

the better poems is *The Dream of the Rood* (the rood is Christ's cross.) This is among the best of all Old English poems.

Old English lyrics⁷ include *Deor's Complaint*, *The Husband's Message*, *The Wanderer* and *The Wife's Complaint*. Deor is a singer who has lost his lord's favour. So he complains, but tries to comfort himself by remembering other sorrows of the world. Of each one he says 'That passed over; this may do so also.'

There are many other poems in Old English. One of the better ones is a late poem called *The Battle of Maldon*. This battle was fought against the Danes in 991 and probably the poem was written soon after that. It has been highly praised for the words of courage which the leader uses:

hige sceal the heardra heorte the cenre
mod sceal the mare the ure maegen lytlath
her lith ure ealdor eall forheawen
god on greote a maeg gnornian
se the nu fram this wigplegan wendan thenceth.
*The mind must be the firmer, the heart must be the braver, the
courage must be the greater, as our strength grows less. Here lies
our lord all cut to pieces, the good man on the ground. If anyone
thinks now to turn away from this war-play, may he be unhappy
for ever after.*

In general it is fairly safe to say that Old English prose⁸ came later than Old English verse; but there was some early prose. The oldest *Laws* were written at the beginning of the seventh century. Some of these are interesting. If you split a man's ear, you had to pay 30 shillings. These *Laws* were not literature, and better sentences were written towards the end of the seventh century.

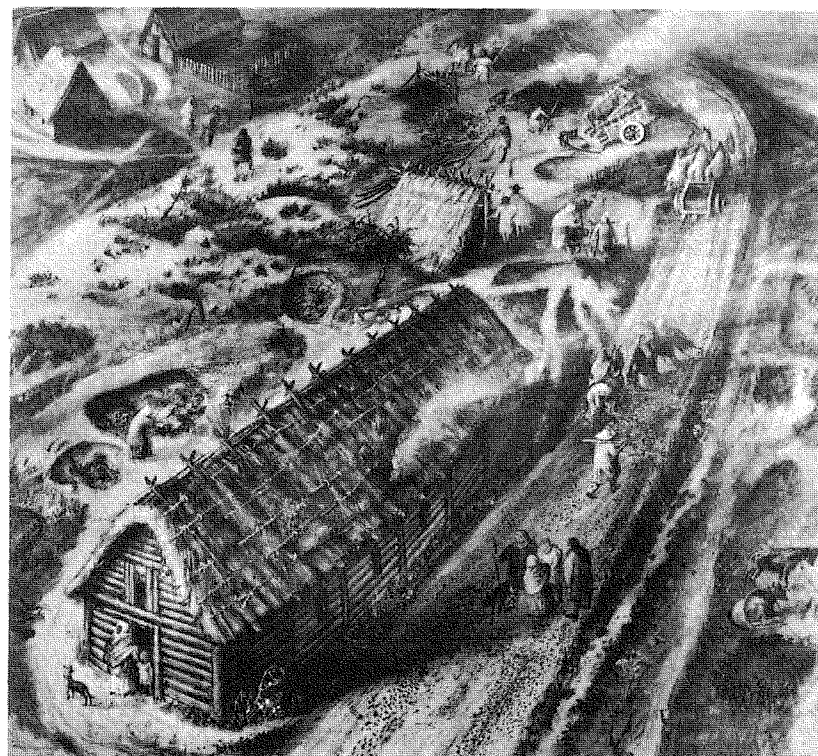
The most interesting piece of prose is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, an early history of the country. There are, in fact, several chronicles, belonging to different cities. No doubt KING ALFRED (849-901) had a great influence on this work. He probably brought the different writings into some kind of order. He also translated a number of

⁷ *lyric*, a poem – originally one meant to be sung – which expresses the poet's thoughts and feelings.

⁸ *prose*, the ordinary written language, not specially controlled like verse.

Latin books into Old English, so that his people could read them. He brought back learning to England and improved the education of his people.

Another important writer of prose was AELFRIC. His works, such as the *Homilies*⁹ (990-4) and *Lives of Saints*¹⁰ (993-6), were mostly religious. He wrote out in Old English the meaning of the first seven books of the Bible. His prose style¹¹ is the best in Old English, and he uses alliteration to join his sentences together.

