

The English Drama before Shakespeare.

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Outline.

I. Introduction.

Three stages of evolution and decline of drama.
Material of the different epochs.

II. Miracle Plays.

Description.

Enumeration of cycles.

Dramatic value.

III. Moral Plays.

Transition from miracles to moralities.

Description

Influence

IV. Interlude

Origin

Form

Influence

V. Regular Drama.

Rise of Comedy.

Character

Type

Rise of Tragedy.

Influences.

Romantic dramatists.

Classical dramatists.

masque

Origin

Influence

Dramatists

Peele

Greene

Marlowe

VII. The Nation and the Drama.

Qualities of Drama.

Permanent Value of Drama.

Moral teachings.

Influence on English language.

The English Drama before Shakespere.

467

The epoch embraced during the preparation, growth and maturity of the drama reaches from one thousand one hundred and ten to fifteen hundred and eighty. This includes the time from the first appearance of a religious play - by Geoffrey, afterwards Abbot of Saint Albans, to the full, rich maturity which the drama reached under Marlowe. The three distinct stages in the evolution and decline of the drama are, first - the period of preparation and endeavor; secondly, that of maturity; thirdly, that of decadence. During the first period the influence of the Reformation and Revival of Learning, did much to mould the form and language of the plays. The effect of the Greek and Latin culture which was revived and used at this time was not permanent; as is shown by the various metres used, a perfect, definite style was not formed. The period of maturity was fixed by Marlowe. It was under his influence that the great task of the dramatist was completed - that of truly representing human life. After this, during the third period, the type which had previously been perfected, fell into decadence by the attempts of some minor playwrights to refine and vary it. It is to the first period, that in which the dis-

aces, Moralities, Interludes and the earliest comedies and tragedies were produced, that especial attention is here given.

The English Church greatly opposing the vulgar and horrible plays of the Roman stage, would not receive playwrights or actors upon her lists. But to win the people from the ancient drama, religious plays were given by the laity. The first productions of the ecclesiastical playwrights are known as the Miracle Plays. These Miracle Plays were probably presented before the middle of the thirteenth century. Originally the sacred dramas were written in Latin, but, as they became more popular, the vernacular was substituted for Latin and their scope was broadened until it embraced the whole of the Christian system - from Creation to Judgement. At first the Miracle Plays were written and presented by the priests. Although crude and absurd in detail, the plays were nobly dramatic in both range and spirit. The style of expression was always weak, but the playwright depended upon the actors and the religious faith and feeling of the audience for the effect. It is certain that until fourteen hundred and seventy-five, the priests not only wrote and

compiled the plays, but were the customary actors as well. After that time, players were selected from each craft and every group or guild, as it was called, was responsible for the presentation of a single scene or pageant. The name pageant was first applied to the movable framework which served as stage, but later passed from the scaffold itself to the play exhibited upon it. At first the presentations of the miracles were made in the churches on platforms, usually two, one above the other, built for that purpose. Then they passed from churches to church yards, and then to any convenient vacant square. Finally, they were presented by means of the pageants were used, a single scene being given by each, and then moving on so that the next could be given. In that way, the audience could see the entire cycle from any street.

In the passage from sacred to popular acting houses, the mother tongue was substituted for the Classical language and the miracles became emphatically popular and national. Altho always treating of religious subjects, these plays contained the germ of what was later the Elizabethan drama.

