



## EVOLUTION OF DRAMA IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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### Abstract

Drama that we are acquainted with today is drastically different from that of medieval times. There were mainly four different genres of drama prevailed from 9th century to mid-16th century: Mystery plays, Miracle plays, Morality plays and Interludes. Other than Interludes, rest all are religious or biblical infused more with didactic elements than entertainment. Plays were the only alternative for spectators to have any kind of amusement during those times so people used to crowd whenever any little entertainment was available. These medieval forms of drama paved the way for secular drama prevailed during Shakespeare's times. Beginning with Christopher Marlowe, they had some sort of influence or the other over each and every playwright of those times. It is assumed that Shakespeare must have watched at least one such a play before he became a playwright himself. Interestingly, these plays are still performed not only in Britain but also in many parts of the world today. The objective of this paper is to explore how drama developed in the UK in due course.

**Keywords:** Mystery plays, Miracle plays, Morality plays, Interludes, Elizabethan drama

### Mystery Plays

Christianity arrived in England by 597 A.D. So by the time Norman Conquest happened in 1066 A.D., England was already a Christian nation. Mystery plays, earliest genre of drama, could be traced in the history of English literature as early as 9<sup>th</sup> century and were widespread during 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. An example for mystery play during 10<sup>th</sup> century was *Quem Quaeritis?* (Whom do you seek?) which leveraged a scope for dialogue between the angel guarding the tomb of Christ and the women in search of his body. The term 'mystery play' originates from Latin word "mysterium" meaning craft or handicraft. Mystery plays largely relied on biblical stories such as *Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Last Judgement* etc., often

performed days together in cycles by craft guilds. They were generally written in elaborate stanza forms to be performed by both professionals and amateurs.

Before John Wycliffe translated Bible from Latin into English in 1382, Bible was hardly accessible to any common man in England. Latin was the language of theology hence was the script of Bible during medieval times. During those times, except clergy men and noble families, majority of English men were illiterates. As though it is not sufficient, Bible was available only in Latin. Because of these reasons, clergy took the onus of preaching the Bible to commoners by enacting stories from the Bible initially in the church premises. As the number of audience increased, venue had to move outdoors

where crowd could gather comfortably and watch. Afterwards pageants, a sort of travelling drama companies, emerged to perform plays at different locations. Though mystery plays were initiated by clergy, they ended up in the hands of guilds for the reason that the Edict 1210 excluded all the clergymen from performing in mystery plays. This brought lot many changes in the way mystery plays were carried forward. Hereafter guilds started taking up the responsibility of organising mystery plays in vernacular tongue, adding some comic dialogues to the original stories from the Bible, allowing the participation of both professionals and amateurs.

There are nearly four complete English biblical collections of plays referred to as 'cycles': Coventry cycle of two pageants, Chester cycle of twenty-four pageants, Towneley or Wakefield cycle of thirty-two pageants and York cycle of forty-eight pageants. These mystery plays would cover almost all the episodes in the Bible beginning with the *Fall of Lucifer* to the *Last Judgement*; in between there would be episodes of *Creation and Fall of Man*, *Cain and Abel*, *Abraham and Isaac*, *Noah and the Flood*, *Moses*, *The Nativity*, *Christ's Baptism*, *Temptation in the Wilderness*, *Rising of Lazarus*, *The Passion*, and *Resurrection of Christ*. Though these plays were getting sponsored by medieval craft guilds, not all guilds were sponsoring all kinds of plays. They were sponsoring the plays that suited their trade: the *Five Loaves and Fishes* miracle from the bakers, the *building of the Ark* from the carpenters' guild, the *Visit of the Magi with their offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh* from the goldsmiths, and the *Doomsday pageant* from the York mercers.

Mystery plays are performed even today across the United Kingdom and in some other parts of the world. Both York cycle and Chester cycle were revived in 1951 and are still performed by the local guilds during festive seasons in Britain. The N-Town cycle was revived as the Lincoln mystery plays in 1978. Revived in 1994, The Lichfield Mystery Plays acquired popularity as the most eventful theatre in the UK presently. It is obvious that the drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods emerged out of mystery plays.

#### Miracle Plays

Although the terms 'mystery plays' and 'miracle plays' are often used interchangeably, these two genres could be distinguished for they use different materials for the purpose. While mystery plays were mostly based on stories from the Bible, miracle plays had saints' lives as their theme. Miracle plays were being enacted during medieval period across 40 districts of England by trading guilds promoted by four major companies which would run these plays in cycles.

Practice of using Biblical figures in plays started as early as 10<sup>th</sup> century and they acquired the name "tropes" which continued to evolve into proper dramatic performances until 14<sup>th</sup> century. These tropes were the major source for miracle plays. Like mystery plays, tropes too were written in Latin and performed by the clergy initially. In due course, Latin was replaced by English and plays were performed by craft guilds. Each guild performed a separate play on a two-tired, horse-drawn platform called a *pageant*. The lower level of the pageant, curtained from the audience's view, was used as a dressing room; the upper as a stage. On the day of a performance, audience would assemble at several locations about town. The guilds would move their pageants from place to place, performing once for each audience. Manuscripts are available even today for most of the cycles of plays performed in the English towns of Chester, Wakefield and York.

While mystery plays use biblical stories as their material, a miracle play focuses on authentic or fictitious account of the life, miracles, or a martyrdom of a saint. For this reason, a miracle play is also named as Saint's play. St. Mary and Saint Nicholas, the 4<sup>th</sup>-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, were the best miracle plays to show the greatness of sainthood and martyrdom. Both of them were believed to have healing powers. Miracle plays were developed during 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries to provide a supplement to mystery plays. They were popular in England from 12<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. By 13<sup>th</sup> century, they were freed from all kinds of biblical elements and moved out of church premises to be performed at public festivals. Most of the miracle plays were destroyed or lost due to the ban imposed by Henry VIII during mid-16<sup>th</sup>

century nevertheless some miracle plays still exist today.

