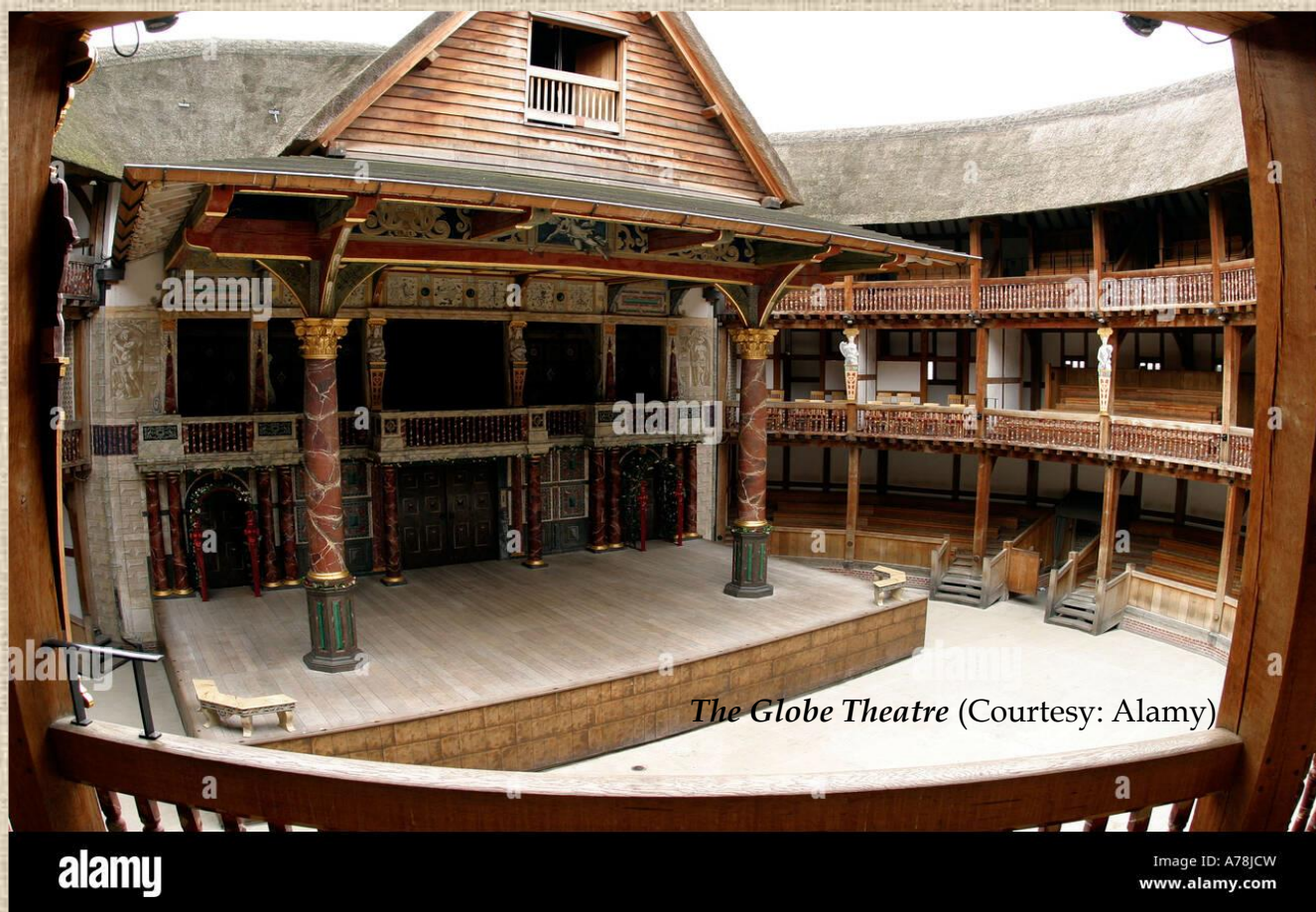


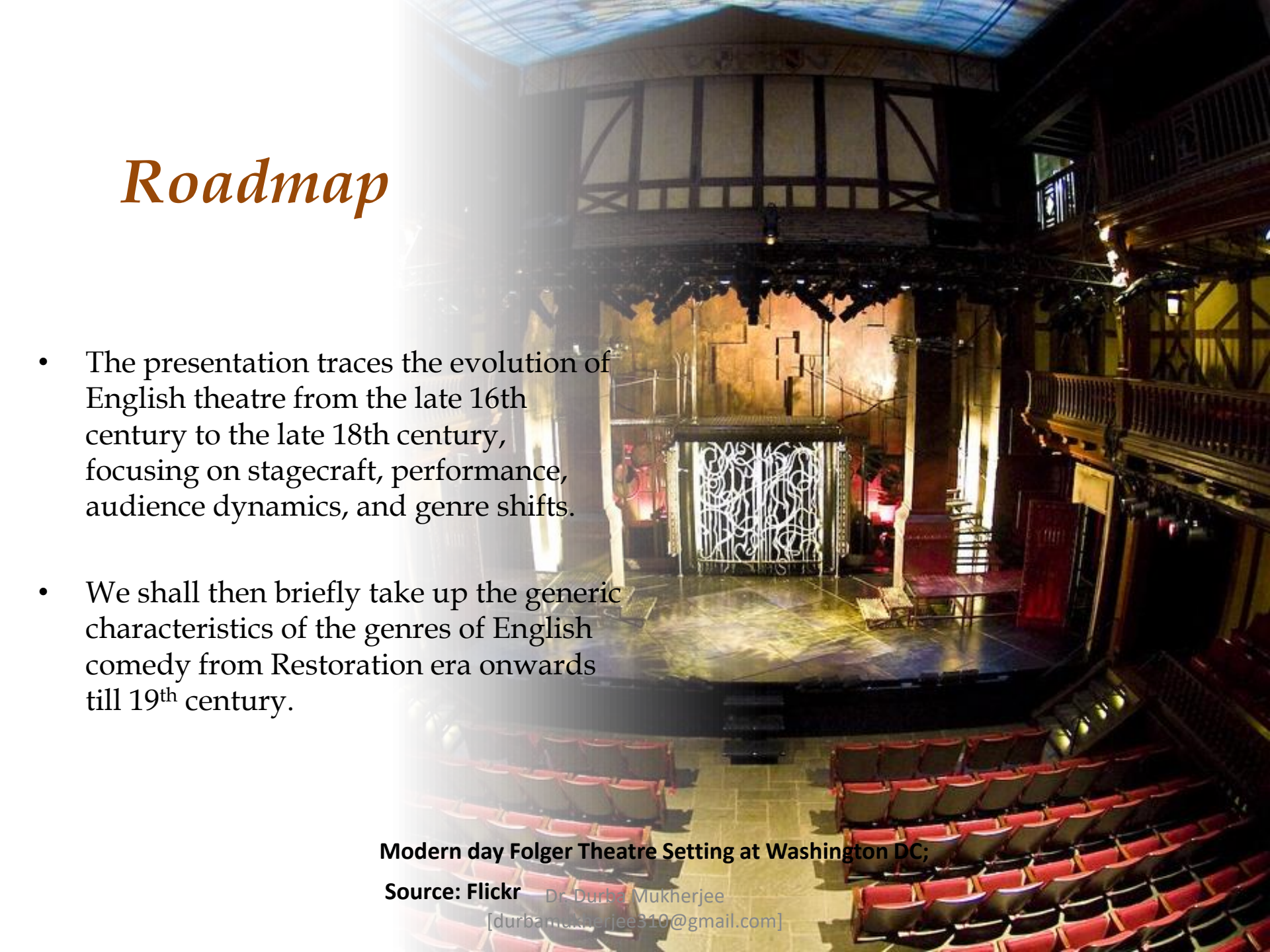


The Globe Theatre (Courtesy: Alamy)

The English Theatre: