

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

### **Introduction**

The medieval and renaissance eras were eras heralded by decline and resurgence respectively. In the case of medieval drama, the decline is that of drama in particular and that of the Roman Empire in general. Rome was sacked by the Gothic ruler Alaric in AD 610, but the empire did not officially end until AD 476 (H. A. Clement: 240). The fall of the mighty Roman Empire with its love of learning and arts plunged the ancient world into what is now known as the “dark ages”, so called because the races, which took over, were the fierce warlike types who did not care for learning but only sought to test their brute strength on battle ground. They pillaged, plundered and wore down the wonders of learning and the intellectual arts, which the free spirit of Greece and the noble Roman temperament had wrought.

Eventually, though, the church got an upper hand and the medieval age began. This age could be likened to an age when men lived in darkness, of the ages, which had gone before them. This was a result of the destruction effected in the interval after the decline of the Roman Empire; the people in this age lived, as it were, on scratch.

### **Drama and the Medieval Age**

The medieval period saw the oppression of the church. However, its emergence is somewhat ironic; it was resuscitated by the very church which sought to suppress it. Drama or what was left of it was appropriated by the church, who sought to cleanse it from elements of profanities and ‘indecenties’ it had acquired in the highly circular environment of Greek and Roman theatre. The sole aim of the church was to employ drama as a means of propagating the Christian faith.

Just like the classical drama before it, the medieval drama took root from the religious rituals of the church. The first form was the *Quem Quaeritis*, Latin for “whom do you seek?” This derived from the symbolic events that occurred during Easter, precisely the visit of the four Marys to the tomb where Jesus was buried which they found empty, the lord having risen. According to Okoro in his essay “Dramatic Genre” in *Essays and Literature Concepts*, the Latin presentation went thus;

*Angel: Whom seek ye in the supulchre, O Christian Women?*

*Marys: Jesus of Nazareth the Crucified, O heavenly one*

*Angel: He is not here, he is risen as foretold, go announce that he has risen from the dead.*

This form was soon transformed into a proper play when in 975 AD, the Bishop of Winchester, St. Ethelwood, published it under the name of *Regularis Concordia*. Soon, the tropes gradually moved out of the church, though still under its control. Other forms developed, notably the mystery plays, which dramatized biblical events; miracle plays which concerned itself with the lives of saints and then the morality play which employed allegory and abstract characters to portray vices or good values as the case may be.

Medieval drama was built by and around the church; therefore, it was only natural for it to fall without the church. And so it did. Its decline started when the church withdrew her support. In 1569, it was banned in England. (Nwabueze, 2011:39).

Although there is no resemblance whatsoever between medieval drama and the renaissance drama that followed it, in terms of content and form one can still make bold to say that once deprived of its affiliations to the church, the medieval drama was automatically on its way to become the renaissance.

## **Drama and the Renaissance Age**

The renaissance age, known also as the age of light, of the birth of knowledge, awakening etc and in England, as the Elizabethan or Jacobean age (depending on who ruled) started officially for dram in 1349 with the production of *Philogus* by Petrarch (Nwabueze, 2011:40).

The era stat in different parts of Europe at different times ant took slightly different names. In France, the period is something referred to as the neo-classical age because the classics of Greeks and Rome were discovered and scholars plunged into spirited efforts to study, copy or recreate using the classic ideals.

Generally, the renaissance age was aided by the fall of Constantinople and the proliferation of scholarship from that citadel of learning. It was also helped the decline of the church and the secularization and independence of drama and most importantly, the invention of the printing press by Johan Gutenberg in1492.

The Italian renaissance was officially started by Franscisco Petrarch's Philologia. The period had other great writers like Dante (*Divine Comedy*) Niccolo Machiavelli (*The Mandrakes*), Batista Guarini (*Faithfull Shepherd*), Torquatto Tarso (*Aminta*) etc. The Italian Renaissance also developed the *intermezzi* or interlude which was performances enacted in between the acts of a play which were unconnected with the play. They eventually developed and became the opera.

French renaissance was propelled by the banning of Mystery Plays by the parliament in 1545. It was also helped by Etienne Jodelles innovations and Julious Caeser Scaligers publication of "*The seven book of Poetica*". The French Neoclassic ideals were borrowed from the classics; they stressed the adherence to the rules as set down by Horace and Plato. They outlined the

basic functions of a play as didacticism and stipulated that a play must be realistic, moral and universal. The notable playwrights of that period include Baptiste Pouvain, Moliere (regarded as the most important playwright of the comedy genre), Jean Racine, etc. The French drama Academy regulated the activities in that age.

The English renaissance started in 1587 with *Tamburlaine* by Christopher Marlowe. The Tudor school of drama and the University Wits were the major dramatic troupes. They adopted the classical ideals and infused it into medieval dramatic methods.

The Elizabethan period (which refers to the rule Queen Elizabeth I from 1558-1603) saw the flourishing of drama and the introduction of diversity to the genre. Playwrights like Christopher Marlow, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson etc wrote romantic comedies, revenge-murder plays etc.

The Jacobean and Caroline drama obtained under the rule of James (Latin Jacobus) and Charles I respectively. This period is considered by some scholars as not being significantly different, but others still maintain there were these differences included the Prioritization of the entertainment factor in place of the overly intellectual and technical drama obtainable in Elizabethan drama.

### **From Medieval to Renaissance: A Transition**

The renaissance period continued from the tired limbs of the medieval age. Although universally unique in several senses, the renaissance age differed in some other significant places. By comparison, the age would be a sort of avant-garde of drama when juxtaposed with the largely dormant and church controlled medieval. The renaissance age was characterized by explosive ideas, experiments and methods and especially the questioning of the religious essence of drama, which caused the refinement of drama.

Some elements of medieval drama manifests in several facets of renaissance dramaturgy. One of these elements is the subject matter. Medieval drama concerned itself with moral and didactic subject matters to further the doctrines of the church, but we can also find this theme echoing through several renaissance works. Notable among them are Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and William Shakespeare's Macbeth.

Conclusively, the renaissance age is arguably a continuation of medieval drama. This is so because the most significant figure in distinguishing between the two is the presence of the church in the former and the rise of secularism in the other. It can therefore be said to be a continuation, albeit, devoid of the distinguishing characteristic of the first. It is important to note that at times, the two eras were as disparate from each other as the North Pole is from the south.

## **References**

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