

SEMESTER III II B.A. ENGLISH
ALLIED 2 – PAPER 3 -HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE I

UNIT I: The Age of Chaucer

Introduction

The Age of Chaucer – beginning with the Middle English Period.

English Literary History

The Old English Period: 600 AD to 1100 AD

The Middle English Period 1100 AD to 1500 AD

The Modern English Period 1500 AD to the present day.

What does AD mean?

BC means Before Christ; AD means Anno Domini in Latin

‘in the year of Lord’.

BCE Before Common Era - same calculation

English originated from Primitive Germanic Language.

Britons, Romans, Germanic tribes-Angles Saxons, Jutes 2000 BC

Might is Right Angles and Saxons migrated to different places

merged with other tribes there language perpetuated Around 555 AD

for convenience 600 AD 1100 AD 1500 AD

Middle English literature: Background

The **Norman Conquest of England in 1066** traditionally signifies the beginning of the Middle English literature. This had 200 years domination of **French in English letters**. French cultural dominance also was general in Europe at this time. French language and culture replaced English in polite court society and had lasting effects on English culture. But the native English tradition survived as most of it was transmitted orally. Anglo-Saxon fragmented into several dialects and gradually evolved into Middle English. An admixture of French was present in English. By the mid-14th century Middle English became the literary as well as the spoken language of England.

Middle English literature: The Early Period

Several poems in early Middle English are extant. The *Ormulum* (c.1200), a verse translation of parts of the Gospels, is of linguistic value than literary interest. “The Owl and the Nightingale” is the first example in English as a

popular continental form. In the poem, the owl was strictly monastic and didactic. The nightingale was a free and amorous secular spirit. It remained the virtues of their respective ways of life.

Middle English literature: The Thirteenth Century

Middle English prose of the 13th century continued in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon prose—homiletic, didactic, and directed toward ordinary people rather than polite society. In the 13th cent, the romance was introduced as an important continental narrative verse form in England. It drew from three rich sources of character and adventure of the legends of ancient Greece and Rome and the British legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Layamon's *Brut* was a translation of late 13th-century metrical romance from French. This marks the first appearance of Arthurian matter in English. Original English romances based upon indigenous material include *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane* were the 13th-century works that retained elements of the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition.

Medieval works of literature often centre on a popular rhetorical figure, such as the *cursor mundi*, which harps on the vanity of human grandeur. A 15,000-line 13th-century English poem, the *Cursor Mundi*, retells human history (the medieval version—biblical plus classical story). A number of 13th-century secular and religious Middle English lyrics are present. The lyric reached its fullest fame during the second half of the 14th and the 15th centuries. During the same time the ballad is also present.

Middle English literature: The Fourteenth Century

The poetry of the 14th century is alliterative. Such alliterative verse includes the best of Middle English poetry. *The Pearl*, a Christian allegory, is a poem of great sensibility and it is meaningful on several symbolic levels. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by the same anonymous author, is also of high literary sophistication. Its intelligence, vividness, and symbolic interest render it the finest Arthurian poem in English. Other important alliterative poems are the moral allegory *Piers Plowman* by William Langland, and the anonymous alliterative *Morte Arthur*.

Middle English literature: The Fifteenth Century

The works of Geoffrey Chaucer mark the brilliant culmination of Middle English literature. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are stories told to each other by pilgrims on their way to the shrine at Canterbury. The pilgrims comprise a very colorful cross section of 14th-century English society. The tales are cast into many different verse forms and genres. They collectively explore virtually every significant medieval theme. Chaucer's wise and humane work also illuminates the full scope of medieval thought.

Chaucer and the Birth of English Literature

Chaucer's language is on the whole understandable to a modern reader. The differences between Old English and the English of Chaucer's time were a result of changes in both the **grammatical system and the vocabulary** of the language. The most noticeable change in the grammatical system was the disappearance of most grammatical endings on words. The Norman French too contributed to the vocabulary of the English language. One extremely significant development that took place in Middle English was the gradual adoption of a **standard written language**. Before that period, there was no such thing as "**Standard English**". The other change is in pronunciation; the long vowel sounds in what is called the Great Vowel Shift.

Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in 1340 (1342/43) in London, England—died October 25, 1400, London. He is the outstanding English poet before Shakespeare and the first finder of our language. Chaucer was probably born shortly after 1340. Although the family name (from French "Chaussier") suggests that the family originally made shoes, Chaucer's father, John, was a prosperous wine merchant.

