

Theater's Twilight: A Historicist Analysis of Dramatic Decline of English Drama

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Abstract

Decline of drama in mid-16th century is usually studied with a particular reference to the role of Puritanical opposition of theatre as if it was the sole major factor sealing the fate of drama after Shakespeare. This paper, however, contends that although the Puritans' anti-theatre ideas were certainly significant and influential but the decline of drama was actually fueled by a plethora of socio-historical, philosophical and aesthetic factors e.g. death of William Shakespeare, the British Civil Wars (1642-1651), the impact of the Great Plague of London, Great Fire of London, censorship especially Robert Walpole's the Licensing Act, opposition of Puritans as well as the lack of genius writers, that led to the sudden fall of English Drama early 17th century.

Keywords: Decline of drama, Theater's Twilight, British Civil Wars, socio-historical, Shakespeare

Introduction

While offering a bird's eye view of history of the English novel's emergence and gradual rise to pre-eminence in 18th century, Richter (2017) mentions how the novel came to occupy the literary landscape with the decline of English Drama and the total eclipse of epic later in 18th century despite its erstwhile symbolism of poetic accomplishment. (Griffin, 1982) The focus of his research since confined to the study of the novel, does not allow him to elaborate on the factors contributing to the precipitous decline of drama in England roughly three decades after Shakespeare's death in 1616. Contextualizing this significant literary event helps us grasp the wider historical and cultural background that shaped this era in order to

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properly comprehend this fall. Drama declined as a result of multiple factors including the loss of influential artists, the repression of theatrical activities, poor economic conditions, shift in public behavior and the emergence of alternative genres of literature.

Kavita (2021) offers a general overview of origin and development of drama followed by its decline in 16th century and eventual revival with John Osborne's plays. Her study lacks focus and is quite a sweeping account of all these disparate aspects of drama. She talks roughly about two factors responsible for the decline of drama; Shakespeare's contemporaries' inability to produce the kind of drama that spoke to the audiences earlier as well the adverse effects of censorship on theatre production. She fails to elaborate the other eventful socio-historical elements which allow us to accept the otherwise quite shockingly abrupt decline of drama.

McLaughlin's (2007) thesis includes a separate chapter on the exploration of anti-theatre movements simmering all along since the increasing popularity of drama even during the reign of Elizabeth. He has compiled a few interesting details about the Puritans' antagonism against theatre and suggests that their movement struck the final blow to the already crumbling drama industry. The current paper, however, argues that decline of drama was almost an historic inevitability even if the Puritans' voice could have been absent or politically powerless. The argument is fleshed out in great detail in the subsequent discussion.

Socio-historical Factors

The death of William Shakespeare in 1616 marks the end of the golden period of English theatre during the Elizabethan era. His extraordinary dramatic genius with his complex storylines, mastery of character portrayals, profound depiction of unfathomable human psyche and poetic touch not only attracted audience to the theatres but also inspired imitations or drama writing among other creative artists. Alongside other dramatists of the age, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd and Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's work represented the highest point of theatrical achievement. The death of these highly accomplished playwrights, the popularity of the Elizabethan theatre plummeted significantly as the later playwrights' inability to produce equally powerful plays resulted in the audiences' disappointment and their loss of intense interest in theatre.

Political instability: British Civil Wars

Popularity of drama convinced the administrators, playwrights and actors alike to arrange these performances in purpose-built theatres allowing them to make the business more profitable by controlling the entrance of the audiences and nullify the possibility of free show by the passers-by as they had experienced during their street/ outdoor performances. In consequence, one notices the emergence of commercial playhouses in mid-16th century one in 1567 and the second one in 1575 (Gurr, 2004). Noticing the mass popularity of theatre and its political influence on the public opinion, Queen Elizabeth I patronized and encouraged the patronage dramatic arts and to influence the portrayal of Queen and the monarchy in contemporary plays.

The Three British Civil Wars was an armed conflict arising from some fundamental political polarization in the three kingdoms; between Royalists (also Cavaliers) supporters of the monarchy of Charles I and Parliamentarians in England, Covenanters in Scotland, and Confederates in Ireland. The differences were rooted in longstanding disputes about religious freedom and how the three kingdoms should be governed. (Kavita, 2021) The wars between Royalists and Parliamentarians were not only a military struggle for power; it also reflects the difference in ideologies and vision for the future of England. As a digressive note, it must be added that usually the wars are referred to as English Civil War which an inaccurate appellation as these wars involved not only England but also the other two kingdoms Scotland and Ireland as indicated above.

