

CHAPTER 4

HISTORY OF ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

There was no drama in England before the Norman conquest. The Latin church had always been scared of the massive appeal of the drama on the senses and considered it as a direct challenge to its spiritual authority. Since the pagan drama of Rome had become decadent, the mass in Latin Christianity was in a way a drama in religion with distinct religious possibilities. Thus initially the drama rose from within the shadows of the church.

In the continent, the clergy requisitioned an elementary form of drama – a sort of tableau – in the tenth century. This then came to England from there along with the Normans. This was also the origin of both the miracle and morality plays. The former dealt with miraculous incidents in the lives of saints and martyrs. These morality plays are not to be confused with the mysteries which were stories taken from the scriptures. These plays were mostly shown through the church and the clergy and were dramatic representations of the validity of religion.

The earliest miracle play, was perhaps written by Hilarius, an Englishman. He wrote three such plays in Latin with refrains in Old French. It took another century before the plays were written in vernacular. By the second half of twelfth century, these performances had become popular as well as common place.

The earlier plays were only performed in the church and were based on its rituals. They were in fact even written by the clergy. Gradually they moved out of the hands of the clergy into those of the laity, and from the precincts of the church and onto the streets. This led to the dilution of the religious element in the plays as the comic element began to dominate, leaving the clergy angry.

Outside the church these plays were performed on moving platforms called pageants. These were mobile platforms and could

be carried from one place to another. The Council of Vienne revived the feast of Corpus Christi in 1311. This festival, held in June every year, was observed by trade guilds as a public holiday. It was also absorbed into the dramatic representations of the day. Scenes of Christmas and Easter were expanded to form a complete cycle which began from the creation and ended with the fall of man. It thus started with the birth of Christ through the events of his life and culminated with the day of the judgement. Four such cycles were mainly preserved. These were the York, Towneley, Chester and Coventry cycles. The York cycle had forty-eight plays to its credit. It functioned around the middle of the fourteenth century and was the most prominent among the four. The Towneley or Wakefield cycle also existed during the same period. Between them they had thirty two plays, which had a more realistic and comical depiction of life. The Chester cycle had twenty-five plays and were enacted at Whitsuntide instead of Corpus Christi. This cycle stuck to the sentiment of religious instruction. The Coventry cycle had forty-two plays. Their relationship to the coventry, however, was dubious, as these plays were performed mostly by a company of stray actors. These plays had abstract personifications and belong to a later date.

These plays continued to be performed till the end of the sixteenth century. The relationship between the miracle plays and those of Shakespeare is obvious. By the time Shakespeare emerged on the scene, the pageant had already gained immense popularity for drama. It furnished opportunities to adapt human nature into the scene depicted from the scriptures. It also brought in materials and characters from other countries, and thus paved way for plots which were beyond the range of the scriptures. These plays also gave Shakespeare innumerable nameless generic characters, like first citizens, gentlemen and soldiers etc. The pageants had added the comic to the serious and the pathetic of the religious scriptures. Lucifer thus figured prominently besides Abraham and Isaac in the story of Christ.

The morality plays existed between the miracle plays and true drama. The Coventry cycle first introduced allegorical characters. The morality plays developed along these lines. The oldest

morality play in England is perhaps the "Paternoster" which is a series of seven plays, with each play highlighting one of the seven clauses of the Lord's prayers against one of the seven deadly sins. The play was performed in York in the fourteenth century. The moralities did not have the dramatic power or the interest of the miracle plays. The miracle plays had no need to create a plot since they were only derived from the scriptures. The morality plays needed new plots everytime. There was an advancement in the unity of construction. Some real characters, though under moral nicknames, were also introduced in an attempt to individualise allegorical characters. The morality plays were thus forerunners to true drama since they had form as well as substance. The miracle plays had little literary value. Their real worth lies in popularising drama by intermixing the comic with the tragic, thus paving way for the romantic plays of Shakespeare. The morality plays first appeared in the fifteenth century. They were didactic, and advanced dramatic art by making characters and dialogues appear as real.