Shakespeare to Sentimental Comedy (1590–1780)

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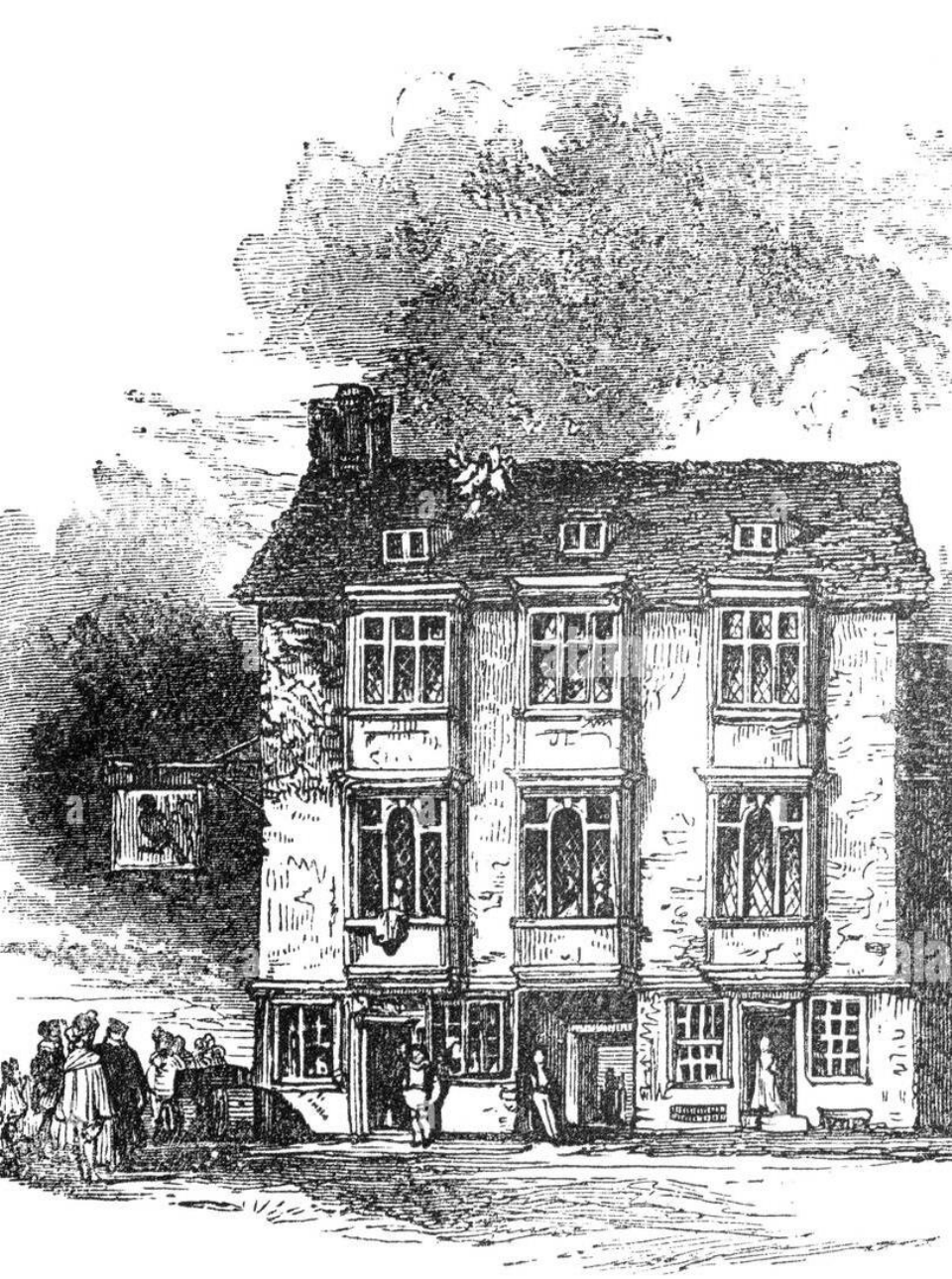
Roadmap

