

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIEVAL DRAMA AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA  
The age of Shakespeare was an exciting one in which to be a dramatist. 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 townfolk.

During and after the Reformation, the drama began to change. Genres like tragedy, comedy and satire replaced contemporary 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.

English Renaissance drama grew out of the established Medieval tradition of the mystery and

morality plays (see Medieval English Drama). 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* ).

At the end of the fifteenth century, a new type of play appeared. These short plays and revels were performed at noble households and at court, especially at holiday times. These short entertainments, called "Interludes ", started the move away from the didactic nature of the earlier plays toward purely secular plays, and often added more comedy than was present in the medieval predecessors. Since most of these holiday revels were not documented and play texts have disappeared and been destroyed, the actual dating of the transition is difficult. The first extant purely secular play, Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrez*, was performed at the household of Cardinal Morton, where the young Thomas More was serving as a page. Early Tudor interludes soon grew more elaborate, incorporating music and dance, and some, especially those by John Heywood, were heavily influenced by French farce.

Not only were plays shifting emphasis from teaching to entertaining, they were also slowly changing focus from the religious towards the political. John Skelton's

*Magnyfycence* (1515), for example, while on the face of it resembling the medieval allegory plays with its characters of Virtues and Vices, was a political satire against Cardinal Wolsey .

*Magnyfycence* was so incendiary that Skelton had to move into the sanctuary of Westminster to escape the wrath of Wolsey.

The first history plays were written in the 1530's, the most notable of which was John Bale's

*King Johan* . While it considered matters of morality and religion, these were handled in the light of the Reformation. These plays set the precedent of presenting history in the dramatic medium and laid the foundation for what would later be elevated by

Marlowe and Shakespeare into the English History Play, or Chronicle Play, in the latter part of the century.

Not only was the Reformation taking hold in England, but the winds of Classical Humanism were sweeping in from the Continent. Interest grew in the classics and the plays of classical antiquity, especially in the universities. Latin texts were being

"Englysshed" and Latin poetry and plays began to be adapted into English plays. In 1553, a schoolmaster named

Nicholas Udall wrote an English comedy titled "Ralph Roister Doister" based on the traditional Latin comedies of Plautus and Terence. The play was the first to introduce the Latin character type miles gloriosus ("braggart soldier") into English plays, honed to perfection later by Shakespeare in the character of Falstaff. Around the same time at Cambridge, the comedy "Gammer Gurton's Needle", possibly by William Stevens of Christ's College, was amusing the students. It paid closer attention to the structure of the Latin plays and was the first to adopt the five-act division.

Writers were also developing English tragedies for the first time, influenced by Greek and Latin writers. Among the first forays into English tragedy were Richard Edwards' Damon and Pythias (1564) and John Pickering's New Interlude of Vice Containing the History of Horestes (1567). The most influential writer of classical tragedies, however, was the Roman playwright Seneca, whose works were translated into English by Jasper Heywood, son of playwright John Heywood, in 1589. Seneca's plays incorporated rhetorical speeches, blood and violence, and often ghosts; components which were to figure prominently in both Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.

The first prominent English tragedy in the Senecan mould was

Gorboduc (1561), written by two lawyers, Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, at the Inns of Court (schools of law). The play is also important as the first English play in blank verse. Blank verse, non-rhyming lines in iambic pentameter, was introduced into English literature by sonneteers Wyatt and Surrey in the 1530's. Its use in a work of dramatic literature paved the way for "Marlowe's mighty line" and the exquisite poetry of Shakespeare's dramatic verse. With a new ruler on the throne,

Queen Elizabeth I, who enjoyed and encouraged the theatrical arts, the stage was set for the body of dramatic literature we today call Elizabethan Drama.