**The Early Modern Period**

The Elizabethan period was incredibly turbulent, chaining in the political arena and in the religious sphere.  Furthermore, new ideas were being introduced through the discovery of older artists and philosophers.   As such as the period we are dealing with 1576 (date of the first public theater in London) to 1642 (when the Puritans closed the theaters) is unparalleled in its output of literature in English.

The English Renaissance begins with the imp oration of Italian art and philosophy during the same period as Henry VII.  This period saw the rediscovery of Classical ideas (from the Greeks and the Romans, who were being translated for the first time).  At the same time, the English combined these Greco-Roman ideas with the medieval religious values, creating tension within the culture.  As a result, Renaissance dramatists are indebted to the classical tradition for rhetoric, dramatic form, and decorum.  IN other words, early modern writers were often concerned with humanists ideals of man's individuality (Greco-Roman) versus God's supremacy (Medieval Christianity).  This tension is further fueled by the emergence of Protestant values which suggested that the older model of Christianity, Catholicism, had strayed from worship of God.

**Evolution of Theatre:**

*The "Dark" Ages*

After the fall of Rome in the 5th century, literature, and drama in particular, suffered greatly.  IN fact the only known instances of "dramatic" performances are traveling mistrals, and physical performers such as acrobats, jugglers, etc.  As Catholicism emerged as the dominant power in Europe, it worked aggressively to suppress drama as it was seen as a threat (due to its Greco-Roman, i.e. pagan, origins)

*Medieval Drama:*

However, the 10th century saw a subtle reemergence of drama as a part of religious functions.  As a large part of the society was illiterate, the Church permitted brief performances of important passages as a means of illustrating religious lessons.  Over time, these dialoguers developed into mystery, miracle, and morality plays.

**Mystery Play:** performances that dramatize stories from the Bible, such as the Creation, the Fall, or the Crucifixion.

**Mystery Cycle**: series of plays on sacred history, from Creation to the Last Judgment.

**Morality Play:** performances that present allegorical stories in which virtue and vices are personified to teach the audience how to achieve salvation (allegorical in nature).  Most famous example is *Everyman*, which examines humanity's struggle to avoid sins that lead to hell and practice virtues that rewarded in heaven.

**Early Modern Drama:**

Since the companies that performed plays needed to convince people to pay to watch , they had to institute several new and incredibly important changes.  These included:

* Enclosed spaces with controlled access
* Rapid creation of new plays to maintain audience interest
* Experiences actors and playwrights
* An increased attention to audience's taste, interests, values, and concerns\*

**Theatre Structure**

Medieval plays were typically performed on carts, then later courtyards.  As the early modern period began, they continued to use courtyards of inns, taverns, and aristocratic houses.  However, these performances became increasingly popular, drawing crowds that were far too large for such small performance spaces. It is also worth noting that throughout the Renaissance, these performances were commonly associated with illegal activities, and therefore were often relegated to outside the city walls.  Indeed, the famous Globe theatre was built on the south bank of the Thames River, which at the time, was outside the limits of London.

**Thrust Stage**

An especially large (25 feet deep and 45 feet wide), platform stage that projected out into an open area.  This stage had to accommodate sweeping actions, such as stage fights, banquets, "bits with a dog (or other animals)" and even opened up to allow characters to come out into the audience.

**Tiring House**

Short for "attiring", the back of the stage, where the actors appeared. Protected the stage from bad weather. Often had a curtain that could be drawn to reveal an interior setting.  Contained doors for entrances and exits.

**Yard/Pit**

in from of the thrust stage, where the cheapest seats were located.  However, the spectators typically didn't sit in this area.

**Groundlings:**

Spectators in the yard that stood at the front of the stage for a penny entrance fee.  These people usually stood for two to three hours.  Because the theaters were open at the top, this part of the audience often stood in mud, snow and rain. *\*Only those who could afford to pay more sat in one of the three tiers of seats under cover.*

**Aside:** a speech directed only to the audience.  Intended to make the audience privy to a character's thoughts, allowing them to perceive the ironies and intrigues that the other characters know nothing about.

