

The Playwrights: During the Middle Ages nobody is known who could be referred to as a professional English playwright. She told Francis Bacon and complained "This tragedy has been played forty times in open streets and houses". Augustine Phillips, one of the leading actors of Shakespeare's Company, was called in and interrogated about the actors' role in the affair, but he maintained that they had known nothing about any seditious intent and that they had simply been encouraged to reprise an old play – so old that they didn't expect much of an audience – and had been paid ten shillings over the ordinary to perform it. The authorities treated the actors leniently and no punishment seems to have been forthcoming. On the day before Essex was executed Shakespeare's Company, perhaps as a sign of forgiveness, was invited to perform before the Queen. More typical of the censorship of Elizabethan plays was the suppression of Sir Thomas More a play which was written and then amended by a large group of different playwrights, possibly including Shakespeare who may have written scenes in his own handwriting in the manuscript. It was an odd choice of a subject for a play, since Thomas More was a Catholic Martyr who had been executed by Elizabeth's father for opposing his divorce and establishment of the Church of England. The Master of the Revels disliked many of the scenes within the play and sent it back repeatedly for alterations – particularly to a scene in which More talked with poor rioters, which was seen as particularly dangerous in its presentation of More himself and its dangerous sympathy with rebellious poor people who opposed the Tudor regime. Despite many such alterations the play was never considered acceptable and so was never granted a licence to be performed or published. We know the play only because the original manuscript survives.

7– Costume, Scenery and Effects: Some modern companies consider the Elizabethan performance style to have been very close to what we now call Minimalism. Companies like the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express claim to be closer to the original Elizabethan performance style because they perform in modern dress, with no scenery and few props, and without using modern lighting, sound or stage effects. Although Minimalist performances of this kind may be closer to the Elizabethan originals than, for example, the spectacular Victorian performances of Shakespeare's plays (with detailed painted backdrops and archaeologically correct costumes and stage designs, and sometimes even real horses, real boats and real canals) they are still very far from Elizabethan performances. In reality the Elizabethans used far more sophisticated props, costumes and stage effects than is sometimes assumed. Elizabethan costuming seems to have been a strange combination of what was (for the Elizabethans) modern dress, and costumes which culturally accurate – while not being genuinely historically of – had a historical or foreign flavour. A famous picture of a performance of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus (one of the few pictures of Elizabethan actors at work) shows Titus in a breastplate and a supposedly historical garment, very loosely based on the Roman toga, while one of his guards (in a play set in Roman times) wears the familiar armour of an Elizabethan soldier and another wears a foreign looking, possibly Turkish influenced, suit of armour. Many of the authentic Elizabethan garments owned by a Theatre Company had been passed onto them, secondhand, by members of the nobility. Strict laws were in force about what materials and types of clothes could be worn by members of each social class laws which the actors were allowed to break onstage – so it would be immediately obvious to the Elizabethan audience that actors wearing particular types of clothes were playing people of particular backgrounds and types. Extensive make-up was

almost certainly used, particularly for the boys playing female parts and with dark make-up on the face and hands for actors playing "blackamoors" or "Turks". It is not known which was the first English History play, but early examples included Shakespeare's Henry VI (eventually a trilogy of plays) and Marlowe's Edward II. Originally English Tragedies and Comedies tended to be written in close imitation of Greek and Roman models and much was made of the Classical rules of writing plays rules which Renaissance writers took from Aristotle's Poetics and expanded upon. The first full length English Comedy, written in about 1553, was Ralph Roister Doister – written by Nicholas Udall, former headmaster of Eton – in which Ralph, a character based on the Roman Dramatist Plautus' stereotypical Braggart, pursues a widow who is betrothed to an absent sea captain, until the widow finally drives him off with the help of her maids armed with mops and pails. Gorboduc also influenced the later creation of a peculiarly English dramatic genre, not based on Classical examples, the Chronicle or History play which was neither Comedy nor Tragedy, but told the story of a genuine Historical period – usually the reign of a particular English Monarch. Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, for example, a bloodthirsty tale of murder and revenge, generally ignored the Classical rules and strongly influenced many subsequent Elizabethan plays including Shakespeare's early Titus Andronicus and his later Hamlet (it is even suspected that Thomas Kyd may have been the author of an early Hamlet play that existed before Shakespeare's). These men were incredulous and envious when subsequently confronted by less well educated playwrights such as Shakespeare, the son of a glover, who seems to have learned his skills as a member of the acting profession and became a writer without being educated in the great Universities, who became rich through his connection with the theatre while many of the better qualified University playwrights lived and died in poverty, given only a few pounds for each of their plays. Fortunately English playwrights increasingly rejected the restrictions of slavishly following Classical models and began to write Tragedies and Comedies in a much looser and more relaxed style. As time passed Marlowe, Shakespeare and other dramatists began to use blank verse in a much more flexible and inventive manner – allowing sentences to run from one line into the next and finish wherever in the line was necessary, breaking the blank verse rules when it suited them to allow extra syllables in the line or irregular stresses and pauses. Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists often used a mixture of blank verse and prose, usually giving the unstructured prose (following no poetical rules and without line endings) to their comical or rustic characters or those who for some other reason were considered more casual in their speech than the significant or serious characters who routinely spoke verse. The punishments for writers whose works were felt to be seditious or offensive could be extreme, including imprisonment, torture and mutilation – but in fact the Elizabethan Censors were more lenient than is sometimes suggested and did not come down heavily on many actors or dramatists during this period. The first full length English Tragedy was Gorboduc – written in 1561 by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville – which tells the story of a mythical English King in a style in imitation of the Roman Dramatist Seneca, complete with choruses and long rhetorical speeches. Blank verse was usually unrhymed (except for occasional couplets in significant places) and used ten syllables a line divided into five iambic feet of alternately unstressed and stressed syllables. The reason for choosing the play was that it showed the decline and fall of Richard II, a weak King closely connected to corrupt favourites, who was overthrown by a rebellion led by the Earl

of Bolingbroke who had the King murdered and took his crown. Death brought out a particular ingenuity in Elizabethan actors and they apparently used copious quantities of animal blood, fake heads and tables with holes in to stage decapitations (an illustration of an Elizabethan conjuring trick shows a table with two holes in it, one boy sitting hidden under the table with only his – apparently decapitated the table with his – head above it another lying on the top of apparently missing – head hidden belowi of this kind were almost certainly used on the Elizabethan stage). Death brought out a particular ingenuity in Elizabethan actors and they apparently used copious quantities of animal blood, fake heads and tables with holes in to stage decapitations (an illustration of an Elizabethan conjuring trick shows a table with two holes in it, one boy sitting hidden under the table with only his – apparently decapitated the table with his – head above it another lying on the top of apparently missing – head hidden belowi of this kind were almost certainly used on the Elizabethan stage). Elizabeth was excommunicated by the Pope who encouraged all Catholic Kings and subjects to work to assassinate Elizabeth and overthrow her regime. Another major scandal involved Shakespeare's Richard II, a performance of which was specially commissioned by followers of the Earl of Essex, who – unknown to the Players – were planning to stir up support in London for a rebellion against Elizabeth the following day. After the play had been performed in 1597, the players Pembroke's Men and the playwright Ben Jonson were arrested and imprisoned .while Thomas Nashe fled to Yarmouth