English drama from its origins to the present day

Drama was introduced to England from Europe by the Romans, and auditoriums were constructed across the country for this purpose. By the medieval period, the mummers' plays had developed, a form of early street theatre associated with the Morris dance, concentrating on themes such as Saint George and the Dragon and Robin Hood. These were folk tales re-telling old stories, and the actors travelled from town to town performing them for their audiences in return for money and hospitality.

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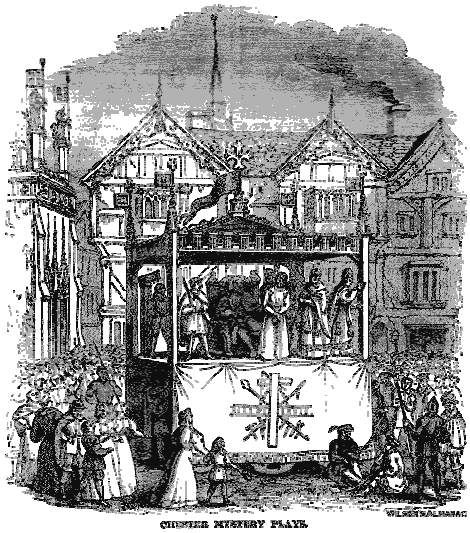
The mystery plays, vernacular drama with its roots in liturgical drama, usually represented biblical subjects. In the 13th century, craft guilds began producing mystery plays at sites removed from the church, adding apocryphal and satirical elements to the dramas. In England groups of 25–50 plays were later organized into lengthy cycles, such as the Chester plays and the Wakefield plays. In England the plays were often performed on moveable pageant wagons, while in France and Italy they were acted on stages with scenery representing heaven, earth, and hell. Technical flourishes such as flying angels and fire-spouting devils kept the spectators' attention. By 1600, the genre of the mystery play had fallen somewhat into decline.



An engraving depicting a mystery play in Chester

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The period known as the English Renaissance, approximately 1500—1660, saw a flowering of the drama and all the arts. The most famous example of the mystery play, *Everyman*, and the two candidates for the earliest comedy in English, Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* and the anonymous *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, all belong to the 16th century.

During the reign of Elizabeth I in the late 16th and early 17th century, a London-centred culture that was both courtly and popular produced great poetry and drama.

A drama is staged in an inn courtyard during the Elizabethan era

Perhaps the most famous playwright in the world, William Shakespeare from Stratford-upon-Avon, wrote plays that are still performed in theatres across the world to this day. He was himself an actor and deeply involved in the running of the theatre company that performed his plays. There were various categories or types of play, predominantly the histories, the comedies, and the tragedies. Most playwrights tended to specialise in one or another of these, but Shakespeare is remarkable in that he produced all three types. His 38 plays include tragedies such as *Hamlet* (1603), *Othello* (1604), and *King Lear* (1605); comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594—96) and *Twelfth Night* (1602); and history plays such as *Henry IV, part 1—2*. Some have hypothesized that the English Renaissance paved the way for the sudden dominance of drama in English society, arguing that the questioning mode popular during this time was best served by the competing characters in the plays of the Elizabethan dramatists.

William Shakespeare
(1564-1616)

Other important playwrights of this period include Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker and John Webster. Jonson, for example, was often engaged to write courtly masques, ornate plays where the actors wore masks. In an effort to combat the dramatic excesses of his English contemporaries, Jonson addressed classical principles and sought to bring back the practices of the ancients in his own plays. Notable among Jonson's 28 plays are *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*.

Christopher Marlowe
(1564-1593)

Ben Jonson
(1573-1627)

The picture above depicts Shakespeare surrounded by numerous notable contemporaries. Shakespeare himself is seated in the centre, while the standing figure on his left is that of Sir Walter Raleigh, leaning on the shoulder of the Earl of Southampton. Seated in the right foreground, meanwhile, with his back to the spectator, is Sir Robert Cotton, with Thomas Dekker on his right. The figures seated immediately behind Shakespeare are Ben Jonson, Donne, and Daniel. The figure seated at the rear of the table is Bacon, and with him are seated Fletcher, Dorset and Camden. Finally, in the rear of the seated group, stands Beaumont with hand extended and next to him stands Selden with Sylvester on the spectator's extreme left.