Geoffrey Chaucer was born a commoner, but through his intellect and astute judgments of human character, he moved freely among the aristocracy. Very little is definitely known about the details of his life, Both Chaucer's father and grandfather had minor standing at court; Geoffrey Chaucer's name appears in the household accounts of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster and wife to Prince Lionel. As a household servant, Chaucer accompanied Elizabeth on her many journeys and he attended her at the Feast of St. George given by King Edward in 1358 for the king of France, the queen of Scotland, the king of Cyprus, and a large array of other important people. Chaucer's acquaintance with greatly influenced the poet. John of Gaunt was the fourth son of Edward III and ancestor of Henry IV, V, and VI and was a guest of Elizabeth in Yorkshire in 1357. Chaucer had a high-born wife, Philippa, whom he married in 1366. Chaucer had a daughter, Elizabeth, and two sons, "little Lewis" and Thomas.

Chaucer was one of the most learned men of his time. He made numerous translations of prose and verse, including Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, saints' legends, sermons, French poetry by Machaut and Deschamps, and Latin and Italian poetry by Ovid, Virgil, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. He also shows a wide knowledge of medicine and physiognomy, astronomy and astrology, jurisprudence, alchemy, and early physics. His knowledge of alchemy was so thorough that, even into the seventeenth century, some alchemists themselves considered him a "master" of the science in Chaucer's time. According to the legend on his tomb in Westminster Abbey, the poet died on October 25, 1400.

Chaucer's Work

His *The Canterbury Tales* ranks as one of the greatest poetic works in English. He also contributed importantly in the second half of the 14th century to the management of public affairs as courtier, diplomat, and civil servant. In that

career he was trusted and aided by three successive kings—Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV. But it is his avocation—the writing of poetry—for which he is remembered.

Perhaps the chief characteristics of Chaucer's works are their variety in subject matter, genre, tone, and style and in the complexities presented concerning the human pursuit of a sensible existence. Yet his writings also consistently reflect an all-pervasive humour combined with serious and tolerant consideration of important philosophical questions. From his writings Chaucer emerges as poet of love, both earthly and divine, whose presentations range from lustful cuckoldry to spiritual union with God. Thereby, they regularly lead the reader to speculation about man's relation both to his fellows and to his Maker, while simultaneously providing delightfully entertaining views of the frailties and follies, as well as the nobility, of mankind.

Chaucer has presented caricatures of himself again and again — in such early poems as *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliment of Fowles*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Legend of Good Women*, and also in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's narrators are, of course, not the "real" Chaucer — except in certain physical respects — but the various caricatures have much in common with one another and certainly reveal, either directly or indirectly, what Chaucer valued in a man.

With the exception of the *Troilus* narrator, a very complicated and special case, all Chaucer's narrators are bookish, fat, nearsighted, comically pretentious, slightly self-righteous, and apparently — because of a fundamental lack of sensitivity and refinement — thoroughly unsuccessful in the chief art of medieval heroes: love. We may be fairly sure that the spiritual and psychological qualities in these caricatures are not exactly Chaucer's. Chaucer's actual lack of pretentiousness, self-righteousness, and vulgarity lies at the heart of our response to the comic self-portraits in which he claims for himself these defects.

The ultimate effect of Chaucer's poetry is moral, but it is inadequate to describe Chaucer as a moralist, much less as a satirist. He is a genial observer of mankind, a storyteller, as well as a satirist, one whose satire is usually without real bite. He is also a reformer, but he is foremost a celebrator of life who comments shrewdly on human absurdities while being, at the same time, a lover of mankind.

Chaucer's incredible career reflects the changing social and economic structures of England in the late 1300s. Before the 1300s, as I discussed, there were basically two classes. There was the Nobility, the wealthiest one or two percent of England, and there were the Serfs, everyone else. As centuries passed, families began to pass on skills at trades and crafts they would pass on. By the time of the 12th into the 13th century, the products that peasants or serfs were able to make became a commodity for exchange.

Instead of importing goods, or having certain products costume made expensively, aristocrats and nobility began to buy from and realize the benefit of trading with domestic and local merchants. Instead of enslaving the masses to maintain agriculture, those with money began to cultivate certain populations for the products and services they could offer. Particularly as trade between nations began to grow, London evolved into a bustling port. This collapse in the two class society created a more mobile middle class that broke from agricultural serfdom, and began to find economic autonomy servicing the rich and, as time goes on, each other.

