

THE PRELUDE TO THE DRAMA—MIRACLE PLAYS AND MORALITIES

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NOWADAYS one does not have to labour the point of the debt which the Fine Arts owe to the Catholic Church for their preservation and, in some cases, even their development, during the period of the collapse of civilization following upon the downfall of the Western Roman Empire. Architecture, Music and Letters especially found refuge with the sons of Saint Benedict. In this connection it is interesting to compare, or rather to contrast, the respective fates of Greek and Latin Letters. The problem at the beginning of the Christian, and more particularly, the Patristic period was the maintenance or prohibition of pagan culture in a Christian *milieu*.¹ The Greek Fathers and ecclesiastics, with a few notable exceptions, such as the Cappadocians, proved much less friendly to pre-Christian Letters than did their Roman confreres. Hence, in the East, there was a period of cultural darkness when even the Greek classics were forgotten: in fact, it required the contact of Byzantine scholars with the fertility of Western and Latin genius in the fifteenth century to bring about a revival. On the other hand, as Professor Rand has pointed out, there was a considerable strain of Humanism in the Latin Fathers which resulted in the preservation of what was best in Roman culture, though Greek literature, slighted as it had been by the later Romans, was, to a large degree, forgotten.

It is striking to note however that dramatic art and literature in the West seems to have died out completely by the fifth or sixth century and that the origins of the modern drama, whatever its later debts may be, owe nothing to antiquity. The reason is not far to seek. Our Western culture is Roman in origin and the Latin dramatic art, as it presented itself to the Church in the third and fourth centuries was not worthy of pres-

¹ Cf. Edward Kennard Rand, *The Founders of the Middle Ages* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1928), Chaps. I-II, for a masterly and sympathetic study of this entire matter.

ervation. The Roman had no appreciation of Greek tragedy; it left him as unmoved as it would the average movie patron of today. The animality of the circus had its counterpart on the stage, which began with cheap comedy and rapidly deteriorated, so that even the nobler pagans deplored its obscenity. Such a drama could have no attraction for the Church, which required that, upon his conversion, an actor must abandon his profession. Pagan Rome had, in fact if not in intention, robbed the Christian of the noble Greek drama and the trash it offered as a substitute was scornfully rejected.² The irruption of the Goths put an end to the theatre of Rome and left little but an occasional troupe of mimes. With them we are not here concerned save that they kept alive the natural instinct for the dramatic.

There is much obscurity as to the origin of miracle plays, the next step in the history of the drama. It is clear, however, that they owe practically nothing to antiquity. It was for long maintained that it is to be sought in the tripartite singing of the Passion during Holy Week. This theory was largely based upon the assumption that such a rendition is of early date and Fr. Herbert Thurston, S.J., asserts that in England, at least, it antedated the Conquest. On the other hand, Karl Young³ holds that the present mode of rendering the Passion goes back only to the fifteenth century and that the signs formerly construed as indicative of a division among cantors are rather to be considered as taken from Notker of Saint Gall's elaborate indications of the various tempi to be used in the chanting of the liturgy. Since the miracle play reached its apogee in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, postulating a considerable anterior development, it seems to the writer, following Young, that the older theory must be abandoned.

It is clear however, and not disputed, that the mediaeval religious and hence modern drama is liturgical in origin. One theory, and that a probable one, attributes it to Tuathal, or Tutilo, a priest of the Irish monastery of Saint Gall in Switzerland, the author of a trope⁴ in the Easter Office, dealing with the dialogue between the Angels and the Three Marys. This trope became dramatic through its fusion with the ceremony of

² Cf. Glenn Hughes, *The Story of the Theatre* (New York, 1928), pp. 78, 83, 88.

³ In a fine study, "Remarks on the mediaeval Passion play," *Publications of the Modern Language Assoc.*, 1910, Vol. 25, pp. 309-54.

