depends on illusion, on magical or arbitrary transformations, or on the characters’ capacity to forget and forgive.

## 11.2 Ambiguity of dramatic genre

The problem plays openly acknowledge the unpleasant elements of human nature which determine the conflicts and the development of the plots. They are extremely ambiguous and problematic and it is more difficult to place them in the genre of comedy for their gloomy atmosphere and their tragic tones; indeed, though they cannot be defined as proper tragedies because they lack great tragic heroes and violent deaths, they also lack the joyousness and levity of comedies; even weddings, that usually mark the happy endings, are forced and rather cheerless.

The dark atmosphere of these plays suggests that it was a period of pessimism for Shakespeare, probably also dependent on the political crisis of those years due to the physical and moral decline of Elizabeth and the uncertainties connected to her succession, with the consequent court intrigues and conspiracies, and with the economy in a precarious state.

The label of “problem plays”, derived from modern **Ibsen** drama, stresses the philosophical tone of these works, composed in the same period of the great tragedies, and, like the tragedies, presenting the complexity of humanity in texts which leave the endings open and suspended on a note of ambiguity, forcing the spectators to think about the issues proposed and to find their own individual answers. Indeed, the meanness and ambiguities of the characters are not redeemed

by a cathartic element or event, and the conflicts are resolved only on a pragmatic level. The quality and vitality of these plays lies in the internal debate, not in its results: what is important is the dialectic confrontation and the search of a truth which cannot be absolute and univocal – an aspect which finds its highest form and expression in the tragedy of *Hamlet*. In this respect, the problem plays represent a moment of experiment toward the creation of a dramatic form which could well reflect the ambiguity of the new reality. A new form that finds a perfect expression in the memorable language of the great tragedies and, later, in Shakespeare's romances.

The importance attributed to the debate rather than to the conclusions reveals an attempt to go beyond the classic and Renaissance models of tragedy and comedy and to create "representations" which could mirror and reflect the new baroque sensibility. In the previous models conflict was always linked to a specific aim: the conquest of a crown, of riches, of love; in the new model proposed in the problem plays conflict tends to investigate the reasons for the actions performed and its major aim is therefore exploration and research.

### 11.3 *Troilus and Cressida*

*Troilus and Cressida* focuses on love, faithfulness, and honour, combining the public conflict (the war of Troy) with a private affair (the love story of Troilus and Cressida), and showing how in both plots treachery and dishonour prevail in a world in which the old values are lost and a new unscrupulous vision predominates.

Troilus, like many other young lovers of the earlier comedies or like Romeo, depicts an ideal image of immutable virtue and love even before he meets Cressida, and, when she betrays him, he is emotionally and mentally shattered, unable to grasp what is real. Cressida, though not an ideal woman, is not a negative character altogether as she appears also as a victim of a masculine world of materialist and military intrigue: she is

betrayed by her father and her uncle who are supposed to protect her, and she is used by the Trojans as an object of exchange.

Also the mythical figures of the Trojan war are questioned and diminished into petty fools when the meanness of their motivation is revealed. Corruption corrodes the court of Troy and the Greek camp; Hector is murdered by Achille's men when he is unarmed; the Trojans still behave according to ideals of chivalry and love in a world ruled by pragmatic realism and are presented as anachronistic idealists.

**Ulysses**, the rationalist, looks dispassionately at both camps and, in his famous long speech proposes an ideological vision in which the hierarchical world order has to be maintained to avoid chaos:

[...] The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre  
 Observe degree, priority, and place,  
 Infixture, course, proportion, season, form,  
 Office and custom, in all line of order.  
 And therefore is the glorious planet Sol  
 In noble eminence enthroned and sphered  
 Amidst the other [...] But when the planets  
 In evil mixture to disorder wander,  
 What plagues and what portents, what mutiny?  
 What raging of the sea, shaking of earth?  
 [...] O when degree is shaken,  
 Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
 The enterprise is sick. How could communities,  
 Degrees in school, and brotherhoods in cities,  
 Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
 The primogenity and due of birth,  
 Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
 But by degree stand in authentic place?  
 Take but degree away, untune that string,  
 And hark what discord follows. [...]

*(I.3.85-110)*

The great question of the play is "What is real?" Having observed Cressida's betrayal of him Troilus says: "This she?



No, this is Diomed's Cressida. / If beauty have a soul, this is not she. / [...] This is, and is not, Cressid" (V.2.137-8, 146). Reality may be different from what it appears and the play constantly acknowledges opposing possibilities. Indeed, rather than on a straight Greek-Trojan dichotomy, the focus of the play is on the split between two world-views: the old order of the Trojans which has no place in the harsh "real" world; the new order represented by the unscrupulousness of the Greeks and the ideology of stability guaranteed by respect of the social hierarchy.

#### 11.4 *All's Well That Ends Well*

The idea of a sick society is also fundamental to *All's Well That Ends Well*. The settings are all aristocratic: the court of the King of **France**, the court of the Countess of **Roussillon** and the court of the Duke of **Florence**, the only exceptions being the house of the Widow of Florence and the soldier's camp. All these courts are struck by some kind of pestilence: the King of France has an apparently incurable malady, the Count of Roussillon has just died, the Duke of Florence is at war with the Siennese.

Against this background of death and war, the story follows the fortunes of **Helena**, who, having cured the king of his disease, is granted the right to choose her own husband regardless of his status (she is not an aristocrat) or inclination. She chooses **Bertram**, the young Count of Roussillon, of whom she had long been in love; Bertram, however, is not in love with her and abandons her after the wedding, joining the Florentine wars and embarking on a military career that also includes seduction, hypocrisy and lying. However, before leaving Helena, he gives her one only hope depending on what appears as an impossible task: he will become her husband only if she manages to take his ring from his finger and to conceive a child from him. Miraculously Helena succeeds in tricking Bertram to give her both his ring and a child through an elaborate set of illusions that involve disguise and a bed-trick

(she goes to bed with Bertram who thinks she is someone else).

Merit and rank, virtue and honour, social class and marriage, male versus female, are the major themes of this text. The plot is a complex tissue of traditional folk motifs: the abandoned wife who performs a seemingly impossible series of tasks in order to regain her husband, the heroine who achieves great good fortune by knowing how to cure the sickness of the king when everyone else has failed, the bed-trick, the exchange of rings, and the association of virginity with magical power.

The title of the text invites us to pay special attention to its ending, and to examine it against the norm of comic ending; indeed, in the final scene, as ironically announced in the title, the play ends “well” with an enforced marriage on Bertram who has to keep his word with Helena. When she asks for her prize (“Will you be mine now you are doubly won”), he tries to make up with her for his past behaviour, promising to the King “I’ll love her dearly, ever ever dearly”. The ambiguity of his feelings, however, remains, and it is Helena herself that seems not to trust him as she replies: “If it appear not plain and prove untrue, / Deadly divorce step between me and you” (V.3.311-315). Indeed, Helena is too good for Bertram and yet she is unable to stop loving him; as to Bertram’s final words, after all his lies and refusal to take responsibility, there is no reason to believe that his feelings for his wife have changed. The play closes with the King’s words – “All yet *seems* well; and *if* it end so meet, / The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet” – in which the “seems” and the “if” confirm the ambiguity and uncertainty of the ending. A short **Epilogue** spoken by the actor/king asking for the audience’s applause closes the play:

The King’s a beggar now the play is done.  
 All is well ended if this suit be won:  
 That you express content, which we will pay  
 With strife to please you, day exceeding day.  
 Ours be your patience then, and yours our parts:  
 Your gentle hands lend us, and take our hearts.

### 11.5 *Measure for Measure*

*Measure for Measure* presents a number of similar disturbing aspects. The concepts of law and justice are central, as well as chastity and unlawful sexual behaviour.

The figure of authority, **Duke Vincentio**, is the source of most of the uneasiness. At the beginning of the play he withdraws from Vienna because it has become necessary to re-establish the law against unruly sexual behaviour that the Duke himself has been unable to enforce. He appoints the Puritan **Angelo** (a symbolic name, as it can often be found in Shakespearean theatre), a man of proved moral rigour and rather willing to repress and punish transgressors. When tested by the chastity and beauty of the young novice **Isabella**, however, Angelo is taken by the desire to seduce her and reveals himself as a hypocrite refusing to grant mercy to her brother **Claudio**, who has been sentenced to death for the same crime that Angelo wishes to commit. The Duke, disguised as a friar, follows the events and in the end he restores order through the four marriages he organises.

Though marriage is the conventional resolution of romantic comedy, here it is used as an instrument of social control and repression. Two of the four marriages are punitive. The marriage of Angelo to Mariana, a woman he had previously abandoned, resembles that of Bertram and Helena. Mariana, in spite of the treatment she has received from Angelo, continues to love him, but there is nothing to indicate that Angelo marries her willingly. Lucio, the cynical libertine and liar, certainly does not wish to marry a whore, and nobody asks the whore what she wants. Claudio marries his fiancée while the Duke's own proposal to Isabella is the most problematic. She responds to it with silence, and although it is unlikely that she would refuse such an offer, it is also difficult to think that she would willingly accept it, given the pain and humiliation she has suffered. Certainly, there has been no opportunity for the development of a true feeling of love.

In conclusion, pure and authentic love is totally lost in favour of an idea of love as power and sexual satisfaction, and in

the end the use of authority or political power to enforce comic resolution appears as a disquieting element.

The Duke's disguise and his role as a spectator of the events is particularly interesting from a theatrical perspective as the audience are given a double focus of attention: the scenes developing on stage and the Duke's reactions and comments.

Disguise is also present in the bed-trick used by Isabella, who, like Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*, turns apparent lust into the service of marriage.

Human sexuality is presented as a sordid matter and a sign of degradation. Claudio himself, when he and his pregnant fiancée are led away to prison for their crime of premarital sex, admits they have committed "fornication" in a highly self-critical manner. When Lucio asks him "Whence comes" his punishment, he replies:

From too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty.  
As surfeit is the father of much fast,  
So every scope, by the immoderate use,  
Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,  
Like rats that raven down their proper bane,  
A thirsty evil; and when we drink we die.

(I.2.104-110)

Claudio depicts his passion as an irrational and self-destructive drive, comparing it to an animal instinct. However, he does not hesitate to ask her sister to commit the same sin in order to save his life, though Isabella replies in a strongly critical and harsh manner, and does not hesitate in choosing her brother's death rather than losing her own virginity:

**CLAUDIO** Sweet sister, let me live.  
What sin you do to save a brother's life,  
Nature dispenses with the deed so far  
That it become a virtue.  
Isabella O, you beast!  
O faithless coward, O dishonest wretch,  
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?  
It's not a kind of incest to take life

From thine own sister's shame? What should I think?  
 Heaven shield my mother play'd my father fair,  
 For such a warped slip of wilderness  
 Ne'er issued from his blood. Take my defiance,  
 Die, perish! Might but my bending down  
 Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.  
 I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,  
 No word to save thee.

(III.1.134-148)

This is evidently a major "problem", a moral question that Shakespeare is asking his audience and which is left open in spite of the final resolution which allows Claudio to keep his life and Isabella to keep her virginity.

Angelo seems not to have experienced the violence of desire until Isabella's first visit on behalf of his brother awakens his appetite:

What's this? What's this? Is this her fault or mine?  
 The tempter or the tempted, who sins most, ha?  
 Not she; nor doth she tempt; but it is I  
 That, lying by the violet of the sun,  
 Do, as the carrion does, not as the flower,  
 Corrupt with virtuous season.

(II.2.162-172)

Like Claudio, Angelo thinks of passion in terms of death and decay, and imagines himself as meat rotting faster under that sun that gives life good things.

As the title itself suggests, *Measure for Measure* poses the problem of commensurability, equivalence, and relative priority in connection with justice and ethical thinking and behaviour. The concept itself of justice and law is questioned in the figures of authority, if both the Duke and Angelo are unable either to apply or to respect the laws they themselves should enforce.

Once more Shakespeare poses major problems, leaving them unresolved.



## 12. William Shakespeare's Roman Plays

### 12.1 Shakespeare and Roman history

Elizabethan history plays developed out of the patriotic mood which followed the defeat of the Spanish Armada, but Shakespeare's histories are more complex and convey sceptical and even radical positions. By the end of the century the national mood had changed, was less secure and much darker, and this could be the reason which led Shakespeare to look elsewhere for political models, distancing himself from England and from historical events which might be too close and connected to the present political situation, and choosing a distant place and time such as the republican Roman State. As **Holinshed's *Chronicles*** had been the major historical source for the composition of his English Histories, **Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*** is the historical source for his Roman plays, ***Julius Caesar*** (1598-99), ***Antony and Cleopatra*** (1606-08), and ***Coriolanus*** (1608).

### 12.2 The characters of the Roman Plays

Shakespeare rewrites Roman history and creates new myths, presenting these well known historic figures also in their private dimension: **Caesar**, **Brutus**, **Antony** and **Coriolanus** are torn between their private and public roles, with their intimate feelings and drives on the one hand, and political reason and action on the other; **Cleopatra** is a great queen and an intelligent political leader, great in her regality and splendour,

but her human fragility makes her a woman in love. Once more the dramatist's attention is captured by man and his conscience rather than by great historical events; once more Shakespeare penetrates the soul of these heroes, making them a mirror for contemporary man and contemporary society by bringing to light those essential traits which belong to human nature rather than to specific historical times or particular cultures, and staging the new conscience and awareness of modern man towards reality and human behaviour. Once more Shakespeare deals with history in total freedom, trying to discuss historical events and political issues from different possible perspectives, creating once again "open plays" which offer the audience important matters for personal meditation on private and public values and behaviours. Once more Shakespeare reveals himself as a great playwright and poet (rather than a historian or politician) who manages to free himself from the burden of history itself in order to explore great themes from an open critical viewpoint through a dialectical discourse unburdened of prejudiced ideological schematisms.

The first editors included Shakespeare's three Roman plays in the group of the tragedies; the definition of Roman Plays is, however, more appropriate as it stresses their political and historical dimension, which belongs to all Shakespeare's historical writing; indeed, in the Roman plays, like the English histories, political issues and the crisis within the state are given greater attention than in the proper tragedies.

### **12.3 *Julius Caesar***

***Julius Caesar***, staged in the autumn of 1599, examines the declining moments of the Roman Republic before the popular unrest led to the outbreak of the civil war transforming it into an empire. It presents an open debate on political choices and forms of government, and conveys the fear for civil unrest which was a general preoccupation in the declining years of Elizabeth's reign.

The play is structured in two parts: the story of Caesar's



last days and the last days of the Republic and its champion. Unusually, the protagonist who gives the title to the play is murdered in the first scene of the third act and, though his massacred body remains on stage for the whole of Act III, he disappears from dramatic action, becoming only an object for major political discussion and assuming a strong symbolic and theatrical meaning. In fact, the play rather than the tragedy of Julius Caesar, focuses on self-interrogation about the rights and wrongs of political action, particularly in Brutus and a group of idealists in whom the old Roman virtues still live on, thus representing the clash between old convictions and new realities. The theatrical discourse, which usually develops around one single protagonist though surrounded by other prominent figures, here focuses on the political contrast between Caesar's murderers and his champions; alternating the viewpoints of Brutus, Cassius and Antony before and after the assassination, Shakespeare gives voice to a debate about the legitimacy of such an act as tyrannicide (a prophetic discussion of the debate which took place half a century later about the death sentence of Charles I and the overthrow of the Stuart monarchy followed by the establishment of a republican government).

Great Caesar is presented in his private weakness. When his wife Calphurnia asks him to stay home expressing her fear that he might be killed, Caesar hesitates but then is persuaded by his pride and his lust for power:

**DECIUS** [...] The Senate have concluded  
To give this day a crown to mighty Caesar.  
If you shall send them word that you will not come,  
Their minds may change. [...]  
If Caesar hide himself, shall they not whisper,  
'Lo, Caesar is afraid'?  
[...]

**CAESAR**

How foolish do your fears seem now, Calphurnia!  
I am ashamed I did yield to them.  
Give me my robe, for I will go.

(II.2.93-107)

Brutus is the modern hero of a “problem tragedy” in which he suffers from painful doubts and hesitations about what he ought to do. He tries to understand and find the reasons for acting for the best and questions every possible aspect and implication before acting. Emblematic for its similarity to **Hamlet** is Brutus’s monologue questioning himself before the killing of Caesar; like Hamlet who in his famous question – “To be or not to be, that is the question” (III.1.56) – expresses his uncertainties about life and tries to understand what to do with himself, Brutus meditates on what to do with Caesar and how to act for the good of the State:

It must be his death; and for my part,  
I know no personal cause to spurn at him,  
But for the general. – He would be crowned.  
How that might change his nature, there’s the question.  
*(II.1.10-13)*

The two characters of Brutus and Caesar are described apparently impartially by Mark Antony’s servant, who reports the word of his master:

Brutus is noble, wise, valiant, and honest;  
Caesar was mighty, bold royal, and loving;  
Say I love Brutus, and I honour him;  
Say I feared Caesar, honoured him and loved him.  
*(III.1.126-129)*

Indeed, **Antony**, as he openly explains in a monologue, wants to avenge Caesar’s death and, when he is given the opportunity to pronounce his mourning speech, he succeeds in changing the feelings of the people.

Brutus explains his act to the people simply as a political necessity rather than a personal choice:

Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that  
Caesar was dead, to live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I

weep for him; [...] as he was valiant, I honour him; but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. [...] I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger for myself, when it shall please my country to need my death.

*(III.2.22-47)*

The fatal weakness of Brutus and the other conspirators is in taking for granted that Republic and Liberty are for the good of the people, who will therefore accept the new situation; their inability to keep the favour of the common people, depends much on their not taking into consideration the force of manipulation that words can exert on the mob. Indeed, the reaction of the people is enthusiastic support of Brutus ("Bring him with triumph home...Let him be Caesar... Caesar's better parts shall be crowned in Brutus", ll. 49-52), but soon they change their minds and hearts as a consequence of Antony's funeral oration. While the plebeians and the spectators are persuaded by Brutus' reasonings that his action has nothing to do with personal power and only tends to public good, Antony's reasons after Caesar's assassination create different feelings in the Roman people and in the audience:

Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.  
 He was my friend, faithful and just to me;  
 But Brutus says he was ambitious,  
 And Brutus is an honourable man.  
 [...]  
 I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,  
 But here I am to speak what I do know.  
 You all did love him once, not without cause;  
 What cause withholds you then to mourn for him?  
 [...]  
 My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,  
 And I must pause till it come back to me.

*(III.2.84-87; 100-107)*

Antony reveals himself to be an expert orator, capable of using effective rhetorical strategies of persuasion, though he denies

possessing these qualities:

I am no orator, as Brutus is,  
 But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man,  
 [...]
   
 For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,  
 Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech  
 To stir men's blood [...]

*(III.2.218-224)*

His oration is a masterly blend of emotional appeal and false logic, very different from Brutus's carefully phrased and politically skilful justification of his action. By using two contrasting facts – Brutus's claim of the existence of Caesar's ambition, and the reality of the massacred body – Antony leads an initially hostile crowd first to sympathy and then on to violence. Brutus, in the end, rather than be taken prisoner, commits suicide following the Roman custom of noble soldiers, with the help of one of his servants ("I held the sword, and he did run on it"). His enemies acknowledge his qualities and give him an honourable burial:

### **ANTONY**

This was the noblest Roman of them all.  
 All the conspirators save only he  
 Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;  
 He only, in a general honest thought  
 And common good to all, made one of them.  
 His life was gentle, and the elements  
 So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up  
 And say to all the world, 'This was a man!'  
 Octavius  
 According to his virtue let us use him,  
 With all respect and rites of burial.  
 Within my tent his bones tonight shall lie,  
 Most like a soldier, ordered honourably.  
 So call the field to rest, and let's away,  
 To part the glories of this happy day.

*(V.5.68-81)*

This ending is echoed in *Hamlet*, and suggests again a comparison between Brutus and Hamlet; indeed, Brutus, rather than Caesar, is the true protagonist of the play as he represents, like Hamlet, the new modern conscience of a man who doubts and questions himself on the reasons for his actions.

#### 12.4 *Antony and Cleopatra*

*Antony and Cleopatra* represents a sort of continuation of *Julius Caesar* as, though written a few years later, it resumes the same political and historical themes.

The major political theme is the power conflict within the Roman Empire which Shakespeare presents in its ideological and psychological complexity: the imperialist ideology of the triumvirs Octavius Caesar, Antony and Lepidus against Pompey; the power struggle of Octavius Caesar against Antony; the political-cultural clash between **Rome**, the land of noble and brave soldiers, of heroic deeds and of political reason, and **Egypt**, the land of lust, sensuality, treachery, and perversion. The private dimension is presented in the sphere of love and passion, of eroticism and tense conflicts between Antony and Cleopatra.

**Antony** is the protagonist of all the various events. It is interesting to consider how Antony, the great general and skilful orator that could manipulate the feelings of the people with the power of his rhetoric in *Julius Caesar*, in *Antony and Cleopatra* appears a totally transformed hero and becomes a weak vacillating man, torn between two opposing worlds and cultures, between two opposing drives – his passion for the Egyptian queen and his military and political duties towards Rome – with whose weakness and human frailty the audience can only sympathise. The great Roman general of *Julius Caesar* is here presented above all in his private dimension, overwhelmed by the passionate love which leads

him to neglect his military and political duties. He is still a man of power, who accepts the political marriage with Octavia, Octavius Caesar's sister, but he is unable to forget Cleopatra and, when he later rejects Octavia, he gives an unforgivable offence and provokes his own ruin; in fact, he suffers a humiliating military defeat that can be redeemed only by death with the heroic gesture of Roman suicide; his last words to Cleopatra before dying recall his past grandeur and value:

The miserable change now at my end  
 Lament nor sorrow at: but please your thoughts  
 In feeding them with those my former fortunes  
 Wherein I liv'd. the greatest prince o' the world,  
 The noblest; and do now not basely die,  
 Not cowardly put off my helmet to  
 My countryman: a Roman, by a Roman  
 Valiant vanquish'd. Now my spirit is going,  
 I can no more.

*(IV.15.51-59)*

Antony's tragedy is determined by his own deep internal conflict between **love** and **power**, by his irresolution between two worlds and two contrasting passions. Rather than a victim of Cleopatra's seductions, he is the victim of his own weakness and feelings, and he is the originator of his own ruin as he abandons his land and neglects his military and political duties, rejecting the political role assigned to him by history, and following his heart and feelings rather than reason and duty.

**Cleopatra** is a character written not only in history but also in myth and legend. The literary tradition usually presents her as an unscrupulous and ambitious woman, selfish and calculating, a "femme fatale" who is ready to exploit her charms to achieve her aims. Shakespeare, however, reads history and legend through his own critical view and conscience and does not simplify a complex problem in

a mere contrast between good and evil; he observes both the political and the psychological dimension, presenting Cleopatra as a political leader but also as a woman in love who combines political reason and the demands of her passion.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra is sensual and jealous, and, beyond her political choices and actions, she proves the strength and sincerity of her love for Antony when she also commits suicide after Antonio's death, choosing an act which can be seen as a "Roman" death, and which ennobles her, bringing her closer to Antony:

[I am] No more but e'en a woman, and commanded  
by such poor passion as the maid that milks,  
And does the meanest chares. It were for me  
To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods,  
To tell them that this world did equal theirs,  
Till they had stol'n our jewel [...]  
Good sirs, take heart,  
We'll bury him: and then, what's brave, what's noble,  
Let's do it after the high Roman fashion,  
And make death proud to take us. [...]

*(IV.15.73-88)*

However, Cleopatra does not deny her political role and intimate nature and creates a death ritual pervaded with royal grandeur and sensuality, wearing her most precious queen's clothes and offering her breasts to the voluptuous bite of the asp:

Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have  
Immortal longings in me. Now no more  
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip.  
[...] methinks I hear  
Antony call. I see him rouse himself  
To praise my noble act. [...] Husband, I come:  
Now to that name, my courage prove my title!  
I am fire, and air; my other elements  
I give to baser life. [...]  
Have I the aspic in my lips? Dost fall?  
If thou and nature can so gently part,

The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,  
 Which hurts and is desir'd. [...]  
 Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,  
 That sucks the nurse asleep?  
 [...] As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle.  
 O Antony! Nay, I will take thee too.  
 [*Applying another asp to her arm*]  
 What should I stay -- [*Dies*]

(V.2.279-312)

The Nile Serpent, the temptress Eve who caused Antony's ruin, proves in her final gesture to be a faithful lover who elevates herself and her love for Antony onto a metaphysical dimension, triumphing in her own death and saving her royalty and loyalty from the dishonour to be taken away as Caesar's prisoner and war spoils.

Shakespeare underlines Cleopatra's nobleness by making her always express herself in verse. Indeed, prose prevails in the first part of the play whereas verse dominates the second part as its more elevated quality can better express the parabolic upward movement towards Antony's final "Roman" redemption and Cleopatra's ultimate sublimation.

Once more in this play the modernity of Shakespeare's theatre emerges thanks to his extraordinary capacity to re-interpret history through human psychology and feeling, restoring the vitality of characters belonging to a remote past, making them live again on the stage as models of a general humanity with which spectators of any age can identify.

## 12.5 *Coriolanus*

***The Tragedy of Coriolanus*** is based on the life of the legendary Roman general Caius Martius Coriolanus, who leads the Romans to the victory against the Volscians, and conquers the city of Corioli. However, his arrogance and aristocratic attitude makes him disdainful of the people's rights and



liberties, and causes him an accusation of treason and a sentence of exile. Determined to take revenge against ungrateful Rome, Coriolanus joins Tullius Aufidius, the Volscian general, and soon brings Rome to its knees. Tullius Aufidius, jealous of the charismatic power of the Roman hero among the Volscians and eager to revenge the past defeats, falsely accuses him of betrayal and Coriolanus is assassinated by conspirators.

