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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIEVAL AND THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD

THE MEDIEVAL/ MIDDLE AGE

The middle age spanned from the fifth century after the collapse of the Roman Empire and the Church took over power. The medieval period runs from the Late Antiquity in the fifth century to the late fifteenth century. That is a period from the end of the classical period to the renaissance, a time the printing press was invented. This period is also the time of illiteracy where only the elites could read and write

The early portion of the medieval period in England was dominated by the Anglo-Saxon, whose language is incomprehensible to today's speakers in English. That early portion is known as the Old English Period. This came to an end with the Norman invasion in 1066. The Normans are a French speaking dialect later called Anglo-Norman.

After the conversion of Constantine, the lustful and bloody spectacles were accursed by the church. With the triumph of Christianity, drama or theatrical performances were abolished and destroyed for what seemed like a forever. The only people that kept theatre alive during this period were the wandering minstrels, mimes and jugglers. When Constantinople supplanted Rome as the capital of civilization, dramatic literature which had been the chief glory of Athens, ceased from the earth for a thousand year and more. The history of drama was all darkness and the writers of the late Dark Ages and early medieval period were the clerics and theologians. So much of the early medieval literature was of religious nature. Countless hymns survived from this time. Religious scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, Pierre Abelard and Martin Luther wrote lengthy theological and philosophical treatises.

The desire for drama, which seem to be instinctive in human nature, the impulse to impersonate and take pleasure in beholding a story set forth in action, may have been dormant during this centuries or it may have found some means of gratifying itself unrecorded in the correspondence of time or by chroniclers. But none the less, dramatic literature which has flourished so gloriously in Greece, was dead at last; and even the memory of it seems to have departed. For in so far as the works of the Greek tragedians and the Roman comedian were known at all, they

were thought of rather as poetry to be read than as play to be acted. The art of acting was a lost art, and the theatres themselves fell into ruin.

So it was that when the inherent demand for the pleasure which only theatre can give became at last insistent, there was to be seen a spontaneous evolving of a new form, fitted specially to satisfy the needs of the people at that circumstance. This new drama of the middle age sprang into being wholly uninfluenced by the drama of the Greek and of the Romans.

In its origin, the medieval drama was not like the Greek or Roman drama. According to Nwabueze (2011:36) it was the product of the church, born out of the desire to suppress certain infamous elements of past dramatic traditions and out of the desire to fashion drama, dramaturgy and service along ecclesiastical lines of the propagation of the Christian faith. Religious rituals had dramatic elements that advanced the rebirth of drama. These include the events during Good Fridays and Easter celebration. There was also the addition of musical troupes to the celebration called the *Quem Quaeritis* a Latin word for “whom do you seek”.

Medieval drama continued to grow with the addition of many scenes to church services. It was a stage wholly devoted to expounding religious philosophy and nothing else. The drama grew within the walls of the church, until it was strong enough to support itself, and when it at last ventured outside, it became independent of the church and got established as secular entertainment through organized groups called the mystery cycles. Two most popular vernacular dramas that also sprang up this period were the Mystery plays which dramatized mainly Biblical events, and the Miracle plays, which were based on the lives of the saints. Morality plays were also introduced to teach important lessons through allegorical characters. All these dramas were traceable to the medieval church sermon and mass. It arose from the ashes of the Roman drama, the last stage of Roman drama.

Language also saw further development during this age. Capital and lowercase letters were developed with rules for each. This period began to witness its decline when scholars began to research and question the authority and convention of the church, writing social commentary observations and discovery as well as poetic fiction. All this gave way to the renaissance period.

RENAISSANCE PERIOD

The term Renaissance is a French word for ‘rebirth’. The term is used to describe a period of great intellectual and artistic achievement. It is sometimes called the Elizabethan period because that was the time Queen Elizabeth 1 reigned between 1562 and 1642.

The Renaissance in Europe was in one sense an awakening from the long slumber of the Dark Ages. What had been a stagnant, even backsliding kind of society reinvented in the promise of material and spiritual gain. There was the sincerely held belief that humanity was making a progress towards a noble summit of perfect existence.

