

The Drama Prior to
and Including Shakespeare.

Emily J. Thier.

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The drama is a presentation of an action or of a series of combined actions by means of speech and gesture. Its subject matter is the action and reaction of the human will and is treated in relation to the causes and effects of events.

The drama was conceived in a desire to vividly express thought and feeling. Furthermore, it is to society that man is indebted for his ability to express his ideas and emotions by means of language and gestures or through a combination of both. Moreover, these expressions vary as the occasion is joyous or sad, and they are acquired mainly by imitation, a quality which is instinctive in man. This quality is especially noticeable in children who take great delight in adorning themselves to imitate their elders; for instance, who has not seen the little girl decked in her mother's wardrobe playing "lady"? This assumption of a real or of a fanciful character is the first step in the drama, but not until the imitation is put into action is the drama itself reached.

The classic departments of the drama are "tragedy" and "comedy", terms handed down to

us from the Greeks.

Tragedy deals with serious themes, especially with the deeper emotions of the human heart. It entertains by exciting sympathy, and furthermore, has a sad or terrible ending. The underplot in a tragedy often contains comic elements in order to counteract the deep emotions excited by the main plot as well as to heighten the effect of the latter by contrast. On the other hand, comedy, dealing with light or gay themes, such as the follies and absurdities of the ridiculous and the base, entertains by exciting mirth. However, there are many dramas which are strictly neither comedy nor tragedy but a combination of both. For example, the "melodrama," a form of opera in Italy, has become a species of mixed comedy and tragedy, appealing to the less critical emotions.

Regular dramatic history had its origin in Greece. Both Greek tragedy and comedy arose in connection with the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine. At first in the religious festivals, the followers of the wine god were impersonated by choruses of men dressed in goat skins and it is probably here that the word "tragedy"

which means a "goat song", originated. Lyrical songs of the life of the god were chanted by the men as they danced about the altar.

About 600 B. C. a chorus of fifty men was led by the poet Arion at Corinth. Fifty years later an actor was introduced to fill the intervals of singing with stories, mimicry and short dialogues with the leader of the chorus. In time the sadder parts of the mythological stories were represented by limited and more serious performances. In the fifth century B. C., however, the Greek drama was enlarged by having two actors instead of one. Later, a third was added. The tragedy in general, then, consisted of a series of episodes, separated by lyric passages sung by the chorus. The whole was introduced by the prologue and ended by the exode.

The classical period of Attic tragedy contains the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the three most famous Greek dramatic writers. The idea of "Hemesis," divine vengeance, which lies at the heart of Greek tragedy, occurs in the dramas of Aeschylus.

as an overwhelming mystery; in those of Sophocles, as a part of the moral law of life, while in the dramas of Euripides it becomes simply a source of human sadness.

Along with the Greek tragedy was developed the Greek comedy which arose from the rude jests accompanying the songs of the rustic Dionysian festivals. In the song known as "comos", sung at a religious feast the praise of the god was combined with much personal ridicule and the person taking part in it was called a "comos singer" or "comoseder" hence our word "comedy".

The peculiar features of the Greek drama bear the impress of its religious origin. Theatrical performances were held at Athens only at certain seasons, and, as a part of the religious worship, they took place in some sacred locality, where the whole population was expected to attend. These performances lasted all day or were extended to as great a length as possible and, being of a religious nature they be-

came a matter of state concern.

Although the drama originated in Greece, it also became popular in Italy, the native land of acting and of scenery. Here dramatic performance began in the rural religious festivals in which there was a lively intermixture of dance, songs, speech, dialogue and the assumption of character. Among the best known early Roman dramatists are M. Pacuvius, who was the first Roman tragedian, and Seneca, who became famous for his plays, the themes of which, however, were derived from the three great Greek poets.

In general no important changes have occurred in the Roman tragedy and the Greek plays seemed to have remained the models. The dialogue scenes were interspersed with musical parts sung by a boy placed in front of the flute-player while the actor accompanied these songs with gestures. Unlike the Greek, the chorus stood on the stage and occasionally seems to have taken part in the acting, in which there were three divisions at first, but later

the number of acts was fixed at five.

Comedy appeared to have been the most natural to the Romans who were not specially gifted in dramatic art. Plautus and Terence were the most successful of the Roman dramatists. The former was once a poor day laborer, the latter, a Carthaginian slave. Each has a characteristic style. Plautus was a comic poet and, though he borrowed his plots from the Greeks yet he was original in his elaboration of character and in his comic details. Terence is distinguished by the refinement and delicacy in his wit and characterization.