After the morality plays came the "interlude". It dealt with secular and comic subjects, and were forerunners to the comedies. These were acted by household servants and retainers, and the wealthy and the noble habitually hired professional actors for their household chores.

The masque had its origin merely as a spectacle or a pageant with a certain element of pantomime. Dancing and concerted movements made it appear like the modern ballet, whereas songs and dialogue made it appear like a modern opera.

English drama was primarily influenced by the native tradition, the Latin and the Italian drama. These three elements are found in almost every Elizabethan play. The mystery, miracle, morality and the interlude represent the development of native tradition. From the last two, developed the rough farce and chronicle play. The historical plays of the Elizabethan era with their jesters and fools owe much to these as well. Seneca was accepted as the model for tragedy and Plautus and Terence supplied the hinterland suggestions for comedy.

The Italian influence is evident in tragedies like Gascoigne's *Jacosta* and Wheatstone's *Promos* and *Cassandra*.

The first regular English comedy, "Ralph Roister Doister" was written by Nicholas Udall. He followed the Latin model, divided his play into acts and scenes and wrote in rhyming couplets. The play had a clearly developed action, lively dialogue, a substantial plot, and live characters. The first English tragedy was written in 1562 by Sackville and Norton and was called *Gorboduc*. The play also is divided in acts and scenes, and is written in stiff blank verse. Each act is preceded by a dumb show which suggests what is to follow. The act ends in a chorus in rhyming verse. The Latin models were followed in both comedy as well as tragedy. The comedy had its role model in Plautus ; the tragedy in Seneca. Subsequently, however, classical influence were to gradually wane and be gradually replaced by native ingenuity and customs.

After this era, the English drama developed through the works of the University Wits, who were scholars fostered under the atmosphere of Cambridge and Oxford universities. The main among them were George Peele who wrote "David and Bsathsheba" and the "Arraignment of Pario". Robert Greene wrote plays and pamphlets, his best play being "Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay". His main fame came for his spiteful attack on Shakespeare in his pamphlet the "Groatsworth of Wit". Thomas Lodge wrote in different plays with sole exception of "The looking Glass of London", in collaboration with Greene. Shakespeare borrowed for his "As you like it" from Lodge's novel *Rosalynde*. John Lyly did nothing much of repute as a dramatist. He is the inventor of Euphism, which influenced Shakespeare considerably. Bastard Euphism was ridiculed by Shakespeare in "Love's Labour's Lost". He depicted genuine Euphism, however, in "Much Ado About Nothing". Thomas Kyd, too wrote along with these University Wits, though there is no surety that he belonged to any particular university. His main work was the exquisite play "Hieronymo" and its sequel "The Spanish Tragedy". The best among the university wits was undoubtedly Christopher Marlowe of Cambridge University. His chief plays were "The Jew

of Malta", "Doctor Faustus", "Tamburlaine" and "Edward II". He influenced Shakespeare the most. His greatest achievement was to discover and make life-like blank verse which Shakespeare later perfected. His problem was that he singularly lacked in humour and artistic proportion. This made him appear bombastic. Yet his work did have force and poetic beauty in fair measure, which, however, could never come anywhere close to what Shakespeare managed.

Shakespeare did not belong to the group of university wits, but to the rival set of playwrights. We know little of actor-playwrights prior to Shakespeare, since they worked in groups and not as individuals. Their drama lacked poetry, and they let characters and the plot develop one another, acting and reacting on each part as a living whole, instead of utilising the plot as a peg on which to hang splendid speeches, or as a background to throw into disrepute hero's all-consuming egotism as depicted by Marlowe.

