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THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE ENGLISH BLOOD TRAGEDY

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The English blood tragedy from its very beginning down to its highest form of development in Hamlet, covered a long period in the history of literature. This type of drama, though not well defined until later, had its origin with the whole class of tragedies in ancient Greece. Therefore, a survey of the beginning and growth of the tragedy in this country is necessary.

It is a significant fact about the drama that it had its origin in the very sect which has since so frequently condemned it - the religious one. While Greece was in its former splendor, religious festivals were frequently being held in honor of their gods. To Dionysius in particular the Greeks showed much reverence. It was to his worship that the beginning of Greek tragedy has been traced. At these festivals, held for the purpose of affording themselves pleasure and divine approbation, the Greeks had games and drank much wine. They also sang, and it was from this singing that the drama was developed. The first songs were what could be expected from any group of merry-makers, but later it became customary for the revellers to call out some particular person to "line out" the songs - much as is customary in some communities even now. Thus, by means of the leader's words and the reply by the listeners, there began a form of conversation which was the first essential of the drama. After a while another step towards the modern play was made by this same leader. When called upon to stand before the company

he would pretend to be some one else, would impersonate a king, a messenger, or some other person. Later, the idea was conceived of the leader's calling out another person and these two would then impersonate such persons as became stock characters in the Greek plays. By this method two actors were brought before the people and dialog resulted. Then the third actor was introduced. There was a further development when the chorus was added.

Of these early Greek dramas hardly too much can be said since from them sprang the imperishable line of English tragedies. Yet they possessed great value in themselves for the few extant ones are almost perfect as a type of literature. In the first or classic age of the drama the Greeks are unsurpassed. To the tragedian, Thespis, about six centuries before Christ, is given the credit of bringing in the first actor. The appearance of the second actor was supposed to have been an idea of Aeschylus's.

Only a short time after this came the great Grecian dramatist - the greatest master of the art that his country boasts. It was Sophocles who introduced the third actor which remained the stock number for the drama. The chorus, after its appearance, was always used and was at first supremely important, but it was given a more subordinate place by Aeschylus and gradually it declined in significance until it was used merely as a commentary on the drama. By Sophocles' time the tragedy had become firmly established in Greece and the choral songs were used as space fillers. Another great Greek tragedian was

Euripides, the author of Trojan Women and other plays. He did much to uphold the high standards of his art attained by Sophocles, but after his time at about the beginning of the fifth century B.C. began the decline of the drama. After this, the descent was rapid. Moral standards were lost sight of, the burlesque crept in, and the tragedy was corrupted to a mere clown show or dance.

The early methods of presentation of dramas which the Greeks had, had a lasting effect on the tragedy of succeeding ages. As has been mentioned before, characters used in their plays became stock figures. The chorus or forms of it were used for a long time. One great influence this classic age had on the early English blood tragedy was that any terrible scenes took place off stage. The Greek's nature was repelled by any horrible sights in the theater and besides the stages of this country were not well enough equipped to show any difficult moves.

After Greek tragedy had reached its climax and declined, the Romans took up the art where it had been left off. But Roman tragedy is at best only an imitation of the Greek. Their characters were mostly Grecian and many of their scenes were laid in Athens. A little later when the comedy type of drama was exchanged for the circus and other low kinds of amusement, the tragedy was kept alive by the aristocracy. Seneca, in the first century before Christ, is the outstanding Roman tragedian, as Sophocles is the Greek. A few of his plays yet survive though they are of the type that are unsuited for acting.

The next few centuries - the first after Christ - may be passed over rapidly as little occurred during these years which has much influence on the drama. The play as a type of literature had declined more and more until it absolutely disappeared in the seventh or eighth century when the barbarous Saracen invaded the civilized world and caused the abolishment of the theater. But since people possess the play instinct, they had to have some form of amusement even if they did not have access to play houses. Hence, wandering scopes and minstrels recited at courts and manor houses and sang songs about their patrons. Although these professionals were cordially hated by the church, they received enough encouragement from the lords to keep them at their business. Two great kings, at least, Arthur and Charlemagne, were known to have favored these wanderers.

In spite of the opposition it felt for these players, the church itself began certain services from which developed the later drama. The clergy had for long felt a need for some sort of ritual which would be more enlightening to the ignorant class than the Latin. The dramatic tendency in their worship was shown at a very early period, and later special services for such occasions as Easter and Christmas were introduced. In these earliest growths of the drama, the aims of the priests were to furnish information for the common people, hence they were usually put into dialog form.