A photograph of the interior of the Folger Theatre in Washington DC. The view is from the audience's perspective, looking towards the stage. The stage is a raised platform with a dark floor, featuring a large, ornate, white, lattice-like structure in the center. The stage is flanked by red curtains and has a balcony above it. The audience seating consists of rows of red upholstered chairs. The theatre's architecture is highly detailed, with dark wood paneling and a large, arched ceiling. The lighting is warm and focused on the stage.

- The presentation traces the evolution of English theatre from the late 16th century to the late 18th century, focusing on stagecraft, performance, audience dynamics, and genre shifts.
- We shall then briefly take up the generic characteristics of the genres of English comedy from Restoration era onwards till 19th century.

Modern day Folger Theatre Setting at Washington DC;

Source: Flickr — Dr. Durba Mukherjee
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***The Falcon Inn* in Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames, London, England**

It was a house of great business and the place from whence coaches went to all parts of Kent, Surrey and Sussex. The area was the entertainment centre of London during the Tudor and Stewart periods, every form of artistic pursuit, and vice, could be found here. Theatres such as the Rose, Swan, Globe and Hope sprang up and playwrights of the stature of Marlowe and Shakespeare became celebrities, and the Falcon became the daily resort of Shakespeare and his dramatic companions.



- Elizabethan stage had three-tier gallery overlooking the yard.
- The aristocrats had their own balconies or private box/chambers as seating arrangements.
- Groundlings, on the other hand, paid a penny to stand and watch the play. They were often very close to the actors and played an interactive role in the theatrical experience.

The Rose was the first of the Bankside theatres south of the River Thames. It was located on the north side of Maiden Lane (now Park Street), west of Southwark Bridge.

This playhouse was opened by Philip Henslowe in 1587 and staged plays until 1604, being dismantled soon after. The Rose was home to the Admiral's Men, who removed to Henslowe's and actor Edward Alleyn's new theatre, the Fortune, near the modern-day Barbican area.