This is the schematic plot of a story which, in Shakespeare's re-writing, is complicated by the presentation of a psychological and private dimension.

On a public plane, Coriolanus is a brave soldier, a modest and unambitious hero, who tries to minimise his own qualities and silences those who glorify his deeds. He is an upright, uncompromising man, loyal to his own nature, unable to deceive in order to achieve his aims or even to avoid his own ruin. His transparency, however, is also a sign of his total lack of any sense of politics, a necessary quality present in all the other characters in the play in that particular political and historical situation; therefore, what can be seen as a virtue turns into guilty weakness and a major cause of his tragedy.

On a private dimension, Coriolanus is presented as a tender husband and father, and above all as a devoted son, who forgets his fury and purposes of proud revenge in order to please his mother, Volumnia, and protect her from suffering, appearing at times even too dependent on her.

From a theatrical viewpoint, Coriolanus is an unusual character as we learn about him above all through the other characters' speeches and interpretations, which describe him as a proud, arrogant man, disdainful with those inferior to him and a champion of a class ideology and of the exclusive power of the aristocracy. The audience is left in the ambiguity of the character as Coriolanus does not speak monologues and asides that would help us to understand his true mind and nature.

Ambiguity dominates also the other characters of this tragedy. The two Tribunes of the People rightly defend the citizens' liberty from the threat of tyranny which might be established if Coriolanus is elected Consul; however, in

order to deprive Coriolanus of his power, they manipulate and incite the People against the hero of so many battles in such a way that the honesty of their intentions remains ambiguous. Equally ambiguous are Coriolanus' mother, Menenius Agrippa and other noble Roman patricians, who try to persuade the hero to act against his own principles and beliefs in order to deceive the people by pretending to humiliate himself and ask for the people's forgiveness:

### **VOLUMNIA**

[...] now it lies you on to speak  
 To th' people, not by your own instruction,  
 Nor by th' matter which your heart prompts you,  
 But with such words that are but roted in  
 Your tongue, though but bastards and syllables  
 Of no allowance to your bosom's truth.  
 Now this no more dishonours you at all  
 Than to take in a town with gentle words,  
 Which else would put you to your fortune and  
 The hazard of much blood.  
 [...]  
 I prithee now, my son,  
 Go to them with this bonnet in thy hand;  
 And thus far having stretched it – here be with them –  
 Thy knee bussing the stones [...]  
 [...] waving thy head,  
 With often thus correcting thy stout heart,  
 Now humble [...]

*(III.2.52-79)*

Volumnia's suggestion implies that, having obtained his power, he would use that same power to suppress the people and deprive them of all their liberties. Coriolanus seems to listen to Volumnia's implorations and accepts to humble himself:

Pray, be content.  
 Mother, I am going to the market-place.  
 Chide me no more. I'll mountebank their loves,

Cog their hearts from them, and come home beloved  
 Of all the trades in Rome. Look, I am going.  
 Commend me to my wife. I'll return consul,  
 Or never trust to what my tongue can do  
 I'th'way of flattery further.

*(III.2.130-137)*

However, when confronted with the people, his pride and his loyalty to himself prevails against political reason, and he turns again against Rome:

I'll know no further.  
 Let them pronounce the steep Tarpejan death,  
 Vagabond exile [...]I would not buy  
 Their mercy at the price of one fair word,  
 Nor check my courage for what they can give,  
 To have't with saying 'Good morrow'.  
 [...] Despising  
 For you the city. Then I turn my back.  
 There is world elsewhere.

*(III.3.87-93+133-135)*

Coriolanus' weakness lies in his being a non-political character, still too much bound to an anachronistic model, whereas the political characters of the play represent the new Machiavellian attitude after which values such as honour and nobility can be easily sacrificed in the name of more concrete and rewarding aims; their ambiguity, therefore, depends on their being the expression of a new system which is not yet established and accepted. In this respect, this play expresses the wider conflict of a whole society which is changing and has not yet found a well-established new order.

Once more Shakespeare deals with a historic and political theme as a dramatist and a poet, rather than a historian and politician, and uses his art and his pen in a critical way, avoiding any fixed statement and favouring dialectics to dogma.



## 13. William Shakespeare's Early Tragedies

### 13.1 The form of tragedy

The first tragedies were written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC by ancient Greek dramatists (**Aeschylus**, **Sophocles**, **Euripides**) and were later imitated by the Roman writer **Seneca** (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) whose influence was widely felt in Elizabethan theatre. In general, tragedy refers to a literary structure that moves toward an unhappy ending, implying an unfavourable evaluation of human experience; final death is the tragic counterpart to the marriage that concludes the comedy.

The conventions of classical tragedy had been identified by the Greek philosopher **Aristotle** in his ***Poetics*** where tragedy is discussed with reference to the plays of his time; those observations cannot therefore apply to all tragedy, nor can they be true of Shakespeare's tragedies as he was probably unfamiliar with Aristotle's work.

For Aristotle, a tragedy tells the story of the fall of a "noble" protagonist who possesses riches, power, and certain admirable personal qualities; his downfall does not depend exclusively on fate but also on some personal error of judgement (defined in Greek as *hamartia*), a weakness in the hero's character which causes his final destruction. The moral aim of the tragedy is to make the audience aware that even the most powerful individuals are capable of destroying themselves through their imperfect understanding of our human condition. This experience in the audience would not occur if the protagonists were wicked, as there would be no regret at their fall, or if their tragedy were a mere consequence of accidental events. The point

of tragedy was to provide some form of moral and philosophical education for the audience about the ways of human life.

### **13.2 Shakespeare's tragedies**

The form of tragedy that Shakespeare helped to shape developed from a variety of sources: from ancient tragedy, primarily Roman rather than Greek, and from medieval and early Tudor English tragedy, with its stress on the moral benefit to be derived from watching the horrifying experiences of fallen princes.

Modern English tragedies represented the nature of political power and the problems of the powerful in the contemporary world, showing an awareness of the transition from the feudal system, based on a different system of values and ideas about life, to a new world in which individuals had more opportunities to make their own way, where new forms of power were competing with old ones, where the role of women was changing.

Shakespeare's tragedies are modern tragedies as they present man's uncertainties in a changing world where reality can be interpreted from different perspectives, thus making the modern tragic hero aware of his task to choose codes of behaviour according to his own individual conscience and personal decision. Shakespeare's tragedies cannot therefore be interpreted according to Aristotelian theories; indeed, seeing them simply as the result of an individual weakness or error would diminish the complexity of the problems and conflicts presented, which are also determined by the interaction of the tragic protagonist with other characters and society. Shakespearean tragic figures are both victims of unfair circumstances or a negative environment and responsible for their own misery. Moreover, Shakespeare complicates the psychological dimension of the central character (and often of other major characters), and, though order is generally restored at the end, the real problems at the base of tragedy remain unresolved and a final conclusion or explanation of events and behaviours is never offered; the spectators are therefore forced

to an individual response determined by varying degrees of sympathy, judgement, identification, distance, pity, and fear.

Shakespeare's tragedy reflects a time of great social, cultural and ideological stress, with the breakdown of the certainties of "the great chain of being", with the erosion of belief in hierarchy and obedience, and with the implications that this had for monarchic rule, developing around the clash between the old system of values and the new vision of the world.

### 13.3 Historical and revenge tragedy

These aspects characterise Shakespeare's mature tragedies, the so-called great tragedies written at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*).

However, in the first period of his activity as a playwright, Shakespeare wrote a variety of plays as if to try the possibilities of his dramatic vein, and this is evident also in his tragic production. His first attempts at tragedy follow the most popular tragic genres of the time, that is **historical tragedy**, with his two tetralogies of histories, and **Senecan tragedy**, or **revenge tragedy**, with *Titus Andronicus*; moreover, it is in this first period that Shakespeare composed one of his most successful and well-known tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet*, a unique text in which an innovative tragic discourse and an original dramatic structure are proposed as an exploration towards new experiments in the theatre.

### 13.4 *Titus Andronicus*

*Titus Andronicus*, published in 1594, might have been written as early as 1589. It has often been criticised as crude and immature, and there have been attempts to deny Shakespeare's authority or to limit his responsibility in the text to a mere revision of an earlier play by another writer, probably Thomas

Kyd or George Peele.

**Revenge tragedy** had become popular in the late 1580's after the great success of **Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*** and **Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta***. In the early years of his career Shakespeare was anxious to make a name for himself and in writing ***Titus Andronicus*** he was trying to achieve greater success than Kyd by creating a tragedy of absolute ferocity. This is certainly Shakespeare's bloodiest tragedy with fourteen killings, nine of them on stage, six severed members, one rape, one live burial, one case of insanity and one of cannibalism. The showing of crude violence on stage is a major difference from Seneca's tragedies in which bloody acts are not performed but narrated by Chorus and the characters themselves.

Revenge is the structuring principle of tragic action in this first Shakespearean tragedy. **Titus** commits the first of the many atrocities in the opening scene by insisting on the sacrifice and dismemberment of the eldest son of **Tamora**, Queen of the Goths, who he has just defeated and captured. Implacable in his application of the law, he justifies an act that leads to horrifying revenge against him and his family: the murder of his son-in-law **Bassianus**, the rape and mutilation of his daughter **Lavinia**, the beheading of two of his sons, and a trick that leads him to cut off his own hand in an attempt to gain mercy for his son's life. Like Hieronimo, Titus goes mad and uses against his enemies their own extreme methods, killing Tamora's sons, responsible for his daughter's rape, and baking them in a pie served to their mother.

Titus's initial refusal of mercy to Tamora's son reflects his strong belief in the laws of republican Rome; his inflexibility also leads him to refuse the imperial crown and to champion **Saturnine**, elder son of the late Emperor, who immediately shows his moral inferiority to his younger brother Bassianus. Therefore Titus makes himself responsible of imposing upon the State a selfish and inadequate leader who places his own desires above duty to the State and attacks its traditional laws.

The play's visual horrors are an extreme representation of the chaotic conflict determined by the fading away of the ethos of



the past, with its rites and certainties, leaving a sense of loss and opening questions about what is right or wrong. It is this vacuum that drives Titus mad and internalises the conflict so that he is set against himself, acting in ways that oppose his deepest beliefs.

The tragedy is set in the time of the late **Roman Empire**. For this first Roman play **Shakespeare** did not have the authoritative source of **Plutarch** but an **uncertain source** which inspired the sensational and horrifying plot of Titus's story without providing him with an adequate historical and political view. **Ovid's *Metamorphoses*** inspire the story of Lavinia who, like Philomela in the classic text, is raped and mutilated with the cutting off of her tongue and hands so that she cannot speak nor write to reveal the name of her rapist. The story of the Moor Aaron is derived by one of **Bandello's *Novelle***, but the character is also reminiscent of Barabas, the protagonist of **Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta***, the model of all Elizabethan Machiavellian characters, cruel and merciless, pleased and satisfied with his art in creating evil. **Aaron** is equally heartless and the practice of evil is his major satisfaction in life:

**LUCIUS** Art thou not sorry for these heinous deeds?  
 Aaron Ay, that I had not done a thousand more.  
 Even now I curse the day [...]  
 Wherein I did not some notorious ill:  
 As kill a man or else devise his death;  
 Ravish a maid or plot the way to do it;  
 Accuse some innocent and forswear myself;  
 Set deadly enmity between two friends;  
 Make poor men's cattle break their necks;  
 Set fire on barns and haystacks in the night,  
 And bid the owners quench them with their tears.  
 Oft have I digged up dead men from their graves,  
 And set them upright at their dear friends' door,  
 Even when their sorrow almost was forgot,  
 And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,  
 Have with my knife carved in Roman letters  
 'Let not sorrow die, though I am dead.'  
 But I have done a thousand dreadful things

As willingly as one would kill a fly,  
 And nothing grieves me heartily indeed,  
 But that I cannot do ten thousand more.

(V.1. 123-144)

**Titus Andronicus**, though often criticised for its excesses and some faults in style, is a seminal tragedy in the Shakespearean canon as it presents characters, relationships and situations which will be later developed in Shakespeare's great tragedies. The character of **Titus**, the proud hero who shows his passions as well as his selfish cruelty, the great general but naïve politician, will find echoes in the passionate and credulous character of **Othello** and in proud **Coriolanus**, whereas **Lear**'s inflexibility with his own daughter is already present in Titus's relationship with his sons. As to the character of **Aaron**, he is a model-villain, the first creation of many Shakespearean villains, particularly **Richard III** and **Iago**. Titus's real/pretended madness will be taken up again in the character of **Hamlet**, whereas **King Lear** will expand aspects such as the complex, painful, often excruciating bond between father and daughter; the constant comparison of microcosm and macrocosm, of human events with the greater natural events of the universe; the presentation of intolerable violence.

**Titus Andronicus**, though the work of a young playwright, has a perfect **structure**, and reveals an unusual coherence in the use of **language**, a capacity of using the **space** offered by the Elizabethan stage at its best, whereas the awareness of its **grotesque** nature and the mechanicism of the horror sequence makes this play a sort of meditation on the nature of revenge plays and on the sense of tragedy in late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### 13.5 *Romeo and Juliet*

**The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet**, written a couple of years later (1593-95), is also based on a story by **Bandello** used in **A Tragical**

***Historye of Romeus and Juliet*** by **Arthur Brooke** (1562). It echoes the poetic writing Shakespeare was producing at the time (sonnets and poems) and is characterised by the use of lyrical language in a large variety of poetic forms. The play opens with a 14-line **Prologue** by a Chorus in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains with alternate rhyming – abab cdcd efef – and a closing rhyming couplet):

### PROLOGUE

Two households, both alike in dignity,  
 In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
 From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
 Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
 From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
 A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
 Whole misadventured piteous overthrows  
 Do with their death bury their parents' strife.  
 The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,  
 And the continuance of their parents' rage,  
 Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,  
 Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;  
 The which if you with patient ears attend,  
 What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

Like this sonnet much of ***Romeo and Juliet*** is written in iambic pentameter, with ten syllables of alternating stress in each line. However, the most common form used is blank verse, a more fluid, nonstructured approach, although Shakespeare uses this form less often in this play than in his later plays.

The structure of ***Romeo and Juliet*** is rather experimental, as it can be divided in two rather distinct parts: the **romantic comedy** up to the end of Act II, and the **tragedy** in Acts III-V.

In the first part Shakespeare follows the classic model of **comedy** which presents **young** people contrasted in their love by **old** people, and supported in its realisation by a devoted servant who helps them to get over the various difficulties and get married. Indeed, ***Romeo and Juliet*** opens with the

presentation of a violent, old contrast between two families, the **Capulets** and the **Montagues**, and then proceeds with the presentation of the love story between the two only children of the opposed families who find support in Juliet's **Nurse** and in **Friar Laurence** who marries them secretly at the end of Act II. The "comedy" at this point is perfectly concluded. The third act, however, moves rapidly towards tragedy with the fight between supporters of the two opposing families and the killing of **Mercutio**, Romeo's friend, at the hands of **Tybalt**, Juliet's cousin. Romeo, in turn, feels morally obliged to revenge Mercutio by the law of honour and kills Tybalt, for which act he is banished from **Verona**. Separation and death follow to conclude the "tragedy". The change from comedy to tragedy is interestingly shown also in the character of **Nurse**, who, from a loyal and devoted supporter of the young lovers, is transformed into a calculating, materialistic woman with no moral principles, who is ready to advise Juliet to forget her beloved husband and to accept the arranged marriage imposed by her parents.

Though certainly a **tragedy**, *Romeo and Juliet*, in the Aristotelian sense, is not a study of a fall from greatness, and the **comic elements** of the play are unusually present not only in the first part structured as a proper comedy, but also in the presentation and discussion of serious matter, particularly through the character of Mercutio.

Love, the major theme of the tragedy, is also presented in its light and comic dimension, and its truth and intensity is questioned through the behaviour of the same protagonist. Initially **Romeo** is described as the typical melancholic lover whose passionate love for **Rosaline** makes him express his feelings in a lyric, euphuistic style:

### ROMEO

Griefs of mine own lie heavy in my breast. [...]  
 Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs;  
 Being purg'd, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes;  
 Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears;  
 What is it else? A madness more discreet,

A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.  
*(I.1.186-194)*

The flame of love for Rosaline is soon transformed into burning fire when he first sees Juliet; this sudden change throws an ambiguous light upon the truth of his feelings:

**ROMEO**  
 O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!  
 It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
 Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear;  
 Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!  
 So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,  
 As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.  
 The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,  
 And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.  
 Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!  
 For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.  
*(I.5.44-53)*

Later, when Friar Laurence hears of Romeo's sudden love for Juliet, he is astonished and love is ironically commented on:

**FRIAR LAURENCE**  
 Holy Saint Francis, what a change is here!  
 Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear,  
 So soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies  
 Not truly in their hearts but in their eyes.  
*(I.3.65-68)*

Despite the coincidences in the play, it is not fate that dooms their love but the fact that they must try to fulfil it outside the perimeters of a loveless society. Romeo and Juliet are not only the "star-crossed lovers", victims of blind Fortune, as they have been seen for a long time by critics who have discussed whether to classify this play as a tragedy of **Fate** or a tragedy of **Character**. The young protagonists become victims of family politics and of the material realities of their circumstances;

their tragedy is the consequence of events and of the men who produce those events. *Romeo and Juliet* can also be considered a tragedy of **Logos**, as language represents the plane of knowledge and often reveals the distance between the real objects and their nomination. Emblematic in this respect is Juliet's "apparent" monologue in the balcony scene:

**JULIET** O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?  
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

**ROMEO** [*Aside*] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

**JULIET** 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,  
And for that name which is no part of thee  
Take all myself.

**ROMEO** I take thee at thy word:  
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;  
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

**JULIET** What man art thou that thus bescreen'd in night  
So stumblest on my counsel?

**ROMEO** By a name  
I know not how to tell thee who I am:  
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,  
Because it is an enemy to thee;  
Had I it written, I would tear the word.

**JULIET** My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words  
Of that tongue's utterance, yet I know the sound:  
Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?

**ROMEO** Neither, fair saint, if either thee dislike.

(II.2.33-61)

In place of Romeo's name Juliet offers her "self", implying that beyond their names, as beyond the name of the rose, the lovers could exist as unnamed selves. The name, however, cannot be cancelled nor can it be separated from Romeo's identity, and though Romeo does not dare to pronounce his name, he is forced to identify it as an opponent of the Capulets.

Though Renaissance culture was profoundly patriarchal, one sphere in which Shakespeare's women are equal to men is their capacity for experiencing sexual desire. Juliet is subject and agent of her own desire, able to speak of it and to act on the basis of it, and this element appears clearly at her first encounter with Romeo:

**ROMEO [To Juliet]** If I profane with my unworthiest hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

**JULIET** Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,  
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

**ROMEO** Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

**JULIET** Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

**ROMEO** O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;  
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

**JULIET** Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

**ROMEO** Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.  
Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged.

**JULIET** Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

**ROMEO** Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!  
Give me my sin again.

**JULIET** You kiss by th' book.

*(I.5.93-110)*

On their first meeting, Romeo and Juliet use metaphor as a form of communication; by speaking through the metaphors of saints and sins, Romeo can test Juliet's feelings for him without committing himself, according to the method recommended

by **Baldassare Castiglione**: if a man used a metaphor as an invitation, the woman could pretend she did not understand the man, and the man could therefore back away without losing his honour. Juliet, however, makes it clear that she is interested in Romeo by playing along with his metaphor.

Later, in the balcony scene, Shakespeare has Romeo overhear Juliet's declaration of love for him, thus breaking away from the normal sequence of courtship and speeding along the plot that, in fact, is condensed in five days whereas the story in its source lasted nine months. The lovers are able to skip a lengthy part of wooing, and move on to plain talk about their relationship, developing into an agreement to be married after knowing each other for only one night.

It is interesting to notice that Juliet, in her first scene, appears as an obedient and inexperienced young lady, totally dependent on her parents and nurse. Although she has never thought of marriage, she is ready to accept her parents' decision for an arranged marriage; however, her attitude on the matter changes within a few minutes of meeting Romeo, and, from that point forward, she seems to move quickly toward maturity. Tragedy and sorrow, along with love and passion, will contribute to make her a full woman. The last dialogue between Romeo and Juliet after they have spent their first and only night as man and wife well describes the mixture of love and pain they both feel:

**JULIET** Wilt thou be gone? it is not yet near day:

It was the nightingale, and not the lark,  
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear;  
Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate-tree:  
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

**ROMEO** It was the lark, the herald of the morn,  
No nightingale: look, love, what envious streaks  
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east:  
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.  
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

**JULIET** Yon light is not day-light, I know it, I:  
It is some meteor that the sun exhales,



To be to thee this night a torch-bearer,  
 And light thee on thy way to Mantua:  
 Therefore stay yet; thou need'st not to be gone.

**ROMEO** Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death;  
 I am content, so thou wilt have it so.

I'll say yon grey is not the morning's eye,  
 'Tis but the pale reflex of Cynthia's brow;  
 Nor that is not the lark, whose notes do beat  
 The vaulty heaven so high above our heads:  
 I have more care to stay than will to go:  
 Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so.  
 How is't, my soul? Let's talk; it is not day.

**JULIET** It is, it is: hie hence, be gone, away!  
 It is the lark that sings so out of tune,  
 Straining harsh discords and unpleasing sharps.  
 Some say the lark makes sweet division;  
 This doth not so, for she divideth us:  
 Some say the lark and loathed toad change eyes,  
 O, now I would they had changed voices too!  
 Since arm from arm that voice doth us affray,  
 Hunting thee hence with hunt's-up to the day,  
 O, now be gone; more light and light it grows.

**ROMEO** More light and light; more dark and dark our woes!  
 (III.5.1-36)

The story proceeds towards the final suicide of the two young lovers whose bodies are reunited in death when Juliet "*Falls on ROMEO's body, and dies*", an emblematic image of identification of Eros and Thanatos.

It is rather ironic that the healing of the division between the two families in response to the death of their children should be expressed in terms of material competition, as they re-embody the passionate lovers as golden statues:

**CAPULET** O brother Montague, give me thy hand.  
 This is my daughter's jointure, for no more  
 Can I demand.

**MONTAGUE** But I can give thee more,  
 For I will raise her statue in pure gold!

That whiles Verona by that name is known,  
There shall no figure at such rate be set  
As that of true and faithful Juliet.

**CAPULET** As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,  
Poor sacrifices of our enmity.

*(V.3. 295-303)*

Materialism is the dominant drive in the new society where old values are irretrievably fading away.

## 14. William Shakespeare's Great Tragedies

### 14.1 Hamlet

*Hamlet* (1600-01) represents the turning point towards the achievement of full maturity in Shakespearean dramatic discourse, marking the beginning of the great experimental season of tragedy, both in language and dramatic structure. It has long been labelled as a **revenge tragedy** not only because it is about Hamlet's revenge of his father's assassination but also because it contains typical elements of that genre: the presence of a ghost, the play-within-the-play as a major means of "holding up a mirror" in which the villain can observe his own sin, the final slaughter which leaves the stage covered with blood and corpses. However, more recently *Hamlet* has been defined a **dialectic play** and has been considered a model for Shakespeare's **problem plays** (*Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*), as its focus is on the dialectic confrontation and the search of truth rather than on revenge itself. The tragedy of Prince Hamlet is in his confrontation with an elusive and mutable reality in a world which appears "out of joint", as he comments at the end of Act I:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right! it right!  
(I.5.196-197)

*Hamlet* begins with the presentation of a political and military conflict: the reign of Denmark is in danger of being attacked by the Norwegian army led by young Prince Fortinbras, in

revenge of his father's killing in a lawful combat with the King of Denmark, Hamlet. However, the fear of war suddenly vanishes thanks to an unexpected and unreasonable, fictitious change of action, as Fortinbras is quickly persuaded to attack Poland rather than Denmark.

Tragedy, freed from the external conflict which was attracting the audience's attention and expectations, shifts its focus to the internal psychological conflicts of the new tragic hero: indeed, after the public/political opening, tragedy develops along the lines of an intimate, private/psychological conflict: Hamlet's impossible existential questions about man, life, death, and the debate within his own conscience. Significantly the tragedy opens with a question – "Who's there?" – and question marks appear in a remarkable number in the text. Both actions and words in this tragedy tend to express the dualistic essence of life structured on the basic oppositions true/false, being/seeming, focusing on intellect and man's conscience which become a sort of stage for the performance of the crisis of modern man.

Hamlet is the perfect emblem of the modern tragic hero, a hero who questions everything and doubts everything in the deep awareness that it is impossible to distinguish true and false, seeming and essence, and that it is impossible to have any certainty in an elusive reality; in this respect, particularly significant is his reply to his mother who, preoccupied by his melancholic humour after his father's death, underlines that death is a common event that has to be accepted:

#### **QUEEN GERTRUDE**

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off,  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.  
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust:  
Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity.

#### **HAMLET**

Ay, madam, it is common.

**QUEEN GERTRUDE**

If it be,  
Why seems it so particular with thee?

**HAMLET**

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'.  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,  
For they are actions that a man might play;  
But I have that within which passes show,  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

*(I.2.68-85)*

The text of *Hamlet* is unusually and extremely long as action is not as important as meditation and discussion; Hamlet is in search of truth and he is given an unusual number of **monologues** to speak in order to interact with his own conscience and with the audience. Here is the most famous of these speeches, though it is not technically a monologue as other characters are on stage, unseen by the protagonist:

**HAMLET**

To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause: there's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life;  
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
 The insolence of office and the spurns  
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action.—

(III.1.56-88)

Hamlet here meditates on **suicide** as a way out of pain and human suffering; however, rather than religion, it is the fear of what is unknown that prevents man from committing suicide; the stress is therefore upon the importance of knowledge and how conscience makes man unable to act.