Only three of the English miracle

cycles are still preserved. These are the York Cycle, the Chester Cycle and the Coventry Plays. The York cycle consists of plays skillfully divided into forty-eight pageants. The variety of metre is very striking, and also the arrangement, the measure often changing with a new speaker or emotion. The tone of this cycle is dignified and devout, yet occasionally passages occur of realistic force and vivacity. The Chester cycle has twenty-five pageants, which require three days for their presentation. The Flood pageant and the Nativity scene are among the most interesting of the Miracle plays. The Chester playwright, notwithstanding his hearty realism and love of fun, is not without some sense of spiritual things, and in some places, he, too, is very devout and tender. The plays known as Coventry Mysteries are not proven to be those played at Coventry, but it is probable that they are the same. The three most striking features of the Coventry series are the sobriety of treatment, amounting to dullness; the pronounced morality, and the foreshadowing of the moralities by the introduction of abstract characters. The versification is monotonous and

poetic beauty - almost entirely wanting. This cycle, like the other two mentioned, treats of the Gospels. Of the forty-two pageants, only seven are concerned with the Old Testament. The Gospels, the scarcely more spirited, have the added interest of new material in connection with the Virgin Mary. Apart from the morality features, the Gospel pageants contain little of any importance.

The miracle cycle has for its fundamental material the Christian faith, crudely comprehended, given with startling realism personal embodiment and physical environment. The theme is full of dramatic qualities, for to the medieval writers, the Christian story is frankly and forcibly dramatic; the range is great, since it includes the complete history of God's creation. The language of the miracles is characterized by "a simple grandeur" of framework, visible even thro' the awkward expression. In all the groups, the features are the same. The strife between God and Satan, the birth, life and crucifixion of the Redeemer - closing with the story of the Judgement - are the characteristics of the Mysteries upon which the later Elizabethan drama is founded.

According to various authorities, the Moral Plays were gradually developed from the Miracles, simply from the desire of the people for variety. The tendency was towards lighter and more humorous plays, and these were introduced by selecting some episode of Biblical history and while maintaining some structure as the Miracles, to concentrate the interest on some single personage. But the chief end of the drama was still instruction, and the new plays adapted Allegory and Personification to gain that end. The next step was to combine the Allegorical and scholastic elements, thus forming the Moral plays. Slowly the Moralities grew to have some definite plot, these helping gradually to disengage the Moral plays from the Allegorical setting and to present them in the form of a comedy.

The Morality plays were first given by roving companies on holidays in halls of noblemen, as well as upon open squares of the town. They acquired the subordinate name of "Interlude" from the custom of presenting them between the courses of elaborate banquets: noblemen kept private companies, and gradually the cities began to entertain companies for the

presentation of pageants, masques and plays. Thus the dramatic profession, which only wanted a favorable opportunity to become independent and grow into a national theater, was developed.

The Interlude was the creation of John Heywoods - a genial writer of Catholic faith, his loyalty to which gave a dignity to his character and prepossessed us strongly in his favor. The style of writing is homely, masculine, full of soundness of judgement and good nature. His works are of the purest English style, unmodified by foreign elements. The Interlude was not lasting, however, the Italian and Classical influences being at work upon it to form a new type.

About twenty years after Heywood's most popular Interlude the "Four P's" was written, a new type in shape of a formal comedy was presented. This was a skillful combination of fable and character-delineation, and is best seen in Udall's "Ralph Roister Doister". Udall's construction of a plot was influenced by a certain Latin playwrights, and the same sources gave him the ease of movement and simplicity of diction which make his works

classical. Gradually, the comic scenes of the miracles become detached; and, after passing thro the intermediate stage of the morality, they finally settled into the form of a five-act farce. This style soon became popular, because, aside from appealing to common minds, it dealt with more familiar motives and demanded less of the actors.

After the Revival of Learning in Italy in the fourteenth century, the educated class began the study of Classical writers. This study of Greek and Latin influenced the style of the times, making it more pure, simple and sincere. The plays produced under the influence of the classical style were soon succeeded by those written by Romantic playwrights. This class of writers held that action, rather than ethical meditation and description, was necessary to their art. They saw that the drama must present human life in all possible vigour and variety, - must picture and develop character; and with this instinct of teaching by example, the Romantic poets produced tragedies more worthy of the name than did the Classical writers.

-Of the most popular English tragedies, "Perrex and Porrex" by Sackville and Norton, is of the most value because it is the first play ever written in Blank verse.

