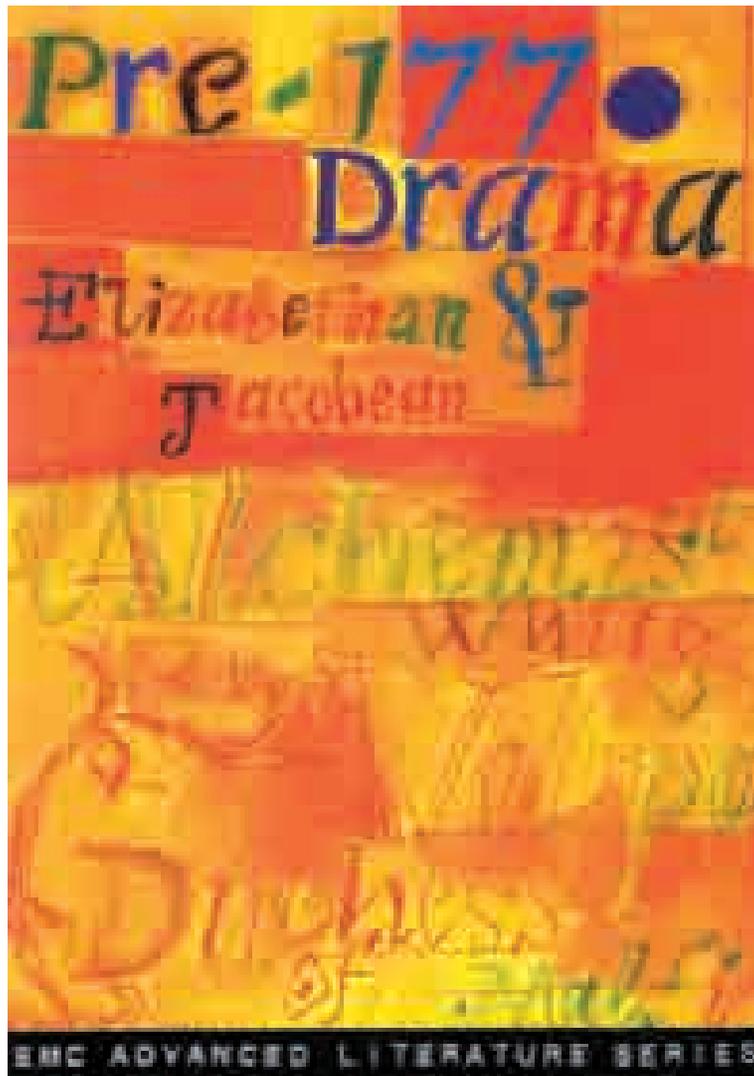


Class & Women from Pre-1770 Drama



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Pre-1770 Drama

Class in Renaissance drama

In this unit you will:

- learn about class and status in sixteenth and seventeenth century England
- consider the customary laws of inheritance and the consequences of these on the family and the society
- consider how these social issues are explored, challenged or confirmed in the plays of the period.

Twenty first century Britain – a classless society?

- Before going on to look at the social structure of sixteenth and seventeenth century England, debate the following statements about 'class' and status in twenty-first century Britain.
 - Class is as important in Britain today as it ever was.
 - Upper, middle and lower class no longer have any meaning; the society is divided according to money.
 - People enjoy finding out about the lives of the rich and famous – particularly glamorous celebrities like Posh Spice and David Beckham.
 - People have less respect for a self-made man like Richard Branson than for someone who has inherited his or her wealth and status.
 - It is still unusual to marry someone of a very different class from your own.

Pre-1770 drama – challenging the status quo?

- Read the following descriptions of plays written in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Consider the ways in which each challenges or undermines the hierarchies in the 'Elizabethan World Picture'.

1	The Duchess of Malfi secretly marries Antonio, her servant.
2	Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester uses his intelligence to trick his father into disinheriting his legitimate son, Edgar.
3	Florizel, the son of King Polixenes disguises himself in order to court a shepherd's daughter.
4	Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator, marries Othello, a Moorish general in the service of the state, without her father's consent and in secret.
5	Olivia, a countess, falls in love with Cesario, a young servant. She refuses to marry Duke Orsino.
6	Hamlet is told by the ghost of his father, the late king, that his brother, Claudius, murdered him. Claudius is now both king and married to Hamlet's mother (formerly his sister-in-law).

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- Now read and talk about the ways in which each of these plays ends. In each case, what does this suggest about whether the play accepts or challenges Elizabethan ideas about hierarchy?

