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MEDIEVAL ENGLISH DRAMA

In this article we have focused on medieval English drama. The study explores the appearance and development of this phenomenon. It has been investigated that religious services gave way to the development of drama. During the 14-15 th centuries drama was at its peak. There were no permanent theatres and performances were in the centre of public attention. They were based on Bible and dramatized on significant Christian holidays. At first the church and clergy were responsible for theatrical productions which were staged indoors. Then the town and guilds took the responsibility for performances which were dramatized outdoors. The plays were called cycle plays consisting of numerous short plays which were dedicated to certain episodes or a cluster of related episodes from Bible. The plays were staged in different ways – on fixed platforms, in the round or on movable wagons. Gradually not only men took part in performances but also women were allowed to act. After moving outside the plays received some theatrical elements like comic effect and closeness to public. Liturgical drama was church performance fully subordinated to the liturgy. It depicted selected events from the Old or New Testament, connected mainly with Christmas and Resurrection. Miracle play presented an account of the life, miracles, or martyrdom of a saint. Most surviving miracle plays concern either the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas, the 4th-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. Mystery plays were based on stories from the Bible. Each Mystery play was a single episode such as the Fall of Lucifer, Noah's Flood or the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Together they formed The Mystery Cycle, which told the story of Christianity from Creation to the Last Judgment. Morality plays gave their audience a moral lesson through dramatic action that is allegorical.

Key words: medieval drama, liturgical drama, mystery play, miracle play, morality play.

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АНГЛІЙСЬКА СЕРЕДНЬОВІЧНА ДРАМА

У цій статті сфокусовано увагу на англійській середньовічній драмі. Досліджено, що релігійні служіння спричинили появу драми, розквіт якої припадає на 14-15 століття. Як наслідок, виникли такі різновиди англійської середньовічної драми, як: літургійна драма, містерія, міраклі та мораліте.

У дослідженні описано властиві їм характеристики та згадано найвидатніші зразки цих п'єс.

Ключові слова: середньовічна драма, літургійна драма, містерія, міраклі, мораліте.

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АНГЛИЙСКАЯ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВАЯ ДРАМА

В этой статье сконцентрировано внимание на английской средневековой драме. Исследовано, что религиозные служения стали причиной появления драмы, расцвет которой выпал на 14-15 столетия. Как следствие, возникли такие разновидности английской средневековой драмы, как: литургийная драма, мистерия, мираклі и мораліте. В исследовании описаны характерные для них особенности и самые известные образцы этих пьес.

Ключевые слова: средневековая драма, литургийная драма, мистерия, мираклі, мораліте.

This article deals with medieval theatre concentrating on the development of medieval English drama. The aim of the study is to research and compare various types of medieval English drama, namely liturgical drama; morality, miracle and mystery plays. The object of the study is medieval drama. Its subject is peculiar features of drama.

The medieval period in Europe (A.D. 476-1500) began with the collapse of Rome, a calamity of such magnitude that the years between then and the beginning of the Crusades in 1095 have been traditionally, if erroneously, called the Dark Ages. Historians used this term to refer to their lack of knowledge about a time in which no great central powers organized society or established patterns of behaviour and standards in the arts [3, p. 143].

Drama, or at least records of it, all but disappeared. The major institution to profit from the fall of the Roman Empire was the Roman Catholic Church, which in the ninth and tenth centuries enjoyed considerable power and influence. Many bishops considered drama a godless activity, a distraction from the piety that the church demanded of its members. During the great age of cathedral building and the great ages of religious painting and religious music from the seventh century to the thirteenth drama was not officially approved. Therefore, it is a striking irony that the rebirth of drama in the Western world should have taken place in the heart of the monasteries, developing slowly and inconspicuously until it outgrew its beginnings [3, p. 143].

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – the heyday of medieval drama – permanent theatres did not exist anywhere in England or on the continent. Yet in medieval communities throughout England and Europe, theatrical productions commanded much public attention. Drama held a privileged place in the culture of those late medieval communities because most of their plays were expressions of religious belief, and most of their productions were occasioned by religious events. Cities and towns all over England and everywhere in Europe dramatized episodes from the Old and New Testaments, from the Apocrypha, and from saints' lives to

celebrate sacred events in the Christian calendar. The most popular occasion was the Feast of Corpus Christi, which took place eight and one-half weeks after Easter [5, p. 159].

