

UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA

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FACULTY: EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT: ARTS EDUCATION (ENGLISH)

COURSE: ELS 140 (INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA)

**TOPIC: DISCUSS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIEVAL
AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA**

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The Medieval period s are the period in European history from the collapse of Roman civilization in the 5th century AD to the period of the Renaissance (variously interpreted as beginning in the 13th, 14th, or 15th century, depending on the region of Europe and on other factors). English Renaissance drama grew out of the established Medieval tradition of the mystery and morality plays. These public spectacles focused on religious subjects and were generally enacted by either choristers and monks, or a town's tradesmen (as later seen lovingly memorialized by Shakespeare's 'mechanicals' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). The origin of Medieval drama, rising in almost total independence from the Greek and Roman theatrical tradition, could be characterised by a paradox: its 'cradle' is the 'empty grave'. Liturgical drama slowly moved out of the church-building into the church-yard, then to the market-place and the streets and other convenient and busy areas of the town: drama gradually became 'secular' and 'profane'.

The sixteenth century witnessed an explosion in the dramatic arts, with new styles of theatre emerging. Theatre in the middle ages was quite unlike the theatre of Shakespeare's day. Folk plays, or 'mummings', about heroes like St George, battles and dragons, treated secular themes, but much other medieval drama had a strong religious ethos. Medieval mystery plays, for example, dramatised Biblical events, while morality plays allegorised the human struggle to choose between vice

and virtue. Drama could be associated with Christian feast days, and was not performed in permanent theatres, but in public or private buildings, in open spaces like churchyards, on temporary structures like 'scaffolds' and pageant wagons, or in the street. Plays were often of composite or anonymous authorship, and some plays, like the mystery plays and the mummings, were performed not by professional actors but by ordinary townsfolk.

During and after the Reformation, the drama began to change. Genres like tragedy, comedy and satire replaced the mystery and morality plays of the middle ages. Playwrights experimented with forms borrowed from classical authors, studying the tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Terence and Plautus. Plots and characters were taken from a range of sources. Shakespeare, for example, read medieval chronicles, classical drama and poetry, narratives of travel and the colonisation of the New World, and the romances and legends of earlier centuries, mining them for material he could recycle into dramatic form. In this period, the identity of the individual playwright became important, and dramatists like Kyd, Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson were developing their own distinctive writing styles.

New themes appeared as well. Love between men and women was a theme adaptable either to comedy, or to tragedies such as Othello or Antony and Cleopatra. History and politics were also of great interest in an age of strong rulers, Elizabeth I and James VI and I. Ideas about the power of monarchs and the burdens and dangers of kingship were explored in history plays, or in tragedies like King Lear. Jacobean revenge drama examined not only the ethics but also the psychology of revenge and aggression. The shift in focus from religious to humanist values led to the creation of the flawed hero, embodied in characters like Hamlet, Lear and Othello, and the Machiavellian villain, as for example Iago or Edmund.

As it expanded and gained prominence, the drama required spaces of its own. Theatres like Burbage's Theatre and the Globe were built in London, reflecting the new status of and interest in dramatic performance. In their turn, the theatres created a demand for new plays to be performed in them, and this helped support the careers of the playwrights. The appearance of the theatres and the existence of professional acting companies (composed, until the latter half of the

seventeenth century, only of men and boys), showed that plays, players and playwrights had become an established part of the contemporary scene.

The Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement which bridges the gap between the middle ages and modern history. The English renaissance dates from the late 15th to the early 17th century. The introduction of the printing press was a major event in this period which led to the flourish of literature. Renaissance drama was mainly influenced by the ideas of Renaissance art, politics, and religion; in addition, it was also heavily influenced by Greek and Roman literature.

The renaissance writers explored religious and social themes in their work; the religious themes were often explored with a completely different approach than the medieval writers. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* are some examples for this theme. William Shakespeare is one of the most popular examples of Renaissance writers. His writing was influenced by Greek tragedy, historical and social issues.

Whereas Medieval dramas were essentially amateurish endeavors in which clergy or various trade guilds participated, the Renaissance theater was composed of professional actors, among whom were those who specialized in tragic roles and others in comic roles. These actors were not members of a guild, a requirement for workers, so they placed themselves under the patronage of royalty; in this way, they would then be considered servants and, therefore, be allowed to perform.

Renaissance drama, centered in England, evolved out of the morality and mystery plays of the Medieval era. While these earlier plays attempted to teach a lesson and were often performed by monks or tradesmen, the Renaissance dramas moved toward entertainment. Renaissance drama developed around the 15th century and was at first often performed as short plays at court or in the homes of nobles. The playwrights of the era, such as Shakespeare and Marlowe, were not intellectuals and wrote to entertain rather than to instruct.

The subjects of Renaissance plays often included comedy, and some, such as Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (1515), also included political satire. The early plays of

the era also included history and set the stage (literally) for the later history plays of Shakespeare and other playwrights.