By the time of Shakespeare, the popularity of theater was the result of a rapidly grown middle class that has some disposable income and a desire for leisure earned after a work week. Chaucer grew up and lived during this expansion of a merchant class. Because his father served an important recreational function for the wealthy — wine distribution — he had connections through clients that allowed Chaucer entrance into a noble and aristocratic world.

As he worked his way up the ladder in the aristocratic and royal world of London (much like a young person working his way up the corporate ladder), Chaucer had access to and enjoyed many of the privileges of nobility. Importantly, he was not aristocracy, nobility or royalty. Chaucer had exposure to a vast variety of humanity and experience, which is reflected in his writing, particularly *The Canterbury Tales*. In short, he was a true social and literary Renaissance man many decades before the Renaissance itself settled in England.

Even though Chaucer is one of the three or four most important figures in English literature, it is important to recognize that no one at the time, including himself, would have called him a “poet” or an “author.” Chaucer would have called designated himself at whatever job he worked, such as Comptroller, or Forester, never, “poet.” Writing in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, was not a career. There were no career writers in England until the eighteenth century, when the publishing industry made it possible for writing to become a commercial enterprise. Poets or narrators, like Chaucer, created their work on the side.

They usually distributed their work to other members of the court or nobility in limited circulation. Or, as in the case of *Sir Gawain*, a poem was written and used for an aristocratic or royal event, like a wedding, birthday or holiday. *The Canterbury Tales* was more than likely distributed for readership amongst Chaucer’s friends and colleagues in the various aristocratic spheres he traveled. Depending upon how you choose to interpret a work, audience can be an important factor. It could be significant to know, for instance, when you read “*The Wife of Bath’s Tale*” that only rich and noble men would have read it.

William Langland

The name of William Langland has a celebrity in the English language for singular work - The Book of Piers, the plowman. In the English literature of the fourteenth century, Langland's Piers Plowman stands out as the most renowned work, save Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. Whereas the latter is a social chronicle, with engaging tales, Piers Plowman is an impressive allegory, more deeply concerned with religious, ethical, social and economic problems of the time. Piers Plowman is definitely a novel and radical work for his age. This is a provocative probe into the depth of the social and moral life of the age. Like Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales this remains a fine mirror of the variety and complexity of medieval life.

Like The Canterbury Tales, Piers Plowman has a prologue that has the typical dream convention of medieval literature. This describes how the author falls asleep on the May morning on the Malvern Hills. He has a vision of a fair field, full of folk from different ranks and occupations. This Prologue, as in Chaucer's Prologue, records a graphic picture of the English society of the fourteenth century. Social scenes, rather than Chaucer's social types, however are more conspicuous in Langland's Prologue.

The framework of Langland's poem is allegorical. This describes a series of remarkable visions. This dreamer, that is the poet himself, has these visions in the dream. Langland's convictions of the moral faith and the social vices of his age find expression through these visions. His ethical point of view is quite clear here. His emphasis is on the supreme sermons of truth, work and love. Man's chief task is to seek truth. To have faith to succeed in his work and love alone leads him to heaven. Piers Plowman stands in the pivotal position of the entire theme. He symbolizes the moral virtues of life - truth, work and love. He remains the very object and inspiration for noble living.

Langland's Piers Plowman is a mighty achievement in the English literature of the fourteenth century. It ranks very high as a social study and a moral sermon. Its significance lies mainly in its threefold manifestation. First, it is a graphic picture of contemporary life and manners. Second, it is a penetrating satire on social and ecclesiastical follies and vices. Third, it is a powerful allegory of human life and morality. As a social picture, the poem throws interesting side lights on medieval life, manners and customs in different places and occupations. As a social satire the poem stands out remarkably. This is, perhaps, the first great English satire. The poet is particularly quite critical of luxury and vices in high places, religious and secular. As an allegory, it brings out subtly the strife between good and evil in the human soul. The poet's emphasis is always on righteous living.

Piers Plowman also bears out Langland's radical view as a reformer. His reformatory zeal is equally evident in his treatment of political, social and ecclesiastical matters. He advocates social equality and equal social responsibility. He is found to emphasize a life of simplicity, sincerity and restraint. Indeed, in him is heard the echoes of the impending Puritanism.

Langland's work is no exhibition of grand poetry of the Chaucerian height. In him is seen neither an artist nor a musician. The poem is written in the old alliterative meter. But the handling of the alliterative line is always easy and confident, and as a result, Piers Plowman never appears as a poem monotonous or hard to read.

