

## **The Relationship between Medieval Drama and Renaissance Drama**

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 Lucreces*, 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.

Medieval drama was mainly religious, the mystery plays which told stories from the Bible and miracle plays which told stories from the lives of the saints. These were very popular forms of drama, normally performed by members of the medieval guilds.

In the 16th century, the rise of the professional theatre led to the suppression of the old medieval guild performances. In France, a decree of 1542, which forbade the *Confreres de la Passion* to continue playing at the Hotel de Bourgone, stated that:

"The entrepreneurs as well as the players are ignorant people, mechanical artisans, knowing neither A nor B, who have never been educated and who have neither eloquent speech nor proper language nor the accents of decent pronunciation . . . These illiterate people, with no understanding in such affairs, in squalid conditions, like a carpenter, a constable, a tapster maker, a fishmonger, have played in the Acts of the Apostles."

The decree was renewed in 1548, while still later, in 1615, the comedians of this same Hotel de bourgogne, bent on the ruin of these Confreres de la Passion, who had persisted in their theatrical activity, declared that "This confrere has neither received nor produced anything but coarse artisans. . . who in consequence are incapable of public honour or responsibilities and unworthy of the title of bourgeoisie, through the reasoning of the Ancients, who made slaves walk with the artisans."

The comedians of the Hotel de Bourgogne, who would end up by having the establishment awarded to themselves for their own productions, aimed to destroy what remained of medieval theatre. why? Because the latter was a matter of popular spectacle. And because the Confrerie was not made up of professionals.

They showed a typical Renaissance disdain for humble people, and an equally typical Renaissance obsession with ancient history. The difference between medieval and Renaissance theatre was the difference between the amateur and the professional, the common people acting out plays for their contemporaries, and the professional actors who disdained the common man.

Name: Ugwu Peace Ozioma

Reg No: 2016/238912

Department: Arts Education(Edu/Eng).