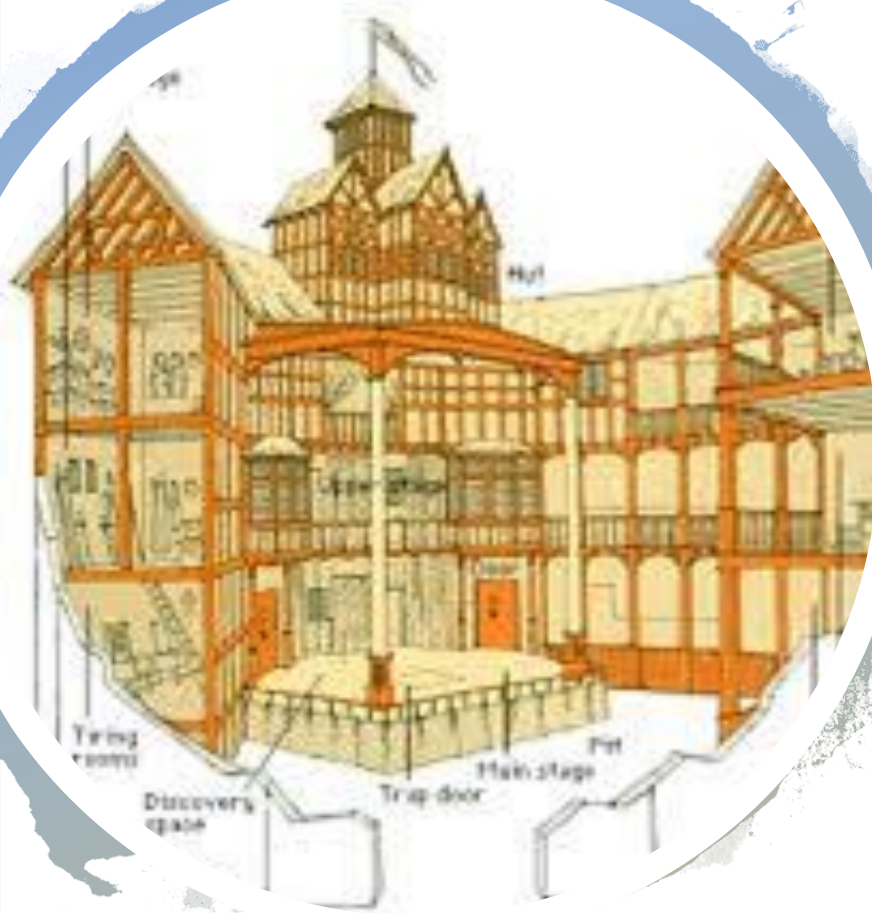
Elizabethan Stagecraft – Thrust Stage & Groundlings

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Groundlings in the pit at the Globe, standing close to the stage.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Elizabethan Era (1558-1603)



- William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson are considered among the most influential and celebrated playwrights of the era. Other notable figures include Thomas Kyd, John Lyly, Francis Beaumont, and Thomas Middleton

- This period was characterized by a strong sense of national pride, exploration, and a belief in the order of the world. Plays often featured:

- **Historical narratives:** Plays like Shakespeare's Henry IV, Henry V, and Julius Caesar explored historical events and figures.

- **Classical influences:** Shakespeare and others drew inspiration from Greek and Roman playwrights, focusing on heroic figures and grand narratives.

- **Love and romance:** Plays like Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream explored themes of love, passion, and the complexities of human relationships.

- **Idealized heroes and villains:** Characters were often presented in clear-cut roles, with heroes embodying virtue and villains embodying evil.

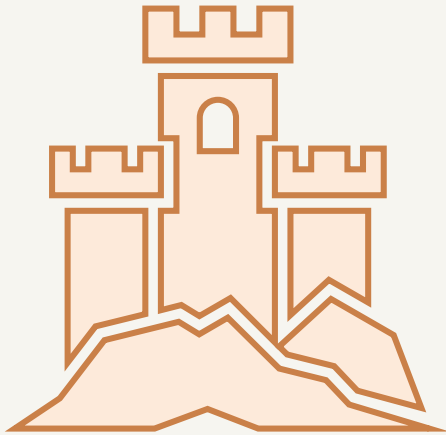
Image Source: <https://elizabethanenglandlife.com/architecture-of-elizabethan-theatres.html>

Jacobean & Caroline Stage



- The Jacobean era (1603-1625) followed the Elizabethan era. Notable playwrights like Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and others continued to create, and theaters like the Globe thrived. The Jacobean stage saw a continuation of the rich dramatic traditions established in the Elizabethan era, but with some shifts in focus and themes.
- Following the Jacobean era, the Caroline stage (1625-1649) saw a continuation of the theatrical scene, but with some notable changes. The reign of Charles I coincided with a period of political and social unrest, which eventually led to the English Civil War. This had an impact on the theater, with some plays reflecting the anxieties and tensions of the time. The period saw a shift in patronage, with the monarchy playing a more prominent role, and a rise in the popularity of courtly and masque-style dramas.

Recurrent Themes and Motifs in the Dramas of the Three Ages



- Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline playwrights delved into the nature of kingship itself, exploring whether a ruler should be guided by virtue, divine right, or personal ambition. Plays sometimes questioned the role of the monarch and the impact of their decisions on society.
- All three periods explored the concept of power, both its legitimacy and abuse. Plays often featured monarchs, queens, and courtiers grappling with issues of authority, succession, and the pressures of leadership.
- A recurring theme was the potential for corruption within royal families and the dangers of unchecked ambition. Many plays featured characters who were driven by a desire for power, leading to betrayal, violence, and the downfall of entire royal houses. Royal characters were often portrayed through the lens of love, with the focus on love affairs and marriages often reflecting the political landscape and the power dynamics within the royal court.
- These plays were as much meant for entertainment as commentary on the social and political realities of the time, often critiquing the monarchy and the aristocracy

