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COURSE: INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA (ELS 140)

## Relationship between Medieval and Renaissance Drama

Theatrical activities began with the Greeks in the fifth century B.C, majorly as a form of religious or religious rite performed to the Greek god of wine and fertility known as Dionysus. This ritual exercise in the course of time evolved into a social affair and brought forth great playwrights with rich literary works. Their works entertained much criticism and also became the paradigm for Aristotle's notion of tragedy.

Despite the success of the Greek theater, it saw its fall after the fifth century, due to certain circumstances climaxed by the Roman conquest in 146 B.C. the fall of the Greek theatre led to the rise of the Roman theatre which is believed to have a footing on Greek theatre. They also produced playwrights like Seneca, Terence and many others. However, it also met its downfall, due to the clash with the Christian church and therefore gave way leaving church as the only stable government and therefore ushering in the medieval period.

This period is also known as the “dark ages” as it is characterized to be a period when all literary accomplishment by both the Greeks and Roman theatre were lost to history. The grand irony, however, was that the church which criticized theatrical art on the note that it was sinful brought about its re-birth again. They took to the replacement of the pagan rituals such as the winter festival (festival of the sun god) and the spring festival with Christmas and Easter respectively. Also, liturgical activities such as the Good Friday event, the mass and even objects like priestly garb created fertile ground for the development of drama.

In the course of time, the church took to the enactment of some biblical passages, the first known as *Quem Queritus*, translated as “whom do you seek.” This play acted by the altar boys, enacts the scene where the three Marys (Mary the mother of Jesus, the sister of Martha and Mary Magdalene) came to the tomb of the resurrected Jesus and were met by an angel who asks them “whom do you seek?”

Owing to the teem of people who come to watch these plays, the church had to change its façade setting, which was the church and took to the outside environs. They also delegated the acting of roles in plays to certain guilds. This eventually led to the secularization of drama through an organized group called the Mystery Circle. This brought about many changes to medieval drama such as the shift of plays from Latin the church language to vernacular. Some of these plays include the mystery plays which dramatized biblical events, miracle plays, which based on the lives of saints and the morality plays, which focuses on teaching moral and spiritual lessons.

One major objective of the medieval drama is sermonizing. They try to bring man back to God and make him conscious of a life after death. This is seen to be the major theme in the morality play, *Everyman*. This could be seen in the words of the messenger thus:

MESSENGER: Greetings one and all. Pay heed to what you are about to witness with great care. For here we present a moral play that shows life is not ours to keep. Pay heed! No matter how you spend your days never forget the end to come. Sin which feels so sweet in the here and now will cause your soul to weep at the end of days. And when God calls your name and commands an account of your life, there is no turning back. Pay heed to the story of The Summoning of Everyman.

Abstract characters like death, God, everyman, strength and five wits are used in this play to express universality of the message.

With the church still placed as the greatest institution during the medieval period, a great height of knowledge hoarding was experience and people were limited only to the biblical views of reality which the church gave. But the reformation led by Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a successful heresy which struck the Roman Catholic Church. This rebellion from the church gave people more audacity to indulge in scientific research to find the answers to certain things in the universe. This era of re-birth of knowledge is therefore tagged the renaissance period and it began in Italy in the fourteenth century.

Through the re-birth of knowledge, the minds of people were liberated from superstitious and eccentric beliefs. One of the new knowledge is the ideology concerning the ordering of the universe or the philosophy anchored on the great chain of being. The philosophy is based on the

idea that God structured the universe in order, placing the divine above then followed by other elements found in the universe. These could be interpreted in Leonardo da Vinci's image of the Vitruvian man.

Tragedy in the Renaissance age is when an individual aspires to change his place in the order of the world as seen in the character Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Doctor Faustus is placed well as he is seen to be a highly learned man. But soon he becomes unsatisfied with whatever he has learnt and feels that he needs more knowledge to distinguish himself from other men and he goes for the forbidden knowledge (magic). This notion of tragedy in the Renaissance is therefore seen to be different from what is seen in the medieval period as the greatest tragedy of man is to lose his soul to damnation in hell after a sinful life on earth as implied by the messenger in *Everyman*.

The hamartia of Doctor Faustus, seen to be the quest of knowledge, however is a great characteristic of the Renaissance period. The chorus informs us in the prologue that Faustus is 'swollen with cunning, of a self conceit' and also that he is 'glutted' 'with learning's golden gifts.' He has become unsatisfied with whatever he has learnt. He feels that: Philosophy is odious and obscure; both law and physic are for petty wits; Divinity is basest of the three, Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile: Hence he decides to master necromancy. Faustus chooses black magic as he feels that 'a world of profit and delight, of power, of honour, of omnipotence, is promised to the studious artisan!'

This quest for knowledge is also in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Macbeth is presented to be a great warrior in Scotland, but he aspires to be greater before the right time due to the knowledge he gets from the three witches that he shall be king. The witches hailed him thus:

'All hail, Macbeth!' cawed the first witch. 'Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!'  
'All hail, Macbeth,' screamed the second witch. 'Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!'  
'All hail Macbeth!' cooed the third witch. 'That shalt be king hereafter!'

This knowledge however leads to his tragedy like Doctor Faustus. Renaissance inspired men to travel around the world and it witnessed the discovery and exploration of new continents. Marlowe perhaps may be mentioning about the discovery of the 'New World' when Faustus says the following lines:

I'll have them fly to India for gold,  
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl, and search all corners of the new-found world  
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates;  
I'll have them read me strange philosophy;  
And tell the secrets of all foreign kings

Renaissance drama is therefore seen to go back to the once buried classical dramas of the Greeks and Romans by the church during the medieval period. This is seen as they follow the quest sequence, which is noted in certain greek mythology and which also dates back to the primordial age, as in the quest of knowledge by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.