**Soliloquy**: a speech delivered while an actor is alone on the stage, also intended to reveal the character's state of mind.  These speeches sought to capture an authentic train of thought, conveying the "realistic" struggle we go through when faced with conflicts and obstacles. (ex. Hamlet's "to be or not to be").

**The Age of the London Stage**

In 1600,the city of London had a population of 245,00 people, twice the size of Paris or Amsterdam.  Play weighting was the most profitable form of writing for literary men since the demand was so great: 15,000 people attended the playhouses weekly (this is astounding, considering that most people had to work so long as the sun was up).  What is often exploited in the plays is the tension between a Court culture and a commercial/lower class culture, which in turn reflected the tension between the City government and the Crown.

**Early Modern Dramatic Conventions:**

The larger theater companies ran on what is referred to as the **repertory system.**  This system was incredibly demanding.  Besides playing six days a week, a company would be in continual rehearsal in order to add new plays and refresh old ones in their schedule.  A player would probably learn a new role every week, with thirty to forty roles in his head.  Over a period of three years, a tragedian such as Edward Alleyn.  As a result of this cyclical system, the Elizabethan adapted several conventions that were easily adaptable for each type of performance:

* BThe dialogue used poetic rhythm, meter, and rhyme (easy to memorize and pleasant to listen to.
* Boys played the roles of women (illegal for women to be onstage)
* Large, choreographed battles (with but three or four participants)
* "Eavesdropping" (many characters overhear others, which the audience is privy to but the overheard characters are not)
* Movement from place to place as suggested by the script and the audience's imagination.  Exits indicated a change of scene.
* Relatively little scenery.
* Extravagant costumes.
* There was often dance before and after the play.

Notes on William Shakespeare's Biography

For such a famous literary figure, we actually have very documented details from Shakespeare's life.

* Born in Stratford-upon-Avon
* April 23, 1584
* Father/mother prominent citizens, with tenuous financial background.
* Records indicate only a limited education, such as grammar school
* Yet clearly, he was learned, as evidenced by his wide-range of knowledge of emerging philosophies/ideas from Italy.
* At 18, married 23 yr. old Anne Hathaway: 3 kids.
* By 1592, living in London, with some successes as a dramatist/actor, as well as a poet
* Well-connected/principle shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (Globe Theatre in 1559) (later known as the King's Men)
* Over the course of his 25-year career, Shakespeare wrote 37 plays and 154 sonnets.
* Returned/retired to Stratford in 1611.
* Died on April 23, 1616.
* First Folio of Shakespeare's plays published in 1623.

Shakespeare's plays fall into 3 categories: histories, comedies, and tragedies.

**History Play:** drama based on historical materials (Richard III, Henry V).  More specifically, the subject matter was originally drawn from Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland, which gained popularity after the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

**Shakespeare's Comedies**

Because of his humanist education, Shakespeare was familiar with classical (Greek and Latin) comedy.

Stock characters:

* The prodigal youth and his female love interest
* "blocking figures" who provide the obstacle to be overcome, such as a parent or guardian of the hero and heroine (who may be in love with her himself)
* shrewish wife
* the braggart soldier
* clowns (ex. Bottom)

The Conventions of Shakespeare Romantic Comedy

Major conventions:

* Conflicts are typically amusing rather than threatening
* The main action is about love.
* The would-be lovers must overcome obstacles and misunderstandings before being united in harmonious union.
* Discord gives way to understanding
* The ending frequently involves a parade of couples to the altar and a festive mood or actual celebration
* Frequently (but not always), it contains elements of the improbable, the fantastic, the supernatural, or the miraculous.
* The happy ending may be brought about through supernatural or divine intervention (comparable to the deus ex machina in classically comedy, where a God appears to resolve the conflict) or may merely involve improbable turns of events.
* There is an emphasis on the connection between the marital bond and public order.  Marriage symbolizes a pledge that life itself is full of new possibilities and means to stabilizing society.

These comedies often contain an element of **satire:** comedy that casts a critical eye on vices bu holding them up to ridicule.

Common Themes in Shakespeare Comedies:

* personal identity
* the importance of love in human existence
* the power of language to help or hinder communication
* the transforming power of poetry and art
* the disjunction between appearance and reality
* the power of dreams and illusions