⁴ "A Trope is an interpolation in a liturgical text or the embellishment brought about by interpolation." *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XV, "Trope."

the veiling of the cross, on Good Friday. The cross was removed on the Saturday. "On Easter Sunday morning a priest took his place beside the veil which symbolised the Sepulchre. Three other clerics . . . entered the sanctuary, and at their approach, the priest chanted the words of the Angels: *Quem quaeritis in sepulchro?* The clerics answered: *Jesum Nazarenum Crucifixum.* The priest chanted the Gospel response: *Non est hic; resurrexit sicut dixit.* At the same time he drew back the veil to show that the cross was gone. Then, the whole monastic choir took up the triumphant introt: *Resurrexi et adhuc sum tecum!* Thus the trope assumed all the elements of the drama: action, dialogue, characterization and *mise-en-scene*.⁵

Whether or not Tuathal can be so credited, the evidence in favour of attributing to the tropes the origin of the miracle play seems convincing. Two tropes of the Easter liturgy were well known in England before the Conquest,⁶ and hence it may be assumed that even apart from the influence of the Normans, the religious drama would have developed in England.

The miracle play may be considered as the development and enlargement of the dramatic note inherent in the liturgy with its employment of dialogue, symbolic vesture, and symbolic action. Arising from the liturgy it was first performed by ecclesiastics, especially by the Friars,⁷ and in Latin, with the altar or the crib as its background. Gradually, as it developed in detail and widened in scope, it moved to the Church porch, then to the churchyard and finally to the market-place, where arrived it speedily fell into the hands of the laity and especially into those of the guilds. Latin gave way to the vernacular and

⁵ Henry Gaffney, O.P., "The Revival of Catholic Drama," *Irish Rosary*, Aug., 1929, p. 565.

⁶ Legouis and Cazamian, *A History of English Literature* (Newed., New York, 1929). P. 185. Cf. also for the entire subject matter pp. 184-195 and Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-100.

⁷ "They (i.e. miracle plays) were written by all sorts of people, no doubt, but some by monks and nuns, by clerics, by bishops. In the Order of Preachers. . . the same tradition was continuous. Jacopo de Veragine, whose 'Golden Legend' was famous in the Middle Ages, was a dramatist as well as a biographer of the Saints. Again, in Germany, we know of a Dominican play written around the tragedy of the Foolish Virgins, which once so sorely scandalized the Margrave of Erfurt. Indeed, on that very occasion the actors were themselves Dominicans. There were others, too, in France, in Portugal and in Spain. In Ireland and England, though we cannot attribute any play surely to Dominican authorship, we can sometimes trace in them affinities to Dominican teaching which may one day be patient of proof." Bede Jarrett, O.P. *Introd. The Poor Man of Assisi, A Mystery Play*, by Fr. H. Gaffney, O.P. (Dublin, 1926).

humor, sometimes rather broad, gained entrance. Although the English plays are usually called "miracles," it would seem better to call them "mysteries," following the French custom, in accordance with which "miracles" were based upon the life of Our Lady or one of the Saints, while "mysteries" were founded upon the Scriptures. This use of "mysteries" corresponds exactly to its use in regard to the Rosary. The English plays, then, were fundamentally scriptural, a fact which may account in part for the exceptional popularity of the Bible in England even to this day, as well as the great number of scriptural quotations and allusions in use in our everyday speech.

These plays, at first short and isolated treatments of particular phases of scriptural history, came to be assorted into cycles. These were originally compiled in the fourteenth century, but were rearranged, as we now have them, in the fifteenth and sixteenth. Sometimes the cycle covered the entire Bible, as at York on Corpus Christi Day where there were forty-eight plays. As noted above, the exodus from the Church had been accompanied by the transfer of control to the guilds, which divided the plays as appropriately as possible among the crafts. Thus, at York, the Armourers present *The Expulsion from Paradise*, (the flaming sword); the Shipwrights, *The Building of the Ark*; the Fishermen and Mariners, *The Flood*; while the Goldsmiths are responsible for *The Adoration of the Magi*, and so forth. The best known play of the Coventry cycle,⁸ itself the best known of the English cycles, that dealing with the Nativity, in which the Shepherds and the Magi have a predominant rôle, was performed, appropriately, by the Shearmen and Tailors. It is not improbable that Shakespeare, himself a Warwickshireman, may have seen the Coventry cycle—it will be remembered that Bottom, in *Midsummer Nights Dream*, was a weaver.

Of the popularity of the English miracle play from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century there can be little doubt. Chaucer, in *The Miller's Tale*, tells us that Absolon the merry clerk

"Sometye to showe his lightnesse and maisstyre
He playeth Herodes on a scaffold hye."