Many of the monologues spoken by Hamlet are, in fact, meditations on his inability to act. In what is known as the “**Hecuba monologue**”, Hamlet compares his own cowardice to the passion and pain conveyed by an actor in reciting Hecuba's desperation over the dead body of her husband Priamus:

#### HAMLET

[...] Now I am alone.  
 O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,

Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage wann'd,  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!  
For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,  
That he should weep for her? What would he do,  
Had he the motive and the cue for passion  
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears,  
And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
Make mad the guilty and appal the free,  
Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
The very faculties of eyes and ears.

Yet I,  
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak  
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,  
And can say nothing – no, not for a king,  
Upon whose property and most dear life  
A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward?  
Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across,  
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,  
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i' th' throat  
As deep as to the lungs – who does me this?  
Ha!

'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be  
But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
I should ha' fatted all the region kites  
With this slave's offal: bloody, bawdy villain!  
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!  
O, vengeance!

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,  
That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,  
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,  
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words  
And fall a-cursing, like a very drab,  
A scullion! Fie upon't! Foh!

About, my brains. Hum – I have heard  
 That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
 Have, by the very cunning of the scene,  
 Been struck so to the soul that presently  
 They have proclaim'd their malefactions.  
 For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
 With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players  
 Play something like the murder of my father  
 Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;  
 I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench,  
 I know my course. The spirit that I have seen  
 May be the devil, and the devil hath power  
 T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this. The play's the thing  
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

(II.2.543-601)

Theatre as a form and means of knowledge, then; theatre as a mirror of life and an objectification of hidden thoughts and feelings; theatre as a stage for human conscience.

The extended and explicit use of metatheatre in *Hamlet*, and the consequent fusion (and con-fusion) of life and theatre in a sort of identification of theatrical illusion and reality, convey the sense of fluidity, uncertainty, ambiguity as elements of the modern world. Though metatheatrical discourse and the use of the play within the play are usually comic devices, they are both widely present in this tragedy, an aspect which confirms Shakespeare's commitment towards ever new experimentations: the arrival at Elsinore (and on stage) of a theatre company, allows young prince Hamlet to use the stage as a mirror of Claudius's conscience; moreover, in the play-within-the-play part, Hamlet acts as stage-director (with suggestions about acting), as **playwright** (he writes some lines for the actors to make the reference to the king's crime explicit in order to provoke his reaction), as **theatre critic** (when he



discusses aspects of the theatre world of his time with the actors and when he comments moments of the performance with Ophelia). Just one example of the many we could choose comes from the opening of III.2. when Hamlet speaks to three players:

**HAMLET**

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue [...] Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently [...] Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature [...]

*(1-5; 17-22)*

However, beyond the well-known explicit 'play-within-the-play' scene, the whole text can be considered a great performance, not only as to the acting of madness that Hamlet chooses to play from the beginning, but for the many 'plays' within the play written above all by Polonius and Claudius for Ophelia, for Gertrude, for Laertes, for Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern and to which they are often present as hidden spectators.

Even Hamlet's final cue can be read in a theatre perspective. The last words – "the rest is silence" (V.2.363) – seem to suggest that Hamlet can be seen as a projection of the playwright who created the play, and who therefore cannot but be silent when the curtains drop:

**HAMLET** [...] I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu!  
 You that look pale and tremble at this chance,  
 That are but mutes or audience to this act,  
 Had I but time--as this fell sergeant, death,  
 Is strict in his arrest--O, I could tell you--  
 But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;  
 Thou livest; report me and my cause aright  
 To the unsatisfied.

**HORATIO** Never believe it:  
 I am more an antique Roman than a Dane:  
 Here's yet some liquor left.  
**HAMLET** As thou'rt a man,  
 Give me the cup: let go; by heaven, I'll have't.  
 O good Horatio, what a wounded name,  
 Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!  
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
 To tell my story. [...]  
 O, I die, Horatio;  
 The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit:  
 I cannot live to hear the news from England;  
 But I do prophesy the election lights  
 On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice;  
 So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,  
 Which have solicited. The rest is silence.  
(V.2.338-363)

There are many other planes and aspects in this tragedy worthy of "discussion and meditation": the **Oedipus complex** in the relationship between Hamlet and his mother Gertrude and Hamlet and his uncle Claudius; the presence of the **ghost** as an element of revenge tragedy, as a projection of Hamlet's conscience, and above all as a manifestation of old feudal values in contrast with Hamlet's sceptical and rationalist approach; the same contrast between old and new values represented in the warlike and passionate **Fortinbras** always ready for action and in the intellectual figure of **Hamlet** whose main concern is in understanding and finding answers to his questions; the role of women in patriarchal society, represented in the character of **Ophelia** and in her dependence on male figures to the point of losing her own identity and falling into madness when her father Polonius is accidentally killed by Hamlet, when her brother Laertes goes away to France, when

Hamlet is sent off to England; the problem of sexual desire and faithful love; the concept of the human body as a prison of the soul and life as a condemnation; the metaphor of disease widely present to express rottenness and corruption in the world ("something is rotten in the state of Denmark", I.4.90).

## 14.2 *Othello*

***Othello*** (1604) also opens with the presentation of a political and military conflict between Venice and Turkey. Again, Shakespeare chooses to shift the focus of the tragedy onto the internal psychological conflicts within the conscience of the tragic hero in contrast with the expectations of the audience, using this time an accidental event: a storm destroys the Turkish fleet before it can reach Cyprus where Othello has been sent by the Venetian Senate to defend that island from the Turkish attack (II.1). Tragedy can therefore develop along the lines of Othello's private and psychological conflicts determined by his powerful, uncontrollable passions and his guilty ingenuousness.

In its dramatic structure ***Othello*** partly echoes ***Romeo and Juliet***, as here too Act I presents a self contained comedy: Othello and Desdemona have married secretly; Brabantio, Desdemona's father, accuses him of witchcraft; Othello undergoes a trial in the Senate of Venice but in the end he is freed from the accusations and receives further honours from the Duke of Venice who sends him to Cyprus as general of the Venetian troops; Desdemona will accompany him to Cyprus and the couple retires at the end of the first act to have "but an hour of love" to spend together as man and wife before they leave for Cyprus. Typical comic structure; typical comic ending. Comedy is also conveyed by the character of **Desdemona** who appears as the typical comic heroine, ready to face society and conventions in the name of her love, very articulated in her speech (she persuades all Venetian Senators of the fairness of her secret marriage with Othello).

Tragedy begins in Act II, though it is announced in

the last scene of Act I in a monologue spoken by Iago, the first of his many monologues in which, as opposed to Hamlet, he attempts to find the reasons for his urge towards acting, and, at the same time, reveals theatre mechanisms:

**IAGO** [...] I hate the Moor:  
 And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets  
 He has done my office: I know not if't be true;  
 But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
 Will do as if for surety. He holds me well;  
 The better shall my purpose work on him.  
 Cassio's a proper man: let me see now:  
 To get his place and to plume up my will  
 In double knavery--How, how? Let's see:--  
 After some time, to abuse Othello's ear  
 That he is too familiar with his wife.  
 He hath a person and a smooth dispose  
 To be suspected, framed to make women false.  
 The Moor is of a free and open nature,  
 That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,  
 And will as tenderly be led by the nose  
 As asses are.  
 I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night  
 Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.  
*(I.3.384-402)*

From Act II onwards also **Desdemona** grows into a tragic character, gradually losing her ability in speech till she becomes speechless and is made eternally mute by Othello's violence.

Similarly, Othello, who was first presented as the fascinating narrator of wonderful adventures, is gradually made unable to speak properly by Iago's capacity to make him believe in a false reality often created by his ambiguous rhetorical strategies (he often denies what he wants to affirm in order to create doubts in his listener) and by his capacity to create real and imagined shows.

Indeed, in **Othello** too the 'play within the play' device is central though in a less explicit form as it is created above all by the spell of Iago's evocative words which project devastating

images and visions on the stage of the Moor's fragile mind. One of the most effective is the 'tale' of Cassio's supposed dream:

**IAGO** In sleep I heard him say "Sweet Desdemona,  
 Let us be wary, let us hide our loves;"  
 And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,  
 Cry out, "Sweet creature!" and then kiss me hard,  
 As if he pluck'd kisses by the roots,  
 That grew upon my lips, then laid his leg  
 Over my thigh, and sigh'd, and kiss'd, and then  
 Cried "Cursed fate, that gave thee to the Moor!"  
**OTHELLO** O monstrous, monstrous!  
**IAGO** Nay, this was but his dream.

*(III.3.425-433)*

Iago makes Othello the spectator of an imagined 'theatrical scene' and, in his last cue, points out how the 'theatrical reality' is evanescent like a dream. Moreover, **Iago** acts as **the artist** (playwright/director/actor) who creates and performs a number of fictitious though concrete 'theatrical actions' acted by unaware actors (Desdemona, Bianca, Cassius) for the sake of an equally unaware spectator (Othello); indeed, these scenes can be considered as 'plays-within-the-play', and their function is that of creating a false vision of reality. If monologues are Iago's instruments for meditation on his feelings and actions and for discussion with the audience in order to make them aware of his malevolent strategies, his words, like Hamlet's, become the means of theatrical actions. And, like Hamlet, Iago too can be considered the creator of the dramatic action who at the end of the performance cannot choose but to be **silent**, refusing to explain the reasons for his criminal actions: "Demand me nothing [...] From this time forth I never will speak word" (V.2.304-305).

In this tragedy too there are many other important aspects to be discussed: class, power, race, love, passion, jealousy, women's

role in society, violence, intrigue, faithfulness and loyalty, sense of identity, madness. Too many aspects for discussion here. To conclude, here is the final speech by Othello:

### **OTHELLO**

Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
 I have done the state some service, and they know't.  
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
 Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak  
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;  
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
 And smote him, thus. ***Stabs himself.***

(V.2.339-357)

Like Hamlet, Othello wants his story to be told; like Antony his last act is that of “Roman” suicide. At the end he recovers his capacity to narrate stories – a sign that he has found himself again – and combines narration with dramatic action.

## **14.3 *King Lear***

***King Lear*** (1605-1606) is a tragedy about power and responsibilities of rulers. It opens with an irresponsible act by King Lear, who abdicates in favour of his daughters, and, imposing his will against his duty, he creates chaos. His act

is made worse by his vanity as he decides to divide his reign according to the strength of love his daughters are able to express; whereas the hypocrite and wicked Goneril and Regan can speak the words of love their father wants to hear, the good and truly loving Cordelia has nothing to say except the truth, that she will love him according to her bond and that she will divide her love between father and husband when she gets married:

**CORDELIA**

Good my lord,  
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I  
 Return those duties back as are right fit,  
 Obey you, love you, and most honour you.  
 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
 They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,  
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty:  
 Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
 To love my father all.

*(I.1.94-103)*

A speech which partly resembles Desdemona's speech at the trial in Act I when she says that her love and obedience are equally divided between her father, Brabantio, and her husband, Othello. As Cordelia has "nothing" (l. 86) to say except the truth, angry Lear replies with the famous words "Nothing will come of nothing" (l. 89), and banishes her from his reign.

The same misunderstanding of loyalty takes place in the parallel story of the Earl of Gloucester who is easily persuaded by the wicked bastard son Edmund that his legitimate son Edgar is a traitor. Neither father can see the truth; they cannot read the new reality in which perspectives may change, and are easily betrayed by false words of wicked characters who echo, to some extent, the model-villain Iago.

Their blindness in a world of power which moves according to the new Machiavellian strategies is punished with physical blindness in Gloucester, whose eyes get plucked out by Lear's

wicked daughters with the help of Edmund, and with mental blindness in Lear who falls into madness when he finds himself with “nothing”, deprived of his role, of his power, of his riches, and of his daughters’ love. Both fathers, in the end, will get help from those children they have banished from their sight, though the tragedy of Lear, in accordance with its genre, ends in general death.

The disorder that Lear has promoted with his initial abdication and banishment of his loving daughter finds an unforgettable representation in the storm on the heath which proves to Lear that the macrocosm shares his own madness:

### LEAR

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
 Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!  
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!  
 Crack nature’s moulds, an germens spill at once,  
 That make ingrateful man!

[...]

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!  
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:  
 I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;  
 I never gave you kingdom, call’d you children,  
 You owe me no subscription: then let fall  
 Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave,  
 A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man:  
 But yet I call you servile ministers,  
 That have with two pernicious daughters join’d  
 Your high engender’d battles ‘gainst a head  
 So old and white as this. O! O! ’tis foul!

(III.2.1-9; 14-24)

As is typical of Shakespearean tragedy, in *King Lear* there are many characters who contribute to the development of



the tragedy – the villains **Goneril, Regan**, her husband **Cornwall, Edmund** – and the supporters of the two tragic figures of Lear and Gloucester: **Cordelia, Edgar, Kent**, and in the end Goneril's husband **Albany**. One special character is Lear's **Fool**, whose theatrical action is in language, made of puns and irony, tending to help Lear recover the sense of the word, to make him "see" reality and truth behind illusion and falseness.

Other major problems presented in this powerful tragedy are: loss of identity, the combination of power and sexual desire, violence, loyalty, love.

#### 14.4 Macbeth

*Macbeth* (1605-1606) opens by presenting the protagonist as a great hero, a courageous and loyal servant to the king, perfectly in harmony with the values of a feudal system. His tragedy of power and ambition is determined by actions freely chosen by him as a consequence of his incapacity to read the real meanings of words. In this case, the illusion of reality is not produced by the falseness of a villain but by the prophecy of the witches, the three Weird Sisters, whose words at the very beginning of the play – "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I.1.9) – hint at the difficulty of reading and interpreting reality in an objective way. However, the conflict between conscience and ambition is, as Macbeth is well aware, of his own making. Even before he kills the king Duncan, an act which goes against all human bonds of kinship and community and which disrupts the fundamental rules of loyalty and obedience to the king and of hospitality, he is aware that his action will "return / To plague the inventor" (1.7.9-10). So it proves; the murder sets him on a path to spiritual isolation that is more dreadful torment than the fear of death could ever be, and what torments him the most is his knowledge of himself as the author of his fortune.

Macbeth grows into an anti-hero who represents pure evil and whose previous qualities are not sufficient to redeem him. He resembles **Richard III** particularly in the kind of

crimes he commits. Richard, however, is proud of his capacity to produce evil actions and only in his final moments shows a tiny trace of conscience. Macbeth, on the contrary, shows a poetic intensity in imagining the consequences of his actions and we are brought into his sufferings to the point that we can also pity him at the same time that we condemn him. He knows very well that he and his wife will receive their due punishment, and it is with great resignation that he receives news of Lady Macbeth's death, pronouncing one of the most well-known speeches of the whole play:

### MACBETH

She should have died hereafter;  
 There would have been a time for such a word.  
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time,  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.

*(V.5.16-28)*

His conscience distinguishes him also from his wife. **Lady Macbeth** presses him into action by mocking his manhood, while she is ready to undo the differences between man and woman by "unsexing" herself and denying her own femininity:

### LADY MACBETH

The raven himself is hoarse  
 That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
 Under my battlements. Come, you spirits  
 That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
 And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
 Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;

Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry 'Hold, hold!'

(1.5.36-52)

She does not see that her husband's reluctance to kill Duncan arises from spiritual implications rather than cowardice. Indeed, Macbeth knows that in murdering Duncan he murders his own sleep, and his wife's sleep, but she does not know this until after the act, after she sees how much blood the King had in him, how the blood cannot be washed away from her hands.

A very interesting dimension in *Macbeth* is that of the supernatural, presented both in the Weird Sisters and in Banquo's ghost.



## 15. William Shakespeare's Romances

### 15.1 Romance writing

The feelings of doubt and uncertainty connected to the transformation of society which appear so explicitly in Shakespeare's tragic writing, also recur in his last plays: *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. The utopistic/fantastic nature of these plays helps to transfigure the historical reality, displacing it into an ideal world (the difficulty to relate to reality is often resolved with the presence of divinity and magic), and showing how nothing is fixed and how alternatives to reality are always possible. Indeed, the romance elements of fable, allegory, dream as well as the metaphorical use of theatre itself make romance a genre particularly fit to represent the crisis of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century world.

Romance writing, free as it is from the rigour of logic and rationality, can use allegory and fable and can propose symbolic and stereotyped characters, models of virtue or villainy, therefore sometimes too simplified in comparison to other great Shakespearean heroes. However, some characters, the male protagonists particularly, though moving in a symbolic dimension, often act in rather ambivalent ways, thus revealing their imperfect humanity, which makes them closer to real men and establishes a level of identification for the spectators.

In Shakespeare's romances the non-realistic/mythic atmosphere prevails over the realistic elements (represented in all of them by lower-class characters: fishermen, sailors, peasants), whereas the exhibition of theatre mechanisms and conventions forces the spectator to retain the awareness of his

own reality and see his own humanity reflected in the passions and consciousness of the characters.

## 15.2 Dramatic structure

The dramatic structure of Shakespeare's romances stretches through long spans of time and moves from place to place thanks to the use of a journey pattern; the changes in time and space are also adopted in order to move from one genre to another, combining different theatrical elements and creating ever new theatrical forms. Indeed, by mixing the conventions of different genres, Shakespeare produces a modern, open form which in some ways anticipates the techniques of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century expressionist theatre based on the estrangement effect; for example, moments of great emotional involvement are sometimes interrupted by external narrative speeches (either spoken by the classic Chorus figure or by the characters themselves); or the audience's attention is shifted to spectacular interludes such as masques, all of these devices evoking the fictitiousness of the theatre performance. Moreover, particularly in the final moments of these plays, the irrationality and arbitrariness of the solutions proposed emerges through the presence of magic and/or divine elements, and this also makes theatre mechanisms more explicit.

By highlighting the artificial nature of the performance, Shakespeare can easily transgress the rational content of his plots and move freely between past and present in order to reach, in the end, a happy conclusion and re-establish the harmony that had been initially broken. This is possible also because, whereas in tragedy the hero's passions and his psychological conflicts lead him to defeat and sacrifice, always concluding with his death, in romances the protagonists can be artificially placed off stage and distanced from their own conflicts which otherwise would lead them towards the tragic catastrophe; the audience can therefore imagine them in acts connected to everyday life, playing roles different from the tragic-heroic

ones of the first part of the plays, not confronted with the world of absolutes but with the world of change and transformation; indeed, when the heroes re-appear on scene after their 'theatrical' exile, they show themselves to be rather changed by suffering and ready to assume their role of positive heroes again.

### 15.3 Heroes and themes

This happens particularly in the case of Pericles and Leontes (the protagonists of *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*), both partly or totally responsible for their wives' (apparent) death, who retire from 'stage life' to spend their time in mourning and penitence along with exerting their duties as governors of their reigns. In both plays, the tragic pattern of the first part is therefore suspended by placing the hero off stage while the passing of time allows a shift towards a non-tragic ending. In the second part of both plays, the action moves to different places, different times and different adventures with new protagonists, and tragedy is set aside and softened by the natural process of life cycles; the passing of time offers the tragic protagonists a second opportunity and makes the happy ending possible, even recovering those apparently unalterable tragic elements such as death which, in a non-tragic genre like this, can be resolved in an atmosphere of renaissance, of a metaphorical and 'literal' return to life. This pattern is partly changed in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* where the time extension refers to a remote past which is partly the background of the plot.

It must be said, however, that though the happy endings in Shakespeare's four romances reflect a sort of more optimistic vision if compared to the tragedies, they remain rather ambiguous and problematic, and comic moments and characters are rather rare (Autolycus and Caliban) if not completely absent (particularly in *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*, in spite of the happy ending, the audience never smiles).

Many are the recurring elements in all four plays and this makes romance writing rather homogenous to a certain extent:

a king and his daughter are always the main protagonists, the young princesses all have symbolic names, divinity and magic are always present as well as good counsellors to the kings and villainous relatives, and so on. However, though Shakespeare's last plays can certainly be considered as a group characterised by romance elements, they also present many differences, particularly when we consider the structure of dramatic discourse.

Shakespearean romances, therefore, are not the product of an artist who had exhausted his creative vein, as critics have often maintained, dismissing Shakespeare's production of the last phase in comparison to the great tragedies; indeed, romance writing can well represent a further step towards the creation of new forms of theatre and confirms how the dramatist's vigour was still alive at the end of his career, how Shakespeare continued to pay attention to all possible aspects and opportunities theatre offered him to create the magic of performance and to express his art.

#### 15.4 *The Winter's Tale*

*Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale* are both constructed on a double-plot structure but, rather than alternating them as in his previous plays, Shakespeare divides the play in two parts and develops two completely different plots, with different protagonists (Pericles/Marina; Leontes/Perdita) setting them in different times and different places: the tragic adventures of the kings are interrupted at a moment at which the heroes's death would be a proper solution and, while the voice of a Chorus figure fills the gap of many years, their daughters, who had just been born in the first part, become the young protagonists of a new play (less tragic but equally adventurous), till fortuitous events bring the two protagonists together again for the happy ending.

This appears particularly evident in *The Winter's Tale*. Act III ends as a proper tragedy, with the death of Leontes's wife and child and with the king's resolution to spend the rest of his life in mourning and penitence: '[...] Prithee, bring me/To the dead body of my queen and son:/...



upon them shall/The causes of their death appear, unto/  
Our shame perpetual. Once a day I'll visit/The chapel where  
they lie, and tears shed there/Shall be my recreation [...]'  
(III.2.233-239); act IV opens with a speech spoken by Time/  
Chorus in the function of bridging the gap of time, space,  
and genre (a new 'comic' play begins in this second part):

Impute it not a crime  
To me, or my swift passage, that I slide  
O'er sixteen years [...]  
[...]  
[...] Leontes leaving,  
Th' effects of his fond jealousies so grieving  
That he shuts up himself, imagine me,  
Gentle spectators, that I now may be  
In fair Bohemia [...]  
[...] and with speed so pace  
To speak of Perdita, now grown in grace  
Equal with wond'ring...

(IV.1.4-6; 17-25)

### 15.5 *Pericles*

In *Pericles* the Chorus figure is the great invention as, not only has he a precise identity being **John Gower**, the author of the poem *Confessio Amantis* in which the story of Apollonius of Tyrus is narrated – a story which is the source for Pericles's adventures and which had already been briefly used by Shakespeare in *The Comedy of Errors* – but also because he comes on stage at the opening of each act, interrupting the dramatic action continuously with the tale of those same actions the audience has just seen or is about to see performed. The continuous alternation between dramatic action and Gower's narrative interludes creates an estrangement effect as the audience is continuously reminded of the artificiality of the performance and is continuously involved in an imaginative

effort to help the success of the performance itself. Just to mention a few of Gower's many addresses to the spectators, particularly useful in this play where action moves from one place to another: 'In your imagination hold/This stage the ship, upon whose deck/The sea-tossed Pericles appears to speak.' (III.vv.58-60); 'Imagine Pericles arrived at Tyre/[.../] Now to Marina bend your mind [...]' (IV. vv. 1, 5); 'Patience then,/And think you now are all in Mytilene.' (IV.4.50-51); 'In your supposing once more put your sight;/Of heavy Pericles, think this his bark [...]' (V.vv.21-22); etc. Gower's narratives are sometimes supported/interrupted by dumb-shows with the purpose of reviving the spectators' attention when narrations are too long, of inserting a spectacular moment, and of representing deep emotions that cannot be simply described, as happens in the third and last dumb-show referring to the moment in which Pericles is told that his daughter is dead and is taken to visit her tomb. Here is the description of this dumb-show:

*Enter Pericles at one door with all his train, Cleon  
and Dionyza at the other. Cleon shows Pericles the  
tomb, whereat Pericles makes lamentations, put  
on sackcloth, and in a mighty passion departs.*

Pericles is devastated by sorrow and pain, his face becomes a tragic mask and his body, covered in sackcloth, becomes a visible theatrical emblem of his tragedy. The full effect of Pericles's 'mighty passion' and deep desperation can only be achieved by theatrical action since, in this case, simple narration would diminish the emotional impact on the audience.

It will be her daughter Marina – so named "for she was born at sea" (III.3.13) – to bring her father back to life, exerting that role of renaissance Shakespeare always entrust the young generation with. In the final agnition scene – another recurrent element in these plays as they always present a plot in which family members are separated by various misfortunes and are reunited in the end – Pericles says to his daughter: "O, come hither, / Thou that beget'st him that thee beget" (V.1.193-

194), acknowledging that he is receiving new life from his own daughter.

## 15.6 *Cymbeline*

The other two romances present multiple plots which take place at the same time, though in different places: various events cause the separation of the characters (either in groups or singularly) who, in the end, are brought together again according to complex developments of the plot while the final agnition and forgiveness for the past crimes mark the happy ending. Whereas in *Cymbeline* this articulation appears sometimes too complicated and confusing, in *The Tempest* Shakespeare creates a perfect structure in which the fragmentation of the plots is functional to the theatrical discourse on different dramatic genres: **tragedy** acted by the aristocratic characters, **romantic comedy** with Ferdinand and Miranda, **farce** with Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo; **masque** directed by Prospero and acted by Ariel and the other spirits.

*Cymbeline* is, in some way, a sort of synthesis of all Shakespeare production and contains many echoes of his previous plays: the **tragedy** of jealousy provoked by false accusations which suggests an obvious comparison of Posthumous and Iachimo with Othello and Iago; the **historical drama** with the war between Rome and Britannia; the **tragicomic play** acted by Imogen with her flight disguised as a young page, like Julia in *The Two gentlemen of Verona*, and her similarity with Juliet when she wakes up from her poisoned sleep and finds herself by a beheaded body which wears her beloved husband's clothes; the bitter **farce** acted by Cloten with his arrogance and stupidity which ends with his death; the **romance/fable** with the envious stepmother and her poisoned potions, and the previous kidnapping of the royal children. *Cymbeline* then presents a whole theatrical world combined in a difficult and complex play whose importance is perhaps in Shakespeare's attempt to experiment a totally new form, which

included all previous forms and produced something different. The result was not as neat and successful as one would hope, but probably its importance lies in its being a necessary stage towards the production of such a perfect play as *The Tempest*.