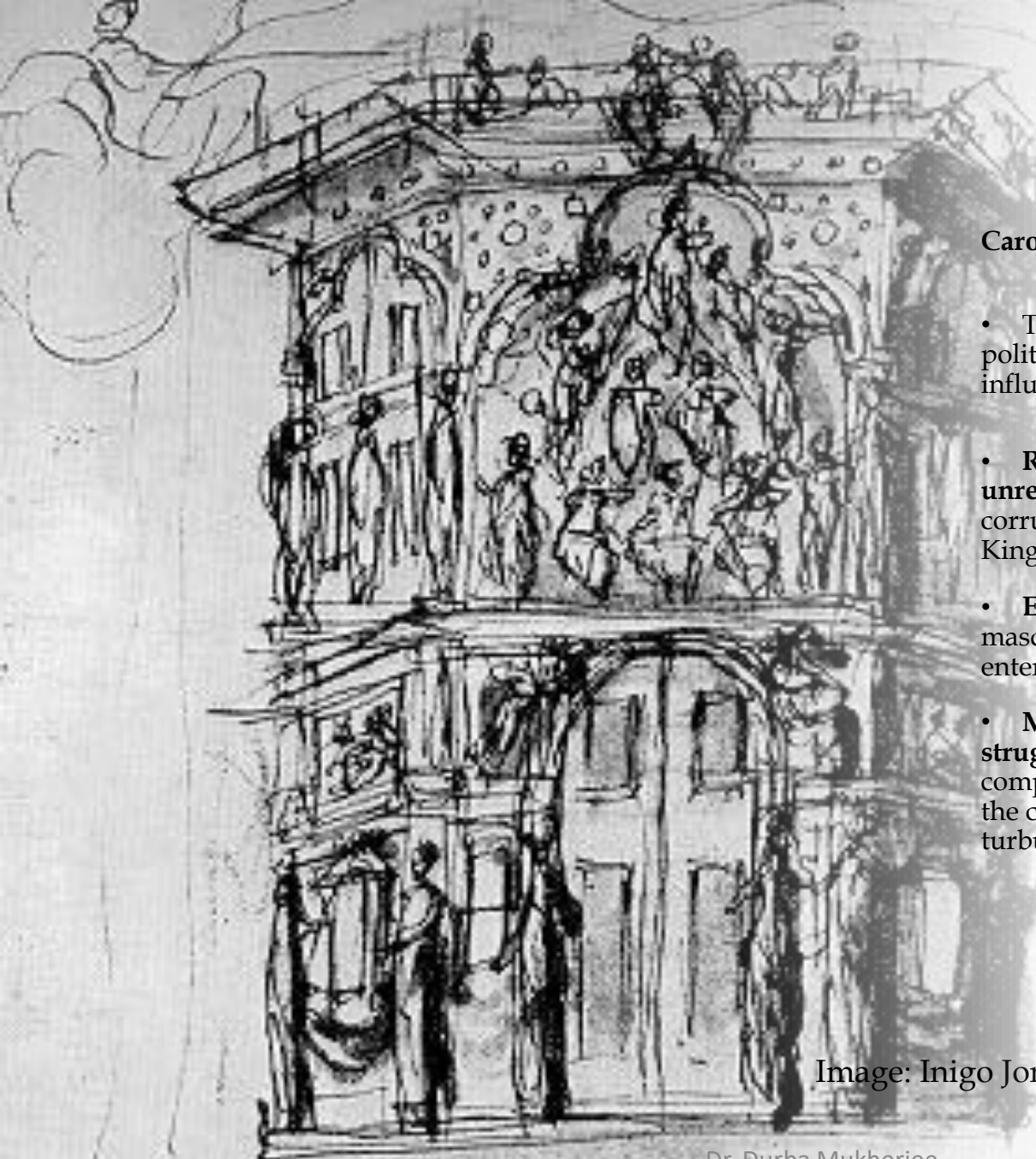


Jacobean Era (1603-1625)

- Although primarily associated with the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare continued to write during the Jacobean period, producing some of his most well-known plays, including *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*. Other significant figures emerged, including John Webster (especially known for dark and macabre plots), Thomas Middleton, Ben Jonson (Jonson's showcased his satirical wit and exploration of human folly in plays like *Every Man in His Humour* and *Volpone*), George Chapman, John Fletcher, Francis Beaumont, etc.
- The death of Queen Elizabeth and the ascension of King James I brought a period of political and social change, reflected in the theatre and the plays began to explore:
- **Darker themes:** Ambition, revenge, murder, and betrayal became more prominent.
- **Psychological realism:** Characters were more complex and multifaceted, with a greater focus on their inner thoughts and motivations.
- **Moral ambiguity:** Plays began to question traditional notions of right and wrong, with characters often caught in morally ambiguous situations.
- **Individual struggles:** The focus shifted from grand historical narratives to the personal struggles of individuals.

