

DISCUSS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIEVAL DRAMA AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA.

Introduction

The drama of Renaissance England was truly remarkable and not just because William Shakespeare wrote during that era. Among his colleagues as dramatists were Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, and John Webster, all of whom wrote plays of lasting greatness. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and *Edward II*; Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*; Jonson's *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*; Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Women Beware Women*; and Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, to name only some of their accomplishments, are plays deserving of serious comparison with the best of Shakespeare. Then, too, the era produced such brilliant plays as Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*, Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, Philip Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, and John Ford's *The Broken Heart*. Still other dramatists flourished, the most important of whom, such as John Lyly, Robert Greene, George Peele, and George Chapman, appear in the bibliographical lists below. All this happened within a span of roughly forty years, from the late 1580s to about 1630. Shakespeare, then, was not an isolated phenomenon; he thrived upon the intellectual excitement of the period, the extraordinary success of a popular theater able to accommodate large and eager audiences, the innovative growth of the English language, and the expanding consciousness of the English as a nation of people rediscovering their potential for cultural innovation. Today, Shakespeare is too often read outside of this context. The present bibliography explores the dimensions of an achievement in dramatic art the likes of which the world has seldom seen. Indeed, the phenomenal success of theater during the English Renaissance asks the question "Why did it occur then, and in that place?" The present entry is devoted to this remarkable achievement.

The Transition from Medieval to 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 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.

Theatre's Transition in Europe

The theatre's transition from the medieval to the Renaissance was more readily apparent in England than in Italy or France ... in those countries, the shift from medievalism to Neoclassicism / Renaissance seemed much more abrupt . We can see much more apparent gradual changes – with the English theatre showing characteristics of medievalism and the Renaissance simultaneously, and occurring over a couple centuries.

The Renaissance did not seem to have much of an influence till the late 15th century (1400's) because of wars and internal strife.

Influences on Elizabethan Drama:

The Renaissance / Neoclassical was less binding than in the rest of Europe. The classics gradually went to England, and some of the early English Renaissance plays reflect that influence. Ralph Roister Doister – by Nicholas Udall, a headmaster at Eton Academy (1505-1556).

Plot – about a boastful coward -- Indebted to Plautus's The Braggart Warrior – foolishness of boastful coward and his courtship of a widow Advanced dramatic construction.

Gorbuduc – Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton – 1561 – the "first English Tragedy" – with a "political" statement to make (about leaving the order of succession of the throne unknown – support for Elizabeth's reign) -- Queen Elizabeth attended.

Medievalism to Elizabethan:

1. Religious and political controversies.

Henry VIII, Mary Queen of Scots, Puritans,

Elizabeth became queen in 1558, died 1603. She outlawed religious drama (her father was Henry VIII, who in 1534 separated from the Catholic Church to form the Anglican Church, or Church of England, with the English monarch as the head of the church – Catholic / Protestant disputes followed and were rampant, and Elizabeth the Queen wanted no religious dissension) – therefore, there was a rapid development of secular drama as a result.

In 1588, the Spanish Armada was defeated (ironically partly because of the weather); and thus there was a time of peace, domestic calm (?) and the gradual supremacy of English, rather than Spanish, influence as a major world power.

2. Medieval Influences: dramas and interludes

Before, during, and after Elizabethan theatre – a sometimes bizarre mixture of classics and native drama (of "sophisticated" and "simple" theatre).

3. Acting became a legal profession in the 1570's.

The English theatre was directly under the control of the government. Acting companies had to have a license, requiring the patronage of a noble. Provincial troupes were deprived of legal status, so theatre was concentrated around London.

The merchant class disliked theatre (most were part of growing Puritan population), while the aristocracy liked it.

Till 1608, theatre buildings were illegal in the city limits of London, the center of theatre, so theatres were built outside of the city limits.

The first – by James Burbage, head of the first important troupe, the Earl of Leicester's Men, licensed in 1574 – called "The Theatre."

Despite opposition, by 1580, two companies or more were playing around London.

University Wits

Acting companies needed new plays. Some of these new plays came from The University Wits – an informal group of scholars applying classical standards to the needs of a vigorous contemporary stage.

- Robert Green (1558-1592)

- Thomas Kyd (1558-1594)– The Spanish Tragedy – c. 1587. Most popular play of the 1500's.
- John Lyly (c. 1554-1606) – prose comedies
- Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) – Dr. Faustus, Edward II

The University Wits all helped develop:

- elegant prose
- romantic comedies
- complex protagonists
- humanism and neoclassicism combined
- blank verse – iambic pentameter, not rhymed (called a "couplet" if rhymed)

Marlowe – the most critically acclaimed of the four – Cambridge educated.

1. focus is on the protagonist; episodic story illuminating his complex motivations
2. development of the "chronicle" play – History Play – (i.e.: Edward II) – rearranging, telescoping, and altering events to create a causal sense...
3. helped perfect blank verse, iambic pentameter, no rhyme. "Couplets" were rhymed.

Tamburlaine parts I&II, 1587 & 1588

Dr. Faustus c. 1588

Edward II c. 1592

Marlowe died in a fight at 29.

Other "University Wits":

John Lyly (c. 1554-1606) and Robert Greene (1558-1592).

The Theatre buildings / structures:

Public theatre emerged with lack of religious and political subjects.

A need for more plays. By 1604, with James I and the beginning of the Stuart reign, all troupes were licensed to members of royal families. Before that, when Elizabeth came to power in 1558, gentlemen could maintain a group of actors – otherwise, they were considered to be vagabonds. A license was required to perform plays. But local authorities (many of the Puritans) found ways to keep troupes from performing. By 1597, the Crown agreed to limit the number of troupes, but took a firmer support of those it sanctioned.

Pre-Shakespearean Acting Troupes:

Many before 1570's, but little known about them. Noblemen probably paid a fixed yearly sum, and they probably did additional public performances for extra money.

By 1570, government decrees made acting more secure, daily performances stimulated building permanent theatres and assembling larger companies.

First important troupe: Earl of Leicester's Men, licensed in 1574, headed by James Burbage – builder of the first theatre in London.

Lord Chamberlain's Men – with the Burbage family, Shakespeare's troupe.

A plague of 1592-3 forced many troupes to dissolve or combine.

In 1603, Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men, until 1642.

Actors were paid by the court, yearly fee plus other expenses.

Most troupes worked on a sharing plan – risk and profits shared. Democratic, self-governing, Some troupes or members of troupes owned theatre buildings—they were known as "householders."

Stagehands hired "hirelings" for a salary.

Troupes were all male, men or young boys playing women's roles, some specialized in particular types of roles.

Elizabethan Acting Style

The actual style is not known. Some scholars argue that acting was formal:

- Males doing female roles
- Non-realistic scripts
- Conventionalized stage sets
- Large repertory

Some scholars argue that acting was more realistic:

- Shakespeare's "advice to the players" in Hamlet
- Contemporaneous references to convincing characterizations
- Emphasis on contemporary life and manners in many comedies
- Truthfulness of human psychology displayed
- Closeness of audience to performers
- In either case, vocal quality and flexibility were necessary.

Prepared by

Name: Ezeh Echezona Emmanuel

REG No: 2016/236102

Department: Art Education

