

## **DISCUSS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIEVAL DRAMA AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA**

Medieval theatre refers to theatrical performance in the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and the beginning of the Renaissance in approximately the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Medieval Theatre covers all drama produced in Europe over that thousand-year period and refers to a variety of genres, including liturgical drama, mystery plays, morality plays, farces and masques. Beginning with Hrosvitha of Gandersheim in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Medieval drama was for the most part very religious and moral in its themes, staging and traditions.

In its origin again, the Medieval drama was unlike the drama of the Greeks, in that the germ of it was religious, and that it was slowly elaborated from what was at first only a casual accompaniment of public worship.

The fall of the Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century also signified the fall of theatre. Drama was banned and theatres were closed. The church felt theatre, as they knew it during the Roman Empire, was barbaric and evil. How ironic is it that the very institution which banned drama can be credited for bringing it back.

During this time period, church services were held in Latin, which was not understood by the majority of the congregation. Most people could not read and had no experience with The Bible or Bible stories. Dealing with an illiterate and pagan audience, the church slowly began dramatizing The Bible as a way to give religious instruction to their congregation. Short dramatic readings turned into performing Bible stories, which turned into full blown performances outside the church.

Three types of plays emerge over time: Mystery, Miracle and Morality. The text of the play changes from Latin to English as they are performed and produced by local trade guilds, instead of the clergy. Over time, the plays move away from the influence of the church. Though the themes were still religious, and the content still monitored by the church, the plays themselves

become more secular. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century the plays were mainly out of the church's control.

Medieval drama is known for its highly stylized character and action, its verse dialogue and its religious themes. Drama developed roughly from the 10<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century, peaking in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the authors were anonymous and there are very few surviving texts. As the plays moved away from the church they took on more and more the attitude of the common people. Humour found its way into the storytelling. Contemporary language and references were liberally mixed into ancient events.

The term Renaissance is used to describe a period of great intellectual and artistic achievements. Renaissance is a French word which means "rebirth". The Renaissance period, therefore, means the period of cultural rebirth. It was a period that marked the rediscovery of past heritage, an age which epitomized in the rediscovery of Greek and Roman civilizations.

The Renaissance age is marked with a number of inventions – the invention of printing, the establishment of universities, and the fall of Constantinople which caused scholars of Classical literature to spread all over Europe. The invention of the printing press made it possible for Classical literature to be printed and taken to Western Europe.

For dramatic literature, the year 1349 and the production of *Philologia* by Petrarch indicate the beginning of the Renaissance age. Preceding Petrarch is the greatest Medieval poet, Dante, whose Divine Comedy championed an avalanche of advanced ideas on the physical aspects of earth, heaven, and hell. The Renaissance age was explosive, diverse, created a host of outrageously different individuals each straining for effect.

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, dramatized Biblical events, while morality plays allegorized 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 colonization 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.