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COURSE CODE: ELS 140 (INTRODUCTION TO DRAMA)

DISCUSS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA

Literature is classified as an art that evolves through periods and time. These periods are spans of time in which literature shared intellectual, linguistic, religious and artistic influences. Some of these periods include the middle age, Victorian period, Romanticism and so on. The activities of these periods also reflected in the genres of literature.

Drama as a core genre of literature also changed as time passed, it has its origin in Greek and passed on to the Romans before it is adopted by the Europeans. New dramatic techniques and themes have been inculcated into this genre of literature right from the 5th century till date.

Medieval drama is one which thrived in the Middle Ages from the 5th century to 15th century and paved way from the great Elizabethan theatre and was developed out of liturgical ceremonies. It is in the church in fact, and in its rituals that the origin of medieval plays is found. These were enacted by choristers and monks. Medieval drama covers variety of genres including liturgical drama, mystery plays, morality plays, farces and masques. It was the most part very religious and moral in its themes, staging and traditions.

It is known for its highly stylized character and action, its verse and religious themes and as the time progressed, it introduced the use of music, chants and other effects. All this give life to the gradual evolution from liturgical drama to miracle and morality plays. Miracle plays were some of the earliest in this era, during the 12th century and could also be called mystery plays. They

dramatized the life, legends and miracles of Roman Catholic saints. It was characterized by realism, simplicity of diction, absence of metaphors and sentimentalism. Morality plays on the other hand emerged during the 15th century; it is different from Mystery play in that they are neither focused on the Bible nor the saints but on the common man. The main character in a Morality play represents all humanity, example is seen in Everyman. The theme of this play dealt with the struggle for salvation.

Allegory is often seen in medieval drama, where a message or meaning is expressed through symbolic representation; ideas and values, vices and virtues become personified. It is didactic in tone and lacks hilarity and comicality. In Everyman, there is use of abstract qualities like Beauty, Knowledge to address the themes of that age.

Renaissance drama, which lasted from approximately 1500-1700, was the rebirth of interest in theatre across Europe. In fact, the Renaissance drama introduced many of the elements that were not available in the Middle Ages: indoor theatres, an arched stage, a curtain dropped between scenes, more elaborate set design. All of these changes were implemented during the Renaissance. More importantly, however, the purpose of drama transitioned from stories told by the Church to stories made primarily for entertainment for both royalty and commoners.

Whereas medieval dramas were essentially amateurish endeavors in which clergy or various trade guilds participated, the Renaissance Theatre was composed of professional actors, among who were those who specialized in tragic roles and others in comic roles. These actors were not members of a guild, a requirement for workers, so they placed themselves under the patronage of royalty; in this way, they would then be considered servants and, therefore, be allowed to perform.

Medieval mystery plays, for example, dramatized Biblical events, while morality plays allegorized the human struggle to choose between vice and virtue. Drama could be associated with Christian feast days, and was not performed in permanent theatres, but in public or private buildings, in open spaces like churchyards, on temporary structures like 'scaffolds' and pageant wagons, or in the street. Plays were often of composite or anonymous authorship, and some plays, like the mystery plays were performed not by professional actors but by ordinary townsfolk.

During and after the Reformation, the drama began to change. Genres like tragedy, comedy and satire replaced the mystery and morality plays of the middle ages. Playwrights experimented with forms borrowed from classical authors, studying the tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Terence and Plautus. Plots and characters were taken from a range of sources. Shakespeare, for example, read medieval chronicles, classical drama and poetry, narratives of travel and the colonization of the New World, and the romances and legends of earlier centuries, mining them for material he could recycle into dramatic form. In this period, the identity of the individual playwright became important, and dramatists like Kyd, Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson were developing their own distinctive writing styles.

New themes appeared as well. Love between men and women was a theme adaptable either to comedy, or to tragedies such as Othello or Anthony and Cleopatra. History and politics were also of great interest in an age of strong rulers, Elizabeth I and James VI and I. Ideas about the power of monarchs and the burdens and dangers of kingship were explored in history plays, or in tragedies like King Lear. Jacobean revenge drama examined not only the ethics but also the psychology of revenge and aggression. The shift in focus from religious to humanist values led to the creation of the flawed hero, embodied in characters like Hamlet, Lear and

Othello, and the Machiavellian villain, as for example Iago or Edmund.

The transition from the medieval drama to Renaissance drama paved a way for the development of drama and exploration of all the possibilities that can be achieved as related to life and its transfer to other genres of literature.