Renaissance came to fruition as a matter of debate among historians. What can not be debated is that humanity took an astounding leap forward after a hundred of years of drift. The fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries in Europe witnessed a deliberate break with feudal modes of living. Aristocratic landowners lost their hegemony over the lower classes, as opportunities for growth and enrichment beckoned from the swelling urban centres. In Italy, educated citizens rediscover the grace and power of their classical, pagan traditions. Greek and Roman mythologies and philosophies served as the inspirational material for a new wave of artistic creation. People began to shed themselves of the beliefs that characterized the medieval society. Intellectuals adopted a line of thought as “Humanism” in which mankind was believed capable of earthly perfection beyond what had ever been imagined before. The overwhelming spirit of the times was optimism, an unquenchable belief that life was improving for the first time in any one’s memory. Indeed, the specter of the Dark Ages and the Black Death were still very fresh in people’s mind and the promise of moving forward and away from such horror was wholeheartedly welcomed.

The single greatest innovation of the Renaissance era was the printing press invention, put into service around 1440 by Johann Gutenberg. Before now, rudimentary presses have existed for a long time, but Gutenberg’s design maximized printing efficiency in a way that change the world of arts, letters and ideas forever. His innovations of moveable typesets fostered the availability of texts from Classical sources, meaning that new sheets of texts could be set in place and printed with far less effort than had previously been the case. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 caused scholars to scatter all over Europe and libraries were thrown open. The Religious upheaval known as the Protestant Reformation was possible due to the capacity of making many copies of documents quickly. Martin Luther’s famous “95 theses” spread through Continental Europe because of the found ease in reproduction.

Literature was no longer a rarefied for only the elites. Another aspect of this innovation is the effect that it had on reading. Previously, one document was read aloud to a group of people, as in oral traditions, biblical or humorous stories were memorized and then passed down. But with this invention of a printing press, communal and oral reading gradually gave way to silent, individual reading.

Every nation in Western Europe experienced its own incarnation of the Renaissance. The manifestations of Renaissance are thought were unique. The rebirth of passion and creativity had undeniably world-altering effects. The English Renaissance produced some of the greatest works of literature the world has ever known. The spirit of optimism, unlimited potentials and stoic English character all coalesced to generate literature of the first order. At the same time, England graduated from an overlooked barbarian nation to a seat of commercial power and influence. This power naturally translated into literature that was bold, sweeping, innovative and trend-setting. Poets experimented with forms, and dramatists revived and reinvented the classical traditions of the Greeks and the Romans.

The dominant forms of English literature during the Renaissance were the poem and the drama. Not infrequently, poetry of the era was intended to be accompanied by music. In any case, the general consensus among critics was that, the chief aim of English Renaissance verse was to encapsulate beauty and truth in words. English poetry of the period was ostentatious, repetitious and often betrayed a subtle wit.

In the area of drama, no one matched William Shakespeare in terms of variety, profundity, and his exquisite use of language. Shakespeare is known for his ability to shift between comedy and tragedy, from complex character to light hearted farce. He is also highly regarded for the exquisite formal structures which all his plays demonstrate.

The theatre in Renaissance England steadily evolved from a village festival attraction to a bona fide cultural institution. In 1567, the Swan Theatre was erected on the outskirts of London, one of the first commercial playhouses. Locals despised the crowd and the noise that the popular house attracted, and the pubs and the brothels that inevitably cropped up nearby. Many saw the theatre as a call to laziness, with children abandoning their studies and labourers leaving work to see plays. The Puritans, in particular, aimed their barbs directly at the Elizabethan stage. The intensely conservative offshoot of Protestantism, the Puritans feared that the cross-dressing and playacting one found at the theatre would lead to sexual corruption among the general populace.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks for artists and writers during the English Renaissance was the ever present need to somehow eke a living out of their craft. The system of patronage was one means by which talented and creative individuals sustained themselves. Original manuscripts which have survived the ravages of time bear witness to the importance of securing the blessing of a wealthy patron. Typically such works are dedicated to the patron who provided the fund for the production.

The unbounded optimism and humanist spirit of the Renaissance could not go forever. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the quest for human perfection had given way to decadence, cynicism, and an introversion which would stifle creativity for a long time to come. In England, the rise of the Puritanism, itself an offshoot of Renaissance philosophy, put the brakes on the pursuit of knowledge and aesthetic endeavours. Another factor leading to the end of the English Renaissance was the failure of Queen Elizabeth to produce an heir, she became literally the end of the line.

So the relationship between the medieval/middle era drama and the renaissance is that the both sprung from religious practices, sermons and pastoral plays and both have the act of impersonation which is the main feature of drama.