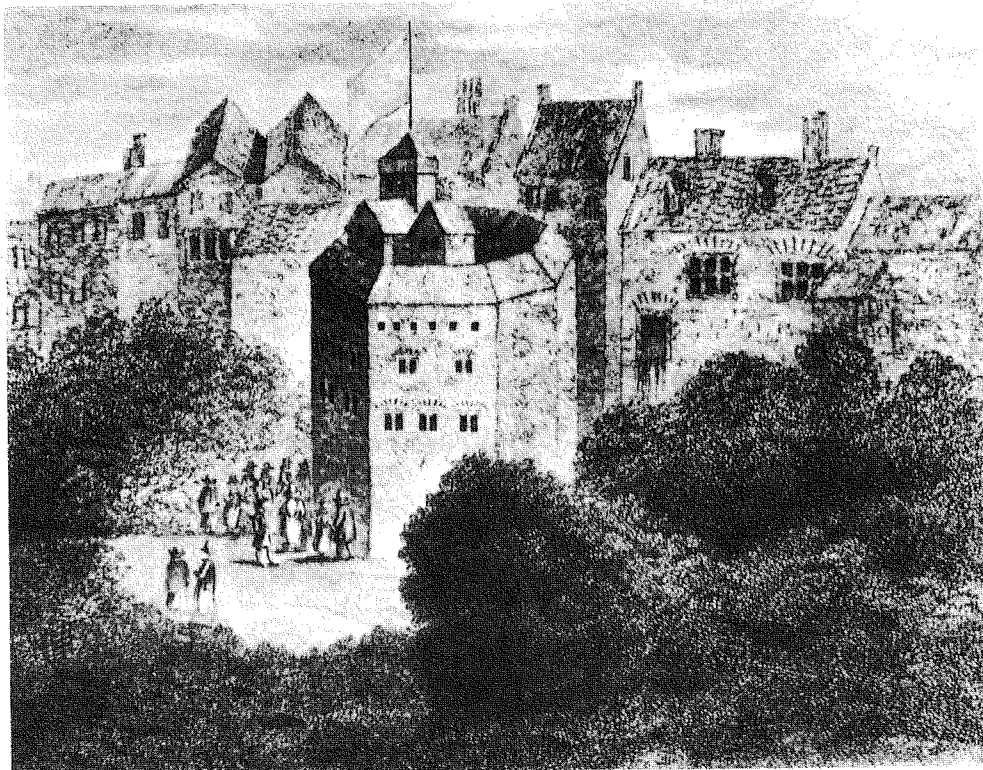


A model of a late Saxon village

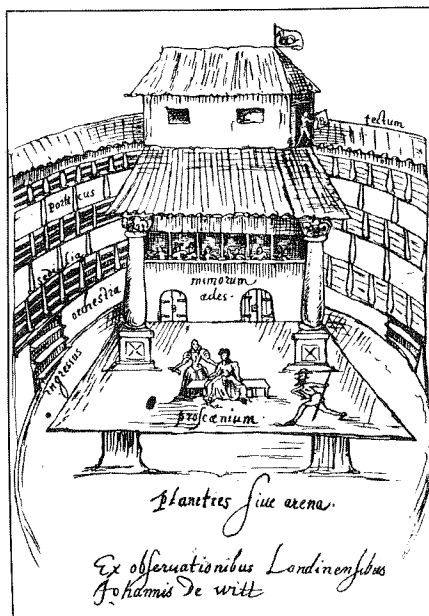
⁹ *Homily*, religious talk.

¹⁰ *Saint*, holy man.

¹¹ *style*, manner of writing; one writer's special way of using language.



The Globe Theatre in Southwark where many of Shakespeare's plays were produced



The inside of an Elizabethan theatre, the Swan Theatre in London, 1596

Chapter Four

Elizabethan drama

The chief literary glory of the great Elizabethan age was its drama, but even before it began several plays appeared which showed that a great development had taken place. They are not very good plays, but in general the comedies are better than the tragedies.¹