### 15.7 *The Tempest*

The metatheatrical discourse is fundamental in *The Tempest* as everything in the play can be read as the product of Prospero's 'art', that is of dramatic fiction. The tempest that unexpectedly opens the play is the result of Prospero's magic powers and all that follows is an expression of the magic of theatre.

**Ariel**, the great invention of this play, and the spirits of the island, help Prospero/Shakespeare to reveal the mechanisms of theatre performance. Ariel becomes a sort of theatrical double of Prospero, as a major actor who can always respond to his director/dramatist requests («[...] be 't to fly,/To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride/On the curl'd clouds, to thy strong bidding task/Ariel and all his quality.» I.2.190-193; indeed, this is Ariel's first cue, a sort of self-introduction of "its" role as an Actor), who is ready to change costume («Go make thyself like a nymph o' th' sea [...]» I.2.301), to give indications to the other actors so that the theatrical action can proceed as the Director/dramatist has planned (and this happens when Ariel wakes Gonzalo in order to prevent his and Alonso's assassination: «My master through his Art foresees the danger/That you, his friend, are in; and sends me forth,—/For else his project dies,—to keep them living.» II.1.292-294). Moreover, Ariel acts as prompter when, invisible, his/her voice is heard accusing Stephano of lying, thus creating farcical contrasts between Stephano and Trinculo (III.2.43, 61, 73); Ariel also assumes the function of *deus ex-machina* in the *anti-masque* scene which leads to the repentance of Prospero's enemies and to the happy

ending («*Thunder and lightning. Enter Ariel like a Harpy*[...]» III.3.53), and receives the director's commendation for the successful performance («Bravely the figure of this Harpy hast thou/Perform'd, my Ariel; a grace it had devouring:/Of my instructions hast thou nothing bated/In what thou hadst to say: so, with good life/And observation strange, my meaner ministers/Their several kinds have done.» III.3.83-88).

Ariel is also stage designer and choreographer for the *masque* in Act IV staged to celebrate Ferdinand and Miranda's engagement, as Prospero wishes («[...] for I must/Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple/Some vanity of mine Art [...]» IV.1.38-41); Ariel is even a sort of playwright himself not only with his songs, but also suggesting part of Prospero's speech when, in act V, Ariel describes the pitiful state in which Prospero's ancient enemies are reduced («[...] Your charm so strongly works 'em,/That if you now beheld them, your affections/Would become tender.» V.1.17-19) and Prospero is therefore forced to speak the lines that Ariel has written for him: «Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling/Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,/One of their kind [...] be kindlier mov'd than thou art?/[...]/[...] the rarer action is/In virtue than in vengeance [...]» (V.1.21-24, 27-28). In conclusion, Ariel, as a projection of Prospero's art, becomes an important means to reveal the mechanisms and artificiality of performance, thus creating a critical distance thanks to which the spectator can experience the theatrical event as a cognitive moment.

The opposite of Ariel, the spirit of the air, is represented by the rebellious, material slave **Caliban**, the colonised who has been usurped by Prospero of his island and who is unable to react against the coloniser's cultural power. Though depicted as a brutal savage who has tried to violate the honour of Prospero's daughter, he is given one of the most poetic speeches in the play:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
 Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
 Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices  
 That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
 Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
 The clouds methought would open and show riches  
 Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,  
 I cried to dream again.

*(III.2.133-141)*

Ariel and Caliban can also be seen as projections of Prospero's spiritual and sensual nature; this interpretation has found support in Prospero's words when, in the end, he refers to Caliban admitting: "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (V.1.275-276).

**Prospero** is the great director of the whole play and openly exhibits his theatrical art, often speaking in terms of meta-theatre. His most well known speech about theatre, and about the identification of dreams, life and theatrical fiction, is spoken when he suddenly interrupts the masque he has ordered to celebrate the engagement of Miranda to Ferdinand in Act IV:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
 As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
 Are melted into air, into thin air:  
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
 The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
 Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
 As dreams are made on, and our little life  
 Is rounded with a sleep.

*(IV.1.148-158)*

In the **Epilogue**, Prospero gives up his magic power, that power of creating theatrical illusion that Shakespeare was also about to abandon (*The Tempest* is his last play after which he retired to Stratford):

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
 And what strength I have's mine own,  
 Which is most faint: now, 'tis true,  
 I must be here confined by you,  
 Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
 Since I have my dukedom got  
 And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell  
 In this bare island by your spell;  
 But release me from my bands  
 With the help of your good hands:  
 Gentle breath of yours my sails  
 Must fill, or else my project fails,  
 Which was to please. Now I want  
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,  
 And my ending is despair,  
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
 Which pierces so that it assaults  
 Mercy itself and frees all faults.  
 As you from crimes would pardon'd be,  
 Let your indulgence set me free.

(**Epilogue**, 1-20)

## 15.8 Shakespearean Criticism

Shakespeare is undoubtedly the author who has attracted the attention of literary critics more than anyone else, and his plays represent an inexhaustible source for new discussions and interpretations. Indeed, Shakespeare's theatre has been studied in the past centuries from all possible critical perspectives: from the philological to the philosophical, from the imagery criticism to the metatheatrical approach, from historicism and Marxism

to structuralism and post-structuralism, from semiotics to post-modernism; recently, in the past few decades, the most popular critical trends have been new historicism, feminism, psychoanalysis, post-colonialism, all of them representing an important enrichment in the field of Shakespearean studies. After all, the function of literary criticism is to offer ever new readings and interpretations of literary texts in order to contribute to the understanding of the world we live in, at the same time adding value and giving new life to the literature of the past. In fact, if the literary text contains the 'primary meanings' the author wants to convey in his own work, literary criticism, on the other hand, allows the text to live on by producing new meanings which change with the changing of time and different cultural climates and sensitivities.

Shakespeare, thanks to his genius and sensitivity, was able to capture the essence of humanity and the many facets of life, still remaining, after many centuries, "our contemporary", and stimulating the critical debate on problems and aspects which still reflect our life and our deepest feelings. However, it is also true that Shakespeare was the greatest dramatist in the theatre of his time, an unrivalled and inimitable innovator and experimenter, an artist who produced theatre for his contemporaries without worrying about future readings of his works that critics would make in the following centuries. Unfortunately, in the history of Shakespearean criticism the theatrical dimension of Shakespeare's work has often been neglected in order to focus on those theoretical aspects which prevailed in different periods.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the contrast between classicism and modernism produced a critical debate which focused both on the form of Shakespearean theatre (particularly as to its respect/disrespect of the Aristotelian unities of time, space and action) and on its contents (particularly as to its careless mixture of different theatrical genres and to its fundamental 'immorality' due above all to Shakespeare's disrespect of the concept of *poetical justice* in the tragedies).

Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly during the romantic



period, Shakespeare was literally 'read' almost exclusively in a philosophical and political perspective, whereas the theatrical dimension of his work was not only neglected but totally denied. An important critic and writer such as **Charles Lamb**, among others, expressed openly his interest in Shakespeare as a philosopher rather than as a playwright and stated that his plays were in danger of losing great part of their force and artistic quality when they were performed on stage, whereas the depth of their content emerged in full from their reading:

It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever. Their distinguished excellence is the reason that they should be so. There is so much in them, which comes not under the province of acting, with which eye, and tone, and gesture, have nothing to do [...]

The truth is, the Characters of Shakespeare are so much the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their actions [...] ('On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, considered with reference to their fitness for stage representation').

Nowadays, in the multi-ethnic/post-colonial world we live in, the Shakespearean text is again discussed above all in its contents, in order to trace elements for debating some of the major issues characterising our society: problems of race and class, hybridity and the confrontation with otherness, the relationship between coloniser and colonised, gender and sexuality problems, homoerotic relationships and transgressions of social conventions.

However, it is important to consider the theatrical quality of Shakespeare's plays, the great creations and innovations that came of his art. Certainly, our contemporary theatre owes a lot to him; indeed, in the twentieth century the theatre recovered meaning and vitality thanks to the Shakespearean lesson which suggested a modern vision of tragedy and a general vision of theatre as a mirror of life. If we consider one of the greatest leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre renewal,

Bertoldt Brecht, to give one obvious and well-known example, it is evident how he, on the one hand, recovers the symbolic essentiality typical of the Elizabethan scenery, and, on the other, structures his dramatic discourse along the lines of the Shakespearean 'open-ended play', always choosing to end his plays with new questionings, reminding us – as Shakespeare did – that the stage mirrors life and that, therefore, there are no final reassuring answers, but we all have to engage with the problems suggested by the play and find our own individual answers, or, we could say, 'write' our own endings.

## **16. Seventeenth century English history**

### **16.1 The Stuart monarchy**

The 17th century is the most complex in English history. It opened in 1603 with the accession to the throne of the Stuart monarchy, with James I Stuart, Mary Stuart's only son, James VI of Scotland since 1567 when he was only one year old. He united in his person the crowns of England, Ireland and Scotland. Coming from a Catholic country, James was keen to prove himself a defender of the Church of England. In that respect, a major achievement was the publication of a new translation of the Bible into English, known as the **Authorised version** (1611), as it was approved by King James. The new Bible was intended to draw its English readers together as members of a national Church which set itself between the extremes of Roman Catholicism and Genevan Calvinism. However, having been an absolute monarch as king of Scotland, James was not ready to accept Parliamentary interference and produced writings in which he declared the king's divine right as an indisputable power.

### **16.2 King James's speech to Parliament**

#### **ON THE DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS**

The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth [...] Kings are justly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth. For if you will consider the attributes to God, you shall see how they agree

in the person of a king. God has power to create, or destroy, make, or unmake at his pleasure, to give life, or send death, to judge all, and to be judged nor accountable to none: to raise low things, and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both soul and body due. And the like power have Kings; they make and unmake their subjects: they have power of raising, and casting down: of life, and of death: judges over all their subjects, and in all causes, and yet accountable to none but God only. [...] I conclude then this point touching the power of kings, with this axiom of divinity, that as to dispute what God may do, is blasphemy [...] so is it sedition in subjects, to dispute what a king may do in the height of his power: But just kings will ever be willing to declare what they will do, if they will not incur the curse of God. I will not be content that my power be disputed upon: but I shall ever be willing to make the reason appear of all my doings, and rule my actions according to my laws [...] Therefore all kings that are not tyrants, or perjured, will be glad to bound themselves within the limits of their laws; and they that persuade them the contrary, are vipers, and pests, both against them and the Commonwealth.

*(21 March 1609)*

### 16.3 Charles I

At James's death in 1625, his son Charles I became king. Like his father, he based his power on the ideology of the divine right of kings and his political attitude was explicitly absolutist, therefore aggravating the contrast with Parliament. Charles came to the throne amid pressure from English Protestants for intervention against Spain and the Catholic powers in the religious wars raging in Europe (the Thirty Years War, 1618-48), and allowed England's foreign policy to be directed by the unpopular Duke of Buckingham, who launched a series of disastrous military expeditions against Spain and France. Charles dissolved his first two Parliaments when they attempted to impeach Buckingham but he was forced to call a third Parliament because he needed funds to pursue his

warlike policies. In 1628, Charles' opponents formulated the Petition of Right as a defence against the King's arbitrary use of his powers. Charles had to accept the Petition in the hope that Parliament would grant him subsidies, but in practice he ignored it. After the assassination of Buckingham in 1628, he angrily dismissed his third Parliament in 1629, imprisoned several of his leading opponents, and declared his intention of ruling alone. The eleven-year period of the King's Personal Rule was also described as the "Eleven Year Tyranny". Without Parliament to grant legal taxes, Charles was obliged to raise income by highly unpopular means; these measures, along with his controversial religious policies, alienated many natural supporters of the Crown.

In 1633 he appointed William Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury; Laud, who was rather close to Roman Catholicism, tried to suppress opposition from Puritans and supported the King's Divine Right. The King's marriage to the French Catholic princess Henrietta Maria had also caused consternation amongst English Protestants, particularly as she was allowed to practise her religion openly and freely. In order to finance war against the Scots, Charles was obliged to recall Parliament in 1640, bringing his eleven-year personal rule to an end. The King's policies in Church and State were strongly opposed by the Short Parliament of April 1640 (so called because it lasted only three weeks) and its successor the Long Parliament (which lasted from 1640 until 1649 as, by a unique Act of Parliament, it could only be dissolved with the agreement of the members, and those members did not agree to its dissolution until after the English Civil War).

In November 1641, a rebellion in Ireland provoked a crisis over whether King or Parliament should control the army that was needed to repress the rebellion. In 1642, as King and Parliament tried to gain control of the armed forces, a violent confrontation became inevitable and the Civil War (1642-1649) broke out. The parliamentary New Model Army against the royal troops was successfully led by Oliver Cromwell. The conflict between the Cavaliers (Aristocracy, Gentry and Clergy

supporting Charles) and the Roundheads (Puritans and middle-class merchants fighting against the King) ended with the defeat of Charles I who had never abandoned the belief that he had been placed on the throne by God. The king was brought to trial on the charge of being “a Tyrant, a Traitor and a Murderer, and a public enemy to the Commonwealth of England”, and was beheaded on 30 January 1649. The King’s execution shocked the whole of Europe. Moreover, his personal dignity during his trial and his beheading created a cult of martyrdom around him, which was encouraged by the publication, only ten days after his death, of a book of his supposed meditations during his final months. The ***Eikon Basilike*** (the “Royal Portrait”), with the subtitle *The Pourtrature of His Sacred Majestie in His Solitudes and Sufferings*, written in a simple, moving, and straightforward style in the form of a diary, combines prayers urging the forgiveness of Charles’s executioners with a justification of royalism.

## 16.4 The Republic

A Republic (the Commonwealth), modelled on strict Puritan values, was proclaimed under the guidance of Cromwell, a form of Government which lasted ten years. It is interesting to consider that England has always had a monarchy – and still has – and that the period 1649-1660 is the only time, in the whole of English history, in which it had a republican form of government. In 1653 Cromwell became Lord Protector of England, Scotland, and Ireland and established a sort of dictatorship. Cromwell has been a very controversial figure in the history of Britain and Ireland as he was considered a regicidal dictator by some historians and a hero of liberty by others.

At his death (1659) his son Richard came briefly to power. The new Lord Protector had no power base in either Parliament or the New Model Army, and was forced to abdicate in 1659. The Protectorate of England was abolished, and the Commonwealth of England re-established. A predominantly

Royalist House of Commons was elected on 8 May 1660, and it resolved to proclaim Charles king and invite him to return. Charles arrived in Dover on 25 May 1660 and reached London on 29 May, Charles' thirtieth birthday, which is considered the date of the Restoration. Monarchy was then restored with practically no opposition and Charles was crowned King of England and Ireland at Westminster Abbey on 23 April 1661.

## 16.5 The Restoration

**Charles II**, who had been sent into exile to France after the execution of his father, was made king, and, having lived at the French court, his return was characterised by an atmosphere of license which made his court particularly lively and hedonistic in reaction to the rigid Puritan behaviour, a change which is emblematically described by the definition of that period as "Merry England".

The king's return allowed a new flourishing period of the arts. The theatres, which had been closed by Act of Parliament in 1642, were opened again in 1660 and a fervent theatrical activity with a remarkable production both in comedy (the *comedy of manners*) and in tragedy (the *heroic tragedy*) developed around the court and the aristocracy, while major innovations were introduced in acting such as the appearance of actresses (this phase is known as the **Restoration theatre**). Poets wrote in favour of the re-established monarchy and a satirical movement in poetry developed as a means of deriding the Puritans and their strict ideology (*Hudibras* by **Samuel Butler** was the first Restoration satire in the form of a mock-heroic poem ridiculing the hypocrisy of the Presbyterians and Independents). Narrative also developed in new directions, towards a closer representation of reality and social problems as appears in *Oroonoko* (1678) by **Aphra Behn**, the first expression in English literature of sympathy for the oppressed negroes and, at the same time, an important step in the development of women's writing.

Charles' attitude during his rule was strongly influenced by the years spent at the French court and he tended to establish an absolute form of monarchy. His Parliament, the Cavalier Parliament (1661–79), was overwhelmingly Royalist, and Charles saw no reason to dissolve it and force another general election for seventeen years. It enacted harsh anti-Puritan laws known as the Clarendon Code from the name of Lord Clarendon, Charles' chief advisor who aimed at discouraging non-conformity in the Church of England; Charles himself, however, favoured a policy of religious toleration. In fact, after entering into the secret treaty of Dover, an alliance with Louis XIV under the terms of which France agreed to support England in the Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–74) (the First and Second Anglo-Dutch War had taken place in the years 1652–1654 and 1665–67, all in order to defend and develop England's economic interests in sea trade), Charles promised to restore Roman Catholicism in England and in 1670 attempted to introduce religious freedom for Catholics and Protestant dissenters with his 1672 Royal Declaration of Indulgence, but Parliament forced him to withdraw it. The religious tensions were aggravated when it was known that the king's brother, the future James II, had converted to Roman Catholicism. It was during this crisis that the Whig (reformers) and Tory (conservatives) opposition started, and since then English political and parliamentary life has been structured on that opposition. Charles sided with the Tories in this fight, and many Whig leaders were killed or forced into exile. In 1679 the Cavalier Parliament was dissolved and the king, like his father Charles I, ruled without Parliament until his death in 1685, thus establishing an absolute monarchy. Charles converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed.

The situation worsened when his brother was crowned king as **James II** of England and Ireland and as James VII of Scotland; indeed, not only did he try to exert an absolute rule, but he also openly supported the resurgence of Catholic trends. In fact,



James had converted to Roman Catholicism in 1669 though his conversion had become known only later, in 1673. Charles II had opposed the conversion, ordering that James' children be raised as Protestants; nevertheless, in 1673, he allowed James (whose first wife had died) to marry the Catholic Mary of Modena. In 1677, James had attempted to appease Protestants by allowing his daughter, Mary, to marry the Protestant Prince of Orange, William III (who was also his nephew), but fears of a Catholic monarch persisted. At first, there was little overt opposition to the new Sovereign and the new Parliament, which assembled in May 1685, seemed favourable to James, agreeing to grant him a large income. Soon after his crowning James had to face the Monmouth Rebellion, led by Charles II's illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, who declared himself King in June 1685, but was afterwards defeated and executed at the Tower of London. To protect himself from further rebellions, James sought to establish a large standing army. By putting Roman Catholics in charge of several regiments, the King was drawn into a conflict with Parliament, which was prorogued in November 1685, never to meet again during James's brief reign. Religious tension intensified from 1686. James allowed Roman Catholics to occupy the highest offices of the Kingdom, and received at his court the papal nuncio, the first representative from Rome to London since the reign of Mary I Tudor. In 1687 James reissued the Declaration of Indulgence, also known as the Declaration for Liberty of Conscience, by which he suspended laws punishing Roman Catholics and Protestant dissenters. In June 1688, a group of Protestant nobles requested the Prince of Orange to come to England with an army. By September, it had become clear that William sought to invade but James refused the assistance of Louis XIV, fearing that the English would oppose French intervention and believing that his own army would be adequate. When William arrived in November 1688, many Protestant officers defected and joined William. James had to escape to France.

## 16.6 The Glorious Revolution

As a result of what is known as the Glorious Revolution, or Bloodless Revolution, then, the king was deposed and Parliament entrusted the crown to his daughter Maria who was to rule jointly with her husband William of Orange, thus establishing the so-called institutional monarchy: the monarchs, before their crowning, had to swear to respect a statute, the Bill of Rights, which defined the rights of Parliament and the civil liberties. The Bill of Rights also charged James II with abusing his power, criticising the establishment of a standing army and the imposition of cruel punishments. As to religion, the Bill stipulated that no Catholic would henceforth be permitted to ascend to the English throne, nor could any English monarch marry a Catholic.

## 17. Seventeenth century prose writing

### 17.1 Prose writing

Over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century English prose underwent an extraordinary development as well as a diversification of styles among the writers of the period. Different forms of non-fiction prose developed as a result of the increasing dissent in religion and politics which created a disturbing sense of uncertainty as to the future of England and, indeed, as to the whole purpose of life. In the first half of the century forms of plain and direct prose styles were modelled on the writing of the Roman philosopher Seneca, characterised as they were by brevity, energy and strength, in contrast with the balanced, rotund, oratorical Ciceronian style, and, with the exception of Milton, the ideal of smooth, simple speech persisted throughout the mid-seventeenth century as well, since it proved to be most persuasive in the battles of propaganda that accompanied the political controversies during the civil wars. At the same time philosophical writings by Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke, also privileged a form of empirical prose characterised by a plain, direct, unequivocal style.

### 17.2 Philosophical prose: Sir Francis Bacon

The work of Sir **Francis Bacon** (1561-1626), English philosopher, essayist, and statesman, belongs to the fields of philosophy and literature. He planned a large philosophical work, the *Instauratio Magna*, but completed only two

parts, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) – later expanded in Latin as *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623) – and *Novum Organum* (1620). With the publication of *The Advancement of Learning* in 1605, English prose can be said to have become the vehicle of philosophical literature, as it was the first important treatise on science and philosophy in English. In this prose work, after rejecting the various objections to learning and enunciating its advantages, Bacon considers the various methods of advancing knowledge, dividing it into history, poetry, and philosophy. He also attempts to make a distinction between two kinds of truth, a theological truth derived from God and determined by faith, and a scientific truth based on the observation of nature and the dictates of reason. Bacon aimed at creating a new philosophical system, based on a right interpretation of nature, that could replace that of Aristotle; indeed, his inductive method opposed the Aristotelian syllogistic deductive method and aprioristic reasoning.

Bacon's theories are further developed in *Novum Organum* – 'The New Instrument' by which human understanding would be advanced – where his new method is clearly described in a series of **aphorisms**:

There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles, the truth of which it takes for settled and immovable, proceeds to judgment and to the discovery of middle axioms. And this way is now in fashion. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way, but as yet untried.

("Aphorism" 19)

Though Bacon strongly believes in the achievement of knowledge through the observation of experience, he underlines that the human mind is subject to defects and limits which are classified in four categories or "**Idols**": those originated by human nature

itself (*Idola tribus*, or ‘Idols of the Tribe’), those determined by aspects connected to single individuals and circumstances (*Idola specus*, or ‘Idols of the Cave’), those caused by verbal confusions in men’s interaction (*Idola fori*, or ‘Idols of the Market Place’), those created by popular superstitions and previous philosophical thinking based on misrepresentation rather than observation of reality (*Idola theatri*, or ‘Idols of the Theatre’). Bacon’s analysis of the source of error results into his proposal for the interpretation of nature through the inductive method making him the initiator of empiricism, and *Novum Organum* is considered as the first important step towards the modern scientific movement.

Of more significant literary interest are Bacon’s *Essays*, 58 short texts written over the course of many years and published in 1605 (first issued in 1597). Bacon’s *Essays* were inspired by **Michel de Montaigne** (1533-1592), the initiator of the essay as a literary genre, whose *Essais* (1580, Books I and II; 1588, Book III) had been translated into English in 1603 by **John Florio** (1553?-1625); like the work of Montaigne, Bacon’s first experiments of 1597 are best seen as short ‘attempts’ at presenting ‘broken knowledges’. They were written in a caustic aphoristic style, then re-edited with additions in a far more colloquial and conversational style. They were meant to be precepts for the people of his time, and indeed prove to be a set of reflections and observations on private as well as public affairs, dealing with society, state policy, marriage, human relationships, human nature, and also with abstract subjects such as truth and death. Some of the opening sentences of these essays sound like sayings or moral principles: “What is truth?” said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer” (*Of Truth*); “Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.” (*Of Revenge*); “He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune” (*Of Marriage and Single Life*); “Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education, in the elder, a part of experience.” (*Of Travel*); “Suspensions amongst thoughts, are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight.” (*Of Suspensions*).

Here is an extract from the essay entitled *Of Studies*:

Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight, is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment, and disposition of business. [...] They perfect nature, and are perfected by experience: [...] Crafty men contemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them; for they teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them, and above them, won by observation. Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention. Some books also may be read by deputy, and extracts made of them by others; but that would be only in the less important arguments, and the meaner sort of books, else distilled books are like common distilled waters, flashy things. Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man. And therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit: and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know, that he doth not.

Histories make men wise; poets witty; the mathematics subtile; natural philosophy deep; moral grave; logic and rhetoric able to contend. [...]

Bacon's philosophical ideas culminated in the utopian work *The New Atlantis* published unfinished in 1626. **Thomas More's** *Utopia* (1516) had set a fashion for accounts of imaginary communities based on ideal forms of government, a fashion that revived in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (also **Tommaso Campanella's** *City of the Sun*, written in 1623, falls into the utopian fashion of the time).

***The New Atlantis***, a treatise of political philosophy in the form of a fable written in plain, expository style, is an account of a visit to an imaginary island of Bensalem in the Pacific and of the social conditions prevailing there. Particularly interesting is the visit of the nameless narrator to ‘Solomon’s House’, a college of natural philosophy, “dedicated to the study of the works and creatures of God”, where the advancement of learning was pursued through the application of scientific methods. Bacon’s aim was to show how a Christian society could be improved by increased knowledge and better technology. Unlike most utopias, Bacon’s proposal for a College of Science was largely realized, within thirty years of the publication of his book, in the shape of the Philosophical Society, later called the Royal Society (1660). *The New Atlantis* is characterised, like Bacon’s other writings, by a plain, straightforward prose, rather different from the over-elaborate and artificial Elizabethan language; in this respect, Bacon’s style paved the way for the foundation of modern English.