One major impact of the Civil Wars on English drama was the closure of theatres. In 1642, as the tension between the Royalists and Parliamentarians escalated and turned violent, the English Parliament issued an order to close all theatres in London. To some extent, this act was influenced by Puritans who viewed theatre as a morally corrupt source of entertainment that distracted people from other productive activities. This closure of theatres was considered an emergency action but was eventually enforced for the next 16 years, till the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The closure of theatres necessitated discontinuation of staging of existing plays but their closure for a long period must have also betokened a gloomy prospect for the practitioners and discouraged the writing of new plays. Playwrights, actors and theatre owners found themselves jobless because they had lost their main source for income and had to look for vocations to earn a living.

The theatre industry suffered a heavy setback due to this continuous shutdown of theatres and ultimately causing a huge capital loss for erstwhile profitable theatre companies and sponsorship networks. This break not only caused the decline of modern drama but also disconnected playwrights from their audiences. The economic slump caused by the Civil Wars also played a part in the decline of drama. The war drained resources from the country, leading to the economic instability for the people of England, including those who were involved in theatre. The cost of war was massive both for the authorities and the masses; as it most significantly increased taxation and inflation. A lot of sponsors of the art, who were usually members of the privileged class high society, were financially unstable or had their own issues, reducing their ability to support the theatre.

Natural Calamities: The Great Plague of London

The mid-17th century was marked by a disastrous event that among other immediate severe effects on civil life, further impacted the decline of drama. The Great Plague of London (1665) was a massively destructive epidemic in the history of British causing heavy death toll and social chaos. In response to the epidemic, all theatres were shut down in June 1665 as a part of efforts to protect public from the disease and to safeguard their lives. This disease made people's lymph nodes swell, about 30% of those who got infected died within two weeks. The situation became even worse as it attacked the lungs and was super transmittable and everyone who got it died. The plague was caused by the bites of black rats that carried bacteria named "Yersinia pestis". The plague took the lives of around 100,000 people, which was about 20% of London's population and caused big social, economic and cultural changes. Many people in the theatre world like actors, playwrights and theatre staff were also the victims of plague. The death of these talented people made it difficult for theatre owners to start their work again ever after the epidemic was over. The plague changed people's life; scared of getting infected, they avoided crowded or public spaces including theatres. Those who survived often suffered traumas of epidemic and bad financial conditions, so the theatres just reopened in 1666 were again deserted. Big death toll meant fewer theatre fans to watch dramas even when it was finally over. The reduction in theatre fans caused less demand for plays.

Fire, Fire Everywhere: Great Fire of London

Hardly had people felt relieved after the ravages of the plague that the city of London was engulfed by Great Fire of London only the following year 1666 that worsened and compounded the people's miseries, catching them unawares. Samuel Pepys a Clerk to the Royal Navy who observed the fire firsthand kept a diary that has been well preserved, and John Evelyn a writer and gardener provide us with a first-hand detailed account of the fire in their diaries. A fire started in London on 2 September 1666, around 1 am from (Charles II's) baker, Thomas Farriner's bakery on Pudding Lane near London Bridge. A spark from one of his ovens probably started the fire which continued for just under five days, spreading across the city unchecked, causing widespread unprecedented destruction. The fire was mostly under control by Wednesday, 5 September 1666.

Houses in London were built from wood made mostly of oak timber with thatched roofs which meant they could catch fire easily. During the five days of The Great Fire an estimated 100,000 people were left homeless after the fire and so many fled the city, leading to many more deaths due to poverty and exposure to the cold. A large part of the city; including numerous public buildings, old St. Paul's Cathedral, 87 parish churches, The Royal Exchange, Guildhall and about 13,000 houses were destroyed. The fire damaged lots of theatre buildings. This multiplied the problems already raised by the plague by making things even worse for the masses in general and the theatre world in particular. The rebuilding of London became more important than the fixing of the theatres which delayed the comeback of theatre industry.

Politics vs. Theatre: Censorship

In England, during the 17th and 18th century, censorship was impacted by political, religious and moral factors. The government and the Church aimed to control public opinion in society and maintain social order, leading towards the censorship and restriction of content. During the Tudor era (1485-1603), the Revels office was established; an office having charge of supervision of the production and financing of plays. The Master of the Revels, an official was authorized to accept or reject plays according to the content they presented, as long as it was not regarded as hateful, unlawful or vulgar. In 1581 and 1603, Master of Revels was given the powers of licensing, censorship and fee-collection. Censorship became a means of preserving

religious and political authority during the Stuart era (1603-1714). Censorship was implemented by both King James-I and King Charles-I to ban plays that included the criticism of the monarchy or the Church in England.