During the tenth and eleventh centuries, when religious drama was just beginning to develop, biblical episodes were staged indoors exclusively, in cathedrals and monasteries. But by the beginning of the thirteenth century, there had been productions outside the church as well as inside of it. Authority over productions of the plays then passed from the church to the town. Theatrical productions became a very public and communal activity, involving townspeople and clergy alike. In England town councils commissioned new plays and revision of old ones, selected plays to be performed, scheduled performances, assigned individual plays to the various guilds, set standards for production and even levied fines for inferior productions. Each guild took care of all the other arrangements for the play it had been assigned by the council: directing, staging, costuming, rehearsing and acting [5, pp. 159-160].

As medieval communities grew and prospered, so did religious plays. Whether they encompassed the entire biblical history of the world from creation to the last judgment, as they usually did in England, or whether they were restricted to the life of Christ, as was customary in France, they were almost always encyclopedic. They are often called cycle plays – they consisted of numerous short plays (called pageants), each devoted to a separate episode or cluster of related episodes from biblical, apocryphal, or saintly experience. The length of cycles varied according to the resources of the towns where they were produced. Of the four surviving English cycles, the shortest from the city of Chester comprises twenty-four individual pageants; Wakefield's contains thirty-two; the N-Town cycle (possibly performed in Lincolnshire or Norfolk) has forty-three pageants; and the longest from York has forty-eight, although with additions and revisions may have even contained fifty-seven [5, p. 160].

Late medieval communities were able and eager to put on extraordinary theatrical productions, using a variety of theatrical structures. Some communities staged their cycles on fixed platforms, others in the round, and others on movable wagons. But all the methods embodied the same conception of theatrical space and movement that had governed the earlier staging of plays within the church. They all combined a neutral acting area with a group of set-like structures known as «mansions» (literally, dwelling places), and as the action moved from one mansion or specific locale to the next, the acting area was understood to be an extension of one location and then another [5, p. 160].

Each mansion represented a building or physical place known to the audience. The tradition of moving from mansion to mansion inside the church carried over into the performances that took place later outside the church. Instead of mansions, wagons with raised stages provided the playing areas. Usually, the wagons remained stationary and the audience moved from one to another. During the guild cycles the pageants would move; the performers would give their plays at several locales so that many people could see them. [3, pp. 147-148].

A pageant cart could also be simply a flat surface drawn on wheels that had a wagon next to it; these structures touched on their long side. In some cases a figure could descend from an upper area as if from the clouds, or actors could descend from the pageants onto the audience's level to enact a descent into an underworld. The stage was, then, a raised platform visible to the audience below [3, p. 148].

A curtain concealed a space, inside or below the wagon, for changing costumes. The actors used costumes and props, sometimes very elaborate and expensive. Between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries, a number of theatrical effects were developed to please a large audience. For instance, in the morality and mystery plays the devils were often portrayed as frightening, grotesque, and sometimes even comic figures. They became crowd pleasers. A sensational element was developed in some of the plays in the craft cycles, especially those about the lives of the saints and martyrs, in which there were plenty of chances to portray horrifying tortures. The prop that seems to have pleased the most audiences was a complex machine known as the Mouth of hell or «Hell mouth,» usually a large fish shaped orifice from which smoke and explosions, fuelled by gunpowder, belched constantly [3, p. 148].

Because the stage often used public spaces, the boundaries between the actor and the audience are not clearly defined. Veltrusky says that that the boundaries were «coextensive» with the existing social structure of the given place (9). The acting place in a church was the space before the altar, but in the street or in the hall it had to be created by the actors. Those fragile boundaries, the fact that the actor and the audience share the same space, together with the fact that the performance took place in the daylight create the theatrical circumstances typical for medieval theatre [2, p.13].

In the early days of liturgical drama, the actors in the tropes were monks and choirboys, and in the mystery plays they were drawn from the guilds. At first all the actors were male, but records show that eventually women took important roles. The demands of more sophisticated plays encouraged the development of a kind of professionalism, although it seems unlikely that players in the cycles could have supported themselves exclusively on their earnings. Special skills became essential for the design and operation of complex stage machines and for the performance of acrobatics that were expected of certain characters, such as devils. As actors developed facility in delivering lines and as writers found ways to incorporate more challenging elements in their plays, professionalism no doubt arose, even if actors and writers had few opportunities to earn a living on the stage [3, p. 149].

Since plays were not all the same length, playing times would necessarily vary, and in the intervals between plays, audience members might go off in search of food or drink, or perhaps even follow the wagon on to the next playing station and watch a favourite play again [5, p. 162].

