

E-contents on Mystery, Miracle, Morality and Interlude

The Mysteries and the Miracles : The mystery or the miracle plays which grew out of the early liturgical drama came into being in the fourteenth century. There is a distinction between the two. The mysteries dealt with subjects taken from the Bible and the miracles with the lives of saints. At the festival of Corpus Christi miracle plays were represented in nearly all great towns in great connected sequences or cycles. These Corpus Christi Plays, or "collective mysteries" exhibited the whole history of the fall of man and his redemption. These plays, which had remained disconnected and heterogenous, were bound together into more or less formal cycles dealing with the main incidents in the Old and the New Testaments and, hence, revealed to the eager crowd the whole story of the world from the creation of Adam to the resurrection of Christ.

A true appreciation of these plays is possible only when we take into consideration contemporary theatre and audience. For staging the liturgical plays in the church some raised platform was employed to raise the actors above the crowd surrounding them. With the elaboration of the cycle of plays such stationary platforms must have become rather cumbersome and inadequate for the performance of various dramas, so that by the fourteenth century we find that the normal theatre was a pageant run on wheels and taken bodily to different stations throughout the town. Crude spectacular effects must have been aimed at. Noah's Ark was certainly in the likeness of a ship and a Dragon's mouth symbolised hell. Costuming, though grotesque and primitive, was an important feature of the performances.

The actors in these plays were all amateurs. The plays and the performances were distinctly the creation of the common people. The audiences were profoundly devout and sincere.

Both seriousness and laughter characterise these plays. Seriousness is represented by the figures of God and his angels, the terrible passion of Christ and His resurrection from the dead. The comic element is revealed through Noah's wife and Satan. They are, indeed, the prototypes of the clown who played a significant role in Shakespearean drama. There is freshness of fancy, a free treatment of material, a rich fund of humour, and at times a true sense of the profound and the tragic.

These plays gave to Englishmen a taste for theatrical shows and prepared the ground for the Elizabethan drama of a later date. In origin the English mystery plays have borrowed much from the French plays of a similar type, but fundamentally they breathed of the native soil.

The performance of the mystery plays was apportioned among the Trading Guilds of the different towns. Four of these cycles have come down to us complete : the Chester Cycle of 25 plays, the Coventry of 42, the Wakefield of 31, and the York of 48.

Moralities and Interludes : In the mystery and miracle, serious and comic elements are interwoven. Now they part. The Morality presents the serious and the Interlude the lighter side of things. The Morality was didactic and dealt in abstractions and allegory. The rise of this form of drama was very natural at a time when allegorical poetry was immensely popular. The characters embodied certain qualities and types—Sin, Grace, Repentance, Perseverance, Seven Deadly Sins, Good and Bad Angels, Everyman etc. Devil held a prominent place in the miracle plays. Vice was introduced as the humorous incarnation of evil and recognised as the fun maker. "He is especially interesting as the direct forerunner of the clown of the Elizabethan Age. Gradually contemporary traits were imparted to the allegorical figures; for example, the Evil counsel in the play called *John, the Evangelist* is a portrait of the Tudor Age. Thus, the writer of Morality plays linked the drama with contemporary reality. The comic scenes in the moralities have in them the germs of that humour which enlivened the Interludes, from which it passed on to the writers of Elizabethan comedy. Rough farce in Bedford's *Wit and Science* is noteworthy. The cardinal feature of nearly all the Moralities was the pursuit of Everyman by Evil and his rescue by Wisdom and Conscience. In Moralities we come across, for the first time, the tragic soul struggle, the secret of progression of character and the delineation of conflicting passions, which became the marked features of Shakespearean tragedy. These plays have also a sense of construction and unity form which distinguish them from the chaotic heterogeneity of the mystery cycles. *Everyman* is considered as the best morality play.

The Interlude was a late product of the dramatic development of Morality play. It flourished about the middle of the sixteenth century. "It had several distinguishing points : it was a short play that introduced real characters, usually of humble rank, such as citizens and friars ; there was an absence of allegorical figures, there was much broad farcical humour; and there were set scenes, a new feature in the English drama." The Interlude was far superior to Morality. John Heywood was the most gifted writer of the Interlude. His *The Four P's* and *Johan Johan* are memorable interludes. Rastell's *A New Interlude* and Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece* and *Calesto Melebea* are remarkable plays of this type. These plays introduce purely secular characteristics for the first time.