Playwrights were now under the monitoring of the government which had an adverse impact on them when major censorship was implemented. The standard and diversity of theatre plays reduced as a result of numerous writers turning to less controversial themes. Playwrights started to restrict themselves and focus on safer and more traditional themes when they understood that discussing social or political issues in their plays could result in their plays being banned. The decreased audience for plays that were banned ultimately damaged the financial conditions of theatres since people viewed the illegal content to be less interesting. Theatre innovation also suffered due to censorship because the playwrights and theatre managers were scared to try out new styles or problematic content. A period of artistic paralysis during which the theatre lost a great deal of its spirit and uniqueness was brought on by the focus on safe and conventional productions.

Religious and ethical issues also had an influence on censorship. Moral advocates and Church supported the banning of plays that they felt promoted immorality. The focus on social stability and ethical standards led to the removal of content that tackled controversial or taboo topics, which restricted the range of theatrical shows. Censorship's limited atmosphere promoted a movement in cultural preferences towards alternative methods of entertainment. For example, the novel became an appreciated genre for exploring deeper into societal themes and complex characters in ways that were less restricted by censorship. Private readings and musical performances became popular as substitutes to the restricted limited theatres.

Licensing Act of 1737

In 18th century, a bill was passed on June 20, 1737 later known as the Licensing Act under the rule of Prime Minister Robert Walpole. The implementation of this Act brought an end to the Revels office and the authority of the Master of the Revels relegating the power of censorship directly to the Lord Chamberlain who had the licensing of London theatres and the censorship of stage plays throughout the United Kingdom. A major purpose of the Licensing Act was to manage and restrict the content of plays and to bring together the power of the government over the public performances. The Act limited the staging of plays to just licensed theatres.

Only the theatres with official legal protection which included the Theatre Royal, Dury Lane and the Covent Garden were permitted to stage plays which ultimately reduced the number of legal venues for drama performances. It was a systematic legal action to defeat difference of opinion at political level and prevent criticism of the government. As theatre was a powerful medium for political observation and plays often used satire and allegory that could challenge the people in the power. Prime Minister Walpole, facing rapidly increasing opposition and satire mostly from the theatre, considered this Act as a way to control the opinions of public and to maintain social stability. This Act also gave sense of understanding to broader social and moral aspects about the content of theatrical production. The plays that were found morally wrong or that questioned societal values were targeted for censorship. Henry Fielding was a popular playwright and satirist whose works mostly had sharp political opinions. His plays such as "Pasquin" (1736) and "The Historical Register for the Year 1736" (1737) were highly critical of the government and satirized political figures of that time. The latter representing Prime Minister Robert Walpole practically undisguised and mercilessly ridiculed was a definitive work that prodded Walpole to introduce and pass the Licensing Act. (Avery & Scouten, 1968)

The implementation of the said Act, was targeted at his Haymarket Playhouse and marks the sudden, silent and somehow willing end of Fielding's a decade-long dramatic career in London during which he had produced twenty-five plays. Lockwood (1987) offers elaborate discussion albeit largely speculative due to unavailability of conclusive evidence to develop a definitive argument about Fielding's sudden disappearance from theatre until Walpole's resignation in early 1742. He considers the possibility some kind of bargaining between the two; Fielding might have conceded to silence (although Jarvis (1946) many years before him had contended otherwise) by stopping the writing and production of plays against Walpole in exchange for some pecuniary gains for the playwright. Although he might be disappointed by the restrictions imposed on his work, Fielding had in fact failed to develop a lifelong love for playwriting. The Act only convinced him to disown it and realize his creative potential somewhere else and this is when he shifted his attention towards other forms of writing such as novel. His shift from drama to novel is represented by his success with works such as "Joseph Andrews" (1742) and "Tom Jones" (1749). The Licensing Act's influence expanded more than the decline of dramatic production. It further contributed cultural shifts in society and controlled forms of public expression. The authority of Lord Chamberlain

persisted until issuance of the Theatres Act 1968 abolishing censorship on British stage.

