

And the whole ceremony ended with the ringing out of the bells and the singing of the Te Deum.

Now it is important to note that the dialogue is taken directly from the Latin of the Vulgate, so that all that we have in addition to the narrative of the Gospel is dramatic action or mime. But little though the addition is, its impact upon an audience, the greater part of which could neither read nor write must have been great. And here we have the original purpose of the English Drama which was to impart a greater sense of intimacy and reality to the Old and New Testaments to those who could neither read nor understand them.

What was done with the story of the Resurrection was eventually done to the Creation, the Flood, the Nativity and the Ascension until all the major incidents of biblical history were dramatised.

The development of this liturgical drama as it is called covered a period of some hundreds of years and there is neither the space nor the time to trace it with any degree of detail. I must move on to the time when the development reached its highest peak, i.e., when the liturgical drama passed out of the hands of the Church into those of the great craft guilds of the Middle Ages.

During the fourteenth century an event took place which was to have a profound influence upon English life, and which was to prove important in the development of English drama. This event was the confirmation by the Pope of the feast of Corpus Christi which was fixed to take place, as it still does on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. During this feast, at which the consecrated Host is carried in great pomp through the streets, the Church, the people and the civic authorities assemble together to join in common celebration. It was but natural therefore that this festival should have been chosen during the fourteenth century as the season most proper for the performance of the liturgical or mystery plays by the guilds who had by that time become largely responsible for the staging and acting of them. It was during this period that the mystery plays reached their highest point of organisation and were gathered together as complete cycles of plays.

The mystery cycle of the fourteenth century set out to represent in dramatic form the history of the world from the Creation to the Day of Judgment. The plays varied somewhat in length but the average time taken to play each one would have been about a half an hour. The method adopted in staging and performing the plays was as follows:—

Each craft guild of the town was made responsible for the production of one play which included the stage, the costume and the equipment. The stage, which was built on a cart so that it could be hauled through the streets, had two compartments, an upper and a lower, the former being used for the major part of the performance and the latter, which was curtained, being used as a dressing room. The play to be performed would be allotted to the guild by the civic authority who had the power to impose a fine on any guild failing to render an accurate performance on the appointed day.

To give you some idea of the nature of the plays and the conditions governing their performance I will quote the beginning of the list of York Plays as compiled by Roger Burton, town clerk of that city in 1415:—

1. The Company of Tanners.—God the Father Almighty creating and forming the heavens, angels and arch-angels, Lucifer and the angels that fell with him to hell.
2. The Company of Plasterers.—God the Father, in His own substance, creating the earth and all which is therein, by the space of five days.
3. The Company of Cardmakers.—God the Father creating Adam of the clay of the earth, and making Eve of Adam's rib, and inspiring them with the breath of life.

4. The Company of Fullers.—God forbidding Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of life.

You will see that collectively the plays form a continuous narrative, and it is thus that they were presented to the people. On the appointed day the carts would go out in their proper order, moving to their appointed stations in the streets, so that a company of people remaining at one station would see the whole cycle performed.

Now in attempting to assess the significance of these mystery plays in the life of the community it is important to bear in mind that the Church itself played a far greater part in the everyday lives of people than it does today. The Church of the fourteenth century was more than a centre and directive of religious worship. It was the hub of everyday life and the chief vehicle of human expression and education. If it had its solemnities and austerities, which went far beyond anything imagined today, it also allowed for a much wider field of thought and feeling. Thus the mason carving the corbels for his village church or even for a cathedral would not hesitate to give vent to his sense of humour if he felt so inclined. A comical face might be a satirical caricature of his master mason or of the lord of the manor, or it might be done simply for the sake of fun. He was probably a devout enough man but he was quite prepared to introduce a mundane element into his religious house. We have precisely the same thing in these mystery plays. They express devotion without doubt and frequently in passages of exquisite beauty, but interwoven with them is an honest humour which has ever been one of the best characteristics of our race. Thus we find one of the shepherds in a play of the Nativity poking fun at the lot of the married man, while another grouches about the unjust treatment of the paid worker. In the Noah plays Noah's wife is a consistently humorous figure, making fun of her husband's fears, refusing to enter the Ark when the time comes for her to do so unless she is allowed to take her gossips with her and delivering her husband a sound smack in the ear when he has her brought into the Ark by force. And on the Day of Judgement the devils who fetch the wicked come into the street to chase members of the onlooking crowd.

Nor was the humour confined to the plays themselves. We find an outstanding sense of irony in the allocation of the plays to certain companies of craftsmen. For instance, in one case the Noah play is given to the Water Drawers of the Dee, and in another to the Company of Fishmongers. Elsewhere The Harrowing of Hell is considered the rightful work of the Company of Cooks, while at York the turning of the water into wine is given to the vintners.

It was this native humour and ready sense of irony in the mystery plays which really formed the foundation of English Drama. Noah's wife, the shepherds and the devils with a personal sense of fun all their own are all humorous criticisms of life as current today on the stages of the theatre and the music hall and on the radio as they were in fourteenth century England.

Had the mystery play not left the precincts of the Church the story may well have been different. In the hands of the craft guilds the mystery play became a community affair just as the building and the upkeep of a parish church was a community affair, and history teaches us that the drama really flourishes only when it is in the hands of the community as a whole, provided of course that the community be a wholesome one.

#### Festival of Britain

OUR READERS will be interested to know that, in connection with the Festival of Britain, our Lecturer, Mr. Francis Edwards is organising a Corpus Christi play to be produced by the Surrey Community Players in the Reigate Priory Courtyard on May 19th and 26th at 5.25 p.m. and 7 p.m.

Tickets, price 2/6 each, may be obtained on application to Messrs. John Nicol Ltd., Station Road, Redhill.

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