### 17.3 Robert Burton

Robert Burton’s (1577-1640) famous treatise, ***The Anatomy of Melancholy***, first appeared in 1621 under the pen name Democritus Junior. Enlarged and revised several times, it is in purpose a medical work aiming at exploring the causes and effects of melancholy, as the full title of the work emphasizes: *The Anatomy of Melancholy. What it is, With all the kinds, causes, symptoms, prognostickes, and severall cures of it. In the Partitions, with their severall Sections, members and subsections, Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically opened and cut up.*

The title-page, which is explained in an accompanying poem, is divided into ten panels, each iconographically representing the symptoms or attributes of melancholy. A picture of the Greek philosopher Democritus seated under the sign of Saturn (the ‘Lord of Melancholy’) is surrounded by representations

of 'Zelotopia' (jealousy), of 'Solitudo' (solitariness), by effigies of a young lovesick melancholic, an old hypochondriac, a superstitious monk, and a shackled madman in rags. The page is completed by pictures of 'sovereign plants to purge the veins of melancholy', and by a portrait of the author as 'Democritus junior'.

It is not easy to define Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* according to a specific literary genre; it is a treatise, an anatomy, an overview, a dissection, an analysis of the subject of melancholy. In this respect, it has been considered as the earliest work of English psychology, but it covers many areas, including science, history, and political and social reform. It describes a plan to improve living conditions, and refers to authorities and historical precedents in order to make the proposed reforms more plausible. Burton presents "An Utopia of mine own, a new Atlantis, a poetical commonwealth of mine own, in which I will freely domineer, make laws and statutes... I will choose a site, whose latitude will be 45 degrees, or perhaps under the equator... There will be 12 or 13 provinces, each with a metropolis containing churches, prisons, public halls, theatres and sports fields." He proposes recreations and holidays for all, and good schools, especially for grammar and languages. Hospitals of all kinds, for children, orphans, old people, physically sick people and mad people are planned, whereas wrong-doers are severely punished. Many of Burton's views reflect the general opinion of his age, but in proposing a welfare state, with social security and old-age pensions, and a national health service, he was centuries ahead of his time.

The work is preceded by a long and interesting satirical **preface** entitled "**Democritus Junior to the Reader**", an introduction in which melancholy is defined as "an inbred malady in every one of us". The proper book is divided into three main parts: the first defines and describes various kinds of melancholy; the second proposes several cures; the third analyses the melancholy of love and the melancholy of religion.

Burton's style is characterised by frequent digressions, a device considered by many scholars to reflect either the



chaos of melancholy itself or, less often, Burton's lack of control as an author. Overall, Burton's prose style is informal, anecdotal, epigrammatic and often pedantic. Moreover, in the exposition and illustration of his argument, Burton uses quotation (or paraphrase) to an extreme degree, drawing on a wide range of literature, from the Bible, through Greek and Latin classics, to the Elizabethan writers.

#### 17.4 Thomas Hobbes

*The Leviathan, or The Matter, Form, and Power of a Common-Wealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*, commonly called *Leviathan*, is a political-philosophical treatise by **Thomas Hobbes** (1588-1679), the second great English philosopher of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, acknowledged pupil of the first, Francis Bacon, and instructor of the third, John Locke. The title of the book, published in 1651, recalls the biblical Leviathan, a huge sea monster whose strength is compared to the absolute sovereign power of the State, necessary for the maintenance of law and order.

The title-page of *The Leviathan* depicts emblematically its purpose: the upper half of the page has, in the foreground, a walled town with tall church spires; behind, the country rises towards a hill out of which emerges the giant figure of a man from the waist upwards, with a crown on his head, a sword (symbol of temporal power) in his right hand, while his left hand grasps a crosier (symbol of spiritual power); his coat consists of a multitude of human figures, with their faces turned to him, as in supplication. On the lower half of the page, on either side of the title, are the pictures of a castle and a church, a coronet and a mitre, a cannon and some lights, a battle-field with a number of war weapons, and a school where a dispute is taking place. Over all runs the legend *Non est potestas super terram quae comparetur ei* ("there is no power on the earth that can be compared to him").

The book is divided into four parts: the first, '**Of Man**',

defines the quality of human nature whose action is determined by aggression and self-interest rather than altruism and benevolence; part two, **'Of Commonwealth'**, is devoted to the examination of 'Civil Society' into which 'rational animals' form themselves for mutual security; in Part III Hobbes seeks to investigate the nature of a Christian Commonwealth; and finally Part IV explores the main causes of ignorance (what he calls the 'Kingdom of Darkness') as opposed to the light of true knowledge.

In the late 1640s and 1650s the debate about the shape and authority of the rapidly changing constitution of England was very intense and many intellectuals expressed their ideas about it. Hobbes argued that chaos or civil war – situations identified with a state of nature and epitomised in the famous motto *"Bellum omnium contra omnes"* ("the war of all against all") – could only be avoided by a strong central government. According to Hobbes, men are not, as Aristotle held, naturally social beings recognising the claims of the community; indeed, they are selfish creatures seeking their own advantages and are driven by the desire to fulfil their wants and needs though, in satisfying themselves, they will inevitably resist the competing claims of others. The result is "contention, enmity, and war". The "state of nature" is one of general war, and "the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place"; there is "continual fear; and the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". To escape from these intolerable conditions man has adopted certain "articles of peace", those "Laws of Nature [...]" by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life". The first law of nature is "that every man ought to endeavour peace"; the second is "that a man be willing, when others are so too, to lay down his right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself"; the third is "that men perform their covenants made". To enforce these covenants it is necessary to establish an external power, which shall punish their infraction; therefore men must enter into a contract "to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon an assembly of men. [...]" This done, the

multitude so united in one person, is called a commonwealth". This sovereign – the Leviathan – has an absolute, inalienable power, which is indivisible; it cannot for instance be divided between King and Parliament.

Here is an extract from *The Leviathan*:

Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. [...] For by art is created that great *Leviathan* called a *Commonwealth*, or *State* (in Latin, *Civitas*), which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the magistrates and other officers of judicature and execution, artificial joints; reward and punishment (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty, every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) are the nerves, that do the same in the body natural; the wealth and riches of all the particular members are the strength; *salus populi* (the people's safety) its business; counsellors, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the memory; equity and laws, an artificial reason and will; concord, health; sedition, sickness; and civil war, death. Lastly, the pacts and covenants, by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that fiat, or the Let us make man, pronounced by God in the Creation.

To describe the nature of this artificial man, I will consider First, the matter thereof, and the artificer; both which is man. Secondly, how, and by what covenants it is made; what are the right and just power or authority of a sovereign; and what it is that preserveth and dissolveth it. Thirdly, what is a Christian Commonwealth. Lastly, what is the Kingdom of Darkness. [...]

(From the **Introduction**)

*The Leviathan* as a whole expresses Hobbes's faith in the authoritarian monarchy as the best form of government. Unlike Milton, Hobbes condemned the regicide of Charles I, and supported a theory of absolutism based on an irreversible

compact according to which the people give over all their power and right to a sovereign, whether a king or some other ruling entity, who incorporates and embodies his subjects acting for them all.

When the book appeared in 1651 it scandalised Puritans by its frankly secular tone and disturbed Royalists because it seemed to make no real distinction between a legal king and an established usurper.

On the whole, Hobbes's work is considered a masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language.

## 17.5 John Milton

**John Milton** (1608-1674) is mainly regarded as one of the pre-eminent poets in English literature. Indeed his prose writings – political and religious essays and pamphlets – were not only highly influential in their time, but remain significant contributions to the canon of libertarian thought. As a prose polemicist, Milton was a masterly and fiery defender of the causes he chose to espouse.

Milton's prose work in controversy is rather complex and varied, as it deals with political and religious issues of the time and also with social problems such as education, divorce, the freedom of the press.

As a devoted Puritan, in the early 1640s he began publishing a number of pamphlets against English episcopacy, that is, against the bishops' government of the church. In ***Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline in England*** (1641) he criticized the Anglican Church, whereas ***The Reason of Church Government*** (1642) is an elaborate defence of the Presbyterian form of church government as opposed to the episcopal one. The theme of these works is the need to purge the Church of England of all vestiges of Roman Catholicism, especially its practices of idolatry, and to restore the simplicity of the apostolic church. Milton believed that Scripture, not the Church hierarchy, was the true source of authority.

A few years later he published *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643) in which he claimed the right to dissolve a marriage on the grounds of incompatibility. Having inherited Catholic canon law, England, unusually for a Protestant country, had no formal mechanisms for divorce, and therefore Milton expressed his hopes for a parliamentary reform relative to divorce laws. Arguing for the legitimacy of divorce was extremely controversial at that time, and Milton was publicly attacked while his tracts found opposition to their printing. In reaction to these forms of intimidation and to counter and confute the denunciations his original essay had received, he published a much-enlarged version of his essay in 1644 and wrote three further pamphlets on the subject: *The Judgment of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce* (1644), *Colasterion* (1645), and *Tetrachordon* (1645). The major argument of the four tracts – private divorce by mutual consent for incompatibility – derives from Milton's view of human nature and the purpose of marriage, which rather than the traditional end of procreation, he defined as “the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman”, as a mutual companionship based on respect and sociable delight.

The tract *Of Education* (1644), written in the form of a letter, represents Milton's ideas about educational reform, and gives voice to his views “concerning the best and noblest way of education”. His ideal of education is overtly inspired and influenced by Renaissance humanism with its emphasis on the alliance between scholarly pursuits and professional and public commitments. In fact, as outlined in the tract, Milton petitioned for the creation of an elite class through the careful instruction of boys in small academies where they could receive “a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war”. He also stressed the importance of the more private sphere of religious feelings and attitudes in which education could “repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love Him, to be like Him,

as we may the nearest by possessing our soul of true virtue”.

***Areopagitica*** (1644) is a polemical pamphlet in defence of the liberty of the press, a plea against censorship (its subtitle reads: *a Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing to the Parliament of England*). Though Milton was a supporter of the Parliament, *Areopagitica* was written in response to a severe ordinance for the control of printing that had been passed by Parliament in 1643 (censorship of books and pamphlets was abolished in 1692). Indeed Milton defends that freedom of thought he had always supported in his pamphlet production, beyond claiming the freedom of the press: “Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.”; “who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye”. In Milton’s opinion censorship would discourage learning itself, and he ends his pamphlet with a magnificent exhortation to the “Lords and Commons of England” to consider “what nation it is whereof ye are, and whereof ye are the governors: a nation not slow and dull, but of a quick, ingenious and piercing spirit. ... Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely, according to conscience, above all liberties.”

On the whole, *Areopagitica* is considered one of the most influential and impassioned philosophical defences of the principle of the right to free speech. Its title refers to Aeropagus, the ancient and much-respected tribunal in Athens where Isocrates in 335 B.C. delivered his famous orations. A comparison between the Greek institution and the English Parliament is therefore implied; moreover the oratorical style of the tract is modelled on the precepts of classical rhetoric.

After the execution of Charles I Milton published a third set of pamphlets which were basically disputations

against critics of Cromwell's regime, and where he defended the right of the people to overthrow tyrannical rulers.

***Of the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*** (1649) supports the right to put a monarch to death on behalf of the people. Overturning Hobbes's theories, Milton defends the reasons for the regicide and supports the idea of a Commonwealth "without King or House of Lords", presenting at the same time a radical theory of government according to which sovereignty always resides in the people, who merely delegate power to, and can always revoke it from, any ruler or any government system.

***Eikonoklastes*** (= Image-breaker) (1649) is a harsh indictment of Charles I in response to the publication of the *Eikon Basilike* (= Royal Image), a book believed to be the prison memoirs of Charles I which portrayed the idealised image of the executed king as a saint and martyr. *Eikonoklastes* takes the *Eikon Basilike* paragraph by paragraph with the aim to refute it, but does so in a tedious manner.

In 1660, shortly before the Restoration of the monarchy, he wrote ***The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*** proposing the establishment of a Council of men chosen by the people to safeguard the republic.

On the Restoration he was arrested and fined, but soon released. He then returned to the writing of poetry, and set about the composition of *Paradise Lost*.

Altogether, Milton's prose production shows the influence of the Renaissance which is responsible for the rich and complex texture of his style, the erudite and often allusive quality of his speech, the multiplicity of its classical references, its wealth of ornament and decoration.





## 18. Late seventeenth century prose writing

### 18.1 Restoration prose writing

Prose writing in the Restoration period (1660-1700) includes a variety of different genres, such as political, philosophical, and religious writing; moreover, new prose genres such as the novel, diary writing, and literary criticism appeared during the Restoration, and developed greatly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### 18.2 Political and philosophical writing

The Restoration saw the publication of a number of significant political and philosophical writings that had been prompted by the political and ideological conflicts of the **Interregnum**, from the regicide of Charles I in 1649 to the restoration of Charles II in 1660; moreover, the development of neo-classicism and empirical science favoured the interest in the publication of important philosophical works.

The foundation of the **Royal Society** in 1662, the first scientific society in the United Kingdom, greatly contributed to the improvement of English prose, as it stated that its members had to employ only plain, concise and utilitarian prose style suitable to the clear communication of scientific

thought. **Thomas Sprat** (1635-1713) defined the goals of empirical science in his ***History of the Royal Society*** in 1667, specifying that unclear terminology and all subjective language had to be avoided in favour of a clean and precise scientific vocabulary, which would make meanings easily comprehensible.

### 18.3 John Locke

Philosophical writing has in **John Locke** (1632-1704) a major figure. His ***Essay Concerning Human Understanding*** (1690), written in a clear but heavy style, focuses on the importance of experience and sense perceptions as the only source of knowledge, thus contributing to the development of **empiricism**, the philosophical approach initiated by Bacon. Indeed, this work led John Stuart Mill, over a century later, to call him “the unquestioned founder of the analytic philosophy of mind”. Locke was also a strong advocate of religious liberty, and wrote four “**Letters concerning Toleration**” (1689-1692) and an essay on the “**Reasonableness of Christianity**” (1695), maintaining that, as our understanding of reality is limited, knowledge must be supplemented by religious faith. His major political contribution is in his ***Two Treatises of Government***, probably composed before 1682, but published to coincide with the success of the Glorious Revolution in 1689-90, a work in which Locke opposes the theory of the divine right of the kings and justifies the Revolution, a work which later inspired the thinkers of the American Revolution. The main ideas expressed in the *Two Treatises* concern self-interest and the necessity of securing individual liberty and protecting individual property rights upon which civil societies are founded. Locke finds the origin of the civil State in a “contract” on the basis of which citizens give the Government their consent, but keep a right to withdraw authority from their rulers in case of an arbitrary exertion of power on their part:

the legislative [the government] being only a fiduciary power to act for certain ends, there remains still in the people the supreme power to remove or alter the legislative when they find the legislative act contrary to the trust reposed in them.

In opposition to **Hobbes' *Leviathan*** and its argument that chaos or civil war could only be avoided by a strong central government (a defense of absolute monarchy), Locke's theory of the "original contract" defends democracy and implicitly justifies the overthrow of the Stuart monarchy, providing a flexible basis for government which was certainly more reasonable and acceptable to his age.

Here is an extract from Book II of *Two Treatises of Government*

### **Chapter II: "Of the State of Nature"**

**Sect. 4.** To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man. [...]

**Sect. 6.** But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it. The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: [...]

**Sect. 7.** And that all men may be restrained from invading others rights, and from doing hurt to one another, and the law of nature be observed, which willeth the peace and preservation of all mankind, the execution of the law of nature is, in that state, put into every man's hands, whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors of that law to such a degree, as may hinder its violation: for the law of nature would, as all other

laws that concern men in this world be in vain, if there were no body that in the state of nature had a power to execute that law, and thereby preserve the innocent and restrain offenders. And if any one in the state of nature may punish another for any evil he has done, every one may do so: for in that state of perfect equality, where naturally there is no superiority or jurisdiction of one over another, what any may do in prosecution of that law, every one must needs have a right to do.

**Sect. 8.** And thus, in the state of nature, one man comes by a power over another; but yet no absolute or arbitrary power, [...]

## 18.4 Religious writing: John Bunyan

Christian religious writing dominated the Restoration literary landscape with the work, among others, of **John Bunyan** (1628-1688).

English writer and preacher, he was in a way the purest voice of Puritanism, of which he was able to reproduce the religious ferments, the strict moral code and the firm faith in God, freedom and independence. In 1658 Bunyan was indicted for preaching without a licence. He continued, however, till he was imprisoned in 1660; his imprisonment was extended for a period of nearly 12 year as he refused to conform or to desist from preaching. It was during this time that he completed his allegorical novel ***The Pilgrim's Progress***. He was released in 1672, when Charles II issued the Declaration of Religious Indulgence, an attempt at extending religious liberty to Protestant nonconformists in England.

Bunyan wrote his famous book ***The Pilgrim's Progress*** (the subtitle reads "*from this World to that which is to come*") in **two parts**, the first of which was published in London in 1678 and the second in 1684. It has been considered as one of the three greatest allegories in world literature, along with **Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*** and **Dante's *Divina Commedia***. Although a Restoration text, it is in one sense the culmination

of a writing which grew out of the Reformation, but which is linked to medieval dream visions too, such as **Langland's** *The Vision of Pierce Plowman*. Bunyan's work is an allegory of personal salvation and a guide to prevail against the temptations of mind and body that threaten damnation. It takes the form of a dream by the author in which he sees the journey of a simple, plain man, Christian, from the City of Destruction to the City of God, through adventures and perils of every kind. The plot is appealing, as the work appears to be structured as a travel book. The style is very easy and direct, as is evident from the description of one of Christian's temptations, Vanity Fair:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a Den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and, as I slept, I dreamed a dream. I dreamed, and behold, I saw a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back. I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and, as he read, he wept, and trembled; and, not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, What shall I do? [...]

Then I saw in my dream, that when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair: it is kept all the year long. It beareth the name of Vanity Fair because the town where it is kept is lighter than vanity; and, also because all that is there sold, or that cometh thither, is vanity. As is the saying of the wise, all that cometh is vanity.

Reading the book, Christian learns that the city in which he lives with his family will be burned with fire. On the advice of the Evangelist, Christian flees from the City of Destruction, having failed to persuade his wife and children to accompany him. **Part I** describes his pilgrimage through various allegorical places: the House Beautiful, the Valley of Humiliation, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Vanity Fair, Doubting Castle, etc. up to the Celestial City. On the way he encounters various allegorical

characters: Mr. Wordly Wiseman, Hopeful, Giant Despair, Faithful, and many others. **Part II** relates how Christian's wife, Christiana, moved by a vision, sets out with her children on the same pilgrimage, accompanied by her neighbour Mercy, escorted by Great-heart, and encountering other allegorical figures.

Bunyan's work is remarkable for the beauty and simplicity of its language (strongly reminiscent of the language of the Bible), the vividness and reality of the impersonations, and the author's sense of humour and feeling for the world of nature. Indeed, the terse, immediate style, suitable to convey a Christian, religious message, as well as the structure of the book, with its complex sequence of episodes, its humour and irony, its characterization, have contributed to the popularity of *The Pilgrim's Progress* which has been translated in over one hundred languages and dialects, and has become a landmark in the history of English prose.

## 18.5 Fiction: Aphra Behn

**Aphra Behn** (1640-1689) has long been claimed to have been the first fully professional woman writer in English living entirely by her own earnings. Poet, playwright, novelist and satirist, her wit, eroticism and clear sense of female power were atypical and were considered scandalous and unwomanly by the prurient middle class that would soon become socially dominant. Aphra Behn is a forerunner in English literary history in many respects; she is not only the first professional female writer; she is also one of the most significant figures in the rise of the novel in the Restoration period. She began to write for the stage (she produced fifteen plays), but when it became less profitable she turned to the emerging field of prose fiction, composing a pioneering epistolary novel, ***Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*** (1684), a "Roman à clef" (French for "novel with a key": a novel describing real-life events behind a façade of fiction) loosely based on a contemporary affair and playing with events of the Monmouth

Rebellion. *Love Letters* even had **two sequels**: *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister, Second Part* (1685), and *The Amours of Philander and Silvia*, (1687).

Behn's most famous work, *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* (1688), a short novel about a noble slave and his tragic love, was inspired by her experience as a royal spy in the new sugar colony in Surinam during the Anglo-Dutch war for the domination of the world trade in 1665 (Aphra Behn had lived in Surinam as a child, and had been employed by Charles II as a spy in Antwerp on the outbreak of the Dutch war).

It is not easy to define *Oroonoko* as a genre, though it is generally considered the "first English novel". *Oroonoko* is one of the very early novels in English that possesses a linear plot and follows a biographical model; indeed, it combines three prose forms: memoir, travel narrative, and biography. As a memoir, it is a personal account of what Behn heard and saw during her own experiences in the South American colony. The travel narrative is composed of three parts: the voyage to a new world often praised as a paradise, the amorous intrigues of a corrupt court in eastern Africa, and the infamous 'Middle Passage' from Africa to the new world over which millions of slaves would be transported during the next century. The fictional biography, the most important part of the book, is about an African prince who had been enslaved in Surinam, **Oroonoko**, the valorous and virtuous grandson of an African king who falls in love with princess **Imoinda**. Their mutual happiness is soon destroyed by the king who takes Imoinda as a concubine by divine right, and then sells her into slavery when he discovers she still loves Oroonoko. Oroonoko himself is sold into slavery and is briefly reunited with Imoinda in Surinam. Here he organises a rebellion, but he is obliged to surrender, and eventually is betrayed, captured, tortured and executed. The novel is written in a mixture of first and third person, as the narrator relates actions in Africa and portrays herself as a witness of the actions that take place in Surinam. In the novel, the narrator presents herself as a lady who has come to Surinam with her unnamed father, a man scheduled

to be the new deputy-governor of the colony. He, however, dies on the voyage from England, and the narrator and her family are put up in the finest house in the settlement. Her own experiences of meeting the indigenous peoples and slaves are intermixed with the main plot of the love of Oroonoko and Imoinda. In the end, the narrator leaves Surinam for London.

*Oroonoko* is the first English novel to show Black Africans in a sympathetic manner, as the indigenous people and noble Africans presented in the text live by a code of virtue, by principles of fidelity and honour that “civilised” Christians often ignore. The novel offers a critical view of European colonialism by depicting the degradation and suffering of human slavery, and it is considered a philosophical novel for its dissertations on abstract subjects, such as the religion of humanity.

## 18.6 Literary criticism: John Dryden

**John Dryden** (1631-1700) is considered the initiator of literary criticism, or at least a pioneer of that genre, and his essays are his main contribution to Restoration prose. In *Essay of Dramatic Poesie* (1668) he discusses, in dialogue form, the main questions concerning the dramatic production of his time, in an unadorned, direct and concise prose, made up of short sentences, in contrast with the long, heavy, often involved style which had characterised English prose previously. Dryden deals with some of the major critical topics of his time, such as the comparison between ancient and modern playwrights, the respect of the classical unities, the superiority of English to French drama, the value of rhyme in plays as opposed to blank verse.

The *Essay* represents the first attempt to draw new attention to the work of Elizabethan writers, and in particular to Shakespeare's, whose qualities he values above Jonson's:

To begin with Shakespeare; he was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of nature were still present



to him, and he drew them not laboriously, but luckily: when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind. He is many times flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him [...]

As for Jonson [...] I think him the most learned and judicious writer which any theatre ever had. He was a most severe judge of himself as well as others. One cannot say he wanted wit, but rather that he was frugal of it. In his works you find little to retrench or alter. Wit and language, and humour also in some measure we had before him; but something of art was wanting to the drama till he came. He managed his strength to more advantage than any who preceded him. [...] Humour was his proper sphere [...] He was deeply conversant in the Ancients, both Greek and Latin, and he borrowed boldly from them [...] If there was any fault in his language [...] he did a little too much Romanise our tongue, leaving the words which he translated almost as much Latin as he found them: wherein though he learnedly followed their language, he did not enough comply with the idiom of ours. If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing. I admire him, but I love Shakespeare. [...]

### 18.7 Diarists

The literary genre of the diary form also flourished during the Restoration. The diary usually records the author's private thoughts in a simple, often telegraphic style, though it assumes

a different importance when the personal accounts are set in a larger social context; in this respect, it partly develops from the Puritan genre of spiritual autobiography, which presented the self in its involvement in the social background. The combination of personal and social accounts characterise the two most famous English diaries of the time, written by **John Evelyn** (1620-1706) and **Samuel Pepys** (1633-1703), which provide a rich insight into the mentality of the rising middle class on the margins of the Restoration court by depicting everyday London life and the cultural scene of the times.

**John Evelyn's *Diary*** was begun in 1641 when he was only twenty-one, but was not published until 1818. This *Diary* consists in the description of Evelyn's travels on the Continent, and contains brilliant portraits of his contemporaries. His tone is almost always impersonal and his style is simple but accurate. His *Diary* is full of scientific observations and comments casting considerable light on the art, culture and politics of the time (Evelyn witnessed the deaths of Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, the last Great Plague of London, and the Great Fire of London in 1666).

**Samuel Pepys's *Diary*** covers the years 1660-1669 and consists of 11 volumes. First published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is written in a secret code of his own invention, characterised by a mixture of shorthand, contractions and foreign words, which was deciphered only in 1825. The detailed private quality of his diary makes it more intimate and personal than Evelyn's diary. Indeed, Pepys is the main protagonist of his diary and is the central character of all events. Pepys's *Diary* is one of the most important primary sources for the English Restoration period, as it provides a fascinating combination of personal revelation and eyewitness accounts of great events, such as public executions,

the Great Plague of London, the Second Dutch War and the Great Fire of London. Pepys's impressions of the Great Fire of London in 1660 represent one of best-known parts of his *Diary*:

By and by Jane comes and tells me that she hears that above 300 houses have been burned down to-night by the fire we saw, and that it is now burning down all Fish-street, by London Bridge. So I made myself ready presently, and walked to the Tower, and there got up upon one of the high places, Sir J. Robinson's little son going up with me; and there I did see the houses at that end of the bridge all on fire, and an infinite great fire on this and the other side the end of the bridge; which, among other people, did trouble me for poor little Michell and our Sarah on the bridge. So down, with my heart full of trouble, to the Lieutenant of the Tower, who tells me that it begun this morning in the King's baker's' house in Pudding-lane, and that it hath burned St. Magnus's Church and most part of Fish-street already.