Not many of these early clerical dramatists are known to us. However, as early as the fourth century A.D. it is evident that Apollinaris, the bishop of Laodicea, wrote both tragedies

and comedies, modeling them after Euripides. It is a disputed point as to whether he or Gregory wrote the famed tragedy of Christ's Passion. In the tenth century also was the nun, Hrotsvitha, who, although she herself wrote comedies, was instrumental in the whole growth of the drama since she inspired others to write. As the dramatic impulse in church services became more pronounced, the matter of children's plays was taken up. Some of the boys being educated in convents were trained to act in these little plays. These children's acting soon became very popular. In fact the first play known to have been acted in England was one, the Ludus de Saint Katharina, which was played by the children before 1110.

The simple minds of the people in a large manner influenced the nature of these church plays. Since any dialog had to be in Latin, most of it was eliminated altogether and the plays had to depend for their success on the acting. Little regard was felt as to whether a church play had a moral purpose as the actors merely wanted to produce entertaining matter. An incident, such as Noah's flood, was taken from the Bible for presentation and a plot formed about it. The masses enjoyed such services and for a while the church heartily approved them, Pope Urban even granting pardons of a few days duration to those who would attend the Corpus Christi play.

The first great change which led to the modern drama occurred in the thirteenth century when the language of the early plays was changed to the vernacular. For some time there had been a tendency for the comic element to creep into those formerly sacred services, such as Mak's stealing of the sheep in the

Second Shepherd's Play. Consequently, the church, feeling that the people were enjoying themselves too much within its walls, began to frown on these early dramatic attempts. So presently we find these plays leave the hands of the clergy to be taken up by the gilds.

These gilds which were at the height of their power took great interest in, and spent much money on, this new work of theirs. Stories of the Bible were linked together, making one continuous whole. They took up their task with much earnestness. The different gilds were compelled to take charge of parts of the plays best suited to their natures. Try-outs for individual parts were held and a novel method of presentation was devised. Pageant cars operated by the various gilds moved over town and in certain designated places presented their parts in succession. The whole story of the Scriptures thus given by the several wagons was known as a cycle, while the incidents taken from the Bible and staged by the gilds were known as miracle plays. As more of the comic element entered into them, they lost their former significance and presently a new sort of play was devised - a generalized one with a moral purpose - the morality play. It was from this type that the tragedy developed. During the latter part of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the next, the morality flourished, attaining a popularity beyond that which the miracle had known. Perhaps the great reason for its success was that there was more opportunity for the exercise of the imagination in this play, and more diverse subject matter was possible. Also the public enjoyed an allegory.

As the material used in the morality plays became more and more original and imaginative, the period of individual experimentation was ushered in. This change was also brought about as a result of the Renaissance, and of the invention of the printing press which made it possible for more people to become interested in reading. The audience, too, had an important part to play in determining the kind of production of these years. They came to see plays for the sole purpose of being amused and were willing to take almost any fact presented them as truth. So Shakespeare's predecessors experimented on their audience and gave them a wide variety of material from which to select their choice.

The English tragedy had its real beginnings from abroad. It was an outgrowth of the morality plays helped through the transitional stage to that of classical imitation by the chronicle histories. Seneca, the greatest Latin tragedian, was taken as the model since England knew little of Greek authors. The melodramatic situations and long rolling speeches of this dramatist appealed to the people. Italy had been imitating the ancient Latin tragedies, and England, receiving the direct stimulus from this source, followed her example. This fact had a great influence on the Elizabethan drama, bringing into England some of the characteristics of the play of Italy - the land of refinement and passion. Kyng Johan, a historical play written by Bishop Bale, was of the Renaissance period and showed the transitional trend of the drama. Different monarchs encouraged the studying of the classics so that the people became steeped in



Latin literature. After learning then about the classical dramas, the playwrights tried to imitate the Senecan tragedy, then to imitate the Greek and Latin drama in their own vernacular. Italy had long before produced plays copied after older models, such as Albertino's Eccerinis presented in 1315. But it was not for two centuries that France and England followed her example. In the latter country, the first regular English tragedy in the vernacular, known to have been produced, was Cinthio's Orbecche, acted in 1541. However, the first tragedy of importance produced in England was Gorboduc.

Gorboduc by Norton and Sackville, which was given in 1562, attained great popularity. It was decidedly classical, and had a very sensational subject matter which latter characteristic offered a strong appeal to the Elizabethan audience. It was a very bloody play in which Gorboduc, a British king, by dividing his realm between his two sons caused the murder not only of himself but of his queen, his sons, and many nobles. The tragedy was very melodramatic, having long tiresome speeches in which the people delighted. The bloodshed took place off stage and was announced to the audience, showing another strong Greek influence. In fact the whole play was just merely an expansion of the old Theban story of Oedipus and Jocasta. Its form was blank verse and it contained a dumb show as in the play within the play of Hamlet.