John Gower

John Gower, who lived between 1325 and 1408, was Chaucer's contemporary, and had, perhaps, some intimacy with him. Of course, he was more medieval than the great master, and was a little behind his time. His major works, mainly narrative, were written in the eighties of the fourteenth century, at a time when Chaucer had already reached the height of his literary excellence.

Gower's first important work, *Speculum Homms* or *Speculam Meditantis* is in French. This is a long sermon against the sins of the time. His next work *Vox Clamantis* is in Latin. This is a dream allegory with a social-political theme. This is about the peasants' uprising of the fourteenth century.

John Gower's last important work, produced in 1383-84, is in English. This is *Confessio Amantis*, an ambitious project to present in pleasing verses numerous stories, taken from various sources. The work, which is a long compilation of 40,000 octo-syllabic lines, contains more than a hundred stories of varying lengths and from diverse sources, from the Holy Bible to Ovid. There is a well set plan to tell some engaging tales in a simple and melodious style.

Gower's work is well-planned, but not properly executed. It marks little originality in his imagination or in his ideas. The influence of Chaucer on him is, no doubt, patent, but there is no Chaucerian sense of proportion and control over the total structure. Moreover, the constant moralizing trend and the conventional bias of the middle ages, expressed in him, weary and make him more mechanically medieval. Gower has also neither the skill of character portraits nor the sense of wit and humour, so prominently found in Chaucer.

Gower's writing however, is not without literary qualities. His originality, as a story teller in verse, is amply evident. No previous author is found to have versified so large a collection of stories or devised such an ingenious and elaborate scheme of combination. Moreover, Gower's mode of narration is simple and straightforward and he never becomes tedious in his story-telling. His description art is well combined with his meditative depth. His language is developed and polished that marks the cultured London dialect- the king's English.

John Barbour

Like Langland, John Barbour (poet) was a literary follower of Chaucer. But, unlike Langland, he was a Scottish poet. Though himself a churchman, he was no author of religious or ethical works. His principal work *The Bruce* is rather political and patriotic.

Barbour's *The Bruce*, written between 1373 and 1378, is a sort of the national epic for the Scottish people. The author is found to present and preserve here poetically the memorable history of the heroic struggle of the Scottish people, under Bruce's leadership and their ultimate success.

Though based on history, Barbour's *The Bruce* like other national epics, contains a good deal of fictional matters. Lots of the material of romances are found mingled with the facts of history. All this, however, serves to add to the poetical as well as popular appeal of the work.

Barbour, of course, is not found to possess the highest gifts of an epic or narrative poet. But he possesses a style that is simple, sincere and straight-forward, with a high degree of rapidity and sonority. Barbour is supposed to have been the author of some other literary works- *Lives of the Saints*, a lengthy work in couplets, *The Stewarties Oryginalle*, containing the genealogy of the Scottish Kings, *Siege of Troy*, a fragmentary work, and *The Bulk of Alexander*, a happy popular poem.

Unit II The Development of Drama

The origin of the drama is deep-rooted in the religious tendencies of mankind. Same is the case with English drama as well. Drama began to exist with religious ceremonials of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It was the religious elements that resulted in the development of drama. As most of the Bible was written in Latin, common people could not understand its meanings. That's why the clergy tried to find out some new methods of teaching and expounding the Bible concepts to the common people. For this purpose, they developed a new method; the stories of the Gospel were explained through the living pictures. The performers acted out the story in a dumb show.

Mysteries and Miracle Plays

In the next stage, the actors spoke as well as acted their parts. Special plays were written by the clerics, at first in Latin and later in the vernacular French. These early plays were known as Mysteries or Miracles (mystery plays and miracle plays). The very word *Mystery* shows its ecclesiastical origin (from the French *Mystere*). The clergy, like priests themselves took part in the Mystery plays. In England the term Miracle is used commonly for any kind of religion play. But the term Mystery is strictly applied to the stories taken from the Scriptures narrative, while Miracles are plays dealing with incidents in the lives of Saints and Martyrs.

In the 13th century, craftsmen began producing mystery plays at sites away from the church, adding mythical/fictional 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. 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.

Origin of Secular and Religious Drama

The lines of development shown by the drama, we can find certain distinctive stages embracing a twofold appeal. They are the two deeply rooted instincts known as 'the craving for amusement' and 'the desire for improvement'. This twofold appeal accounts for the complex origin of the drama, and enables us to differentiate the lay or common part from the sacred element.