His style is simple, frank and natural, rich in detail and humour as well as pathos. Pepys' *Diary* is a document of extraordinary interest, on account both of the light that its sincere narrative throws on the author's own character, and of the vivid picture that it gives of contemporary everyday life, of the administration of the navy, and of the ways of the court.



## 19. Jacobean Poetry

### 19.1 Historical background

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was a complex period troubled by major political upheavals. The century opened with the accession of **James I Stuart** to the throne (1603), whose political attitude and approach to social and religious problems were remarkably different from those of Elizabeth I. Religious and political conflicts between the Crown and the Parliament dramatically increased during the reign of his son and successor, **Charles I**, whose anti-Parliament and absolutist politics, along with his tolerance towards religious attitudes diverging from the Church of England, led to a general anti-royalist dissent, which the **Puritans**, by way of their leader **Oliver Cromwell**, were able to exploit to spread their Calvinist/orthodox code of behaviour. A civil war broke out (1642) between the **Cavaliers** (Aristocracy, Gentry and Clergy in favour of the King) and the **Roundheads** (Puritans and Middle-class Merchants against the King) ending with the execution of Charles I (1649) and the birth of a **Republic** (the **Commonwealth**) modelled on strict Puritan values.

### 19.2 Cultural climate

Moreover, as a consequence of the major changes which had taken place in the previous century – the discovery of the American continent and the confrontation with new worlds, Reformation and the questioning of the Catholic Church as

the only religious perspective, the new political unscrupulous models indicated by **Machiavelli**, the scientific and philosophical revolution originated by the new Copernican vision of the world based on a heliocentric model which had destabilised the commonly-accepted Ptolemaic geocentric and stable vision of the universe – 1600 was a period not only of political and ideological turmoil, but also of cultural effervescence, as the lack of fixed models and values inspired a new artistic sensibility, which expressed the anxiety of an “out-of-joint” time, but which was also free to look at reality from a variety of perspectives and to create new imaginary worlds. This new sensibility was intensified under the influence of **Mannerism** and **Baroque**, cultural movements flourishing throughout Europe at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which contributed to express the contradictions and complexity of the human soul and of society. Though directly deriving from the Italian Renaissance, these new trends tended to break the canons of rigour and linearity to privilege a more redundant and complex form, which gradually became rather intellectualistic in the case of Mannerism or openly sensualistic in the case of Baroque. The poetical production of this period is permeated with the influence of this specific cultural climate and responds in different ways to the precarious existential condition of the time by exploring its impact on human interior life.

### 19.3 John Donne and the Metaphysical school of poetry

One of the most significant representatives of this new poetical sensibility was **John Donne** (1572-1631). He is generally considered the initiator of a poetical movement usually labelled as metaphysical poetry, a definition invented by **John Dryden** and later adopted by **Samuel Johnson** in *The Lives of the Poets* (1781) with an explicit reference to Donne’s intellectualist poetry which Dr Johnson, a classicist critic, considered too obscure and abstract. **George Herbert**,

**Richard Crashaw**, and **Henry Vaughan** are among the most interesting “metaphysical poets” influenced by Donne’s style; in fact, Donne and his followers are known in literary history as the “Metaphysical school” of poets.

**Donne’s** contemporaries considered his poetry sophisticated and cerebral, rather different and distant from the Elizabethan sonnet, as well as from **Sydney** and **Spenser**. Donne, in fact, distorts and even mocks the clichés of the English poetic tradition, expressing in his poetry a more critical consideration of human experience and trying to convey the sense of the complexity of the world he lived in. His verses sadly acknowledge how the collapse of the Ptolemaic system and of the old stable structure of the universe has caused a sense of disruption and uncertainty in a new reality in which everything, even knowledge, has become relative; hence, the choice of an extremely cultivated language, full of puns, oxymora, and paradoxes which help to demonstrate how meaning itself can be ambiguous and elusive. On the other hand, the use of elaborate metaphors (the so-called “conceits”) and of a sensual imagery characterises Donne’s poetry as a singular fusion of Mannerism and Baroque, while its peculiar wit emphasises the scepticism and the critical tone of the poems. In short, John Donne speaks the language of a modern newborn conscience, which reacts against the decadence of the destabilised post-Copernican world by means of a continuous and transcendental research, and whose outcome is profane and divine love.

Indeed, the love-theme is central in all his works, which can be roughly grouped into love poems, including the works of his youth – ***Songs and Sonnets*** (1593-1601) and ***The Anniversaries: An Anatomy of the World*** (1611) and ***Of the Progress of the Soul*** (1612) – and religious poems, belonging to his maturity (after 1614), when he took orders and became Dean of St. Paul’s: the ***Divine Poems*** (composed in the years 1606-1631) which contain the collection of the ***Holy Sonnets*** (published in 1633-1635). Both groups combine sensuality and intellectualism to express love for a woman or for God.

***Songs and Sonnets*** (1593-1601) include fifty-five poems focusing on different love situations in which the speaking “I” confronts a listener, who is not necessarily the love-object. Indeed, the love-objects are numerous and never idealised; these features, along with stylistic aspects such as the structure of the stanzas and the rhyming pattern, put Donne’s sonnets in opposition to the Petrarchan tradition. Metrically, the poems vary, oscillating between simple traditional forms and more elaborate ones, invented by the poet. The moods and attitudes expressed by the poet are also rather heterogeneous, expressing a variety of contrasting feelings about love, often presenting an opposition between the lovers’ life, exclusively centred on individual emotions, and common everyday life.

In ***The Sun Rising***, for example, the main theme is the annoyance of the lovers, whose sleep has been disturbed by the rising sun:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,  
 Why dost thou thus  
 Through windows and through curtains call on us?  
 Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?  
 Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide  
 Late schoolboys and sour prentices,  
 Go tell court huntsmen that the King will ride,  
 Call country ants to harvest offices;  
 Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,  
 Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.  
 [...]  
 She is all states, and all princes I,  
 Nothing else is.[...]  
 Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,  
 [...] and since thy duties be  
 To warm the world, that’s done in warming us.  
 Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;  
 This bed thy centre is, these walls thy sphere.

(ll. 1-30)

The poem opens with a challenge, an irreverent address to the



sun who has dared to awake the sleeping lovers, and the poet, bothered by the light penetrating into the bedroom through the windows, complains about the sun's disrespectful incursion. The following lines evoke scenes of everyday life, opposed to the isolation of the lovers' bedroom, where the usual activities of the starting day seem to have no sense. Love for the poet is not subjected to the normal seasonal cycle, and so the small world of the two lovers appears as self-sufficient. The last lines refer to the centrality of the "bed", symbol of love, to which the sun has to be functional. By proclaiming the centrality of his earthly love over that of the sun, the poet mocks **Copernicus's** heliocentric theory, reducing the sun's importance to the only function of warming and lighting his bedroom.

Also the two *Anniversaries*, *An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *The Progress of the Soul* (1612), written to commemorate the death at fourteen of Elizabeth Drury in 1610, emphasise the crisis caused by Copernicus's theories. Elizabeth represents the harmony of the past destroyed by the new theories, so that to mourn her death is the occasion to reflect on the world's decay: the title of the *First Anniversary*, in fact, refers to "an anatomy" of the world, that is, the dissection of a body (a corpse by now). The choice of the term "anatomy", however, also evokes the influence of the scientific thought of the time on literature; the scientific method inaugurated by Francis Bacon seems to be reflected in the way Donne configures his poem as an "examination" and an exploration of the existential condition of the time. The *Second Anniversary*, *The Progress of the Soul*, dwells on the advantages enjoyed by the soul after death comparing them to "the incommodities of the soul in this life".

In the *First Anniversary, An Anatomy of the World*, Donne analyses the world's condition with scientific punctuality, scrutinising the various fields of the cultural and social life which have been infected by the "new philosophy",

implicitly warning that his research can only show the collapse of the old harmony, but is unable to find a new stability:

Then, as mankind, so is the world's whole frame  
 Quite out of joint, almost created lame:  
 For, before God had made up all the rest,  
 Corruption entered and depraved the best.[...]  
 And new philosophy calls all in doubt:  
 The element of fire is quite put out;  
 The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit  
 Can well direct him where to look for it.  
 And freely men confess that this world's spent,  
 When in the planets and the firmament  
 They seek so many new; they see that this  
 Is crumbled out again to his atomies.  
 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
 All just supply, and all relation:  
 Prince, subject; father, son, are things forgot,  
 For every man alone thinks he hath got  
 To be a phoenix, and that there can be  
 None of that kind of which he is, but he.  
 This is the world's condition now, and now  
 She that should all parts to reunion bow,  
 She that had all magnetic force alone,  
 To draw and fasten sundered parts in one; [...]  
 She, she is dead; she's dead: when thou know'st this,  
 Thou know'st how lame a cripple this world is.  
 And learn'st thus much by our anatomy,  
 That this world's general sickness doth not lie  
 In any humour, or one certain part;  
 But, as thou sawest it rotten at the heart  
 Thou seest a hectic fever hath got hold  
 Of the whole substance, not to be controlled,  
 And that thou hast but one way not to admit  
 The world's infection, to be none of it.

(ll. 191-246)

The first lines describe mankind and the world itself as “out of joint”, using the same famous words spoken by Hamlet.

The following lines hint at the frustration of human research after the new philosophy has deconstructed the old system, spreading doubt everywhere. Even the search for new planets and firmaments – and here Donne refers to **Galilei's** research and experiments with his telescope – is doomed to be nonsensical, defeated by the awareness that the world is fragmented and incoherent. Also the old social and family constructions are gone, and human beings are therefore in a condition of existential isolation, aware that there is no longer a structure to belong to and that each individual is a single, isolated entity. After the death of Elizabeth (the old harmony) the world is comparable to a “cripple”, an image which emphasises the sense of incompleteness, disease and crumbling expressed in the previous verses. This part is sarcastically concluded with a “medical response” on the world's condition, whose sickness is not due to a humour – and here Donne refers and criticises the theory of the four humours in vogue at the time – but to a general infection, which is impossible to avoid.

The impossibility to find a solution to illness and death, metaphors of the deconstruction enacted by the new science/philosophy which gives a pessimistic tone to the ***Anniversaries***, is overcome in the works of maturity, where sufferance is tempered by religion. In fact, the ***Divine Poems*** (including the ***Holy Sonnets***) represent an evolution of the previous stage of Donne's poetry, where love, passion and scepticism turn into mysticism. This does not mean that the intellectual unrest characterising the poet's youth is silenced by faith; on the contrary, it is even intensified, as here the poet confronts himself with God, still using the typical “metaphysical” elements of wit and conceits, along with sensual imagery to express his love for God. The most vivid sonnets are concerned with the darkness of the human condition in this world; they are also meditations designed to involve all the powers of the soul, including the senses, in

the contemplation of some religious object or moment. On the whole Donne's late works convey that intellectualism which had characterised his previous poems, though his pessimism is softened by his religious perspective and faith.

Donne's poetical production is accompanied by a parallel prose production, particularly a great number of prose sermons, in which themes such as sin, judgement and death are discussed.

## 19.4 Ben Jonson

If John Donne's poetry expressed the restlessness of a modern conscience, Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was the first writer to embody the modern idea of an author collecting and editing his works, which he published in 1616 as ***The Works of Benjamin Jonson***. Eclectic and brilliant, Jonson reflected the spirit of his age in different fields, obtaining success and general consent to the point of being named Poet Laureate in 1616. His presence in the literary scene of the 17<sup>th</sup> century was strong, as he was friend of the most important artists and intellectuals of the time (his circle came to be known as the "Tribe of Ben") and took part in most of the cultural debates, sharply criticising the vices and virtues of his contemporaries.

His name is mostly tied to a rich and valuable theatrical production, even though he is also famous for his three collections of poems: ***Epigrammes***, ***The Forrest*** (both published in ***The Works of Benjamin Jonson***), and ***The Underwood***, published in the second edition of ***The Works*** (1640).

Jonson's poetry, courtly and cultivated, expressed an aristocratic taste, celebrating the values of nobility, formally taking inspiration from the classics. In fact, Jonson admired the metre and style of **Horace**, **Martial**, **Catullus** and **Juvenal**, whose lessons he tried to revive, in order to render poetry an instrument of moral elevation. Nonetheless, he did not despise irony and composed 'festive' lyrics celebrating opulence and good life.

Metrically, the poems are heterogeneous and are

accompanied by a variety of other works in verse, such as elegies, epitaphs, songs and epigrams.

Jonson used epigrams very freely, not considering this genre just as a vehicle for personal attacks. The *Epigrammes*, in fact, apart from satiric/denouncing poems, also contain poems of courtesy (dedicated to well-known aristocrats of James's court and to the King himself), epitaphs and a verse letter – *Inviting a Friend to Supper* – all modelled on Juvenal and Horace's rhyme-schemes.

Also in *The Forrest* – a miscellany of Jonson's short poems, odes, epistles, and songs – the poems are full of references to the classics; the title is a translation of the Latin word *silva*, meaning 'forest', but also used by the Latin poet **Statius** in the sense of 'poetical collection'. In this miscellany, the author celebrates the life of refined aristocrats, by analysing city, country and court life, and emphasising the morality and decorousness of the nobles.

**"To Penshurst"** is a significant poem in this respect, through which Jonson paid homage to the values of aristocracy by evoking the atmosphere of **Martial's** epigrams and the anti-urban inclination marking Latin poetry of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. With this poem, actually dedicated to a place (for the first time in the history of literature), the country residence of the Sydneys in Kent, Jonson inaugurated the genre of the *country house poem*:

Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show  
 Of touch or marble, nor canst boast a row  
 Of polished pillars, or a roof of gold;  
 Thou hast no lantern, whereof tales are told,  
 Or stairs, or courts; but standest an ancient pile,  
 And these grudged at, art revered the while.  
 Thou joyest in better marks, of soil, of air  
 Of wood, of water: therein thou art fair.  
 Thou hast thy walks for health, as well as sport;

Thy Mount, to which the Dryads do resort,  
 Where Pan and Bacchus their high feasts have made  
 Beneath the broad beech and the chestnut shade,  
 That taller tree, which of a nut was set,  
 At his great birth, where all the Muses met. (ll. 1-14).

[...]

Where comes no guest, but is allowed to eat  
 Without his fear, and of thy Lord's own meat,  
 Where the same beer and bread and self-same wine  
 That is his Lordship's shall be also mine.  
 And I not fain to sit (as some, this day  
 At great men's tables) and yet dine away. (ll. 61-66).

The poem opens with a direct reference to the place, whose beauty is gradually justified with the presence of a good "Lord". The initial lines describe the country house not as a place of external, empty opulence, but as an ancient place, of sombre solidity. Here the poet celebrates the natural qualities of the residence, almost an Eden, connected to classic deities, such as Pan, Bacchus and the Muses. From the description of the place, Jonson later moves to the celebration of the hospitality of the owners, who share their own food with their guests whoever they are. The generosity and open-handedness of the owners of Penshurst offers an idealised portrait of modern aristocracy, which far from being excessively sumptuous appears as modest and decorous.

In "**To Sir Robert Wroth**", an important aristocrat of the time, the theme of the simple and healthy country life, metaphor for the moral good behaviour of aristocracy, is central again, recalling the subgenre of *retirement poetry*. Jonson used the celebration of the country in opposition to the city in this and in other poems, in order to create the image of an idyllic place (a feudal community) where the general happy condition of people depended on the established and accepted hierarchical order.

The last collection of poems, *The Underwood*, was added to the second edition of Jonson's works and therefore was published posthumously in 1640. It consists of a heterogeneous group of poems on love and religion, and three elegies.

### 19.5 Metaphysical Poets vs. Cavalier Poets

Jonson's style founded a poetic school, whose followers were called *Sons of Ben*, or *Cavalier Poets*. In the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, then, poetry was dominated by two opposed tendencies, which represented different aspects of the time.

The **Metaphysical Poets** (**George Herbert**, **Richard Crashaw**, and **Henry Vaughan**) wrote on speculative themes combined with Baroque imagery. Their exploration of the human soul required an intellectual tone and was also expressed through a varied and irregular versification, even formally reflecting their restlessness.

The **Cavalier Poets** (**Thomas Carew**, **John Suckling**, and **Richard Lovelace**) were mostly courtiers, as the term 'Cavalier' implies, indicating the supporters of the Monarchy. Their verses, unlike those of the Metaphysical Poets, were centred on secular themes (love, life at court, vices and virtues of society), and kept a light tone inspired by Horace's motto "*Carpe diem*", "seize the day". Horace was also their formal model as, following Jonson's example, the Cavaliers privileged the classic metre and an elegant, courtly language, inherited from Elizabethan poetry.





## 20. John Milton

### 20.1 The Puritan Age

During **Cromwell's** Republic, cultural and social life was marked by a Puritan code of behaviour. The **Puritans** believed in a frugal and simple way of living, despite their abnegation to work and material success (they condemned poverty as the result of laziness); the sumptuousness of the Caroline court was replaced by parsimony, and the forms of entertainment, previously encouraged by the monarch and welcomed by the people, were abolished. Culture and art suffered from this orthodox discipline, which achieved its peak with the closure of the theatres (1642-1660); nonetheless, the Puritan age can boast a profuse poetical production, mostly connected to the name of **John Milton**.

### 20.2 John Milton

**Milton** (1608-1674) is considered the greatest poet of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as his life and work reflect in many ways the cultural and political climate of his time. As a student, he was fond of the ancient classics: he was a brilliant learner of Latin and Greek, and a reader of the Italian humanists. This background is evident in his use of the classical forms which he combined with themes mostly inspired by religion and by his Republican ideas. He was deeply anti-royalist and anti-aristocratic, and sustained the Civil War and Cromwell's cause (he was even involved in the execution of Charles I).

All his works express his ideals and embody the model of a new intellectual and poet, attentive to the literary canons and educated in the classics, but also politically and ethically involved in the historical events of his time: both his prose- and verse-writing reinterpreted the English literary tradition, replacing the celebration of the aristocratic and courtly culture with a more ‘democratic’ and Puritan view of life. Hence the combination of classical forms and Biblical themes, in order to offer readers formal rigour and ethical content in line with Puritan beliefs. At the same time, Milton’s writing resonates with the renaissance/humanist background: the frequent references to the classics and the tendency to write sentences and verses modelled on Latin syntax is mixed with the use of ornament and sophistication in the diction/ language, a typical element of Baroque style. Moreover, what makes Milton’s works “modern” is the way he presents characters and action: everything happens within the mind of the hero, who is therefore constantly debating with his troubled conscience.

In many works, it is possible to detect autobiographical elements and a sort of identification of the poet with the hero; this appears above all in the works of his maturity, when his physical suffering (he went blind) and his precarious political condition after the Restoration of the Monarchy destroyed his personal ambition and political hopes.

Milton’s writing is usually divided into three periods, mirroring the three stages of his life.

### 20.3 First period

The first period (1629-1639) covers the years of his education, during which he composed *Ode on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity* (1629), a poem celebrating the birth of Christ, *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* (1632), two companion poems clearly centred on two different human attitudes, the mask *Comus* (1634), and *Lycidas* (1637), a pastoral elegy written to commemorate his friend Edward King.

Since the writing of these first works, Milton's poetry was characterised by his attempt to reinterpret traditional poetic genres in order to divert from the aristocratic forms of writing in vogue at the time, and to define a new model of artist/intellectual.

This tendency is particularly evident in the poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, poems in tetrametre couplets, in which the author presents two figures, respectively embodying the aristocrat Cavalier poet and the new intellectual, with whom Milton himself identifies.

*L'Allegro* is an invocation to the goddess Mirth to allow the poet to live with her, first amid the delights of rustic scenes, then amid those of "towered cities" and the "busy hum of man". This poem, though characterised by a "pagan" vision of life, is far from being dishonest and corrupt: the "cheerful man" enjoys life and pursues pleasure in feasts, theatres and aristocratic ceremonies. By criticising this aspect of his life, Milton implicitly criticises the Cavaliers' poetics and way of living, showing how the celebration of rural life was only (for the Cavaliers as well as for *L'Allegro*) a way to celebrate aristocratic city life.

Differently from this prototype of the joyful, public man, *Il Penseroso* is the melancholic subject who lives in isolation from the city, ascetically contemplating nature and searching for a highly moral purpose in life, embodying love of the pleasures of the studious, meditative life, and of mystic knowledge, which were for Milton the necessary requisites of the poet. This idyll opens as an invocation to the goddess Melancholy asking her to bring Peace, Quiet, Leisure, and Contemplation.

*Comus*, though described as a masque, is strictly a pastoral entertainment. Comus is a pagan god, invented by Milton, son of Bacchus and Circe who tempts travellers by giving them

a magic liquor which changes their faces into those of wild beasts. In the guise of a shepherd, he tempts a virtuous lady who resists and is freed in the end. The subject of temptation, which is central in his later epic writing, is central also in this earlier work.

***Lycidas***, an elegy written in irregular metre, has a pastoral theme, focusing on the shepherd-figure.

The initial epigram makes it clear that ***Lycidas*** is a “monody”, a lyrical lament, in which the main narrator is a shepherd, who mourns his dead friend, Lycidas. But this lament, (actually written to commemorate the death of Edward King, one of Milton’s university contemporaries) gradually becomes a reflection on the general human condition and a critique of contemporary society. As in the traditional pastoral elegy from **Virgil** to **Spenser**, the world described is artificial and strongly allegorical, with references and quotations taken both from classic and Christian sources.

## 20.4 Second period

After the writing of his first poems, Milton devoted many years (1640-1659) to the writing of prose works (with the exception of 14 **Sonnets** written in 1645), an expression of his active participation in the political life of his time.

To this period belong ***The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*** (1643), ***Areopagitica*** (1644), ***Of Education*** (1644), ***Of the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*** (1649), ***Eikonoklastes*** (1649) and ***Defensio Pro Populo Anglicano*** (1651-1654).

## 20.5 Third period

The third phase (1660-1674) of Milton's life and career covers the years after the restoration of the Monarchy, a sad period in which physical decadence was accompanied by disappointment for the political situation, even though the poet, also thanks to some powerful friends, was never persecuted or punished for his past support of Cromwell.

In these years Milton wrote his masterpieces: *Paradise Lost* (1667), *Paradise Regained* (1671) and *Samson Agonistes* (1671).

Milton planned the writing of a great epic poem as early as 1639, though he composed *Paradise Lost* between 1658-1663, when he was already a successful writer.

At first he had the ambition to write something glorious and mythological that could celebrate his ideals and measure his literary capacity, and, as the highest poetic achievement for a writer in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was the epic genre, Milton planned to write an epic poem concerning King Arthur's deeds and the mythical past of Britain; at the same time, he wanted to write a tragedy on the theme of the Fall and the Biblical figure of Adam.

The final project, *Paradise Lost*, thus originated from a mediation between these two plans: in fact, Milton decided to write an epic poem on the Biblical theme of the Fall, abandoning the idea of a tragedy and also that of the Arthurian theme, as they were both in contrast with his Republican ideals. In particular, to write about the mythical past of England would have meant paying homage to the chivalric and courtly values which he had always rejected, a position which he maintained even after the Restoration, when to sustain anti-royalist values was useless if not dangerous.

*Paradise Lost* (published in 1667) has a complex structure, as its plot does not follow a linear sequence of actions but is

characterised by shifts in time. The basic events explore the causes and consequences of the Fall – that of Adam and Eve and that of Lucifer – and the idea of Redemption, possible through the intercession and sacrifice of Christ.

Formally, *Paradise Lost* is composed of 12 books and written in blank verse, in opposition to the vogue of the heroic couplet. The use of blank verse is slightly evocative of Elizabethan drama, as well as the theme of the Fall, which recalls for instance the heroes of Marlowe's tragedies; Satan is, in fact, an Elizabethan tragic hero, endowed with pride, determination, and a strong sense of individualism, and his fall is the consequence of his uncontainable ambition. He rebels against God, as he refuses to recognise the Creator's superiority and is finally punished. After being thrown out of Heaven (which is the chronological ante-fact to Adam and Eve's Fall), however, the archangel Lucifer, like the protagonist of a revenge tragedy, returns to the garden of Eden disguised as a snake to induce Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, in order to disturb God's creation and to demonstrate his own power over his creatures.

These facts are presented in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, where the story of Satan is also recounted. The very first lines, in which Milton invokes the Muse (conforming to the rules of the epic) condense almost all the content:

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
 Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste  
 Brought death into the World, and all our woe,  
 With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man  
 Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,  
 Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top  
 Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire  
 That Shepherd who first taught the chosen seed  
 In the beginning how the heavens and earth  
 Rose out of Chaos: or, if *Sion* hill  
 Delight thee more, and *Siloa's* brook that flowed  
 Fast by the oracle of God, I thence  
 Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,  
 That with no middle flight intends to soar

Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues  
 Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.  
 And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer  
 Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,  
 Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first  
 Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,  
 Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss,  
 And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark  
 Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
 That, to the height of this great argument,  
 I may assert Eternal Providence,  
 And justify the ways of God to men.

*(Book I, ll.1-26)*

The initial lines anticipate the entire action of the poem: the fall and then the coming of Christ ("one greater Man"), through whom humankind will be able to regain heaven. The poet, in this opening, stresses the form of this text as a religious-epic poem, with a double invocation; indeed, he invokes the Muse for inspiration to write "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme", being aware that he needs special support for the form and style of a poem with such elevated aims; in the following lines he also invokes the Holy Spirit for "instruction" because he has Knowledge ("for Thou know'st") and can bring light to the poet, so enabling him to sing such a "great argument" and serve God by presenting his divine design for humanity ("And justify the ways of God to men").

