

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIEVAL DRAMA AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA

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English Renaissance drama grew out of the established [Medieval tradition](#) of the [mystery](#) and [morality plays](#). 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 Lucres](#), 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.

The relationship between Medieval drama and Renaissance drama is more of a contrasting one than a close one. This is because the Medieval drama was a religion driven aspects of literature while Renaissance thinkers reverted back to the idealism of classical civilization during A.D. 1500 which abhors Christianity religion. Instead of focusing on the dreams of the future, Renaissance drama were concerned with the here and now but the Medieval drama were concerned about personalities transcended to those of fictitious figures (God, Saints, and revered leaders).

Medieval and Renaissance literature were influenced by two completely different eras in human history. During the Middle Ages, (A.D.1066-1500) the toils of daily life affected the mindset of those at this time. As a result, these ideas found its way into the making of Medieval drama. However, after the great rediscovery of the classical civilizations during A.D.1500-1660,

men began creating what is now looked upon as Renaissance drama. Though they are both forms of writing, their history as a part of society greatly differed from contrasting philosophies of life, leading to two different personalities.

Another distant relationship between the Medieval drama and the Renaissance is that Renaissance drama revolved more around having a real humanistic protagonist with a real story to tell. These basic ideas evolved from a humble place in life to a materialistic dream steeped in luxury. This entails that Renaissance drama is a secular drama while Medieval drama is a religious drama. There was a religious undertone hidden in Medieval drama.

In the Italian Renaissance that dates back to the 14th Century, people shed themselves of the beliefs that characterized the medieval society. They refused to accept the artistic literary standards of the Medieval age and began to look around them for new ways of thought that would be appropriate to the thinking of the age. In the Italian Renaissance, there were two distinct dramatic forms—the humanist drama which was literary in form and essentially dominated by the elite, and the popular theatre given the appellation of *commedia cellaret*. Political instability and lack of national unity contributed to the paucity of dramatic literature during the Italian Renaissance. In the Medieval drama, the stage was wholly devoted to expounding religious philosophy and nothing else. The Medieval stage was replete with thrones, scaffolds, trolleys and other contrivances used in staging plays having to do with the Annunciation and the Ascension. Medieval architects, including Filippo Brunelleschi, invented an apparatus for the representation of paradise. Stage music and lighting equally became sophisticated.

During the Renaissance, dramatic productions were given at courts and academies for aristocratic audiences, and were usually produced during special occasions. All aspects of the

plays were dominated by the court. Court poets authored the plays, court architects and painters did the scenery and costume design, while courtiers did the acting. In the Medieval drama, those who came to watch medieval drama at its beginnings did not get any message that was not religious. This is because Medieval had one major focus--the sermonizing focus. The language of the Bible ought to be simple, and torpid.

Renaissance Italian theater developed in the courts of the nobility in settings that differed radically from those of the past. The invention of perspective painting in the 14th and 15th centuries led to painted scenery that attempted to create the illusion of reality. The most influential theatrical work of the Renaissance was the *Second Book of Architecture*, by Sebastiano Serlio (1545; Eng. trans., 1611), which proposed three basic perspective scenes--tragic, comic, and satiric--to correspond with the work performed. The scenes consisted of a painted backdrop and three pairs of angled side-wings-- freestanding units that masked the space on either side of the stage.

Serlio's scenes were permanent, but as court productions became more elaborate it became necessary to change scenery during a performance. Movable scenery evolved over a 200-year period and was a major innovation of the Renaissance Theater.

The first practical system was introduced about 1600. Known as flat-wing and groove, it consisted of a series of flats--canvas -covered frames on which scenery was painted--set in grooves on the stage floor. Flats could be pulled offstage to reveal a second set. The major disadvantages of this arrangement were the number of stagehands required and the difficulty of coordinating changes. This problem was solved in 1645 by Giacomo Torelli (1608-78) with the chariot-and-pole system. Flats were mounted on poles that passed through slots in the floor to

rolling wagons, or "chariots," beneath the stage. These, in turn, were attached to winches by a system of ropes and pulleys. Changes of scenery became so fascinating that they were frequently made during a performance for no dramatic reason.

Monumental scenic design was made possible in the 17th century by the use of multiple perspective. Although sets still fostered the illusion of reality, they created the illusion that the world of the stage was of a larger scale than that of the audience, thereby reinforcing the sense of distance between stage and auditorium. The mythical and allegorical content of the plays was aided by complex machinery, especially flying apparatus such as chariots and "cloud machines." Grandiose Italianate design reached its peak with the Bibiena family, whose designs were popular throughout 18th-century Europe.

Renaissance architects attempted to re-create Greek and Roman theaters, but because their information was often ambiguous or incomplete, the result was a new style of theater architecture. Serlio adapted the Roman form to rectangular palace halls, but no building specifically designed as a theater was constructed until the 1530s. The oldest surviving Renaissance theater is Andrea Palladio's Teatro Olimpico.

The major development in Renaissance theater architecture was the proscenium arch--a curved or rectangular frame enclosing the stage--which is found in many modern theaters. The first theater to use the proscenium arch was the Teatro Farnese (1619) in Parma, Italy, designed by Giovanni Battista Aleotti (1546-1636). The proscenium arch masks the offstage space and aids scenic illusion by separating the stage and auditorium; the audience must look through the opening onto the stage. The U-shaped seating area for the audience in the Teatro Farnese also influenced theater design and is now a common feature of European theaters and Opera Houses.

The Teatro Farnese was the first theater designed for the use of movable scenery and one of the first to use a curtain in front of the proscenium arch. Its steeply banked seating tiers held an audience of 3,500, who came to see the fabulous spectacles that only a theater of this size and complexity could mount: not only opera, ballet, and drama, but--on the spacious orchestra floor separating the audience from the stage--extravaganzas and ceremonials of all kinds.

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