During the 1580's a group of men formed a group called "The University Wits." These were men who were interested in writing for the public stage. The "wits" included Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, John Lyly, and Robert Greene. Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy,* the most popular play of the 16th century. He constructed a well-planned plot which made for a very interesting play. The Cambridge-educated Marlowe was important in the development of chronicle plays such as *Edward II*. He also wrote the well-known play *Doctor Faustus.* Lyly was another member of the University Wits who wrote primarily pastoral comedies in which he used mythology along with English subjects. *Campaspe, Endimion,* and *Love's Metamorphosis* are just a few examples of Lyly's work. Greene, meanwhile, wrote pastoral and romantic comedies, taking many different aspects and pieces and combining them into a single play. Two of his adventurous works are *Friar Bacon & Friar Bungay* and *James IV.*

The historical 1596 sketch of a performance in progress on the thrust stage of The Swan, a typical circular Elizabethan open-roof playhouse.

After 1610, changes started to occur in English drama . There was an increase in technical skill, playwrights handled exposition better, they began to compress action to fewer episodes, and they built startling climaxes to surprise audiences. With these changes came a new breed of playwrights who created a drama more focused on thrilling and exciting subject matter than complex characterization or tragic emotion.

John Fletcher was one of these new playwrights who became very successful writing jointly with Francis Beaumont. Together they wrote about 50 plays including *The Maid's Tragedy, Philasta,* and *A King and No King.* Fletcher also wrote plays on his own after Beaumont retired. *A Wife for a Month* and *The Scornful Lady* are two of his most famous solo works. Interestingly enough, during the subsequent Restoration period, Fletcher's plays were performed more frequently than Shakespeare's or Jonson's.

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During the Interregnum (the period in which no monarch reigned, namely from the Civil War and the fall of Charles I in 1649 to the ascent of Charles II in 1660), English theatres were kept closed by the Puritans for religious and ideological reasons. A law was passed in 1642 that suspended performances for five years. After the law expired, Oliver Cromwell's government passed another law declaring that all actors were to be considered rogues. Many theatres were even dismantled during these eighteen years of stasis.

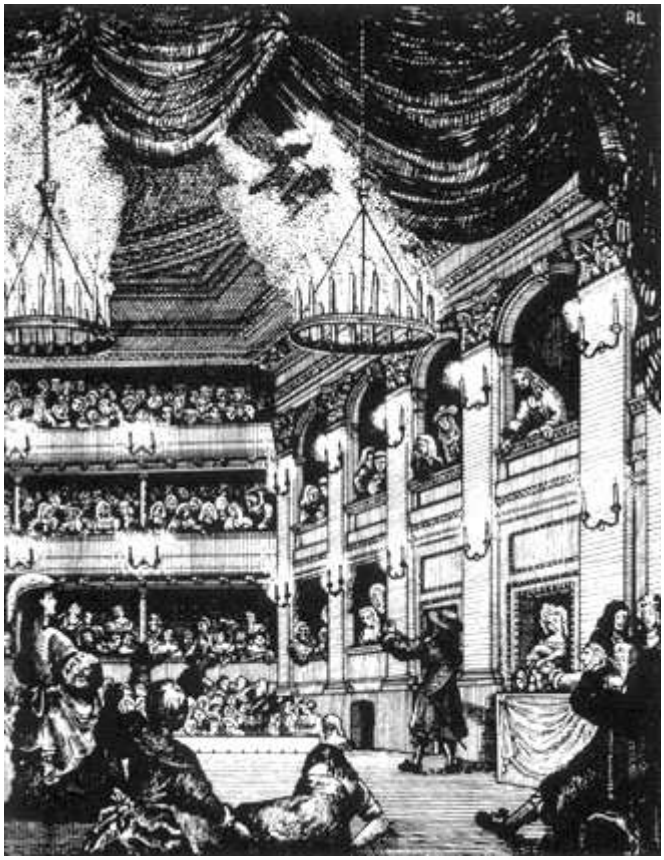
When the London theatres opened again with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, they flourished under the personal interest and support of Charles II, a huge patron of theatre who helped breathe new life into British drama. Wide and socially mixed audiences were attracted by topical writing and by the introduction of the first professional actresses (in Shakespeare's time, all female roles had been played by boys). New genres of the Restoration were heroic drama, pathetic drama, and Restoration comedy. Notable heroic tragedies of this period include John Dryden's *All for Love* (1677) and (Aureng-Zebe) (1675), and Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682).

