

Drama

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Drama In the 1580s Philip Sidney complained that English playwrights were ignoring the principles of drama; he meant the classical principles exemplified by the tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Plautus, Ben Jonson published his own plays in a grandiose format, and with a title (The Works of Benjamin Jonson), that invited comparison with the editions of these same dramatists. The prologue to the first play in this collection, *Every Man In His Humour*^{*}, announces that its author 'hath not so loved the stage, As he dare serve the ill customs of the age' Throughout its life, then, the theatre of Renaissance London was haunted by that of classical Rome - not simply as a source of plots and devices, but as a standard to which writers aspired, or by which they were condemned. Today, the Renaissance plays are themselves classics, canonized and edited for academic study. But of course they had no such status then: even the word 'drama' was not applied to English stage writing until after 1660. The early modern canon of drama was Latin. The relations between the two bodies of writing were shaped by this distinction. Classical plays were encountered as printed texts demanding close attention to their language; the modern repertoire, on the other hand, existed primarily in performance, and was published piecemeal and belatedly. So the opposition between Latin and English was also an opposition between drama (a branch of literature) and theatre (a kind of amusement). Moreover, classical texts belonged to their authors, whereas new English plays, as we have seen, belonged to the companies. Drama is located in the mind of the dramatist; theatre in the bodies of the players. This is also a question of class. Seneca and Plautus mostly remained on the page, but when they were performed, it was not in the playhouse, but in the

schoolroom, as part of a gentleman's education. It can be argued - it often is, in various terms - that in expressing this desire Jonson did not know what was good for him. Surely he was better off in the playhouse? As everyone knows, classicism imposed arbitrary restrictions on the resources of theatre: that the time and place of the action should not exceed one day and one city; that comedy and tragedy should not be mixed in the same play; that characters should conform to commonly held ideas of consistency; that violent deaths and the like should not be shown but reported by messengers. These regulations can fairly be extrapolated from Sidney and Jonson, and from their Latin sources; but in this country Jonson was virtually alone in taking them seriously. After all (this line of argument continues), the Elizabethans were heirs to a medieval tradition which had successfully ignored all such rules. *****Festivity***** Early modern England observed a complicated calendar of festive days. Some were religious like Easter, some seasonal like May Day, and some political like the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's accession. These festivals were unsummarizably various, not only because each occasion had its own distinctive customs, but also because they were celebrated by different communities. Despite this diversity it is possible to generalize about the structure and character of festivity, and its relation to theater. As we saw, drama was itself a seasonal diversion, Christmas festivities might well include plays. And beyond that drama responded to what was play like in festive practices. Several of the comedies are set around holidays. *The Shoemakers' Holiday* is a Shrove Tuesday play, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is a Lent-into-Easter play. Others do not represent festivals directly, but borrow their motifs. Festivity

most radically does to theater is to undermine the idea of mimesis. the proposition that drama imitates life entails a binary opposition , on the one hand there is real life , on the other hand the imitation of it . festive games, dances, masquerades and disorders confuse (mix) this opposition by failing to be either one or the other .