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English and Literary Studies

The Relationship Between Medieval Drama and Renaissance Drama

"In its origin again, the Medieval drama was not unlike the drama of the Greeks, - in that the germ of it was religious, and that it was slowly elaborated from what was at first only a casual accompaniment of public worship." Brander Matthews, *The Development of Drama?*

The fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century also signified the fall of theatre. Drama was banned and theatres were closed. The church felt theatre, as they knew it during the Roman Empire, was barbaric and evil. How ironic is it that the very institution which banned drama can be credited with bringing it back.

Medieval drama could also be seen as middle-age drama.

During this time period, church services were held in Latin, which wasn't understood by the majority of the congregation. Most people couldn't read and had no experience.

Medieval drama is known for its highly stylized character and action, its verse dialogue and its religious themes. Drama developed roughly from the 10th to 16th century, peaking in the 15th century. Most of the authors were anonymous and there are very few surviving texts. As the plays moved away from the church they took on more and more the attitude of the common people. Humour found its way into the storytelling. Contemporary language and references were liberally mixed into ancient events.

"The ancient Jews and Romans who figure in the stories become contemporary Englishmen, the soldiers Medieval knights, Noah's wife a recognizably English shrew whose good gossips or friends celebrate in song the virtues of a pottle of Malmsey, a favourite English beverage."

Allardyce Nicoll, *British Drama*

Renaissance drama is the re-birth of drama. Anything that undergoes rebirth could be seen as something that has been dead before or that died.

Whereas Medieval dramas were essentially amateurish endeavors in which clergy or various trade guilds participated, actors were always men in England, women would occasionally be allowed on the stage in Europe. The Renaissance theater was composed of professional actors, among whom 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.

Theaters became established and profitable (admission was charged). At first theaters were performed in inns with tables put together as the stage. People could stand on the balconies of their rooms and watch. Later on, they were constructed to three stories high and built around an open space at the center.

The Renaissance was a period of a great flowering of English drama. It differed from many ways from the medieval dramatic tradition immediately preceding it but was strongly influenced by classical drama.

Renaissance drama, centered in England, evolved out of the morality and mystery plays of the Medieval era. While these earlier plays attempted to teach a lesson and were often performed by monks or tradesmen, the Renaissance dramas moved toward entertainment. Renaissance drama developed around the 15th century and was at first often performed as short plays at court or in the homes of nobles. The playwrights of the era, such as Shakespeare and Marlowe, were not intellectuals and wrote to entertain rather than to instruct.

The subjects of Renaissance plays often included comedy, and some, such as Skelton's *Magnificence* (1515), also included political satire. The early plays of the era also included history and set the stage (literally) for the later history plays of Shakespeare and other playwrights. As the Reformation re-introduced European audiences to the Latin classics, much of the material of classical humanism was adapted into Renaissance drama. For example, Shakespeare included story lines from an English translation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (particularly the story of Pyramus and Thisbe). In addition, the traditional Latin structure of the five-act play was introduced into English drama. Roman writers such as Seneca influenced Renaissance playwrights to pen tragedies such as *Hamlet* that included elements such as ghosts and violence.