The Roman drama ended in show, buffoonery and sensual allurement. The spectacles of the amphitheatre reached their climax in the days of Constantine the Great and this hastened the downfall of the Roman drama. The Church became its bitter opponent and finally condemned all exhibitions of the drama. This fate was deserved for the dramatic entertainments had long been of such a nature that even the

later Roman Emperors were obliged to prohibit them in the interests of public morality and order. Thus the Roman drama fell into decline and the stage became the scene of dancing and pantomimes.

Another interesting type of the drama is the Indian which is generally held to be of independent growth. It, too, was of religious origin and arose from the union of song and dance in the festivals of the gods to which were afterwards added narrative recitation and dialogue, first sung, then finally spoken.

The Indian drama began about the third century B. C. Its classical period dates from the first century B. C. to the tenth century A. D. and includes the works of Kalidasa, author of "Sakuntala" (a dramatic love idyll of great beauty and one of the masterpieces of the poetic literature of the world); and of Bāṇarasi who lived in the earlier part of the eighth century and whose "Malati and Madhava" has been called the "Romeo and Juliet" of the Hindus.

From the eleventh to the fourteenth century A.D. the Indian drama gradually declined. During this time there seems to have been added a great deal of narration and description thus making the style of the dramas over-elaborated and affected. Single plays were written during the centuries following the fourteenth but these are regarded as mere aftergrowths exhibiting the Indian drama in its decay.

Another Oriental branch of the drama that needs especial mention is the Chinese, supposed by some to have been derived from the Tartars but more commonly considered as an evolution from the native songs and dances. From a careful study of the Chinese dramas we find that they are broadly classified, not as tragedies and comedies but as military and civil plays. The former include combats and violent deeds of all sorts. The latter have a comic tendency, are quieter and deal with ordinary social life. The favorite virtue exhibited in Chinese plays is piety; while the favorite

interest lies in the discovery of long hidden guilt and in the avenging of persecuted innocence.

Theoretically no drama is more elevated in its purpose and tone than the Chinese. Every play is supposed to have a moral and a meaning, but in practice it falls far short of its ideal.

The Chinese plays are divided into acts and scenes. Usually there are four acts with a narrative prologue spoken at times by some of the actors. The chief character of the play also represents the author. Whole series of pieces are often performed without intermission so that some of the Chinese plays are of great length.

The next important drama of early history is the Mediaeval which was chiefly of a religious nature. The Church undertook to offset the pagan plays by having christianized dramas so that religious truths might be made more real and vivid to the unlettered classes of people. The ecclesiastics who wrote plays imitated both the tragic and the comic forms of the ancient

drama but derived their themes from the Scriptures and from legends of Christian saints.

The Mediaeval drama comprises, first, the "mystery plays" which deal only with Scriptural events, their purpose being to set forth the central mystery of the redemption of the world as accomplished by the birth, death and resurrection of Christ; next, the "Miracle plays" which are concerned with the legends of the saints of the Church; and lastly, the "Moral plays" which teach and illustrate truths allegorically, their characters being personified virtues, vices or any human condition or quality. The serious character of the moral plays was relieved by comic scenes and jests.

Just at this time the attitude of the clergy towards dramatic performances in the Church was not uniform because of the presence of other than religious elements. In the thirteenth century we find that mystery and miracle plays entirely lost the favor of the Church and

the clergy were positively forbidden to take part in them. Not being permitted longer to be performed within the church the plays passed first to the churchyard, then to the streets and finally to the public squares where they were performed on movable stages drawn from place to place. In France these plays came under the control of half-religious and half-literary societies and by the fourteenth century history tells us they were wholly secularized.

To day we scarcely think of Spain other than as a degenerate nation, yet to her is due the honor of having created a genuinely national form of the drama. The Spanish drama, like all the early forms was closely connected with the religious life which in Spain was very sacred to the people since the splendid reign of Ferdinand and Isabella.

J. de la Encina is the father of the Spanish drama. His "ecologues" were dramatic dialogues of a religious or pastoral nature.

The Church in Spain, dominant in character was unwilling to give up its control over such plays as it allowed and even tried to suppress those plays which were not of a strictly religious nature. However, Lope de Rueda, a mechanic of Seville, with some of his friends, succeeded in bringing dramatic entertainments out of the churches and palaces into the public places of the towns where they were produced on temporary stages.

