

# History (theatrical genre)

**History** is one of the three main genres in Western theatre alongside tragedy and comedy, although it originated, in its modern form, thousands of years later than the other primary genres.<sup>[1]</sup> For this reason, it is often treated as a subset of tragedy.<sup>[2]</sup> A play in this genre is known as a **history play** and is based on a historical narrative, often set in the medieval or early modern past. History emerged as a distinct genre from tragedy in Renaissance England.<sup>[3]</sup> The best known examples of the genre are the history plays written by William Shakespeare, whose plays still serve to define the genre. History plays also appear elsewhere in British and Western literature, such as Thomas Heywood's *Edward IV*, Schiller's *Mary Stuart* or the Dutch genre *Gijsbrecht van Aemstel*.



A scene from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, Act II, Scene 4. Falstaff offers a false account of a skirmish between himself and eleven assailants.

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## Precursors

Plays with some connection to historic narratives date to the beginnings of Athenian theatre. For one, although many early Greek plays covered subjects that modern audiences consider myth (rather than history), the Greeks did not make such a distinction, incorporating their stories of their gods into the same overarching narrative that included stories of their kings.<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, the earliest surviving work of theatre, *The Persians* records an event that was entirely historical, even under the modern understanding of history.<sup>[5]</sup> A key difference between *The Persians* and a history play in the modern sense is the incorporation of supernatural elements into the narrative of the Salamis. Additionally, it primarily dramatizes the Persian reaction to the battle, information that would have been at best a secondary concern for the Greek historian. Thus, although it concerns a verifiable historic event, it differs



Room 17, the Nereid Monument at the British Museum, London. An actress performs a play in front of the monument

# Tragedy

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**Tragedy** (from the Greek: τραγῳδία, *tragōidia*<sup>[a]</sup>) is a genre of drama based on human suffering and, mainly, the terrible or sorrowful events that befall a main character.<sup>[2]</sup> Traditionally, the intention of tragedy is to invoke an accompanying catharsis, or a "pain [that] awakens pleasure", for the audience.<sup>[3][4]</sup> While many cultures have developed forms that provoke this paradoxical response, the term *tragedy* often refers to a specific tradition of drama that has played a unique and important role historically in the self-definition of Western civilization.<sup>[3][5]</sup> That tradition has been multiple and discontinuous, yet the term has often been used to invoke a powerful effect of cultural identity and historical continuity—"the Greeks and the Elizabethans, in one cultural form; Hellenes and Christians, in a common activity," as Raymond Williams puts it.<sup>[6]</sup>

From its origins in the theatre of ancient Greece 2500 years ago, from which there survives only a fraction of the work of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, as well as many fragments from other poets, and the later Roman tragedies of Seneca; through its singular articulations in the works of Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Jean Racine, and Friedrich Schiller to the more recent naturalistic tragedy of Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg; Samuel Beckett's modernist meditations on death, loss and suffering; Heiner Müller postmodernist reworkings of the tragic canon, tragedy has remained an important site of cultural experimentation, negotiation, struggle, and change.<sup>[7][8]</sup> A long line of philosophers—which includes Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Voltaire, Hume, Diderot, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin,<sup>[9]</sup> Camus, Lacan, and Deleuze<sup>[10]</sup>—have analysed, speculated upon, and criticised the genre.<sup>[11][12][13]</sup>

In the wake of Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BCE), tragedy has been used to make genre distinctions, whether at the scale of poetry in general (where the tragic divides against epic and lyric) or at the scale of the drama (where tragedy is opposed to comedy). In the modern era, tragedy has also been defined against drama, melodrama, the tragicomic, and epic theatre.<sup>[13][14][15]</sup> Drama, in the narrow sense, cuts across the traditional division between comedy and tragedy in an anti- or a-generic deterritorialisation from the mid-19th century onwards. Both Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal define their epic theatre projects (non-Aristotelian drama and Theatre of the Oppressed, respectively) against models of tragedy. Taxidou, however, reads epic theatre as an incorporation of tragic functions and its treatments of mourning and speculation.<sup>[8]</sup>

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