But perhaps there should here be explained the temper of the people of the Elizabethan era as that was one of the main factors in bringing about the emergence of the blood tragedy

from the dramatic material already on hand. It has been stated earlier that these people loved sensational matter. Their chief purpose in life was to find entertainment, and any play which would arouse their emotions was welcomed. They cared little whether what was shown on the stage as truth had really occurred, just so it was something diverting. It was this quality of the Elizabethan that enabled Shakespeare to add his imaginary situations to slight historical settings, thus producing his best plays. There was also a Stoical tendency in this age, shown by the great master dramatist in his careless disregard of life. But these people, calm as they usually were, were very excitable when once aroused. For this reason they stood ready to welcome any highly emotional play, and this new type was now ready to appear.

The dramatist who produced what is generally considered the first real English blood tragedy was Kyd. This author was well acquainted with his audience and was able to write in a style which the theater-goers thought wonderful. In his Spanish Tragedy, he shows practically all the traits characteristic of this type of drama. The story of this play is briefly as follows:

Lorenzo, out of jealousy of Horatio, plots with Balthazar, the Portugese prisoner. They have him slain while he is with Bel-imperia, Lorenzo's sister, after which they conceal the girl. It is planned that the war going on between Spain and Portugal will be ended by the marriage of Balthazar and Bel-imperia. Hieronimo, Horatio's father, half mad after his son's death, plans with Bel-imperia the destruction of those they hate. Before the

rulers of Spain and Portugal they prepare a play in which they carry out their plot, Hieronimo stabbing Lorenzo, Bel-imperia stabbing Balthazar, then herself. Hieronimo will not give the names of his confederates but bites out his tongue and later, obtaining a knife, stabs Lorenzo's father, then himself.

So it may be observed that in this drama, which is a tragedy of revenge, we have foreboding, the intervention of ghosts, the hesitancy of the avenger for vengeance and the feigned or actual madness of the main character, all of which traits we find in Hamlet. Also there is the noble lover murdered, the generous, whole-hearted gentleman, Hieronimo, the beautiful injured lady, Bel-imperia, the extravagant scenes and the many murders. To present day readers this play, engrossing as it was when first produced, seems extremely dry and uninteresting. The dialog is unnatural, but the plot is unified and well constructed. Another tragedy by the same author, Hieronimo, deals with the same characters.

One of Shakespeare's predecessors in the drama whose name is frequently coupled with Kyd's was Marlowe. His greatest drama, Tamburlaine, with Kyd's masterpiece are known as the first two vital tragedies of England. Both were imitated, though the influence of the latter was more permanent, it having more original plotting and maturer conceptions of character and incident. In his two tragedies, Tamburlaine and The Jew of Malta, Marlowe's genius is unquestionable and the ability shown is unsurpassable even in Shakespeare. In the former and greater of these, we have displayed characterization which probably influenced Hamlet. First was the use of blank verse. This type of writing had been

used before but not with the great success with which Marlowe employed it. Then, too, in this play we have the first really great piece of characterization. Little of this had even been attempted before but now we have a most excellent study in mental change such as Shakespeare later employs. Tamburlaine, the invincible hero of the first part of the drama is finally crushed as the story proceeds. At the opening of the play the curiosity of the audience is aroused in a skilful manner by having a discussion of this famous new monarch. Later Tamburlaine the great warrior himself appears - the man who was formerly but a shepherd and is now married to Zenocrate, the captured daughter of the Soldan of Ehypt. The play continues with but slight plot and much characterization of Tamburlaine until the end when the great ruler, grieved by the death of his wife, is finally crushed by the invisible forces of fate. The Jew of Malta is not as good a play as the one just described. Because of the fact that the first two acts are good character studies while the last three are very inferior, it has been thought that probably Marlowe was not responsible for all of it. Still it is an unprejudiced handling of the Jew problem, and parts of it are equal to the later portrait of Shylock.

After the success of this type of drama had become established other authors tried to imitate. Such a dramatist was Marston, a contemporary of Shakespeare's. In his Antonio's Revenge he tried to outdo either Sackville or Kyd in terror and bloodshed. Another blood tragedy of these times was Lust's Dominion, whose authorship is uncertain. Webster and Tourneur also wrote plays of this same kind, the former of whom really

stamped them with artistic genius. The main fault of most of these authors was that they made a conscious effort to startle the audience with their horrible plots, giving little attention to characterization. Yet such a criticism is not wholly deserved by Webster. In his masterpiece, The Duchess of Malfi, a real blood and thunder tragedy, he brings in some good passages of characterization. In this play he takes a common vulgar story and clothes it in such virtue as is attained by lifting the commonplace to a high plane. In spite of the artificial horrors introduced, the play is a real tragedy and outside of Shakespeare, is one of the most consistent of the age.