The story of **Satan** is recounted subsequently: after a three-day battle against **God**, Satan and the other rebellious angels are driven out of **Heaven**. They fall for nine days and nights until they land on an icy and burning region of the Earth, **Hell**. Here, Satan takes over and becomes the Lord of the place:

"Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime,"  
 Said the lost Archangel, "this the seat

That we must change for Heaven? – this mournful gloom  
 For that celestial light? Be it so, since He  
 Who now is Sovereign can dispose and bid  
 What shall be right: farthest from Him is best,  
 Whom reason hath equalled, force hath made supreme  
 Above his equals. Farewell, happy Fields,  
 Where Joy forever dwells! Hail horrors! Hail,  
 Infernal World! And thou, profoundest Hell,  
 Receive thy new Possessor – one who brings  
 A mind not to be changes by Place or Time.  
 The mind is its own place, and in itself  
 Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.  
 What matter where, if I be still the same,  
 And what I should be, all but less than He  
 Whom Thunder hath made grater? Here at last  
 We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built  
 Here for His envy, will not drive us hence:  
 Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,  
 To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:  
 Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

*(Book I, vv. 242-263)*

These lines present Satan as the “new Possessor” of Hell, a place of “mournful gloom” different from the “happy Fields” of Heaven. Though he admits his defeat by a God who is superior in force but not in intelligence (“Whom reason hath equalled, force hath made supreme/Above his equals”), Satan accepts his destiny, as, though in Hell, his ambition and greed for power seem to be satisfied. What is important is the power of the mind which can be exerted anywhere (“The mind is its own place”), a power of transformation and mystification (he “can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven”). Satan admits God’s superiority (“Whom Thunder hath made greater”) but he is happy to be free and powerful in such a place that cannot be envied by God (“the Almighty hath not built/Here for His envy”), thus projecting his own envy onto God himself. What counts for Satan is to “reign secure”, even in Hell. The famous last line of Satan’s speech, a sort of final motto, expresses his



ambition and pride which prevent him from ever yielding even to God : “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.”

The reference to the power of speech which can persuade and transform is very important as it will be that power that will later enable the archangel to disguise himself as a snake and, more important, to persuade Eve and Adam to sin. In this respect, Satan’s language can be compared to the language of equivocation of other characters of English tradition, such as Duessa in *The Faerie Queene* or the witches in *Macbeth*, who play on the meaning of words in order to disorient and confuse their interlocutor, saying one thing but obscurely meaning something else; in this sense, Satan’s attempt on Adam and Eve’s innocence is based on equivocation. It is important to point out that in opposition to this kind of language, Christ’s (and even Adam and Eve’s) language is marked by simplicity and linearity, as if to emphasise the transparency of the Truth.

If Satan represents a traditional tragic hero, **Adam** and **Eve** are presented as modern characters, whose bad behaviour questions their conscience rather than their personal ambitions. Though their internal debate may suggest a comparison with characters such as Hamlet, their modernity is different as Milton, in opposition to the relativity of Elizabethan theatre and Baroque literature, refers to universal values grounded on Christian religion. Adam and Eve’s drama concerns ethics and the struggle between Good and Evil, but the path to Goodness is shown without hesitation by the author. After having eaten the forbidden fruit, the two main characters are driven away from the Garden of Eden, despite their repentance. On the way to the Earthly world, they are accompanied by the archangel Michael who relates what shall follow, revealing the future coming of the Messiah, his incarnation, death, and resurrection, and foretelling the corrupt state of the Church till his second coming. The knowledge of a hopeful future of redemption for humankind is a consolation for Adam

and Eve, when they sadly pass through the gate of Heaven.

Adam and Eve's Fall, then, is paradigmatic of the Fall of any human being, who can aspire to redemption only by repenting and accepting the responsibility of their own actions. They will be able to find "a Paradise within" only by founding their life on values clearly inspired by Puritanism: humility, temperance, friendship, and above all work.

Adam and Eve are therefore an expression of Milton's Puritan religious belief, whereas his anti-royalist convictions are evident in the way he depicts the relationship between Satan and his mates: despite his words of incitement during the rebellion against God – when he claims their right to be equal to the Creator – Satan behaves as a tyrant who makes decisions by himself and acts as a supreme ruler. Thus, Milton mocks monarchy and any kind of absolutist government, not only through Satan's example, but also clearly stating that God alone can claim supremacy over his creatures whereas human beings are all equal.

At the same time, however, while affirming this principle of equality, Milton proposes a model of the family based on a hierarchical structure. Adam and Eve's relationship clearly suggests, in the author's optic, that Eve must be subordinate to Adam as their Fall is the consequence of Eve's fault in accepting the snake's advice and above all in her persuasion of Adam to follow her example, thus inverting the "correct" hierarchy between husband and wife.

***Paradise Regained***, an epic poem in four books published in 1671, resumes the theme of the temptation and presents again two great protagonists of ***Paradise Lost***: **Satan** and **Christ**. The action is developed around Satan's attempt to corrupt Christ, when he is alone in the desert, isolated from the world and in a condition of despair; Christ, however, though made a common man, is able to resist Satan's persuasive rhetoric. Whereas Paradise is lost by the yielding of Adam and Eve to

Satan's temptation, so it is regained by the resistance of the Son of God to the temptation of the same spirit. Satan is here presented not in the majestic lineaments with which he is characterised in *Paradise Lost*, but as a cunning, dissembling creature, a "Spirit unfortunate", as he describes himself. In this epic as well as in *Paradise Lost*, the action is heroic in a religious sense and the battle is again between Good and Evil.

***Samson Agonistes*** (published in 1671) is a tragedy centred on Samson's last days, when he is a prisoner of the Philistines and blind, a similarity to the circumstances of the poet himself. In his prison, Samson is visited by friends of his tribe (the Chorus), by his father, and finally by his wife Dalila who seeks pardon and reconciliation, but being repudiated shows herself "a manifest serpent" in the end. Betrayed by Dalila, Samson must face physical and spiritual degradation but this heroic figure, like the characters of the previous poems, achieves heroic status in the ultimate acceptance of his condition and in the final vocation to sacrifice (he causes the destruction of the Philistines and his own death by pulling down the pillars supporting the roof of the palace where they are). The interior struggle of the protagonist, who feels abandoned by God, makes him similar to the Christ of *Paradise Regained*, and leads him to conceive his suffering as necessary to God's plans for Israel.

This play is modelled on Greek tragedies in its use of the Chorus and respect of the Aristotelian unities.



## 21. Restoration Poetry

### 21.1 Restoration Poetry

After Cromwell's death, his son Richard became the Protector of the Commonwealth. As the Army did not sustain him, a free Parliament was formed, and it soon became clear that the Republic was no longer supported by the people; the late King's son, **Charles II Stuart**, was recalled from his exile in France, and Monarchy was restored in 1660.

This period, known as the **Restoration**, was marked by a general change of atmosphere in social and political life, and its effects were reflected also in literature and culture: the severe Puritan set of values was replaced by a more lively approach to life; the Court resumed its central cultural role and the King promoted art and science at many levels, encouraging a variety of forms of entertainment; the theatres re-opened and new plays, as well as narrative and poetry writings, were influenced by the French taste that Charles had brought from the Continent; aristocratic life and ideals returned to be celebrated by writers, now less interested in intellectual or spiritual themes.

This was particularly true of poetry, whose metaphysical and religious trend gradually disappeared, to return to courtly themes or to anticipate 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism.

## 21.2 Andrew Marvell

A figure of transition is **Andrew Marvell** (1621-1678), whose poetry is characterised by ambiguity and by an ironic, often obscure intellectualism, as his poems combine Metaphysical sensitiveness with Cavalier exuberance. Analogously, also his personal ideals remain uncertain and his political attitude changes with the change of political atmosphere, as his pamphlets and lyrics reflect at first his support of Charles I's politics, then his agreement with Cromwell's cause, and finally his consent to Charles II and the restored Monarchy. He worked as Latin secretary and **Milton's** assistant during the Puritan period but, surprisingly, after 1660 he became a member of the Parliament and a violent politician, author of satires and pamphlets, attacking first the ministers, but afterwards Charles II himself.

Among his satirical poems, the most famous are: ***Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*** (1650), ***First Anniversary of the Government under Oliver Cromwell*** (1655), ***Last Instructions to a Painter*** (1667). The latter is his principal verse satire on the subject of the Dutch War.

Apart from satirical verses and poems written on occasions, Marvell also produced poems about more general themes; most of his lyrics centre on dichotomies, such as earthly/divine love, the body/soul relationship, city/country life. Marvell intensifies these apparent contradictions or re-conciliates them, playing with language and calling the reader to solve personally the doubts he deliberately creates. Even the Good / Evil, the earthly / spiritual oppositions are continuously relativised and problematised through a speaking "I" who is not univocal but indeterminate, and who expresses contrasting feelings and viewpoints, proving in the end only the impossibility of declaring one aspect more important than the other, also as those binomial cannot be separated clearly.

Marvell wrote a group of poems which, despite their thematic heterogeneity, share a reflection on writing and creativity,

presenting obscure lines which involve the reader into an impossible research of the ultimate sense of the words.

### 21.3 Samuel Butler

**Samuel Butler** (1612-1680) is considered the initiator of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century movement of satirical poetry, with ***Hudibras*** (1663), the first great satire which looked back upon the Commonwealth presenting, in a farcical way, the fanaticism of a Presbyterian knight, Hudibras (a name taken from the ***Faerie Queene***), and his independent or radical Protestant squire, Ralpho, clearly modelled on **Cervantes's** ***Don Quixote***. Though Hudibras is more Aristotelian and Ralpho more neoplatonic, they both represent the uncritical arrogance and superstition of an excessive zeal. Butler's wit, with its parody of baroque idiom of paradox, ridicules man's constant effort to exceed his rational powers; by ridiculing the hypocrisy of the Presbyterians and the Independents, Butler criticises the Puritan period and the most recent history of England, from a royalist and Baconian perspective, without neglecting hints at contemporary society. ***Hudibras*** is divided into three parts, each containing three cantos, and takes the form of a mock-heroic poem.

Here is part of the presentation of the protagonist, Hudibras, pictured as a pedantic Presbyterian, a grotesque figure on a miserable horse, and openly mocked at his use of logic and rhetoric; the opening is modelled on proper heroic poetry, though the ironic and satiric intent is immediately evident:

#### **From Part I Canto I**

##### ***The argument***

Sir Huidibras his passing worth,  
The manner how he sallied forth,  
His arms and equipage, are shown;  
His horse's virtues and his own.  
The adventure of the bear and the fiddle

Is sung, but breaks off in the middle.  
 When civil fury first grew high,  
 And men fell out, they knew not why;  
 When hard words, jealousies, and fears  
 Set folks together by the ears,  
 And made them fight, like mad or drunk,  
 For Dame Religion, as for punk;  
 Whose honesty they all durst swear for,  
 Though not a man of them knew wherefore;  
 When Gospel-Trumpeter, surrounded  
 With long-ear'd rout, to battle sounded;  
 And pulpit, drum ecclesiastic,  
 Was beat with fist, instead of a stick;  
 Then did Sir Knight abandon dwelling,  
 And out he rode a colonelling.

*(ll. 1-14)*

[...]

He was in logic a great critic,  
 Profoundly skill'd in analytic;  
 He could distinguish, and divide  
 A hair 'twixt south, and south-west side:  
 On either which he would dispute,  
 Confute, change hands, and still confute,  
 He'd undertake to prove by force  
 Of argument, a man's no horse;

[...]

For rhetoric, he could not ope  
 His mouth, but out there flew a trope;  
 And when he happen'd to break off  
 In the middle of his speech, or cough,  
 He had hard words ready to show why,  
 And tell what rules he did it by;  
 Else, when with greatest art he spoke,  
 You'd think he talked like other folk,  
 For all a rhetorician's rules  
 Teach nothing but to name his tools.

*(ll. 65-90)*



## 21.4 John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester

Social life, presented from a satirical viewpoint, was also the main theme of **John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester** (1647-1680), a courtier and a favourite of Charles II for his attractive person and manners, who at the time was famous for being a notorious libertine and whose figure became a model of the typical rake. Rochester somehow inherited the Cavalier elegance and style, but his main purpose was that of presenting humankind as it actually was, breaking the veil of hypocrisy which for him covered all human intentions and instincts. His production includes ironic and even scurrilous poems – together with irreverent lines directed to the King, which cost him periods of provincial exile – and more serious lyrics, in which the poet was able to reconcile scepticism and softness, presenting, for instance, the theological concept of Nothing, from which something can be created, or affirming the sensual nature of the soul and reinterpreting sexually the Cavalier motto “seize the day”. Many of his poems are centred on the relentless passing of the Time, and some of his amorous lyrics are marked with sincerity and feeling, as well as wit.

He can be considered a satirical poet for most of his writings, the most notable of which is “**A Satire Against Mankind**” (1675) on the essential dishonesty of humankind, whose values are nothing but justifications for criminal actions. It reflects the scepticism of his age, going back to classical sources in Lucretius and the Epicureans, combining materialism with some fideistic doctrines. Perhaps the most influential immediate source was **Thomas Hobbes** whose view of man’s acquisitive and competitive nature was founded on materialism. The rake also tries to serve his own appetites, disdaining meanwhile the hypocritical and moralistic censure of those courtiers, clergymen, or merchants whose behaviour and actions equally aim at acquisition. In his “**Satire**” Rochester attacks hypocrisy and false respectability, hoping for authenticity, goodness and freedom; in fact, after bitterly mocking man in all his aspects, and wishing, in the opening, not to belong to humankind, he

finally concludes on a more optimistic though ideal note:

Were I (who to my cost already am  
One of those strange, prodigious creatures, man)  
A spirit free to choose, for my own share,  
What case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear,  
I'd be a dog, a monkey, or a bear,  
Or anything but that vain animal  
Who is so proud of being rational.

*(ll. 1-7)*

[...]

But a meek, humble man of honest sense,  
Who, preaching peace, does practice continence;  
Whose pious life's a proof he does believe  
Mysterious truths, which no man can conceive.  
If upon earth there dwell such God-like men,  
I'll here recant my paradox to them,  
Adore those shrines of virtue, homage pay,  
And, with the rabble world, their laws obey.  
If such there are, yet grant me this at least:  
Man differs more from man, than man from beast.

*(ll. 212-221)*

## 21.5 John Dryden

**John Dryden** (1631-1700) was probably the most representative literate of the Restoration period. He was a critic, a poet, a dramatist. He was nominated Poet Laureate in 1668, when he was already an influential figure, greatly appreciated at Court (he searched and won the King's patronage). Dryden started his poetical career by following the Metaphysical model which he soon abandoned to realise the canons of rigour and order inspired by the classics and in particular by Imperial Rome, also in order to establish a parallelism between the Stuarts England and Imperial Rome, and between Charles and Augustus; this is particularly evident in his late works

written in honour of the king, which, both in the choice of their content and in their metrical pattern, open the way to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Neoclassicism. In fact, the ‘Neoclassic’ tendency was gradually developed and accompanied by his research of an ideal formal model: he privileged the **Heroic Couplet** – which followed a precise and balanced outline, an ideal scheme to express order – and the **Pindaric Ode**.

In his first poetical works, he celebrated or commented public events: *Heroic Stanzas on the Death of Oliver Cromwell* (1659) is clearly a tribute to Cromwell, while *Astraea Redux* (1660) and *To His Sacred Majesty* (1661) are panegyrics dedicated to Charles II, who is depicted, in both works, halfway between a Virgilian and a Biblical figure. *Annus Mirabilis, The Year of Wonders* (1667), is a ‘historical poem’, as Dryden himself stated in its *Preface*, in 300 quatrains, the first 200 dealing with the sea-fight against the Dutch at Bergen in August 1665, some uncertain days of battle, and the final victory over the Dutch in July 1666; the remaining one hundred quatrains relate the Fire of London (2-7 September 1666) and celebrate the heroic reaction of Londoners to the **Great Fire** and the **Plague** of 1666; the author speaks from a royalist viewpoint and tries to reject the theories which attributed those contemporary tragic events to the Court’s corruption.

After a pause of fourteen years, Dryden published a political satire in heroic couplets, *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), whose main purpose was “the amendment of Vices”, as he wrote in the Preface. It proposed the Biblical episode of Absalom rebelling against his father David, which in fact symbolised the behaviour of Monmouth, Charles II’s illegitimate son, who wanted to be declared the King’s successor. Thus, Dryden sided with the Catholic Duke of York (the King’s brother and only legitimate descendant) and attacked the Whigs and the other Protestant supporters of Monmouth, among whom the most authoritative was the Earl of Shaftesbury. Monmouth

and Shaftesbury were represented in the poem, respectively, as Absalom and his malicious tempter, Achitophel.

The 1680s were also the years of Dryden's philosophical and religious poems. In ***Religio Laici*** (1682) the author sustained the authority of the Church of England against the assault of Papists and Puritan dissenters; it is in the form of the Horatian epistle, and it is above all a defense of Christianity against a number of enemies, particularly Deism or natural religion.

In ***The Hind and the Panther*** (1687) Dryden officially declared his conversion to Catholicism and to the Roman Church. The poem is divided into three parts; in the first he describes the various religious sects under the guise of the different beasts, and particularly the Church of Rome, the "milk-white Hind, immortal and unchanged", and the Church of England, the fierce and inexorable Panther; the second part discusses the arguments between the two churches; the third part moves from theological controversy to a satirical discussion of temporal and political matters.

During the last decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Dryden devoted himself mostly to translation. He translated in verse ***Persius*** and the ***Satires*** of **Juvenal** (1693), the whole of **Virgil** (the complete work appeared in 1697), and parts of **Horace**, **Ovid**, **Homer**, **Theocritus**, and **Lucretius**. In that period he also composed delicate lyrics, such as ***A Song for St. Cecilia's Day*** (1687) and ***Alexander's Feast*** (1697), this last one considered by him the best of all his poetry, which contributed to spread the vogue of the irregular metrical pattern in that period. In 1699 Dryden published ***Fables, Ancient and Modern***, a selection of fables and poems, partly paraphrases of tales by **Chaucer**, **Boccaccio**, and **Ovid**, but also originally composed by him.

## 22. The English theatre from Jonson to the closing of theatres

### 22.1 Ben Jonson

In his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) **John Dryden** compares **Ben Jonson** (1572-1637) with Shakespeare, stating that the former was “the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit”, thus expressing a view which underlines Shakespeare’s “natural genius” as opposed to a dramatic production rather dependent on classical models and rules. Indeed, Shakespeare worked with the popular dramatic tradition of his time producing an English drama which developed its own kind of form and unity; on the other hand, Jonson, more learned and deeply concerned with classical precedents, referred to classical models, and defended the unities of action, time, and space, and the clear distinction between tragedy and comedy. However, Jonson was also a sardonic observer of the London life of his day and of human nature, and, though classical sources influence the form of his plays, the contents are very much an expression of aspects of contemporary life.

Ben Jonson is a prominent figure in the literary world of the early 17th century: actor, playwright, poet, scholar, critic, translator, man of letters. He took part actively in literary and political debates of his time, often suffering the consequences for expressing his opinions freely. That is the case of *Eastward Hoe* (1604-5), a play written jointly with **John Marston** and **George Chapman**, which was considered an insult to the Scottish nation at a time when king James had just arrived from Scotland, and Jonson was jailed for it. Having converted to Catholicism, he was the object of deep suspicion after the

Gunpowder Plot of Guy Fawkes (1605). He gradually mellowed as he grew older, reconverted to Anglicanism, and in his latter years became the King's pensioned poet and a favourite at the court.

Jonson considered his profession as a poet with great seriousness, and edited the "in-Folio" publication of his collected works – *The Works of Benjamin Jonson* (1616) – an act which, though it may seem rather presumptuous, contributed to establish the respectability of professional authorship.

Jonson's first important and successful play is *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), a comedy of intrigue owing much to the Roman comedy of **Plautus** and **Terence**, but highly original in tone and manner. It is a study of the kind of excesses which Jonson criticises and condemns, and presents a satiric picture of his age; much of the dialogue is in colloquial prose while the action of the play exhibits the fatuities, the follies, the obsessions, and the absurdities of the different characters.

The **Prologue** contains an exposition of Jonson's dramatic theory, in the form of an attack against themes and conventions of contemporary drama and a defence of a comedy which has to be closer to real life:

[...] you will be pleased to see  
 One such today as other plays should be,  
 Where neither chorus wafts you over the seas,  
 Nor creaking throne comes down, the boys to please,  
 Nor nimble squib is seen, to make afeard  
 The gentlewomen, nor rolled bullet heard  
 To say it thunders, nor tempestuous drum  
 Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;  
 But deeds and language such as men do use,  
 And persons such as comedy would choose  
 When she would show an image of the times  
 And sport with human follies, not with crimes.

Jonson considered himself as a reformer of the stage: theatre had to be more correct in structure, more contemporary in theme, and more improving in effect. As the main function of comedy is for him the ridiculing of human obsessions and weaknesses, he takes inspiration from the medieval theory of the four humours – choler, melancholy, phlegm and blood – characterising human beings, whose personality and behaviour is determined by the predominance of one humour over the others. On this assumption, Jonson developed a “**comedy of humours**”, in which each character is seen to be dominated and possessed by one particular obsession and therefore comes out as a ridiculous and farcical caricature.

In his next comedy, ***Every Man out of His Humour*** (1599), the plot is more episodic and is above all concentrated on the illustration of ridiculous humours whose names indicate their particular obsession (Carlo Buffone, Fastidius Brisk, Sordido).

After ***Cynthia's Revels*** (1600), a satire of contemporary court types depicted through mythological characters (Cynthia is Queen Elizabeth), Jonson wrote ***The Poetaster*** (1601), set at the court of Caesar Augustus but dealing with the quarrels and rivalries of Jonson's own day known as the Wars of the Theatres. The comedy satirises Dekker and Marston under the names of Crispinus and Demetrius, while Jonson himself figures as Horace (**Dekker** replied to this attack in “**Satiromastix**”, 1602, where Horace's appearance, vanity and bitterness are ridiculed).

Jonson's greatest success was ***Volpone, or the Fox*** (written in 1605 and performed by the King's Men in the spring of 1606), a model for his following comedies as to his characteristic mixture of cruelty and humour, of moral feeling and bitter pleasure. Taking inspiration from the classical satire of **Petronius**, **Horace** and **Juvenal**, the comedy deals with the sordid greed deluded by the unscrupulous cunning of the Venetian society. Indeed Jonson criticises greedy people as well as greedy laws

which protect the acquisitions of the greedy, and the state of Venice is shown to be a worse criminal than the criminals it prosecutes. The parallel between Venice and London is implicit. The focus on greed and the dramatic tone are set by Volpone's opening words as he pays his daily worship to his wealth:

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!-  
 Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.  
*[Mosca withdraws the curtain and discovers piles of gold, plate, jewels, & c.]*  
 Hail the world's soul, and mine! More glad than is  
 The teeming earth to see the long'd-for sun  
 Peep through the horns of the celestial ram,  
 Am I, to view thy splendor darkening his [...]

(I,1,1-6)

Volpone is a cunning rich man who feigns a mortal illness so that his wealthy neighbours would court his favour in the hope of being named his heir. His servant Mosca cunningly plays on their hopes and fears, promising each that Volpone is on the point of naming him as his heir, so each is induced to bring gifts to the supposedly dying Volpone in the expectation of receiving them back together with all of Volpone's property when he dies. In the end both Mosca and Volpone become the victims of their own games, and their villainies are exposed and punished.

***Epicoene, or the Silent Woman*** (1609), a comedy in prose much admired by Dryden, is concerned with fools and hypocrites. The main character, Morose, is unable to stand noise and lives surrounded by silence. He hates the essential sounds of city life and seeks to withdraw from human society into the selfish security of his own company; later, he decides to marry a young "silent" girl, in order to disinherit his nephew. But the girl – a boy in disguise – turns out to be an incessant talker and the nephew finally agrees to arrange



a divorce in return for a satisfactory financial settlement.

***The Alchemist*** (1610) is a satiric comedy, dealing with a pretended alchemist whose victims are attracted by the hope of easy gold. Jonson, presenting a great number of characters, can display a great variety of human weakness and hypocrisy.

Jonson's **later comedies** – ***Bartholomew Fair*** (1614) ***The Devil is an Ass*** (1616), ***The Staple of News*** (1625), ***The New Inn*** (1629), ***The Magnetic Lady*** (1632), and ***A Tale of a Tub*** (1633) – repeat the same dramatic pattern of tricksters who deceive foolish people.

Jonson is the author of two **Roman tragedies**, ***Sejanus, his Fall*** (1603) and ***Catiline, his Conspiracy*** (1611), dealing with the topics of virtue, treachery, and conspiracy. His sources are Latin authors – **Tacitus, Svetonius, Juvenal, Seneca** – and vivid parallels between Roman corruption, treachery, and venality on the one hand, and the instability of the modern state in Jonson's age on the other, are suggested.

In ***Sejanus*** (first acted in 1603, Shakespeare and Burbage having parts in the cast) Jonson describes the rise of the historical Sejanus, the confidant of the emperor Tiberius, his machinations in order to secure the imperial throne, his fall and execution.

***Catiline*** is based on Catiline's conspiracy to overthrow the existing government; the analogy between Catiline's conspiracy (63 B.C.) and that of the Gunpowder Plot (1605) is easily recognisable.

The theme of power is central in Jonson's production for the royal court of **James I**, particularly in his masques. The **masque** was a popular court entertainment and a particular dramatic form generally in praise of the powerful, often based on an allegorical tale performed by professional actors (*masquers*) and enriched by music, dance, and scenery.