Image Source: https://elizabethanenglandlife.com/Jacobean-Era/jacobean-tragedies.html#google_vignette

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Caroline Era (1625-1642):

- This period was marked by escalating political and religious tensions, which influenced the theatre. Plays often:
- **Reflected social and political unrest:** Plays explored themes of power, corruption, and the conflict between the King and Parliament.
- **Experimented with new forms:** The masque, a spectacle-filled court entertainment, gained popularity.
- **Maintained a focus on individual struggles:** Plays continued to explore the complexities of human relationships and the challenges faced by individuals in a turbulent society.

Image: Inigo Jones, *House of Fame*



Image Source: Jefferson Public Radio

The Closure of Theatres in England

- Theatres of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras were frequently closed down because of health scares and civil unrest – although these closure orders were frequently flouted.
- Claire Cochrane, professor of theatre studies at the University of Worcester, says: “The current situation is almost unprecedented. The only comparison is really the plague outbreaks in the 16th century and the early 17th century – and then the really big outbreak in 1665 to 1666. In each case, the public theatres were closed to protect the public from infection.
- By the early 17th century, the frequency of outbreaks prompted the Privy Council to issue an order that theatres should close when the death toll rose above 30 a week. In the decade between 1603 and 1613 “the total theatrical closures due to the plague accumulated to a grand total of 78 months,” says William Baker in his book *William Shakespeare*.
- After the theatres reopened in Southwark in April 1604, Neil MacGregor (former British Museum director) says: “Actors and audiences must have noticed that many of the regulars, especially among the groundlings, were no longer in their usual place.” That sentiment would equally apply to the subsequent outbreaks of the disease up until after the last major plague in England in 1665, when the theatres were shut again.
- See: <https://operahollandpark.com/news/chorus-magazine-from-pandemics-to-puritans-when-theatre-shut-down-through-history-and-how-it-recovered/>

The Closure of Theatres in England

- However, the other major closure of the 17th century is seen in 1642, when the Puritan-led parliament ordered the indefinite closure of all London theatres, citing “times of humiliation” and “stage-plays representative of lascivious mirth and levity”.

- Trevor R Griffiths (Society for Theatre Research) says: “The Puritans had been quite active late in the 16th century as well as the 17th century. They were always trying to get the theatres closed on moral and economic grounds. Plays were performed in the daylight and their apprentices would slope off work and ‘lose their souls’. But the big one was in 1642 when they closed the theatres because they could... It was a toxic anti-entertainment environment.”

- Since this coincided with the start of the English Civil War, the banning of public entertainment may have been more about preventing riots from breaking out in the febrile political climate, rather than the actual content of the plays. [...] To get through this period of repression, many venues continued to host ‘illegal’ performances. Others tried to convince parliament to overturn the order – one group of leading actors unsuccessfully petitioned parliament to reopen the theatres in 1643, reassuring MPs that “we have purged our stages of all obscene and scurrilous jests”.

- Puritan parliament demolished the Globe Theatre and introduced stricter official closure orders elsewhere in 1647 and 1648 – which introduced fines for spectators and called for playhouses to be pulled down.

- Bulstrode Whitelocke’s *Historical Memorials* note that in 1649 players were arrested by troopers, stripped and taken to prison. There were also reports of soldiers storming on to stages to stop performances. That year soldiers pulled down parts of the Fortune Playhouse, which never reopened, and then in 1655, the Blackfriars Theatre was demolished.



The Burning of Globe

Image Source: <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-globe-theatre/>



Restoration Theatre – Proscenium Arch & Boxes

With the Restoration, theatre moved indoors. Proscenium Arches, box seating, and the presence of actresses marked a shift in theatrical aesthetics.

Image: FlowVella

PLAYHOUSE.



Listen to:

Timothy Drake

- <https://youtu.be/DNjZwRGm07M>

Ian Finley

- <https://youtu.be/I1zm4eSHoRE>

Image Source:

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-theatre>

The Duke's Theatre in Dorset Gardens.

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With the Restoration era accommodating theatres again, the genres, comedy of humour and comedy of manners flourished on English stage.

Read:

HR Blackwell *A Study of the Moral Tone of Restoration Comedy*

https://scholarship.richmond.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/masters-theses/article/1097/&path_info=1955ma_blackwellherbert.pdf



Image Source: FlowVella

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What is Comedy of Humours?

- **Historical Context:** from late 16th – early 17th century

- Emerged during the Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods.
- Influenced by classical Roman comedy and the medieval theory of bodily "humours" determining personality.

- **Key Features:**

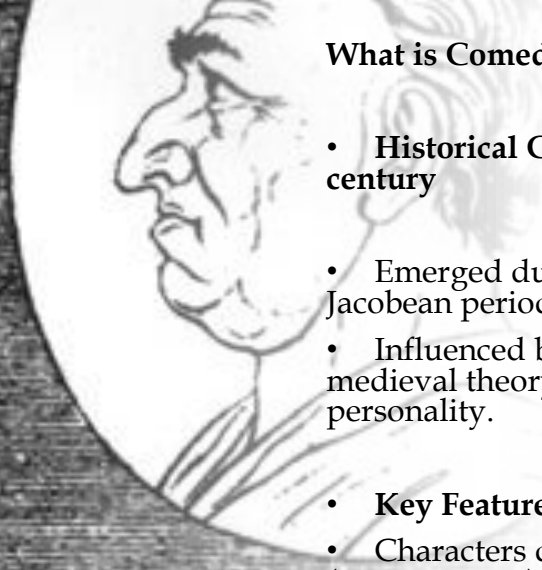
- Characters dominated by a single *humour* (temperament): blood (sanguine), phlegm (phlegmatic), yellow bile (choleric), black bile (melancholic).
- Satirical and moralistic tone.
- Social correction through ridicule.
- Plots are often thin; the focus is on character-driven satire.