King Charles II
(1630-1685)

Thomas Otway
(1652-1685)

John Dryden
(1631-1700)

The Restoration plays that have best retained the interest of producers and audiences today are the comedies, such as George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1676), John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). This period saw the first professional woman playwright, Aphra Behn, author of many comedies including *The Rover* (1677). Restoration comedy is famous or notorious for its sexual explicitness, a quality encouraged by Charles II (1660–1685) personally and by the rakish aristocratic ethos of his court.



Restoration drama in progress

Many scenic innovations developed during the Restoration. One of the most innovative and influential designers of the 18th century was Philip Jacques de Loutherbourg. He was the first designer to break up floor space with pieces of scenery, giving more depth and dimension to the stage. Other designers experimented with lighting by using candles and large chandeliers which hung over the floor of the stage.

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In the 18th century, the highbrow and provocative Restoration comedy lost favour, to be replaced by sentimental comedy, domestic tragedy such as George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), and by an overwhelming interest in Italian opera. Popular entertainment became more dominant in this period than ever before. Fair-booth burlesque and musical entertainment, the ancestors of the English music hall, flourished at the expense of legitimate English drama, which went into a long period of decline. By the early 19th century, the drama was no longer represented by stage plays at all, but by closet drama, plays written to be privately read in a "closet" (a small domestic room).

An engraved eighteenth century theatre ticket by artist William Hogarth (1697-1764)

Two notable eighteenth century writers of comedy were Richard Sheridan (*The Rivals*) and Oliver Goldsmith (*She Stoops to Conquer).* John Gay authored the popular *The Beggar's Opera,* updated in the twentieth-century playwright by Bertolt Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera.*

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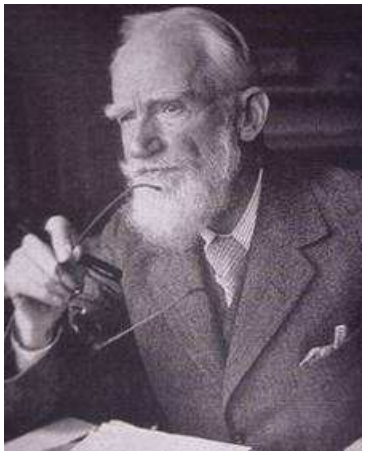
A change came in the later19th century with the plays on the London stage by the Irishmen George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, all of whom influenced domestic English drama and vitalised it again. Bernard Shaw had the unique honour of being awarded both a Nobel Prize and an Oscar (the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925, and the Academy Award for Writing Adapted Screenplay in 1938 for *Pygmalion*). Wilde (*Lady Windermere's Fan, The Importance of Being Earnest*), a playwright, novelist, poet, short story writer, was known for his barbed and clever wit, and was one of the most successful playwrights of late Victorian London, not to mention one of the greatest celebrities of his day. As the result of a famous trial, he suffered a dramatic downfall and was imprisoned after being convicted of the offence of "gross indecency," which also included homosexual acts.

W.B. Yeats, though born to an Anglo-Irish mother and father, was perhaps the primary driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats also served as an Irish Senator. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 for what the Nobel Committee described as "his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation".