Jonson's masques were magnificent productions for the King and his court, thanks also to his collaboration with the famous architect and stage designer **Inigo Jones** (1573-1625), pupil and admirer of **Andrea Palladio**, who introduced into England the picture-stage framed in a proscenium arch, reproducing the Palladian **Neoclassical style** with a careful use of architectural perspective. Jonson wrote thirty masques, innovating that genre by the introduction of an **anti-masque** at the beginning of the show – the presence of the forces of evil and darkness – in opposition to the following proper masque – the apparition of the nobility as order and harmony. Simple and allegorical in form, the masque became technically more and more spectacular over the years. Jonson and Inigo Jones created very important productions: *The Masque of Blackness* (1605), *The Masque of Queens* (1609), *Oberon, the Fairy Prince* (1611), *Mercury Vindicated from Alchemist at Court* (1616) and *Pleasure Reconciled with Virtue* (1618); but their artistic collaboration did not last long, breaking finally in 1620.

## 22.2 Tragicomedy: Beaumont and Fletcher

**Tragicomedy** became popular at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and followed the model of the Italian playwright and critic **Giambattista Guarini**, author of the pastoral drama *Il Pastor Fido* (1590), translated into English in 1602, and of the theatrical treatise *Il Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica* (1601).

**John Fletcher** (1579-1625), author of successful tragicomedies, in the address “to the Reader” prefaced to the Hellenic pastoral *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1608) specifies that tragicomedy represents the sufferings and joys of “familiar people” and that it is not so called because it combines mirth and murder, but because it does not end in death “which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near to it, which is enough to make it no comedy”.

Fletcher, who wrote many plays in collaboration with **Francis Beaumont** (1584-1616) in the period 1606-1616, combines, in his texts, intrigue and romance, the amorous and the perilous, the bucolic and the lyrical. Beaumont and Fletcher became a popular pair of playwrights and introduced a new kind of tragicomedy, where passion and honour are the focus of the action which develops through confusions, disguises, separations, revelations of concealed relationships, up to the final happy resolutions. *Philaster, or Love lies a-bleeding* (c. 1609) opens the series of the Beaumont and Fletcher tragicomedies and deals with the subject of power and love; in *A King and No King* (1611) the theme of incest is central. However, the best work by Beaumont and Fletcher is a tragedy, *The Maid's Tragedy* (1611).

Francis Beaumont's comedy, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (c. 1607) differs markedly from his tragi-comic collaborations with Fletcher. It is a **burlesque** of knight-errantry and a **comedy of manners**. It is set in modern London, not in an imagined Arcadian landscape, at the Blackfriars Theatre, where the Prologue of a play is interrupted by a grocer and his wife in the audience who insist that their apprentice, Ralph, shall have a part in the play. He therefore becomes a Grocer Errant, with a Burning Pestle portrayed on his shield, and undertakes various absurd adventures. In this respect, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* demonstrates the extent to which City manners and characters had come to determine the subjects chosen by the London-based comic dramatists of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### 22.3 City comedy: Thomas Dekker

London was represented in different ways on the English stage in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century by dramatists such as **Thomas Dekker**, **Thomas Middleton** and **Philip Massinger**, who created a new theatrical genre, the "**City comedy**". Their plays present real life, unheroic characters (usually motivated by desires for money and love), social distinctions (especially between the

new rich trading class and the lower classes), and farcical plots, and provide a critical comment on religious hypocrisy and intolerance and greed for wealth on the one hand, celebrating the professional pride of the new middle class on the other.

**Thomas Dekker** (?1570-1632) shows in his plays a remarkable knowledge of **London low life**, which he knew well from his own experience, having suffered poverty. He often collaborated with other dramatists, in particular with **Thomas Middleton** (*The Roaring Girl*, 1611, and *The Honest Whore*, 1604-05). Of the comedies written by Dekker alone, *Old Fortunatus* (1599) and *The Shoemaker's Holiday, or A Pleasant Comedy of the Gentle Craft* (1599) show his typical dramatic combination of romantic imagination and realistic detail. *The Shoemaker's Holiday* takes its plot from **Thomas Deloney's** prose story of Simon Eyre, the London shoemaker who rose to become Lord Mayor of London. Dekker presents the honest work and the honourable trade of the London middle-class as the keys to the health of a modern commonwealth.

**Thomas Middleton** (1580-1627), author of satirical comedies of contemporary manners and of romantic comedies, also deals with London life, focusing on the comic conflict between generations and classes, and showing the corruption of urban society through intrigues reminiscent of Latin comedy. In his own comedies – *A Mad World, My Masters* (c. 1605-1607), *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605) and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1611) – Middleton combines fine poetry, melodrama, and insight into feminine psychology. In his late comedy, *A Game at Chess* (1624), he treated allegorically a topical political theme with a strong anti-Spanish tone; it is, in fact, a political satire dealing with the fruitless attempts

made at the time to unite the royal houses of England and Spain. Middleton also wrote two tragedies: ***Women Beware Women*** (1621) and ***The Changeling*** (1622).

**Philip Massinger** (1583-1640) spent his early years as a dramatist working as Fletcher's assistant. He also collaborated with other playwrights, but the comedies ***A New Way to Pay Old Debts*** (c. 1625) and ***The City Madam*** (1632) were the liveliest and most successful of the plays that he wrote alone. In the former, Massinger sets out to ridicule the new rich middle-class and to condemn the power of money, suggesting that impoverished noblemen are still superior to those wealthy merchants who try to enter the ranks of the gentry. Massinger's social attitude reflects the crude hostility to bourgeois pretension on the part of the nobility.

## 22.4 Domestic tragedy: Thomas Heywood

Although most of the tragedies written for the London stage in the last decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and in the first thirty years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were concerned with emperors, kings, princes, or noblemen, a group of influential dramas began to employ middle-class husbands and wives as their subject. The domestic tragedy represents the social and human crisis of the patriarchal family, and it is often based on real events that happened to common people, as in three anonymous domestic tragedies which define this particular kind of tragedy: ***The Tragedy of Mr. Arden of Faversham*** (1592), ***A Warning to Fair Women*** (1599), and ***A Yorkshire Tragedy*** (1608). The first of these presents the story of Thomas Arden, a prosperous Kentish landowner, who was murdered in Faversham in 1551, the second deals with the tragic death of a London merchant in 1573.

The most famous and important domestic tragedy of the period is ***A Woman Killed with Kindness*** (c. 1603) by **Thomas Heywood** (1574-1641), a professional dramatist who produced a large number of plays, many of which are lost. Though set in contemporary Yorkshire, ***A Woman Killed with Kindness*** has no obvious source in sensational facts, and presents the story of a happy marriage broken when the wife is seduced by a friend of her husband. Heywood continues his study of adultery in ***The English Traveller*** (1625).

## 22.5 Revenge tragedy: Tourneur, Marston, and Chapman

If domestic tragedies focused on the middle-class violent passions and were set in England, Italy was the ideal background for traditional tragedies of power, centred on kings and noblemen and on political and religious conflicts, as the idea of Italy was still very much connected to Catholicism and Machiavellism, and could therefore be associated with evil, superstition and bloody violence. The tradition of the *revenge tragedy* established by **Kyd** with his ***Spanish Tragedy*** (c. 1585), is resumed by two of the most representative dramatists of the time, who set their tragedies in Italy: ***The Revenger's Tragedy*** (1607) and ***The Atheist's Tragedy*** (1611) by **Cyril Tourneur** (?1575-1626), and ***Antonio and Mellida*** (1599), ***Antonio's Revenge*** (1599) and ***The Malcontent*** (1602) by **John Marston** (1576-1634).

**George Chapman** (?1559-1634) also wrote a revenge play, ***Bussy D'Ambois*** (c. 1604), based on the dangerous career of a protégé of the brother of Henry III of France, which offers a highly unflattering picture of the later 16<sup>th</sup> century French court.

**John Webster** (1580-1625) is the author of *The White Devil* (1609) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), two extreme and successful revenge tragedies set in Catholic and Machiavellian Italy, both founded on Italian *novelle*. They are passionate dramas of love and intrigue in Renaissance Italy, and combine crude horror and sublime poetry. These Italian tragedies represent late examples of the genre, rich in imagery, innovative in plotting and characterization, and effective in theatricality.

The decadence of values represented by bloody violence and senseless words is present also in the plays of **John Ford** (1586-?1639), Catholic exponent of the English baroque theatre, who continued the dramatic line of disturbing explorations of aristocratic corruption into the Caroline age, combining the aberrations of love and passion with that taste for melodramatic incidents which is characteristic of so much Jacobean drama.

*The Broken Heart* (1633) presents a strange variety of themes involving love, revenge, despair, and regret. It is set in pagan Sparta where the values of an old military code are broken by the evolution of private moral codes. Almost as a parody of Puritan individualism, Ford's leading characters, both male and female, define themselves by declaring war on received or traditional definitions of spiritual values.

*'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633) is set in Italy and presents dramatic machinations leading to death by violence. Its chief concern is with the incestuous love between Giovanni and Annabella, brother and sister. The play opens with Giovanni's attempt to persuade a friar of the lawfulness of such love and it proceeds with a strong scene in which brother and sister declare their mutual passion. Annabella's subsequent pregnancy makes it necessary for her to marry Soranzo, who only later discovers the truth and prepares his revenge at a party. Annabella receives her brother in her room before the festivities begin, and Giovanni stabs her to prevent her

violation by her husband; he then shows his sister's heart fixed on his dagger in the banqueting room, sacrilegiously declaring that his act of murder parallels the sacrifice of Christ and his martyrdom. In the end Giovanni is killed. Ford's characters can be seen as moving in a Calvinistic world where their destinies are inexorable and their souls preordained to damnation.

**James Shirley** (1596-1666), author of tragicomedies in the tradition of Fletcher, comedies of manners and masques, along with tragedies of Italianate intrigue, villainy, and dark passion, wrote the last of the revenge plays, ***The Cardinal*** (1641), a lively mixture of ambition, passion, love and murder, and a discussion of the principles of good government.

One year later, in 1642, the outbreak of the Civil War caused the closure of theatres; until they reopened in 1660, plays were to be only read as literature, and not performed.



## 23. The theatre restored: 1660-1700

### 23.1 Restoration and theatre

When Monarchy was restored with **Charles Stuart**'s return in May 1660, there was an almost universal satisfaction; indeed, after the Civil War (1642-1649), and the revolution and the rigours of **Cromwell**'s Republic (1649), there was great hope that the king would bring order, peace, and freedom back into national life.

A sign in this direction was the re-opening of public theatres in 1660. In July of the same year the veteran dramatists **Thomas Killigrew** (1612-1683) and **William Davenant** (1606-1668) – faithful Royalists and fellow exiles – obtained from the king **Charles II** a patent to form acting companies and build theatres, while any other enterprise in London was considered illegal in order to avoid the dangers of a politically independent theatre. Killigrew and Davenant were successful theatre managers, and greatly contributed to re-establish a theatrical tradition which, though respectful of the recent past, reflected new tastes and fashions. They had both been successful dramatists before the closing of the theatres in 1642.

### 23.2 Thomas Killigrew

**Thomas Killigrew** had written several tragi-comedies, the most successful of which, ***The Parson's Wedding*** (1641), based on a play by Calderón, was revived in 1664 with a cast consisting of women only. However, Killigrew's importance in the history of

the English theatre is not as a dramatist but as the founder of the present **Drury Lane**, which he opened as the **Theatre Royal** in 1662 with a performance of the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.

### 23.3 William Davenant

**William Davenant** had arrived in London in 1622, after spending his formative years in Oxford, and soon made his name as a playwright and as a writer of court masques in the style of Ben Jonson, whom he later succeeded as Poet Laureate. His career, interrupted by the Civil War; was resumed towards the end of the Commonwealth with the staging mainly of "dramatic concerts". In 1656 he produced privately *The Siege of Rhodes*, considered by some the first English opera, and staged it again later, in 1661, as the opening play of the new **Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre**, which Davenant had enlarged for use as a theatre, making it the first playhouse in England to have a proscenium arch. Davenant also encouraged the use of machinery, dancing and music in the production of plays, and greatly influenced the development of the English theatre. He planned a third important playhouse, the **Dorset Garden Theatre**, built by **Christopher Wren** in 1671 for the Duke's Company, the best-equipped of the post-Restoration theatres, though contemporaries considered it to be acoustically better-suited to opera than to plays.

### 23.4 Theatre companies and actors

As to theatre companies, Killigrew recruited most of the experienced actors and was granted the rights to the majority of the old repertoire (Ben Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher). His company, the **King's Men**, changed its name to the **King's Company** because of the presence of a pioneering

woman who was first employed to play Desdemona in a production of *Othello* (1660). Davenant's **Duke's Company** had generally younger actors, included professional actresses for the first time in England, and produced mainly new plays. **Thomas Betterton** (1635-1710), the best actor of the time, particularly successful in leading roles of Shakespeare's plays, was a member of the Duke's Company.

Theatres were closed again for eighteen months during the Restoration period because of a plague epidemic (1665) and the Great Fire of London (1666).

### 23.5 John Dryden

**John Dryden** (1611-1700) dominated the genre of **heroic drama**, a kind of grand opera without music, presenting conflicts of love and honour, and inspired to chivalric romance and the etiquette of the most refined courts.

Inspired by Davenant's works *Love and Honour* (1643) and *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656), which were taken as a dramatic model, Dryden considered the heroic play as "an imitation, in little, of an heroic poem"; in particular, in his opinion it should imitate the Renaissance epic such as **Ariosto's Orlando Furioso**, whose opening, he said, gave him the programme: "Le donne, i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori. / Le cortesie, l'audaci imprese io canto". But the genre is conventionally seen as the result of various literary and critical influences beside the epic: the strict observation of the unities of time, place, and action shows a debt to the French neoclassical tragedies, especially **Pierre Corneille**; the content recalls the French heroic romances; the Italian opera was a source of inspiration for the use of music; furthermore, neoclassical critical theory considered epic as the noblest literary form and encouraged plays of chivalry, making the heroic style in the early years of Charles II the best expression of the spirit of the time. Moreover, Dryden insisted that a high subject needs an equally highly formal style, such as a versification in the

**heroic couplet** (rhymed couplet), a form which was widely used in poetry and drama also as a consequence of Charles II's outspoken admiration of its use in French tragedy.

The crucial ingredients of the heroic tragedy – epic plot and characters, the theme of love and honour, exotic background, rhymed couplets – are used by Dryden in ***The Indian Queen*** (1664), the first of its kind to reach the London stage. The setting is Mexico and the protagonist is Montezuma, who falls in love with a beautiful princess, also contended by a prince, who in the end commits suicide, and by a wicked man who is killed in the end by Montezuma. A year later Dryden produced a sequel, ***The Indian Emperor*** (1665), setting it twenty years later and showing the moral conflicts of Montezuma again, troubled by ghosts from the first heroic tragedy.

***The Conquest of Granada*** (Part I, 1670; Part II, 1671) is the most well known and successful of Dryden's heroic plays, which was first published in 1672 with a preface written by the author, the essay ***Of Heroic Plays***. The play, based on a complex interweaving of several stories set during the final Christian siege of Moorish Granada, was very popular and, though its plot and characters are rather clumsy, it contains all the elements, good and bad, of heroic drama: rhetorical and pompous speeches, poetry, battle, murder, and sudden death. This play was satirised by **George Villiers**, second Duke of Buckingham (1628-1687) in ***The Rehearsal*** (1671), in which Dryden appears as a conceited dramatist who presents a rehearsal of his new heroic play.

From the restraints of rhymed couplets Dryden returned to blank verse with ***All for Love, or The World Well Lost*** (1677), one of the finest Restoration tragedies and certainly Dryden's masterpiece. It is a retelling of the story of Antony

and Cleopatra which takes its plot from Shakespeare: it is well constructed, contains some fine poetry, and observes more strictly than any other English tragedy the unities of time, place, and action. This was an important element at a time when neo-classical critics, particularly French and Italian, referred to Aristotelian rules as models for dramatic writing (the *Art Poétique* by the French critic **Nicolas Boileau** was, in this respect, one of the most influential texts for the literary taste of the time, as it fixed the aesthetical theories of classicism). Shakespeare's Roman play, with its numerous characters, different episodes and changes of place and time was ill-adapted to a theatre that was sensitive about the unities, and therefore Dryden reduced it to one place (Alexandria), one day, one scene per act and ten characters, while the action is centred on the lovers' last hours. These changes made the play more acceptable to neo-classical taste and more actable on the Restoration stage. The first scene, which has no Shakespearean counterpart, builds up a strong sense of Egypt as a cultural entity, and then shows what it means to be an Egyptian or a Roman in that world. The cultural polarities around which the whole play moves are thus established at the very beginning, developing then through the old love/honour dichotomy. In the play, however, Egypt and Rome also come to represent other conflicting aspects such as private/public, emotion/reason, disease/health.

Dryden had already adapted a Shakespearean play in 1670 in collaboration with Sir **William Davenant**, *The Tempest, or the Enchanted Island*, a Restoration version of the original romance in which the Shakespearean transgressions are regularised and made more acceptable to the taste of the time. The musical parts are greatly increased, and some new characters are introduced to form multiple couples and develop the love-theme rather than the plot connected to power and usurpation. Indeed, one favourite theme of Restoration comedy was love and the battle of the sexes.

In fact, Dryden is also the author of comedies containing typical aspects of the “comedy of manners”: *The Wild Gallant* (1663) is one of the first London comedies whose main characters are witty lovers, whereas *Marriage à la Mode* (1671) deals with the difficult relation between passion and marriage, as it is specified in the lyric with which the play opens:

Why should a foolish marriage vow,  
Which long ago was made,  
Oblige us to each other now,  
When passion is decayed?  
We loved, and we loved, as long as we could,  
Till our loves was loved out in us both;  
But our marriage is dead when pleasure is fled;  
’Twas pleasure first made it an oath.

### 23.6 The comedy of manners

The **comedy of manners** is so called because it presents the social behaviour of the fashionable upper classes of the town and of the middle-classes in a brilliantly witty, critical and cynical way. In this respect and also in its use of characters’ symbolic names, the comedy of manners echoes Ben Jonson’s “**comedy of humours**”; the difference is that Jonson ridicules human types (the parasite, the trickster, the greedy person, etc.) whereas Restoration playwrights satirise social models (the aristocratic libertine, the fop, the coquette, the country gentleman, the middle-class Puritan, etc.). In the comedy of manners the male hero lives not for military glory but for pleasure and the conquests that he can achieve in his amorous campaigns. The object of his games of sexual intrigue is a beautiful, witty, and emancipated lady. Men and women are distinguished not for their virtues but for the true wit and grace with which they conduct their complicated love intrigue. On the whole, Restoration comedy is produced by the aristocracy for a selected aristocratic audience, and presents aristocratic

values in a positive, though ironical, way, whereas it ridicules the behaviour of the middle classes. It is therefore a class theatre in reaction against the rigours of the Commonwealth period and the Puritan values of the middle classes.

The dramatist who can be considered as the founder of “genteel comedy” (as the comedy of manners was then called) was Sir **George Etherege** (c. 1635-1691). ***The Comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub*** (1664) was his successful debut on the English stage. It presents four different plots on distinct social levels, and, like most Restoration comedies, is set in **London**. The main plot, written in couplets, develops the figure of the first significant **rake** in Restoration comedy; the comic subplot, with its lively realistic scenes written in prose, becomes a model for the English social comedy of **Congreve**, **Sheridan**, and **Goldsmith**; indeed, the success of ***The Comical Revenge*** produced a number of imitations, anticipating tone, features and characters of the comedy of manners.

Etherege’s second play, ***She Would if She Could*** (1668), is considered the first proper comedy of manners, in which the pretensions of the middle class people from the country are unmasked (the Cockwoods) while two young London libertines (Courtall and Freeman) win their love games through their witty deceptions (the names of the characters are explicitly symbolic of the characters’ personalities).

Etherege’s funniest and best-crafted play was ***The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter*** (1676). The main character, Dorimant, is a model of wit, merriment, cleverness, and sexual irresistibility: his power is his language (brilliant dialogue is the major quality of this comedy), which he uses to court and win the love of a beautiful, rich and, above all, witty girl; indeed, the heartless and witty Dorimant has been considered a portrait of **Lord Rochester**. This play contains the character of Sir Fopling Flutter, the “prince of **fops**”, a Frenchified fool who is set against Dorimant and fails: the “rake” defeats the “fop”.

**William Wycherley** (1640-1715) wrote Restoration comedies which, though often considered a little too coarse and even indecent, are very powerful attacks on the vices of the day. His best play, ***The Country Wife*** (1675), deals with the efforts of a jealous husband to keep his young country wife from the temptations of London, illustrating the folly both of excessive jealousy and of excessive credulity in lovers. The play well expresses the opposition between London and the country, exploiting the comic theme of the social inaptness of rural people in London life. ***The Plain Dealer*** (1676), Wycherley's last comedy, is a sharp satire, an adaptation of **Molière's *Le Misanthrope***. The 'plain dealer' is Mainly, an honest misanthropic sea-captain, who trusts nobody except his best friend and the woman he loves; they both betray him, and in the end he finds true love in the honest and devoted Fidelia (another symbolic name).

**William Congreve** (1670-1729) writes his comedies during a period of change. In the new political and social context following the *Glorious Revolution* aristocratic values are declining and the middle-classes are not only imposing their political power but are also trying to find new ways to spread their own values in English culture. The typical elements of the *Comedy of Manners* and the sometimes sharp criticism of bourgeois values and defence of the aristocratic world are presented by Congreve in a different light; indeed, in his very successful comedies, he shows himself a master of the comedy of manners, using brilliant language to display the narrow world of fashion and gallantry. In his first comedies, ***The Old Bachelor*** (1693), ***The Double Dealer*** (1693) and ***Love for Love*** (1695), Congreve uses the typical characters of the comedy of manners to show the human hypocrisy and social insincerity behind marriage.

In reply to ***A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*** (1698) by **Jeremy Collier** (1650-1726), a strong attack on the theatre, Congreve



wrote his last and most brilliant comedy, *The Way of the World* (1700), though it was a public failure. The play is based on the two lovers Mirabell (the adorer of beauty) and Millamant (the woman of a thousand lovers). In order to get married and receive Millamant's full dowry, Mirabell must receive the blessing of Millamant's aunt who has planned to marry Millamant to her own nephew. The various complications lead, of course, to a happy ending for the young couple. What is particularly valuable in this comedy is the brilliant dialogue, where the false note is not easily distinguished from the true, and where true wit is often mixed with genuine feeling.

Here is a passage from a scene in which Mirabell and Millamant discuss their marriage in terms of a contract, revealing however their belief in true love in marriage:

**MILLAMANT**

[...] Ah! I'll never marry, unless I am first made sure of my will and pleasure.

**MIRABELL** Would you have 'em both before marriage? Or will you be contented with the first now, and stay for the other 'till after grace?

**MILLAMANT** Ah, don't be impertinent—My dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you then adieu? Ay-h, adieu—my morning thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers, all ye *douceurs*, ye *someils du matin*, adieu—I can't do't, 'tis more than impossible—Positively, Mirabell, I'll lie abed in a morning as long as I please.

**MIRABELL** Then I'll get up in a morning as early as I please.

**MILLAMANT** Ah! Idle creature, get up when you will—And d'ye hear, I won't be called names after I'm married; positively I won't be called names.

**MIRABELL** Names?

**MILLAMANT** Ay, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweetheart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar—I shall never bear that—Good Mirabell, don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks, like my Lady Fadler and Sir Francis: nor go to Hyde

Park together the first Sunday in a new chariot, to provoke eyes and whispers; and then never be seen there together again; as if we were proud of one another the first week, and ashamed of one another ever after. Let us never visit together, nor go to a play together, but let us be very strange and well bred: let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while; and as well bred as if we were not married at all.

**MIRABELL** Have you any more conditions to offer? Hitherto your demands are pretty reasonable.

**MILLAMANT** Trifles, as liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogations or wry faces on your part; to wear what I please; and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation upon me to converse with wits that I don't like, because they are your acquaintance; or to be intimate with fools, because they may be your relations. Come to dinner when I please, dine in my dressing-room when I'm out of humour, without giving a reason. To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea-table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in. These articles subscribed if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a wife.

**MIRABELL** Your bill of fare is something advanced in this latter account. Well, have I Liberty to offer conditions – that when you are dwindled into a wife, I may not be beyond measure enlarged into a husband.

**MILLAMANT** You have free leave, propose your utmost, speak and spare not.

**MIRABELL** I thank you. *Imprimis* then, I covenant that your acquaintance be general; that you admit no sworn confidant, or intimate of your own sex; no she friend to screen her affairs under your countenance, and tempt you to make trial of a mutual secrecy. [...] I article, that you continue to like your own face as long as I shall: and while it passes current with me, that you endeavour not to new coin it. To which end, together with all vizards for the day, I prohibit all masks for the night, [...] Lastly, to the dominion of the tea-table I submit.—But with proviso, that you exceed not in your province; but restrain

yourself to native and simple tea-table drinks, as tea, chocolate, and coffee, as likewise to genuine and authorised tea-table talk—such as mending of fashions, spoiling reputations, railing at absent friends, and so forth—but that on no account you encroach upon the men’s prerogative, and presume to drink healths, or toast fellows; [...]—These provisos admitted, in other things I may prove a tractable and complying husband.

**MILLAMANT** O horrid provisos! filthy strong waters! I toast fellows, odious men! I hate your odious provisos.

**MIRABELL** Then we’re agreed. Shall I kiss your hand upon the contract? and here comes one to be a witness to the sealing of the deed.

*(Act IV)*

Though the protagonists embody the typical aristocratic social models of the libertine and the coquette, their treatment of marriage as a contract is only a façade hiding true love; indeed, in this comedy the traditional rake becomes the villain, and Mirabell emerges as a new kind of hero, warm, generous, and loving. In this respect, Congreve represents a compromise between the recent past of the Restoration world and the new sensibility of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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