Four of his contemporaries were connected with Shakespeare either by personality or by the quality of their work. They were Ben Jonson, Chapman, Marston and Dekker. Jonson became famous with his work "Everyman in his Humour". He wrote many plays, prominent among them being "Sejanus" and "Catiline". He had an acute observation of the foibles and follies of human beings, and his plays exhibit a variety of wit, subtle character analysis, and worldly knowledge. Jonson did not have the sympathy and kindness of heart to make him a real good dramatist. His characters are not endearing as are of Shakespeare. Chapman was a close friend of Jonson, and shared in his beliefs and literary skill to a large extent. He wrote a fine comedy "All Fools", and an equally fine tragedy "Busyd Ambois", though he did not quite manage the excellence of Jonson, leave alone Shakespeare. John Marston wrote several plays, the best being one of his earlier plays "Antonia and Mellida". He also wrote a reasonable comedy "What You Will", which was based basically by an improbable and unpleasant plot. Thomas Dekker was more of a hack writer, who did large amount of dramatic work in collaboration with other writers. He is closer to Shakespeare than the other three, primarily in depicting pathos and in the delineation of women.

CHAPTER 5

THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

The performance of the gospel stories within the church is the beginning of the theatre in England. As interest grew in the plays, the performance was shifted to the churchyard. Due to the large number of spectators, this resulted in the desecration of the graveyards. The stage had to be shifted thus into the green or any other open space in the outskirts of the town, particularly to the inn-yard.

At the beginning of the Elizabethan era the public thus witnessed plays performed on the stage erected either in the open air or in some yard. In the year 1576 three theatres were set up in London. The servants of the Earl of Leicester built their theatre at Blackfriars, while "The Theatre" and "The Curtain" were erected in Shoreditch fields.

The theatres mentioned above were largely open air, with only the stage and a portion of the gallery being covered. The stage had a bare room whose walls were covered with tapestry. The theatre was a rectangular platform with a thatched roof and hangings above. It had no side or front curtains. It projected far into the yard which was occupied by the lower classes who watched the performances while standing. They were known as "the groundlings of the pit". The nobility sat either in the boxes on each side of the stage or on the rough strewn stage. The back of the stage had two wings. Each wing had a door opening obliquely on to the stage. The recess between the two doors formed the inner stage. Lastly there was a balcony or gallery behind the inner stage, and above the actors, "tiring house". Scenes of the inner chamber were performed on the inner stage. The gallery served a number of purposes. On it, those actors who were supposed to speak from upper windows, towers, mountain sides, or any elevated place, took their stand.

A flag was unfurled on the roof of a theatre when a

performance was about to be given. A flourish of trumpets was the signal that the play was about to commence. When the trumpets had sounded a third time, a figure clothed in a long black robe came forward and recited the prologue. The curtain in front of the stage then divided and the play began. The actors acted their parts in masks and wings ; and the female characters were always filled by boys or smooth-faced young men. We have reason to doubt whether the female parts were adequately rendered by boys ; at any rate Shakespeare thought they were not, for he makes Cleopatra regret at the moment of her death that "some squeaking Cleopatra" will "boy" her greatness. The performance of a tragedy was signaled by draping the stage with black. For a comedy blue hangings were substituted. There was no movable scenery. Sometimes a change of scene was represented by the introduction of some suggestive articles of stage furniture. Thus for example, a bough of a tree was brought on to represent a forest ; a cardboard imitation of a rock served for a mountainous place, or for the pebbly beach of the seashore. But the most common way of indicating a change of scene was by hanging out a board bearing in large letters the name of the place of action.

Indeed, the Elizabethan audience had no experience of elaborate "realism" on the stage. The rude stages on which the earliest dramas had been played compelled an ideal treatment of space and symbolic treatment of properties. The audience eked out the imperfection of the stage with their thoughts.

Women were not allowed to act by law, and their parts had to be taken by boys with broken voices. This resulted in poor depiction of the women's character on stage. This is why the dramatists preferred so few feminine characters. Julius Caesar has only Calphurnia and Portia. The ban also accounts for the large number of plays where a woman disguised herself as a pageboy. This not only made it easier for the producer but also added intrigue into a play.

Plays were not acted in period costume, though some bizarre attempts were made to suggest a period. Although there was no

scenery, managers spared no expense on the most lavish costumes.

A flag displayed from the turret suggested that the theatre was open. The beginning of a play was heralded by the sounds of a trumpet. It is not difficult to visualize how hard it must have been for Shakespeare to write for such a theatre. Despite the handicap, it is remarkable that he is so expressive and manages to say so much.