Surprisingly, authorship of any mystery or miracle play is unknown. It is even difficult to find out a date of the publication of any play. As miracle plays were being performed mostly in the towns of York, Chester and Wakefield, people knew them as Chester miracle plays, Wakefield miracle plays etc rather than by the name of the author. These cycles would continue to be played for 12-14 days during which merchants, tradesmen, commoners would avail a day off from their work. History tells us that these cycles were in existence during Shakespeare's time and he drew lot of material for his stage craft. Every big town had its own body of miracle plays, known as a 'cycle' performed once a year to celebrate a religious holiday, usually *Corpus Christi*. Any cycle of plays would cover complete story such as the *Christ's life*.

#### Morality Plays

Morality plays came into existence in the latter part of 14<sup>th</sup> century and continued to appear until mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. They served as a connecting factor between the medieval drama and Elizabethan drama. Popularity of these plays declined gradually after mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Biblical stories and biblical characters are backbone for mystery plays and saints' lives for miracle plays. In morality plays, abstract characters, virtues and vices play the role of characters in the personification of Good Deeds, Gluttony, Pride, Temperance, Faith, Charity, Truth, Mercy, Justice, Vice etc. Morality plays were not all about morality; lot of immorality was getting celebrated in these plays. These morality plays helped audience to come out of boredom caused by both mystery and miracle plays which were didactic and moralistic in nature. The sole aim of morality plays is to save the soul of a man from the vices and help him seek the salvation. In this process, virtues and vices clash with one another. Personifications of virtues and vices made their way even into the Elizabethan drama as may be found in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

By the time morality plays were introduced in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, people had a belief that they had a certain amount of control over their post-

death fate while they were on earth. This belief of people resulted in evolution of morality plays having a protagonist representing humanity or society as a whole supported by personifications of good or evil. This entire drama provides a moral to audience at the end of the play that might help them lead good life thereby achieving salvation. In any morality play, elements of both good and evil find a place for themselves. In most of morality plays, evil is focussed more than good. Main objective of morality play is to warn audience of evil thoughts and behaviour.

The best example for morality play is *Everyman* of 15<sup>th</sup> century which has summoning of everyman by Death as its subject. This is the archetypal morality play which lays emphasis more on good than on evil. Some characters in this play that represent good are God, Good-deeds, Angel, Knowledge, Beauty, Discretion, Strength etc. Moral of this play is only people who upheld values would be allowed to reach God. The play reminds us that God is more powerful than anybody else and he is the one who decides our fate after death depending on the deeds we had in our lives. This play is also a kind of warning to the people who crave for money, neglecting the God. Such people would be punished severely in hell. Two more examples for morality plays besides *Everyman* can be *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Mankind*. These plays exhibit true qualities of a morality play.

#### Interludes

Interludes started appearing in the middle of 16<sup>th</sup> century causing transition from morality plays to Tudor dramas. With Interludes, true foundation for English drama was laid during 1550s. They were performed by professional actors or amateurs at court, mostly between two acts of a serious play to provide witty entertainment to audience. Unlike the pageants, interludes were performed indoors essentially for aristocrats at banquets in their homes. Duration of an interlude was very short focusing on topical issues of the day.

This was the time when renaissance was spreading across Europe. Henry VIII was also about to establish Church of England after his split with the Pope Clement VII. Interludes were mostly used as a

mask to criticize religion or politics or public officials under allegorical names. Since they were fun-oriented, they were even considered as secular farces. Being nonreligious in nature most of the times, an interlude used to be introduced as filler than as a main part of an entertainment. The earl of Essex owned a company of interlude players in 1468 leading to the establishment of first royal company in 1493.

John Heywood, one of the most famous interlude writers in the first half of 16<sup>th</sup> century, perfected the genre of Interlude in his *The Play of the Wether* (1533), *The Merry Play between John John the Husband, Tib his Wife, and Sir John, the Priest* (1533) and *The Playe Called the Foure P.P.* (c. 1544). Both abstract characters and didacticism disappeared completely from the sphere of English drama with the arrival of interludes. Hereafter human beings would play the role of every character on the stage and genuine English comic spirit was revived with a break after Chaucer.

#### Elizabethan Drama

Although comedy of Plautus and Terence and tragedies of Seneca influenced English drama initially a lot, England started developing its own kind of drama with native elements. *Ralph Roister Doister* (1551) written by Nicholas Udall, headmaster of Eton, one of the most ancient public schools in Britain, is considered as the first English comedy. There is another English comic play titled *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1575) which showcases English life of 16<sup>th</sup> century.

By the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, Oxford and Cambridge universities were developed into centres of excellence where plays of Latin and Greek were imitated. Exactly during this time, Thomas Sackville and Norton together produced the first English tragedy *Gorboduc* (1562) in Senecan lines. Though some classical elements crept into *Gorboduc*, it appreciably deviated from the classical theme. This was followed by many more experiments by Elizabethan playwrights in the second half of 16<sup>th</sup> century. They started deviating from classical principles of drama laid by Aristotle and Seneca. They could mix up both comic and tragic elements in a single play; they gave more priority for action on

the stage; they did not even observe three unities suggested by Aristotle: *Unity of Action*, *Unity of Time* and *Unity of Place*. This is quite visible in the plays of Shakespeare and his co-playwrights. For English drama to evolve fully, it took nearly seven centuries i.e. from 9<sup>th</sup> century to 16<sup>th</sup> century.

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