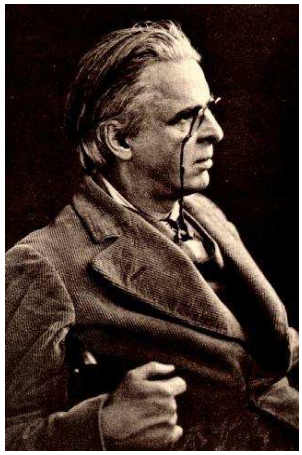
Yeats was a co-founder of the Abbey Theatre, also known as the National Theatre of Ireland, located in Dublin. The Abbey first opened its doors to the public on 27 December 1904 and, despite losing its original building to a fire in 1951, it has continued to stage performances more or less continuously to the present day. The Abbey was the first state-subsidised theatre in the English-speaking world; from 1925 onwards it received an annual subsidy from the Irish Free State. In its early years, the theatre was closely associated with the writers of the Celtic revival, many of whom were involved in its foundation and most of whom had plays staged there. The Abbey served as a nursery for many of the leading Irish playwrights and actors of the 20th century. In addition, through its extensive programme of touring abroad and its high visibility to foreign, particularly North American, audiences, it has become an important part of the Irish tourist industry.

John Millington Synge was another Irish dramatist, poet, prose writer, and collector of folklore. He was also a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and was, together with Yeats, one of the co-founders of the Abbey Theatre. He is best known for the play *The Playboy of the Western World*, which caused riots in Dublin during its opening run at the Abbey. Although he came from a middle-class Protestant background, Synge's writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic peasants of rural Ireland and with what he saw as the essential paganism of their world view.

Oscar Wilde
(1854-1900)



George Bernard Shaw
(1856-1950)



William Butler Yeats
(1865-1939)

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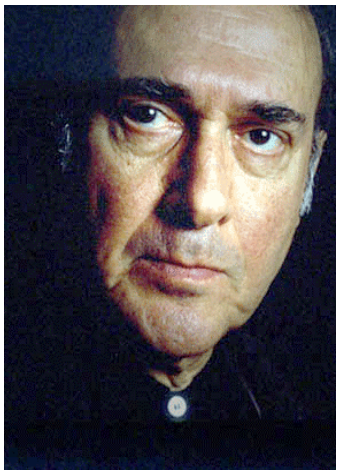
Postmodernism had a profound effect on English Drama in the latter half of the 20th Century. This can be seen particularly in the work of Samuel Beckett (most notably in *Waiting for Godot*). Beckett's work is stark, fundamentally minimalist, and, according to some interpretations, deeply pessimistic about the human condition. The perceived pessimism is mitigated both by a great and often wicked sense of humour, and by the sense, for some readers, that Beckett's portrayal of life's obstacles serves to demonstrate that the journey, while difficult, is ultimately worth the effort. Similarly, many posit that Beckett's expressed "pessimism" is not so much for the *human* condition but for that of an established *cultural* and *societal* structure which imposes its stultifying will upon otherwise hopeful individuals; it is the inherent optimism of the human condition, therefore, that is at tension with the oppressive world. Beckett, in turn, influenced subsequent writers such as Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard.

Pinter, a British playwright, screenwriter, poet, actor, director, author, and political activist, is best known for his plays *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming*, and *Betrayal*, and for his screenplay adaptations of novels by others, such as *The Servant* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The recipient of scores of awards and honorary degrees, Pinter received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. In its citation, the Swedish Academy states that "Harold Pinter is generally regarded as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century."[

Samuel Beckett
(1906-1989)



Harold Pinter
(1930-)

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Today the West End of London has a large number of theatres, particularly centred around Shaftesbury Avenue. A prolific writer of music for musicals of the 20th century, Andrew Lloyd Webber (*Cats*, *Jesus* Christ Superstar, *Evita*, *The Phantom of the Opera*), has dominated the West End for a number of years, and his works have travelled to Broadway in New York and around the world, as well as being turned into film.

The Royal Shakespeare Company, meanwhile, operates out of Stratford-upon-Avon, producing mainly but not exclusively Shakespeare's plays.

The above text has been edited and adapted from: http://www.wikipedia.org