- **Key Playwright:**

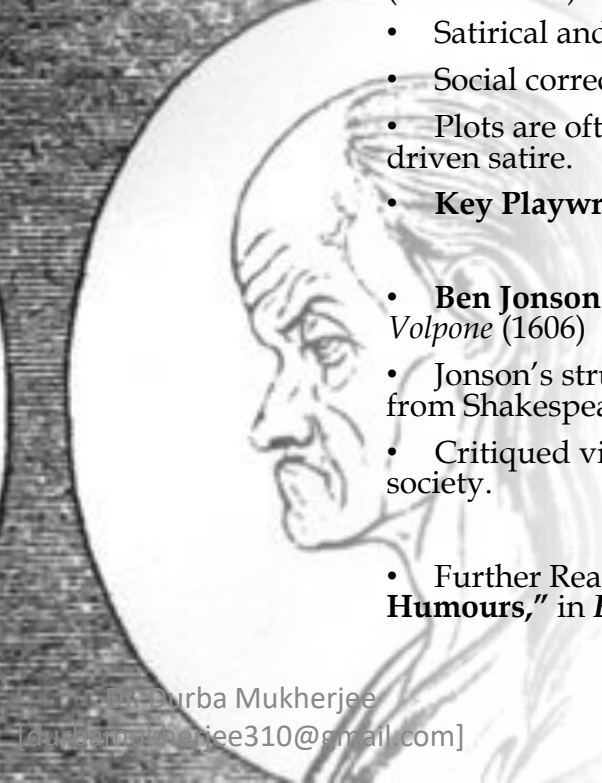
- **Ben Jonson:** *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), *Volpone* (1606)
- Jonson's structured, formal style set him apart from Shakespeare's romantic comedies.
- Critiqued vice and folly in contemporary London society.
- Further Reading: **Palmer, John.** "The Comedy of Humours," in *Ben Jonson*.



Sanguine



Melancholic



Comedy of Manners

- **Historical Context: Restoration Period – Late 17th Century**
- Flourished after the Restoration of Charles II (1660), when theatres reopened after the Puritan ban.
- Influenced by French theatre (especially Molière) and courtly culture.
- **Key Features:**
- Sharp, witty dialogue and repartee.
- Satire of aristocratic manners, sexual intrigue, and marriage market.
- Stock characters: fops, rakes, witty heroines, cuckolded husbands.
- City-centered (usually London high society).
- Morality is often flouted; wit is celebrated.
- **Key Playwrights and Plays:**
- **William Congreve:** *The Way of the World* (1700)
- **William Wycherley:** *The Country Wife* (1675)
- **George Etherege:** *The Man of Mode* (1676)
- **Significance:**
- Language and verbal wit were prized above plot.
- Criticized for immorality but later praised for its elegance and sophistication.

Sentimental Comedy

- **Historical Context: Early to Mid-18th Century**
 - A reaction against the perceived immorality of Restoration comedy.
 - Aligned with Enlightenment ideals and growing middle-class values.
 - **Key Features:**
 - Emphasis on morality, virtue, and domestic respectability.
 - Characters were idealized, virtuous, and emotionally expressive.
 - Aim: to evoke tears and moral reflection rather than laughter.
 - Conflict often between virtue and vice, resolved through poetic justice.
 - Didactic in tone.
 - **Key Playwrights and Plays:**
 - **Richard Steele:** *The Conscious Lovers* (1722)
 - **Colley Cibber:** *Love's Last Shift* (1696)
 - **Significance:**
 - Shifted theatre toward sentimentalism and respectability.
 - Criticized later for lack of realism and dramatic interest.
-



Image Source: <https://www.reviewsgate.co.uk/reviews-archive/the-importance-of-being-earnest-by-oscare-wilde-the-rose-theatre-kingston-upon-thames-tp-12-november-2022-2-stars-william-russell>

Anti-Sentimental Comedy

- **Historical Context: Late 18th Century – 19th Century**
- Reaction to the excesses of sentimental comedy.
- Coincides with the rise of Romanticism and renewed interest in wit and satire.