Drama as Entertainment

Regarding the common element and the craving for amusement, in the Middle Ages, the juggler, the tumbler and jester ministered to the needs of the time. They are found in the twelfth century. William Langland tells us how gaily and unblushingly they flourished in the fourteenth century. But the serious-minded wished to restrain them to a modest hilarity. In the primitive

stage, there were dialogues and repartees present. The Middle Ages solely needed a Pepys. Of these entertainers, the jester was the best. He lived by his wits in a very literal manner, disgrace and death. He survived into Shakespeare's day, and later falling from his high state to play the fool between the acts of a play. What he had been at this zenith we may judge from the picture of Touchstone, of Feste, and the Fool in Lear. The earlier writing *The Owl and Nightingale* influenced the development of the drama. Before Chaucer's time some of these writings were turned into story.

Importance of the Pageants

The most important entertainments of the Middle Ages were supplied by the Pageants, the May Games, and by the Mysteries and Miracles of the Church. The May Games, the Masques and Pastoral Plays were so popular in Elizabethan times combining instruction with amusement.

Drama is obviously inherent in the very ritual of the Church, and the Mass itself was factor in dramatic development. The season of the year suggested the subject matter of plays: Christmas, Easter, stories derived from the Bible, called Mysteries, stories from the lives of the Saints, called Miracle Plays. Early in the Middle Ages the clergy celebrated Holy Days. Christmas, Easter, etc, by playing scenes from the Life of Christ. The first positive stage in the development of the drama is marked by the performance of these stories in the Church.

From the Church to the Marketplace

The second stage is reached when the play emerges from the Church into the marketplace. This effected when the guilds were entrusted with the performances in the fourteenth century. It was customary for each craft to represent a play according to its **particular trade**. The work was very seriously taken by the guilds, lack of confidence and competence and unpunctuality being met by heavy fines.

Stage Properties Introduced

Performances were given on car or scaffolds in the open spaces of the town. There was no attempt at scenery, but attention was giving to stage properties. There was a monstrous head with a movable jaws to represent Hall; and in addition to a rich costume the actor had some symbol to denote his part.

Element of Humour

The play of Noah shows us the amalgamation of English humour and didactic purpose. Though, the drama had its source in holy story, in the method of narration we can trace the influence of the old English amusements-the pageants and May games, the juggler's horse-play, and the quips of the jester. On the whole, Miracle plays proved more popular than Mysteries, probably on account of their fresher subject matter. Each big town possessed its own cycle of plays - York, Chester, and Coventry.

The Morality Plays

The third stage is the rise of Morality Plays. The Mystery and Miracle Play gave rise to the Morality and Interlude. In the Miracle and Mystery plays, serious and comic elements were interwoven. Now they part; the Morality presenting the serious and the Interlude the higher side of things. The Morality was frankly didactic. The characters typified certain qualities e.g., Sin, Grace, Repentance. The Interlude aimed merely at amusement. *Everyman* and *Four P's* of Heywood are best examples in this regard.

Moralities began to be acted in the reign of Henry VI and like the miracle plays continued to flourish until the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. The morality, as we have said, is a drama in which the characters are allegorical, symbolical, or abstract. The main purpose of the play is didactic. The allegorical characters to be found in some of the earlier Miracle plays owe their importance to religious sources. They are not essential to the story. One of the earliest morality plays was *The Castle of Perseverance*, a drama of the old faith. The spiritual progress of mankind from the day of his birth to the Day of Judgment is set forth in this drama.

The Interludes

The Interludes dealing with the Old Faith gave place to others that set forth the teaching of Reformation, e.g. *Hyche Scornor*, *Lusty Tavantres*, *New Custom etc.* Others concerned the New Learning, *Nature of the Four Elements*, *The Trial of Treasure etc.*

Emergence of Modern Drama

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.

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.

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 like *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.

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*.

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.

Thomas 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.

Robert 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*.

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. * 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 are John Dryden's *All for Love* (1677) and *Aureng-Zebe* (1675), and *Thomas Otway's Venice Preserved* (1682).

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. 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.

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).

Two notable eighteenth century writers of comedy were Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*.

John Gay authored the popular *The Beggar's Opera*, updated in the twentieth-century playwright by Bertolt Brecht in *The Three penny Opera*.

A change came in the later 19th 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.

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."

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.