But all these minor playwrights sink into insignificance when compared with the great dramatist of English literature. It was the treatment of character in his tragedies which formed such a contrast with the ghastliness of those of Tourneur and Webster. Shakespeare was the man of his age who was admirably fitted to excel in any type of the drama. From early manhood he had been interested in theaters. For years it is thought that he worked at play houses, observing the people who attended them and noting their likes and dislikes. At the time when he first began his literary career, England was stocked with plays of all sorts. There had been a great demand for dramas - such a demand that authors had done their best to supply the people's wants. Plays were written and produced at great speed, and were generally accepted. Quality had to give way before the cry for quantity. But any story must be well told in order

to get attention, so in their efforts to satisfy the public, dramatists resorted to any kind of expedient that would procure the desired effects. They sought new phases of the drama; they experimented in every imagined field. After every kind of drama had been attempted, the time was just right for a literary artist who could bring from out the chaos real masterpieces of the different type plays. And Shakespeare had the genius and versatility to do so. Yet his first plays are not especially good when compared with those of his contemporaries. Rather, he had the ability to analyze his own plays, note the mistakes, and improve upon them. As has been mentioned, any audience wants a well told story, yet the Elizabethans did not demand that the plot be new. Consequently, we find many of the playwrights adapting old plots to their needs and putting on successful productions. For a while Shakespeare himself did this. He has frequently been criticised because of the fact that many of his best plays had borrowed plots. But such criticism is not adverse for he merely selected plots which he must have known from experience would appeal and worked them up in a manner which has never known rivalry.

Shakespeare's first period of writing was undoubtedly experimental. He was adapting old plots to his use and was learning the art of plotting. His first melodrama came during this period. In Titus Andronicus the intention to produce horror is quite evident. But the play holds the attention and is sufficient to show that its author had ability as a worker in melodrama. After this trial period was over, Shakespeare learned

how to weave excellent and consistent plots. Next, he worked in high comedy until he mastered that art. And lastly he turned to tragedy, for though he wrote other plays afterwards, he was again merely experimenting. So that it seems his last concentrated efforts were expended on the tragedy.

It is in one of these, the one generally ranked as his greatest, that we are most interested. Hamlet is in fact considered by most people to be the greatest drama in English literature. Yet its plot is highly melodramatic. We note in it the developments of many of the traits of earlier blood tragedies. The so-called "wooden lines" of Gorboduc have evolved in Hamlet to wonderful displays of the finest sensibility of which a human is capable. In the hero, Hamlet, we have a universally loved figure - loved, because in him nearly every person sees the embodiment of some of his own tendencies. The fact that this drama is freed from the immature horrors, the crude artificial devices for creating excitement, which the earlier plays of a similar nature possessed, places it in a class altogether superior to the others. Outside Marlowe, Shakespeare is about the only dramatist of the age who could write real tragedies divested of the element of chance. In Hamlet we have the young prince endowed with certain temperamental qualities which render him different from his companions. He is placed in certain circumstances, and from then on he is the victim of fate; the outcome of the tragedy is perfectly natural. The ability of Shakespeare to work out the real tragical ending of his hero without having to resort to such theatrical trick-

ery as Webster and others used is what lifts Hamlet above the class of mere melodramas. Yet it certainly is a "blood and thunder" tragedy for in the last scenes the carnage is so great as to disgust an audience if it were not handled with such skill. It is a point worthy of note that Shakespeare used many of the figures employed in the Spanish Tragedy. Ophelia is the beautiful heroine with whom the audience sympathizes. Hamlet is the maddened lover who seeks revenge, yet hesitates as to how he is to get it. In the whole play we recognize the convergence of all the good points brought into the blood tragedies of previous authors, together with additions by its inimitable author himself.

From the above discussion of Hamlet, it may be seen that with this play, the tragedy of the type in which we are interested reached its climax. The further consideration of other and later plays would be merely to follow their decline. But as the development of the blood tragedy is the theme of this paper, to give the decadence of this literature would be out of place. Hence, it seems that from the time when the dramatic element first crept into the Greek religious festival, through the evolution of the tragedy and the emergence of the particular type, the blood tragedy, until the culmination in the great masterpiece of the English age, is really the period of the origin and development of the English blood tragedy.



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