⁸ This play, somewhat modernized and adapted, was presented by the Harvard Dramatic Club in December, 1922, and was so successful that an annual production of an adapted miracle play resulted. As a result a volume of ten plays thoroughly representative of the miracle play of Europe was compiled under the title *The Harvard Dramatic Club Miracle Plays* (New York, 1928) which have been so arranged and adapted as to be most useful for amateur dramatics.

and the Miller himself was well versed in Noah's quarrels with his wife, always one of the most human and amusing scenes in the Flood plays. Langland himself shows the influence of the miracle play, casting more than one of the scenes of *Piers Plowman* in that mould. Besides the York and Coventry cycles, those of Chester and Woodkirk Abbey near Wakefield, (known as the Towneley plays) are extant as well as parts of those of Digby, Newcastle, and Dublin, but there are at least a score of towns whose cycles have been lost. While the miracle plays were more popular and more artistic and literary in England than on the Continent and enjoyed a longer existence, they represent a type of drama common to Western Europe in the later Middle Ages and many of the Continental plays are still extant.⁹

Space does not permit of more than a brief mention of the "morality," the second step in the drama, the connecting link with the modern stage. "Later born than the mysteries, which are a product of the epical period of the Middle Ages, the moralities are the product of the allegorical period. . . . For the characters of sacred history they substitute abstractions, vices or virtues . . . they have a more intellectual character. While a miracle play is essentially a spectacle, appealing primarily to the sight, a morality demands greater attention to the spoken word. Its text is more important than its scenery.¹⁰ While it is less vivid than the miracle play and, to a certain degree, cold and artificial, it marks an advance in dramatic art, for with it commences that analysis of character, that conflict of emotions and ideas which is at the basis of the modern drama. That the "morality" is not without its appeal to the modern mind is proved by its successful revival in recent years.

Such is the mediaeval drama, too long confined to the scholar and pedant. It provides a vast unquarried store where the modern seeking a religious drama can find a plentiful supply for use either in its original form, with only such modification as is absolutely imperative to give it appeal, or as a groundwork for drama in a more modern style.

Of recent years there has been a considerable revival in religious drama. In most cases this has taken the form of plays of modern construction and character with a plot hinging upon

⁹ Eight of these, cut and adapted for modern presentation, can be found in the Harvard volume mentioned above.

¹⁰ Legouis and Cazamian, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

some scriptural or ecclesiastical character or story.¹¹ The success of *Everyman* when revived some years ago, on the other hand, proved that the older dramatic forms were not without their appeal. Henri Ghéon, one of France's finest poets, has done much in reviving this form, as far as possible according to the mediaeval norms. Fr. Gaffney, O.P., whose work for the religious drama in Ireland is outstanding, however, feels that there should be a much more modern note if the religious drama is to succeed and his own excellent plays have a distinctly modern *cachet*. In our own country, Fr. Daniel Lord, S.J., who has been so successful in this field, seems to hold an intermediate position, due to his greater use of the pageant form, though his productions are moralities rather than mysteries. To the writer, in view of the success of M. Ghéon in France and of the Harvard Miracle Plays in the United States, it would seem that there is ample scope for both, provided, as in the Harvard revival, though not quite as thoroughly, the older plays are somewhat modernized.

As to the value of the religious drama in Catholic Action, the words of Fr. Gaffney, *mutatis mutandis*, are applicable even in the United States. "The impression which they (simple episodic plays representing the lives of the Saints) create is lasting and vivid. One virile drama, based upon the life of an Irish saint, will be found to be a more vigorous force than many sermons in reforming a degenerate pattern. . . .¹² One would like to see in this country for example, a dramatic representation, in the form of the ancient mysteries, presented annually at Auriesville, N. Y., in honour of the Jesuit martyrs. The same could be done profitably in connection with the Franciscans of the Southwest and of California¹³ and there is a golden opportunity for some mediaevalist dramatist in the forthcoming Maryland tercentenary. We need something more vital than mere pageantry, more beautiful and intense than mere spoken drama, but it will require not only the consecrated love of beauty of the Middle Ages, but, and chiefly, their faith and their self-sacrifice.

¹¹ A fine example of this is to be found in *Barter* by Urban Nagle, O.P., reviewed in this issue.

¹² *Irish Rosary Aug.*, 1929, p. 571.

¹³ Mention should be made of the Mission Play of John Steven McGroarty presented annually since 1912 at San Gabriel, California. This is in pageant form.