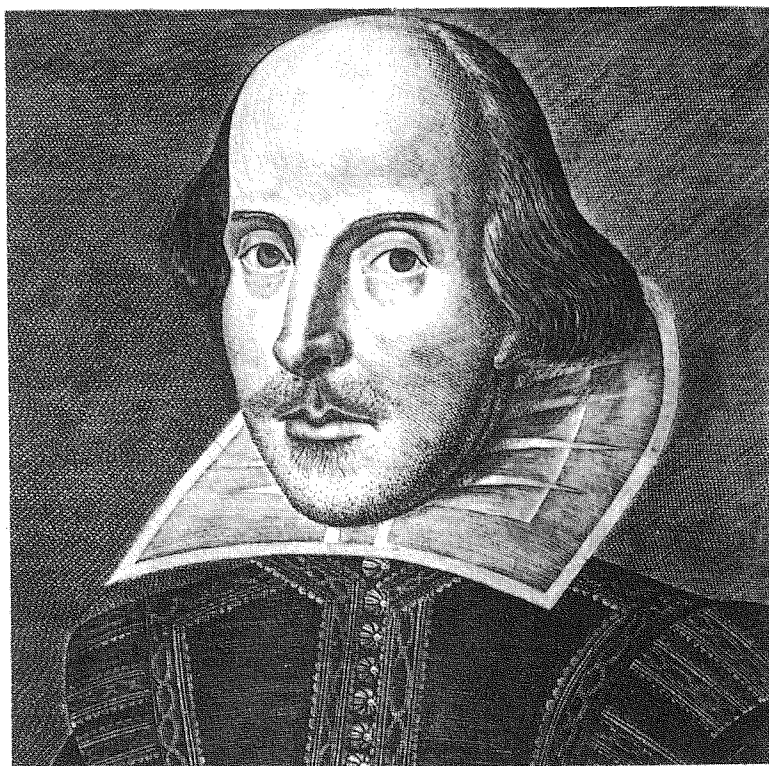
The first regular English comedy was *Ralph Roister Doister* (1553?) by NICHOLAS UDALL, headmaster of Westminster School, who probably wrote it for his boys to act. It is in rough verse and contains the sort of humour² that may be found among country people. Another comedy was *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, acted at Cambridge University in 1566, also in rough verse. It is about the loss and the finding of a needle with which Gammer Gurton mends clothes. Quarrels, broken heads, and a drinking song are important parts of it.

Lyly's prose comedy *Campaspe* and his allegorical play *Endimion* are an improvement on this. They were performed in front of Queen Elizabeth, probably by boy actors. These boys, known as 'Children of Paul's', no doubt caused a lot of fun when they played the parts of great men such as Alexander the Great, or the philosopher,³ Diogenes.

¹ *tragedy*, a very sad event (adj. *tragic*); a *tragedy* is a play with an unhappy ending, usually written in fine language and concerned with the fate of great men.

² *humour*, the way of seeing things which, when expressed in words or actions, makes other people smile or laugh.

³ *philosopher*, a man learned in *philosophy*, the study of reason and of the causes and real nature of things and events.



A picture of William Shakespeare from the title page of an early edition of his plays published in 1623

The order in which the plays of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE were written is uncertain. In fact, we know very little about his life. He was born and educated at Stratford-on-Avon, married Anne Hathaway in 1582, and later went to London, where he worked in a theatre. It is known that he was an actor and dramatist by 1592.

Shakespeare's earliest work is probably seen in certain historical plays. Perhaps he began his work as a dramatist by improving the work of other writers; the three plays which tell the story of *Henry the Sixth* may be an example of this. In *Richard the Third* (1593?) and the later *Richard the Second* (1595?) we see Shakespeare gradually discovering his powers and mastering his art. In the smooth blank verse of *Richard the Third*, the sense usually ends with the line:

Oh, I have passed a miserable night,
So full of ugly sights, of ghastly^A dreams,
That, as I am a Christian faithful man,
I would not spend another such a night
Though 't were to buy a world of happy days.

^A terrible

In *Richard the Second* there is rather more freedom. Although the line usually ends at a natural pause, there are times when the sense pushes through from one line to the next:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings ...
All murdered; for within the hollow crown
That rounds^A the mortal^B temples^C of a king
Keeps Death his court

^A surrounds ^B having only a man's life ^C side of the head

The rhythm of the blank verse is still quite strictly observed; Shakespeare has not yet developed the master's freedom which brings such freshness and power to his later verse plays; but the start is here.

Romeo and Juliet (1594-5) is the first of Shakespeare's great tragedies. The plot of this story of pure and tragic love is known in all parts of the civilized world. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet are necessary: their families are enemies, and death is the only way out of their hopeless situation. The tragedy is deeply sad and moving, but without the shock of the terrible tragedies that followed later.

The first of the comedies was probably *A Comedy of Errors* (1592-3?); its plot depends on the likeness of twins⁷ and the likeness of their twin servants, with the resulting confusion. The order of the early comedies after this may be *The Taming of the Shrew*⁸, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*. The real step forward comes with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6), which shows Shakespeare's growing power in comedy. The different stories of

⁷ twins, two children born at the same time to the same parents.

⁸ shrew, noisy and troublesome woman.