Anti-theatre Voices: Puritan Influence

McLaughlin (2007) discusses how Elizabeth I patronized the theatre and helped it flourish exponentially as a profitable industry, anti-theatre sentiment existed all along. Some of her followers had their reservations about theatrical productions and their promotion of immorality. The Puritans had already started a movement within the Church of England, aimed to purify the church and society from the moral and spiritual corruption. Among their core ideas was opposition to theatre for its wickedness and lavishness which they now disseminated using the print media. They considered that witnessing and performing dramas or plays in theatre are a "sinful" act and ethically wrong. Their opposition particularly during the Civil War and the Commonwealth era, resulted in the ban of theatrical performances. They also disappointed theatrical customs of that time, such as male actors representing female character by wearing female costumes, which they considered as a violation of natural and divine order. Their continued struggle eventually jolted the English Drama with a resounding blow when the Parliament passed an Ordinance to ban theatre activities in London in 1642. Puritans' social ideals were strictly enforced during the Interregnum period (January 30, 1649 - May 29, 1660) and whoever was found to violate the ban on plays faced severe consequences. Illegal and secret performances did happen but they were very rare and risky.

Puritanical opposition to theatre was, among others as discussed, indubitably a strong force to push drama down the hill. The Ordinance on stage plays, however, by the Parliament and subsequent stricter orders and actions against any kind of dramatic performances was in fact motivated by a fear of the emergence of a popular theatre nurturing political and religious radicalism in the masses. During the next two decades, theatre was closed and drama non-existent. From a highly profitable business it now faced imminent extinction.

Reopening of Theatres and Restoration Drama

The restoration of Charles II marked a significant turning point for the theatre. After spending years in exile in France which had by now become the arbiter of literary taste, the new king returned with a renewed approach towards the means of

entertainment. In 1660, theatres reopened signaling the resumption of dramatic performances. The drama produced then is now known as Restoration Drama. Although drama had received a new life under the patronage of Charles II but the moral character of society metamorphosed drastically. If the Puritans were rigid to impose their own version of Christian values and interpretation of the Bible; allowing no alternative perspectives, after the Restoration, out of grudge and ideological enmity the Puritans' moral ideals though logically genuine were also jettisoned and discarded. Hudson's (1913) brief remarks on the age offer us a window into a society under the kingship of a morally depraved Charles II; the society had adopted and cherished infidelity and profligacy. This moral laxity begot dissipation of earnestness of purpose contributing to loss of strong passion and which ultimately numbed the great creative energy that was necessary for the production of timeless art. The drama produced at the time was so gross that it justifiably received castigation in Jeremy Collier's (1650-1726) *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (1968). So, the Restoration comedy with its grossness offered a theatrical illustration and reinforcement of Puritanical objections levied against theatre. A realization of the problem and some moral regeneration could be seen by early 18th century and by the time great drama had become extinct.

On the other hand, restoration dramas had a unique style that focused on social satire, sexual fascination and comedy of manners. Notwithstanding the fact that the playwrights like John Dryden and William Congreve rose to popularity, their plays did not have the same lasting impact as those from the golden era. As time passed, viewer preferences and choices shifted. The restoration period's content mostly revolved around the comedy of manners but the earlier plays contained a large variety of styles and themes capturing the attention of the audience.

Conclusion

The decline of English Drama almost immediately after Elizabethan era has its roots in a complex nexus between political, socio-historical and aesthetic factors. Political unrest through British Civil Wars, natural calamities in the form of Plague and Fire of London, introduction of strict censorship legislation were among the reasons shaking the strong position of Drama and precipitated by the Puritanical opposition culminating in closure of theatre in 1642. The crown patronage as well as the subsequent remonstrance voices against theatre underscores its massive reach to

the public; it could not only shape people's views about the political system of the country but also their own moral, religious and social character. This public appeal of the theatre apart from its lucrative commercial gains strengthened the support from the patrons but also repelled the ant-theatre sentiments of the Puritans who were wary of its moral degenerative impact on the people. The closure of theatres and censorship acts, however, were rooted in a fear of theatre's cultivation and nurture of anti-government sentiments what Howard calls the "iconoclastic potential of the theater" (1994) sending alarming bells to the corrupt ministers like Robert Walpole who actually spearheaded the campaign of censorship as well other means to silence any unfavorable voices. In the meanwhile, another genre of literature albeit embryonic around that time, attracted the masses and furthered the already weakening status of Drama. Drama written during the Restoration period of British history lacked the aesthetic exuberance to appeal for the people to return to theatres.

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