CHAPTER 6

SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

The idea of tragedy as a dramatic art or attitude to life came from the ancient to the modern world, or it may be more relevant to say, from Pagan Greece to Christian Europe along with the renaissance. In England the tragic art was transmitted largely through Seneca. He had boastfully misunderstood the spirit of Greek tragedy in his closet dramas that were blind translations or adaptations of Greek tragedies, and presented them with excessive exaggeration of the terrible and the rhetorical. Thus the first efforts in writing tragedies in English lacked the essence of tragedy. Marlowe had some feeling for the tragic rhythm of life, but his dramas lack pattern and vision of tragic experience. It was left to Shakespeare to bring to tragedies a distinct attitude towards life.

There were also other sources which, on academic level, encouraged the practice of writing tragedies. They were mainly Aristotle's "Poetics" and commentaries on it by Misturno, Scaliger, Castelvetro, Sydney and others. These critics treated Aristotle's work primarily as a study of the technique of tragedy and extracted out of it a social morality that suited their taste and environment. They failed to understand Aristotle's religious and philosophical background and thus could not see the basic assumptions implicit in the text on which he based his analytical study of Greek tragedy.

The Greeks were highly civilized and could see with ease the unifying simplicity in the baffling variety of human emotions and suffering in relation to an established set of principles. They could present in their dramas, all the terrors of living but their clear vision of life and world order helped them to put things in their proper place.

Their world order was basically religious. It was not a narrow religion, but one which provided not only a broad base but also spiritual adequacy and moral sufficiency to a civilized race of men. It was

a religion devoid of dogma, martyrs and sacred books. It was a religion very fleetingly concerned with sin, and one which treated sex as a normal human function. It had its concept of "aidos" or punishment and "hamartia" or purification thrust on them by fate or their own destiny beyond the gods. They had an abundance of tolerance towards gods of other religions. This made them healthy and profoundly spiritual. Within such a framework there was naturally a greater scope for independent human action and suffering and also for a more willing sense of reverence. The Greeks were not optimistic of their world but through the freedom to perform the Dionysian act, they thought they could hope to falter their way to the Appolonian grace by way of self realization. The purification or expiation is the one which brings the full realization of the tragic destiny of the individual life as well as the life viewed as a whole. It also vindicates the gods who allowed things to take its own course and merely watched as spectators. Aristotle understood this concept and purpose of tragedy, and if he lay so much emphasis on the catharsis of pity and fear, it was because he wanted the spectators to rise above pity and fear, to be able to see this grand design in the tragic drama of life.

The main concern of tragedy is with truth and the pleasure it gives is the pleasure of knowledge. Plato had used the word catharsis to mean purification or sublimation. Accepting this meaning, Aristotle seems to confirm that tragedy, first by arousing pity and fear, ultimately sublimates them and raises the spectator to a state of understanding. Pity and fear in that nakedness distort our vision of truth. Tragedy takes us through various rational responses, culminating in an intellectual purification. Plato's approach to tragedy was emotional. Aristotle sought an intellectual response to tragedy, and that response applied consistently to Shakespeare.

Greek tragedy was myth, ritual and drama, all in one. Their view of tragedy was not all encompassingly tragic and gloomy, mainly because their dramas justified the ways of the gods not in the ethical sense, but in the terms of cosmic law and order that their gods stood for. Shakespeare felt the need for questioning their beliefs of God

as a cosmic, divine power, because he found the existing world more definitely theological than mysteriously cosmic. He, however, did gradually see a design in the suffering of the world and the law of tragedy justifying it. This design he brought out in his tragedies. Shakespeare was always concerned with justice. It varied with his characters and situation though there was a distinct moral purpose in his kind of justice. His justice was sometimes poetic, sometimes tragic, sometimes wild, but it always gave an impression of being just sufficient to serve his tragic cause of arousing pity and fear in the audience and finally sublimation and nemesis. Shakespeare establishes a moral order as his suffering characters grow in stature and acquire wisdom. Shakespeare's tragic vision is thus almost similar to that of Aristotle. His approach to tragedy is intellectual and not physical as that of Plato, and the catharsis is the culmination of the intellectual response to the tragedy.