1	The Duchess of Malfi is murdered.
2	The shepherd girl is revealed to be the daughter of King Leontes, abandoned by her father.
3	Desdemona is murdered. Othello commits suicide.
4	Cesario is revealed to be a woman of good birth, Viola. She had disguised herself as a male servant in order to try and find her twin brother, Sebastian, from whom she was separated in a shipwreck. Viola marries Duke Orsino; Sebastian marries Olivia.
5	Edmund's lies and deceptions are revealed. Edgar's loyalty and honesty is discovered. Edgar kills Edmund in a duel. Edgar is to be crowned King.
6	Claudius, Gertrude and Hamlet are all killed. Fortinbras, whose father was killed 30 years earlier in a duel with the old king, arrives to take the throne.

Elizabethan and Jacobean Britain – a changing society?

The following statements about class and social hierarchies are taken from sixteenth century writers and twentieth century historians.

- Read the statements and identify the contrasting opinions. To what extent is the social hierarchy of the 'Elizabethan World Picture' confirmed or challenged by these statements?

We in England divide our people commonlie into foure sorts ...

[Merchants] often change estate with gentlemen, as gentlemen do with them, by a mutual conversion of the one into the other ...

William Harrison, The Description of England, 1577

The souls of Emperors and Cobblers are all cast in one same mould. Considering the importance of princes' actions, and their weight, we persuade ourselves, they are brought forth by some as weighty causes: we are deceived; they are moved, stirred, and removed in their motions, by the same springs and wards that we are in ours.

Michel de Montaigne 'An Apologie for Raymond Sebond', trans. 1603

It is a commonplace to assert that sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Englishmen were deeply preoccupied with the problems of order and degree. In their most elevated discussions of the universe they envisaged a 'great chain of being' stretching down from the deity to the very elements, in which each creature, each created thing, had its appointed place. In their accounts of the 'tree of commonwealth' or the 'body politic', they presented society as an organism of functionally interdependent, though unequal, parts. Such accounts of society were at once an explanation of social inequality and a scheme of values. They portrayed society as it ought to be, providing a prescription for an

ideal harmony in social relations. The scheme of social order thus propounded was the conventional bombast of sermons and homilies, of proclamations and of preambles to statutes. That it was platitudinous is not to say that it was not employed with sincerity often enough, but even its most enthusiastic protagonists knew very well that it was an ideal, an aspiration.

In trying to describe society as it was, or rather as it seemed to them to be ... contemporary writers came down to earth more firmly. They invariably put forward a scheme of ranks or degrees, of hierarchically arranged social categories which were intended to simplify the complexity of reality and clearly distinguish the principal social groups ...

Keith Wrightson, English Society 1580-1680, 1982

A new nobility had been created: a nobility not of ancient lineage but of newly acquired wealth ... Social divisions blurred as middle-class land speculators married their children to indigents of noble birth, and the herald's office made a lucrative business of 'discovering' forgotten pedigrees and armorial bearings on old registers.

Lacey Baldwin Smith, The Horizon Book of the Elizabethan World, 1967

The right of inheritance and of entry into the ranks of nobility (duke, marquis, earl, viscount, baron or knight) was known as primogeniture. The right went to the first-born legitimate son. Younger sons often inherited nothing and married daughters of wealthy middle-class merchants in order to receive their dowry. This obviously increased social mobility in Elizabethan England.

adapted from Simon Trussler, Shakespearean Concepts, 1989

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Exploring class and status in your set play – the opening

- Work in small groups and organise the characters in your set play into appropriate social groups as they exist at the beginning of the play. Rank each character within the different groups. Represent your ideas as a diagram, showing which characters have most authority in the society. Annotate the diagram with your reasons for the decisions you have made. In another colour, suggest some of the ways in which this society might be challenged by the characters in the play.
- Present your diagram to the class and talk about the role each group plays and the ways in which they relate to each other.

The middle

- Use your diagram as a focus for exploring the way in which the social structure has shifted or been questioned by the middle of the play. Use the questions listed here as a starting point for talking about these changes.
 - Who has changed groups?
 - How have they achieved this? (Wit? Cunning? Deception? Disguise? Marriage?)
 - How have other characters reacted to this change?
 - What are the consequences in the middle section of the play?
 - What do you think will happen as a result of these challenges to the status quo?

The end

- Repeat this activity for the end of the play. Compare your grouping of the characters at the end of the play with the ones you completed for the beginning and middle.
- As a class, talk about the changing social order throughout your set play.

A mini-debate

Literary critics and audiences of pre-1770 drama continue to argue about whether the plays confirm an ideal view of a stable society or offer a challenge to the status quo. These positions are summed up in the two statements below.

- In pairs, take it in turns to argue each position, in relation to the play you are studying.
 1. Even though the middles of the plays show the society inverted or disordered, by the end of the plays social order has been restored.
 2. The way in which the social order is restored at the end of the play draws attention to the fact that this is a fiction. The restoration of order is less memorable than the challenges which have taken place in the middle of the plays.