In the Spanish drama as in the mediæval we find three general classes of plays, first, those whose principal characters are taken from that class of society which wears cloak and sword and whose main theme is gallantry; then there is a class in which some of the persons are of royal or of very high rank and in which the theme is of a historic nature; while the third class of plays deals simply with the scenes in common life.

In 1598 Phillip II came to the aid of

the Church by prohibiting all secular plays. To establish his decrees Lope de Rueda not only supplied religious plays of various kinds but he even wrote a great number of "comedias de Santos" which became a Spanish variety of the miracle plays. Just at this time another kind of religious play which was performed in the open air known as "Autos Sacramentales" or "proceedings in honor of the Sacrament" was very popular.

The Spanish drama, however high it may have been held at one time was purely a national creation, hence it was destined to share the lot of the people it so fully represented and thus gradually lost its importance.

With the literary movement of the Renaissance the regular French drama began. Stephen Jodelle at the Court of Henry II of France was the first to produce a regular tragedy. This was provided with a ghost and a chorus but was

devoid of action

In the period from 1545 to 1601 the French tragedy reached its greatest height in nobility and dignity of style as well as in the exhibition of dramatic passion. During this period comedy also was influenced by classical models.

Before either tragedy or comedy in France became illumined with any imperishable masterpieces they had, together with the other French literature passed through a new phase of national life. The troubles of the great civil and religious wars of the sixteenth century produced a reaction against culture and refinement and so the progress of the French drama was checked.

The history of the drama would hardly be complete were England omitted. Here, as elsewhere, we find that the early dramas were connected with religious services. Ecclesiastics were at first not only the authors but also the actors of the miracle

plays in which religious instruction was combined with a good deal of comic amusement. However, by the beginning of the fifteenth century the presentation of the English drama was systematized. Different companies undertook the performance of different acts or scenes on two-story wagons (serving as stages) drawn in front of the Church or to the public square. The lower floor of these wagons was used as a dressing room and the upper, as the stage. The plays were in series and required several days for presentation. They were rudely constructed and the mixture of the sacred and the comic was so complete that the two were constantly merged.

The English "moralities" succeeded the miracle plays and showed an advance in imaginative power though a step backward from the dramatic idea. The earlier English

plays had shown some skill in the development of character but in the "moralities" the stage was occupied by personified abstract qualities and the plays became mechanical, rigid and uninspired.

It was not until the sixteenth century when the influence of the Renaissance was felt, that the English drama became free from the formalism of the old plays. During the prosperous reign of Elizabeth when the English were free from political and religious strife, the nation devoted its best mental energy to the development of one special field of literature the drama.

The earliest known English comedy entitled, "Ralph Roister Doister" was written by Nicholas Udall in 1551 and was an imitation of Plautus, the Latin comic dramatist. The "Torbodine" or "Ferreus and Parvex", the first English tragedy was produced by Sackville and Norton and was written after the

style of the Latin tragic poet, Seneca. From this time dramatic production was rapid and the forced work in England made her drama a new creation rather than a classic imitation. Patriotism was stirring the hearts of the English and out of the general national impulse the historical drama arose.

About 1580 the English drama was being formed by a group of dramatists in London. Among these were John Lyly, who produced a play before 1584, Thos. Kyd, who wrote the "Spanish Tragedy", Geo. Peele, who holds an important place in the development of the historical drama, and Robt Greene who gave some charming pictures of English country life in his "Honorable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay".

Among all of Shakespeare's predecessors Christopher Marlowe was the greatest. He was the first to introduce blank verse on the stage and some of the passages in his tragedies of

"Doctor Faustus" and "Edward II" are considered worthy of Shakespeare himself.

But all of the dramatists named above are obscured by their nearness to the greatest dramatic genius that has appeared in the world - Shakespeare. He brought the drama to its highest perfection. His writings present the finest examples of depth, sublimity, refinement and variety of which the drama is capable.

Shakespeare began his work by adopting and partly rewriting old plays; later, he wrote plays in which he imitated the classic models of Greece and Italy. But the spirit of patriotism which was sweeping over England had a great influence on him and he abandoned the works of the ancient masters and began producing in rapid succession his great Historical plays.

Previous to 1601, Shakespeare had devoted himself chiefly to composing comedies and historical dramas but after that time he began his series of plays which place him foremost among the tragic poets of the world.

Some of his finest works are "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "The Merchant of Venice" and "Macbeth." In all these he portrayed life as he found it. Comic humor, lyrical beauty, tragic earnestness and imaginative power are all imbibed in his works and the one true aim of the drama, namely, the presentation of human character in action was triumphantly achieved by him.