The masque was also popular at this time, altho it did not reach the height of its popularity until during the reign of Elizabeth. The masques seem to have originated in the practice of introducing into state processions masked persons, representing fictitious characters. At first the masques were little more than living tableaux; but later they became a sort of private theatrical thus gradually assuming a more strictly dramatic form. The Masque, like the Interlude, was of little importance in itself, yet helped in the preparation of the regular drama which followed.

Between fifteen hundred and eighty-five the year that Shakespere left Stratford-on-Avon for London, and sixteen hundred, the dramatic stage was supplied by Thomas Kyd, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Nash, Robert Greene, George Peele and Christopher Marlowe. Of these dramatists, Marlowe stands apart as a vastly superior genius, the true founder of the drama which Shakespere perfected. Of Kyd's works, very little of any significance is left us. Greene, Peele

nash and Lodge were bound together by ties of personal comradeship and a common spirit, but they submitted to Marlowe's dictatorship. All of them were well educated and of good families, but after taking their degrees, they abandoned their friends to follow their profession, a profession, as is well known, at that time barred them from good society.

Of Greene's works, "Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay" is most popular. Written by a clever story teller, without a high ideal of art or deep insight into character, this play is decidedly interesting. The language is simple, and natural, altho in places it is defaced by the use of flowery phrases which, when used by Greene, are mere bombast.

Peele did the least in the development of the English drama. He wrote in no new vein, his greatest poetical qualification lying in the elegance of his descriptions and his sweetness and tenderness of expression. His plays have simple plots, yet are charming because of the versification.

Of Marlowe, the true creator of English tragedy, much might be said. His name stands second only to that of Shakespeare and

his style is characterized by the freshness, energy and passion of his thoughts. His works were the result of a tremendous poetic force which we should prize highly, for it is this poetic force which made his works immortal. It was under his leadership that the English drama gained its unity and permanence of form. The first of Shakespeare's plays, "Titus Andronicus" was of a new style, full of life and vigor, and took London by storm. The people were ready for it. They were beginning to lose interest in the cold moralities and mysteries and eagerly accepted this new creation. It was written in blank verse, like the first tragedy, "Gorboduc", but the lines were so full of energy and freshness, that it was a complete change from the hard, dull verse used by the earlier writers. Of his later plays, "Dr. Faustus" is thought by many to be his greatest, though "The Jew of Malta", "Edward II" and others were very popular.

The variety of material handled by the playwrights did not affect their principles of treatment. The style of all themes was Romantic, the same liveliness of spirit, disregard of rule and method mark all the English dramas and give to them a unity of tone hitherto lack-

ing. In the Romantic drama, there was a lack of artistic gradation and modulation, a sudden change from good to bad, from love to hate, which is almost incomprehensible to our modern feelings. Long meditations on death and life were given much prominence, but beside this portrayal of the anguish of life, we find also the beauty of nature and dignity of the soul.

The drama had permanent value, because, growing as it did, beneath the patronage of the whole English people, it became a central point, a central heart. At that time, the English cared for no other art, the aesthetic emotions of the people finding expression in poetry. There was no mode of education to be patterned after, thus depriving the poets of all restraint; of all authority but nature; no standard but popular approbation was heeded.

The tone of the drama is manly and wholesome; the moral sense is not offended by hints - what is bad is represented as bad. We are sometimes shocked at the familiar way in which sacred subjects were handled, yet there is very little which is really offensive. Then, too, the utility of the drama as a popular educator

was recognized. Here the people became familiar with Bible history. It was this that encouraged the production of plays. It was here also, that the people first learned to love their sovereign and first became conscious of a deep-seated yearning for freedom. Under the drama, the English language became one conveying exquisite and varied thought. The dramatic gave dignity, melodiousness to it. Above all else, it was this drama that created the great pride of English poetry - blank verse.