The liturgical drama was one of the dramatic-and-theatrical genres of the Middle Ages. Together with mystery, miracle and morality plays, it formed the basis for modern theatre; at the same time, as a musical phenomenon, it constituted an important stage in the development of musical drama. The term «liturgical drama» was used for the first time in the 19th century by F. Clement and E. de Coussemaker, and soon afterwards it gained widespread popularity and was common worldwide in literature about the theatre. The term is usually understood to encompass such church performances which, on the one hand, already fell within the drama convention and, on the other, were still fully subordinated to the liturgy. Such performances depicted selected events from the Old or New Testament, connected mainly with the two most important incidents in Christ's life: Christmas and Resurrection [10, p.1].

Apart from the Holy Scripture, other sources of inspiration such as sermons, legends or apocrypha, were also used. These half-spoken, half-sung forms were partly taken from the liturgical forms common in church services (responsories, verses, antiphons, hymns and sequences) and partly specially created to meet the needs of the drama (tropes); they were sung, more rarely spoken, in Latin. The subordination of the drama to the liturgy meant that they were performed at a strictly defined time and place, and that

their duration was also subject to restrictions. In their classic form, such dramas had 15-100 lines each, which translated into 10-20 minutes' worth of performance time. Performers included priests, sometimes clerics, monks or *schola cantorum* students. All of them made free use of mimic, gesture and the so-called stage movement. Liturgical vestments and objects functioned as theatrical costumes and props, and performances were staged exclusively in churches [10, p.1].

In the 14th century guilds presented an extended series of the plays, a series which together contained the essential substance of the Christian story, and therefore of the Christian faith. The Church generally still encouraged attendance, and not only did all the townspeople join wholeheartedly, but from all the country round the peasants flocked in. On one occasion the Pope promised the remission of a thousand days of purgatory to all persons who should be present at the Chester plays, and to this exemption the bishop of Chester added sixty days more. The list of plays thus presented commonly included: The Fall of Lucifer; the Creation of the World and the Fall of Adam; Noah and the Flood; Abraham and Isaac and the promise of Christ's coming; a Procession of the Prophets, also foretelling Christ; the main events of the Gospel story, with some additions from Christian tradition; and the Day of Judgment. Generally each play was presented by a single guild (though sometimes two or three guilds or two or three plays might be combined), and sometimes, though not always, there was a special fitness in the assignment, as when the watermen gave the play of Noah's Ark or the bakers that of the Last Supper. In this connected form the plays are called the Mystery or Miracle Cycles. In many places, however, detached plays, or groups of plays smaller than the full cycles, continued to be presented at one season or another [1].

Each cycle as a whole has a natural epic unity, centring about the majestic theme of the spiritual history and the final judgment of all Mankind. But unity both of material and of atmosphere suffers not only from the diversity among the separate plays but also from the violent intrusion of the comedy and the farce which the coarse taste of the audience demanded. Sometimes, in the later period, altogether original and very realistic scenes from actual English life were added, like the very clever but very coarse parody on the Nativity play in the «Towneley» cycle. More often comic treatment was given to the Bible scenes and characters themselves. Noah's wife, for example, came regularly to be presented as a shrew, who would not enter the ark until she had been beaten into submission; and Herod always appears as a blustering tyrant, whose fame still survives in a proverb of Shakespeare's coinage—«to out-Herod Herod.» [1].

The plays were always composed in verse. The stanza forms employed differ widely even within the same cycle, since the single plays were very diverse in both authorship and dates. The quality of the verse, generally mediocre at the outset, has often suffered much in transmission from generation to generation. In other respects also there are great contrasts; sometimes the feeling and power of a scene are admirable, revealing an author of real ability, sometimes there is only crude and wooden amateurishness. The medieval lack of historic sense gives to all the plays the setting of the authors' own times; Roman officers appear as feudal knights; and all the heathens (including the Jews) are Saracens, worshippers of «Mahound» and «Termagaunt»; while the good characters, however long they may really have lived before the Christian era, swear stoutly by St. John and St. Paul and the other medieval Christian divinities. The frank coarseness of the plays is often merely disgusting, and suggests how superficial, in most cases, was the medieval religious sense. With no thought of incongruity, too, these writers brought God the Father onto the stage in bodily form, and then, attempting in all sincerity to show him reverence, gilded his face and put into his mouth long speeches of exceedingly tedious declamation. The whole emphasis, as generally in the religion of the times, was on the fear of hell rather than on the love of righteousness. Yet in spite of everything grotesque and inconsistent, the plays no doubt largely fulfilled their religious purpose and exercised on the whole an elevating influence. The humble submission of the boy Isaac to the will of God and of his earthly father, the yearning devotion of Mary the mother of Jesus, and the infinite love and pity of the tortured Christ himself, must have struck into even callous hearts for at least a little time some genuine consciousness of the beauty and power of the finer and higher life. A literary form which supplied much of the religious and artistic nourishment of half a continent for half a thousand years cannot be lightly regarded or dismissed [1].

