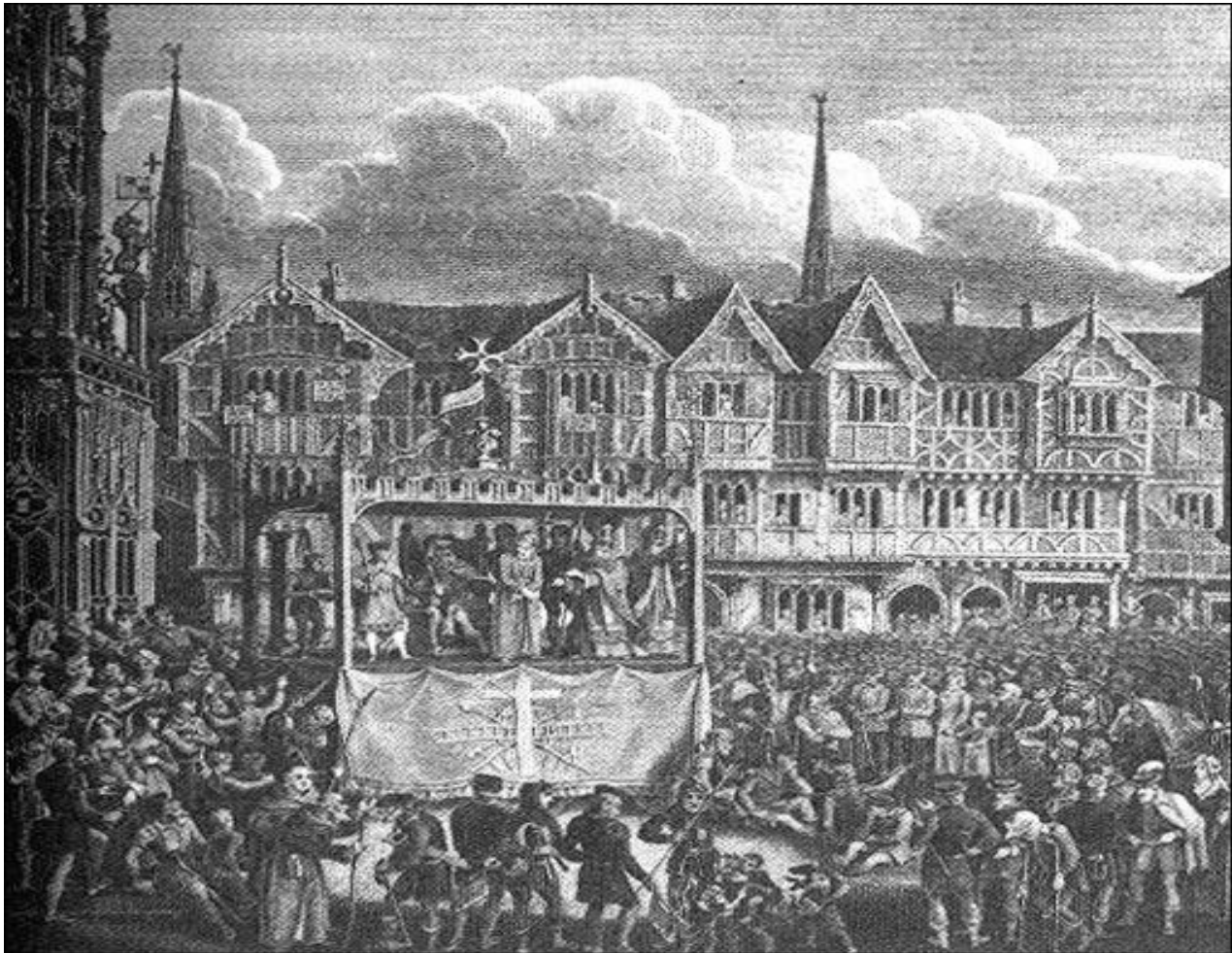




# ***Medieval Drama***





**The Middle Ages** are the period in European history from the collapse of Roman civilization in the 5th century AD to the period of the Renaissance (variously interpreted as beginning in the 13th, 14th, or 15th century, depending on the region of Europe and on other factors). This period was also called “The Dark Ages”, since it was marked by frequent warfare and a virtual disappearance of urban life. Though sometimes taken to derive its meaning from the fact that little was then known about the period, the term's more usual and pejorative sense is of a period of intellectual darkness and barbarity.<sup>1</sup>

**Medieval Theatre** refers to the theatre of Europe between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the beginning of the Renaissance. Most medieval theatre is not well documented due to a lack of surviving records and texts, a low literacy rate of the general population, and the opposition of the clergy to some types of performance. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church banned theatrical performances, mostly as an attempt to curb the excesses of the Roman theatre.

In the tenth century, the **liturgical drama** was born in the *Quem Quaeritis?* This Latin kernal is based on the story from the New Testament in which Mary Magdalene and her companions discover Christ's empty tomb, and it was performed in the church or cathedral at Easter time. Eventually, liturgical drama would encompass many stories from many parts of the Bible and be performed at diverse times of the year, according to local custom.

By about 1250, however, the plays would move outdoors into the churchyard and into open fields, town squares, or the city streets. As geographically further from the church, the clergy had less control over the content. The plays were also presented in the local vernacular languages, instead of in Latin, as was the mass. This allowed the message of the Bible to be more accessible to the illiterate audience. These new plays in the vernacular based on Bible stories are called **mystery plays**. In England, they would sometimes be performed in day-long festivals (often during Corpus Christi) in groups of dozens of plays that traveled through town on wagons. Mystery plays were also written about the lives and miracles of saints, especially the Virgin Mary.

By the late medieval period, several genres had developed in theatre. **Morality plays**, such as *Everyman*, personified Christian virtues and vices as they battled with one another for control of a mortal's soul. These plays were explicitly designed to teach a moral and improve the behavior of their audience.

Secular plays in this period existed, although documentation is not as extensive. **Farces** were popular, and the earliest known vernacular farce was the French *Le garcon et l'aveugle* ("The Boy and the Blind Man"), dating from the thirteenth century. In England, *Robin Hood* plays were popular, and all over Europe **interludes** with simple plotlines were performed at various social functions. Secular dramas were usually performed in winter indoors, and were often associated with schools, universities, and nobility, who would have the resources, time, and space to perform organized plays.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Middle Ages (European History)”, **Encyclopedia Britannica Online** (Database), [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/380873/Middle-Ages](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/380873/Middle-Ages)

<sup>2</sup> “Medieval Theater”, **Wikipedia**, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval\\_theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_theatre)



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