Key Features:

- Return to laughter, irony, and the ridiculous.
- Morality is present, but conveyed through humor, not tears.
- Revives elements of Restoration wit with greater sensitivity to audience morality.
- Characters are more rounded and realistically flawed

Key Playwrights and Plays:

- **Oliver Goldsmith:** *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773)
- **Richard Brinsley Sheridan:** *The Rivals* (1775), *The School for Scandal* (1777)
- **Oscar Wilde's Contribution (Late 19th Century):**
- **Play:** *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)
- **Features:** Satirical, paradoxical, elegantly farcical, exposes the absurdities of Victorian earnestness.
- Wilde's plays are often seen as the culmination of the anti-sentimental tradition, mixing comedy of manners with refined wit.

Significance:

- Balanced social critique with entertainment.
- Wilde's style combines the best of all previous comic traditions with a modern, aesthetic sensibility.

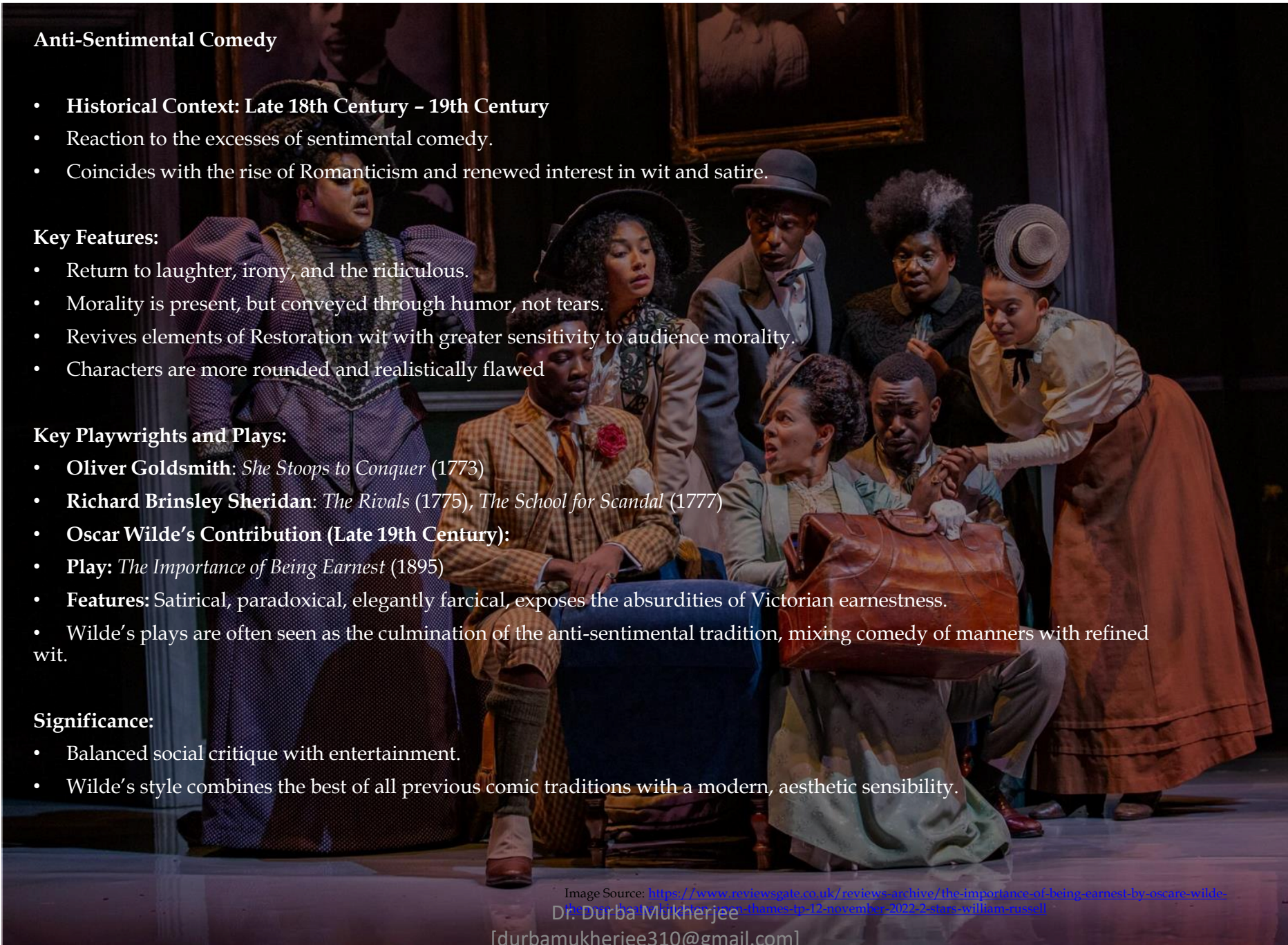


Image Source: <https://www.reviewsgate.co.uk/reviews/archive/the-importance-of-being-earnest-by-oscar-wilde>

Dr: Durba Mukherjee [dams-12-november-2023-1-star-william-russell]

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Summing Up

From open-air playhouses with thrust stages and groundlings to ornate indoor theatres with seated audiences, from themes of power and regal lives to those of middling aristocrats, English theatre evolved greatly between 1590 and 1780. The evolution reflects broader shifts in politics, taste, and the role of drama in society.

Thank You

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