Samuel Johnson once said that Shakespeare's plays are not "in the rigorous sense either tragedies or comedies, but composition of a distinct kind." His plays express the course of the world where the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another. Shakespeare united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow and all his plays are divided between the ludicrous and serious characters, producing sometimes sorrow but on other time's joy and laughter.

Yet Shakespearean plays have been divided into comedies, histories and tragedies. Shakespearean tragedy may in the simplest terms be stated as a story of exceptional calamity and sorrow leading mostly to the death of hero in high estate. Thus it is prominently the story of one person, the "hero," or at most of two, the hero and the heroine, the latter coming into prominence mainly in love tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespearean tragedies, however, cannot be typified into any particular slot as has been often stated of late. Each tragedy is a new beginning, a fresh "raid on the inarticulate," for although there is development there is no repetition. There are even marked differences of manner, approach and intention in each of his tragedies. Thus *Othello* is a revelation of character and its focus is on

individual and domestic qualities. Lear is a universal allegory and its dramatic technique is determined by the need to present certain human situations. Macbeth defines a particular kind of evil that results from a lust for power. Antony and Cleopatra brings out a conflict in our moral bearings, in sharp contrast to Macbeth where we are never in any such doubt.

It is true that there are certain similarities. Tragedy, in simple terms means that the protagonist dies. In Shakespearean tragedy too a hero of high standing dies in the end. Throughout the play he opposes some conflicting force, either external or internal. The tragic hero should be dominated by a hamartia (a so called tragic flaw, but really an excess of some character or trait, e.g. hubris or pride). It is this hamartia that leads to his downfall and because of his status, to the downfall of others. The action in the tragedy must appear real to the audience, so that its passion or emotion is heightened, and the conclusion of the action thus brings release from the passion (catharsis).

Tragedy thus purifies the mind by means of pity and terror, which purges the mind of these emotions themselves, and is termed as catharsis. Shakespeare, like Aristotle believed that his hero of a tragedy must never be common-place and, his faults notwithstanding, must never be inherently bad. The hero must not be depicted in such a manner that when he comes to his fated end we are only to be pleased and think there has been a good riddance. The disaster should arouse feelings of pity and of terror in the minds of the audience ; terror because of the terrible consequence of our weakness and the formidable authority which prohibits even a person of hero's standing to trespass against its decrees ; pity at his downfall despite his nobility and grandeur. Since the hero is a man of exceptional intelligence and sensibilities, his sufferings due to his tragic flaw and due to the forces of nature that thrust on him owing to that tragic flaw, are also more acute than what may be suffered by ordinary men.

The elements of tragedy have often been split up into three aspects from the point of view of individual, action and solution. The

three aspects are

- (a) The tragic individual must be the champion of a great purpose into which he devotes his whole existence.
- (b) The tragic action must be such that in the story there must be threads which connect the different characters with one another, although each of them must have some special purpose in view.
- (c) The tragic solution is usually held to be the triumph of the principles of the ethical world.

Shakespearean tragedy, however, does not follow the above characteristics in their entirety. We do not admit that his tragedy is the work of an arbitrary fate or chance since it proceeds from the activity of the hero. The hero has a fatal flaw despite his noble and honourable existence. It is the combination of these two diverse characteristics that brings out the emotions of pity and fear as nemesis catches up with him.

Dowden has said that tragedy as conceived by Shakespeare is concerned with the ruin or the restoration of the soul and of the life of man. Its subject is the subject of good and evil in the world. In his tragedies there are certain problems which Shakespeare pronounces as insoluble. He does not say anything about the origin of evil, not as he pursues the soul of man through the unending torture of inferno or through the spheres made happy and radiant by the perennial presence of a benevolent god. According to Shakespeare evil exists and it exists with an emphasis. In the same way, pure love also exists. Shakespeare presents a man groping from among these myriad pulls and pushes of the moral world. He gives us no easy solution to our problems through religion. If any thing he conveys moral values based on an inviolate thought process. He also understands that despite his flaws man will ultimately assert himself.