Only five medieval English morality plays survive: *The Pride of Life*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom*, *Mankind* and *Everyman*. Medieval morality plays not only served as entertainment, but they also served as life lessons for the audience. According to Potter: «in style, they are presentational; in setting, they are microcosmic analogies; in the originating circumstances of their performance, they are communal calls to repentance» [7, p. 32]. These morality plays give examples of repentance and directly convey this to an audience. Potter explains further: «the speaker emphasizes that the events are contemporary rather than historical – they are occurring (as indeed they were, on stage) here and now» [7, p. 32]. While watching a morality play, «members of the audience are not so much asked to suspend their disbelief, as invited by the actors to participate in a theatrical analogy» (7). Unlike many contemporary theatrical plays, a morality play invites the audience to think of their own actions, because the characters are ultimately not actual characters, they all represent abstract religious or moral concepts [8, p.15].

The plays offer their audiences moral instruction through dramatic action that is broadly allegorical. Hence they are set in no time, or outside historical time, though their lack of historical specificity is generally exploited by strategically collapsing the eternal with the contemporary. The protagonist is generally a figure of all men, reflected in his name, Everyman or Mankind, and the other characters are polarised as figures of good and evil. The action concerns alienation from God and return to God, presented as the temptation, fall and restitution of the protagonist. The story of man's fall and redemption presented in a cycle of mystery plays as an epic historical narrative is thus encapsulated in the morality play [4, p.240].

Although the action of a morality play is frequently described as allegorical, the term is used loosely to describe how action, character, space and time are related to the real world through a tissue of metaphor. The use of personification in creating dramatic characters involves a fundamental rhetorical separation between the play world and the real world, as players take on the roles of qualities, e.g. Mercy; supernatural beings (Good Angel); whole human categories (Fellowship) and human attributes (Lechery). The original audience's perception of reality was in any case different to that of a modern one, and it is not always clear what is an outside agent sent by God or the Devil and what an internal motive. Each role, as actualised in a theatrical context, is presented as a distinct consciousness and is, therefore, a dramatic character. The action can be seen securely only in terms of its own mimesis, as an instance imitating an eternal reality. What may seem abstract was, for the period when the plays were written, representative of true reality, transcending the ephemeral and imperfect world of everyday existence [4, pp. 241-242].

All the plays are in verse and employ clear rhetorical markers. The speaker is instantly placed at any given moment on a scale between absolute good and absolute evil by the controlled choice of lexis, syntax and register, as well as by manipulation of stanza

structure. The transformational nature of fall and redemption are both indicated in this manner: fall into sin is characterised by fragmented lines, blasphemy and nonsense. Virtue, on the other hand, is characterised by high-style, Latinate structures, characters more usually talking in complete stanzas [4, pp.242-243].

Miracle play, also called Saint's Play, one of three principal kinds of vernacular drama of the European Middle Ages (along with the mystery play and the morality play). A miracle play presents a real or fictitious account of the life, miracles, or martyrdom of a saint. The genre evolved from liturgical offices developed during the 10th and 11th centuries to enhance calendar festivals. By the 13th century they had become vernacularized and filled with unecclesiastical elements. They had been divorced from church services and were performed at public festivals. Almost all surviving miracle plays concern either the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas, the 4th-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. Both Mary and Nicholas had active cults during the Middle Ages, and belief in the healing powers of saintly relics was widespread. In this climate, miracle plays flourished [6].

The Mary plays consistently involve her in the role of *deus ex machina*, coming to the aid of all who invoke her, be they worthy or wanton. She saves, for example, a priest who has sold his soul to the devil, a woman falsely accused of murdering her own child, and a pregnant abbess. Typical of these is a play called *St. John the Hairy*. At the outset the title character seduces and murders a princess. Upon capture, he is proclaimed a saint by an infant. He confesses his crime, whereupon God and Mary appear and aid John in reviving the princess, which done, the murderer saint is made a bishop. The Nicholas plays are similar, an example being Jean Bodel's *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas* (c. 1200), which details the deliverance of a crusader and the conversion of a Saracen king. Few English miracle plays are extant, because they were banned by Henry VIII in the mid-16th century and most were subsequently destroyed or lost [6].

Thus, we have analyzed the medieval period in Europe in general and in Great Britain in particular. We have focused on various types of medieval drama with their structural, lingual and contextual peculiarities and also their background. In addition to this, the article covers information about time and place of performances as well as actors.

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