

THE ELIZABETHAN AGE – CHIARA DE STEFANIS – A.S. 2020/2021

SONNETS AND PROSE

The most common poetic form was **sonnet**, imported by Thomas Wyatt and by Earl of Surrey. It was used by Philip Sidney in his collection of poems *Astrophel and Stella*, by Edmund Spenser who published a collection of sonnets and by Shakespeare who wrote *Sonnets* that concerned universal themes and were rich in metaphors and conceits.

In the same age it was also used the **prose** that was expressed in many ways; the first prose writer was Thomas More with *Utopia*, where he wrote about an imaginary society on an imaginary island, with which he inaugurated the utopian literature. Also Philip Sidney wrote many works in prose, like “Defence of Poesie” that is an example of literary criticism. In these ages there was an important work of translation: authors translated foreign languages, like Italian, and religious books like the Bible too.

THE DRAMA AND THE THEATRES

It's the product of specific social, cultural and historical conditions. It flourished in **London**, a big city that was the centre of political, religious and civil power; it also was a busy harbour from where many ships left towards the New World and other countries. In London there were many artists and intellectuals that made it was a city of entertainment. In particular the Elizabethan entertainment industry gravitated around Southwark, a place where the strict rules of the city didn't apply. People chose to go to the **theatre**, originally called playhouse, to be entertained.

The first theatre in London was The Theatre (1576), in general theatres were **open-air structures** with the shape of a big amphitheatre and a square stage covered by a roof. They were 12 metres high, and were round or octagonal; around theatre walls there were 3 levels of galleries and this was where the higher classes sat. Poor people, called **groundlings**, stood around the stage and paid only 1 penny. Instead rich people sat on benches around the stage and paid 6 pence. The relationship between actors and audience was intimate.

Elizabethan drama was characterised by 3 elements: **playwrights**, **actors** and the **audience**. The audience was a mix of all the social strata, people went to the theatre also to meet other people and to socialise, they ate and drank, expressed their emotions, they wanted to see a play with strong feelings, metaphor, thrills and horror. Playwrights had to adapt the comedies to the public's taste, they usually had a modest background. The actors were only men because women weren't allowed to act, they were considered as vagabonds, so they had to organise themselves in companies under the protection of a rich person and this led to the creation of professional acting companies.

Due to the open-air spaces it was impossible to create artificial darkness and plays took place in daytime, so actors had to use the basic props. Theatre represented a **mix of tradition and innovation**. There was the mix of tragedy and comedy but also

the avoidance of the Aristotle's three unities (action, time, space) and so many plots and different places were put on stage; plays followed the rhythm of life; expressed feelings and avoided strict schemes.

MOST IMPORTANT PLAYWRIGHTS

One of the most important playwright was Christopher Marlowe, he wrote *Doctor Faustus*, a play standing between middle age and modern age: a mix of comic and tragic, with a clear avoidance of the Aristotle's unities and a fight between vice and virtue.

Playwrights used the genre of "revenge tragedies" , and this is why they took inspiration from Seneca and plays were set in catholic countries; these were characterised by the insistence on horrors and deaths, the theme of revenge, the role played by supernatural apparitions, the difficulty of language and the use of monologue. This genre was imported by Thomas Kyd with his work "The Spanish Tragedy".

The most important playwright was absolutely **William Shakespeare**. His rivals were **Ben Jonson** and **Christopher Marlowe**.