The English Drama Before Marlowe

The Origin and Liturgical Plays:

Briefly stated, the drama in England developed from the liturgical play to the miracle play to morality, from the morality play to the interlude, and from that to the "regular' drama of the Elizabethan age. The story of this development is, however, not so simple as it may wrongly appear. There are overlappings, aberrations, and missing links.

As in Greece and many other countries, the drama in England had a religious origin. It sprang from church service as the ancient Greek tragedy had sprung out of the ceremonial worship of Dionysus. As a critic well puts it, the "attitude of religion and drama towards each other has been strikingly varied. Sometimes it has been one of intimate alliance, sometimes of active hostility, but never of indifference." In England the church was, in the beginning, actively hostile to drama and all along during the Dark Ages (the 6th century to the 10th) there is missing any record of dramatic activity. Only in the ninth century there were tropes or additional texts to ecclesiastical music. These tropes sometimes assumed a dialogue form. They were, like church service, couched in Latin. They were later detached from the regular service and presented by themselves on religious festivals such as"Easter and Christmas. By and by they took the form of "liturgical plays" after becoming somewhat more complex. They were dramatisations of the major events of Christ's life, such as the Birth and the Resurrection, and were enacted by priests right in the church. These plays enjoyed a vast popularity. Thus, as Sir Ifor Evans observes, "while at the beginning of the Dark Ages the church attempted to suppress the drama, at the beginning of the Middle Ages something very much like the drama was instituted in the church itself."

The Miracle and Mystery Plays:

The next stage of development comes with miracle and mystery plays. The early liturgical drama assumed the more developed form of the miracle and mystery plays sometime in the fourteenth century, though, of course, there is evidence that the first representation of a miracle play took place in Dunstable as early as 1119. In England the "miracle plays" and "mystery plays" are often considered svnonvmous. but technicallv there is a difference between the two. The miracle plays dealt with the lives of saints (non-scriptural matter), whereas the mystery plays handled incidents from the Bible (scriptural themes). The miracle and mystery plays differ from the early liturgical drama in their slightly more developed sense of drama and better dialogue. They were both written and enacted by ecclesiastics and had for their obvious object the instruction of the people in scripture history. They treated of such themes from the Bible as the Creation, the Flood, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection of the Saviour. But they had an element of entertainment too. in the form of crude grotesqueries which may appear to the modern reader as outright profanities.

With the development of the early liturgical play into the miracle and mystery, there were significant changes of locale and players. The place of performance shifted from the inside of the church to the churchyard, and from the churchyard to the market-place, because vast crowds, especially at the time of fairs, had to be accommodated. The clergy could not go to the market-place to perform and in 1210 there was a papal edict forbidding their appearance on the stage. The performance therefore fell in the hands of laymen who were amateurs. With the change of the locale and the performers, the

strictly religious nature of the performances underwent a shift towards secularization. It was in the thirteenth century that professional troupes took over the job of performing and, consequently, there was a marked improvement in stage techniques and overall performance. There are four "cycles" of miracle plays extant today. These are York, Towneley, Chester, and Coventry cycles. Each of these cycles embraces the main events of biblical history from the Fall of Satan to the Day of Judgement.

The Morality Plays:

The next stage in the secularization of drama comes with the morality plays which developed out of the miracle and mystery plays. The morality play, as David Daiches observes, "has more direct links with Elizabethan drama." The difference between the miracle and mystery plays on the one hand and the morality plays on the other is that whereas the former deal with, as we have pointed out above, biblical events or the lives of saints, the latter have characters of an allegorical or symbolic nature, such as the personifications of various vices and virtues or other abstract qualities like Science, Perseverance, Gluttony, Sloth. Despair and Everyman (symbolising mankind). The personified vices and virtues are generally shown as fighting among themselves for man's soul. The moralities intended to convey moral lessons for the better conduct of human life. The writer of the morality play enjoyed a greater freedom than that of the miracle of mystery play, as he was not bound by a particular chain of events presented by the Bible or popular legend which he had to adhere to. It may be pointed out that personified abstractions had already appeared along with scriptural figures in some miracle plays. The function of the morality play was to detach these abstractions from their religious setting and employ them in a new kind of drama. The best known among the morality play are The Castle of Perseverance and Everyman. In the former, allegory is almost identical with that of the second book of The Faerie Oueene where the castle of Alma is besieged by the Passions. It also reminds one of The Pilgrim's Progress as regards its central significance. Everyman appeared at the end of the fiteenth century and enjoyed vast popularity right till the end of the sixteenth. Its story is given by David Daiches as follows:

"Everyman is summoned by Death to a long journey from which there is no return. Unprepared, and unable to gain a respite, he looks for friends to accompany him, but neither Fellowship nor Goods nor Kindred will go; Good Deeds is willing to act as guide and companion, but Everyman's sins have rendered her too weak to stand. She recommends him to her sister Knowledge, who leads Everyman to Conffession.and after he has done penance Good Deeds grows strong enough to accompany him, together with Strength, Discretion, Five Wits and Beauty. But as the time comes for Everyman to creep into his grave, all the companions except Good Deeds decline to go with him. Knowledge stands by to report the outcome while Everyman enters the grave with Good Deeds. An Angel announces the entry of Everyman's soul into the heavenly sphere, and a 'Doctor' concludes by pointing the moral."

Of all the stock characters employed in the morality plays the most amusing were Vice and the Devil. The former, arrayed in grotesque costume and armed with a wooden sword or dagger, was the prototype of the Fool of Shakespearean drama, and seeriis chiefly to have been employed for belabouring the Devil who appeared generally with horns, a lona beard, and a hairy chest.

Interludes:

The interlude signifies the important transition from symbolism to realism. It appeared towards the end of the fifteenth century but it could not displace the morality which continued enjoying popularity, as we have pointed out above, till the end of the sixteenth century. It dispensed with the allegorical figures of the morality play almost completely and effected a complete break with the religious type of drama, even though retaining some of its didactic character. It was purely secular and fairly realistic, though quite crude and somewhat grotesque. The most notable writer of interludes was John Heywood (14977-1580?) whose interludes are of the nature of light playlets in which, as David Daiches observes, "the emphasis is more on amusement than instruction." In his The Four P's, for instance, he light-heartedly satirises shrews and impatient women. The four P's are a Pardoner, a Palmer, a Pothycary, and a Pedlar who engage themselves in a kind of lying competition in which the most flagrant Her is to be awarded the palm. The Palmer wins the prize by saying that out of half a million women that he has met so far, not one was seen by him to be out of patience! In The Play of Weather Jupiter is presented as listening to the complaints of the people regarding weather, and confused by conflicting opinions and demands he decides to give the mortals all kinds of weather. Most of Heywood's other interludes are farcical playlets which are, however, full of wit and humour and very realistic portrayal of men and manners.

Another well-known interlude writer was John Rastell whose interlude The Four Elements is of the nature of a Humanist morality play. Various allegorical figures are represented as teaching Humanity science and geography, and "Sensual Appetite" is shown as obstructing the efforts of "Studious Desire." The Four Elements is typical of a class of plays which are quite near the morality but have been classed as interludes. However, strictly speaking, an interlude signifies, in the words of W. H. Hudson, "any short dramatic piece of a satiric rather than of a dkectly religious or ethical character, and in tone and purpose far less serious than the morality proper."

The Beginning of Regular Tragedy:

In between 1530 and 1580 the drama in England underwent a "dramatic" change. With the dawn of the Renaissance in this period English dramatists started looking back to the ancient "Greek and Roman dramatists. It is interesting to note that they were more influenced and impressed by the work of Roman dramatists (who were themselves imitators of the Greek dramatists before them) than that of the Greek. The tragedies of Aeschylus. Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes influenced them less than the tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Plautus and Terence. The tragedies of Seneca are "closet-tragedies", that is, they are meant to be read only, not to be acted. All of them (some ten in number) have revenge as their leitmotif. Further, they are characterised by excessive bloodshed, long rhetorical speeches, and the inclusion of the Ghost as an inevitable member of the dramatis personae. Instead of the element of fear or terror as in the Greek tragedy, we have a superabundance of horror in Senecan tragedy.

The first English tragedy based evidently,and rather unthinkingly, on the Senecan model was Gorboduc (or, later, Ferrex andPorrex) written by Thomas Sackville (1536-1608) and Thomas Norton (1531-84). It was acted in 1561-62 before Queen Elizabeth at White-hall. We have in it the same excessive bloodshed, the device of narration by some characters, long rhetorical speechification, the revenge motive, and the chorus

between the acts which characterised Seneca's tragedies. The plot of the play reminds one of that ofKing Lear. Gorboduc is the king of England who in his lifetime divides his kingdom between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex. One brother murders the other, and in revenge is killed by his mother. But the people rise and murder both the king and the queen. The nobles assemble and kill the assassins, but then a civil war ensues between the nobles themselves and the whole of the country is ruined. One important feature of Gorboduc is its employment of blank verse which makes it the first English play to use that measure. Further, the play is divided, after the Roman model, into five acts—a practice which became from then onwards universal for tragedy.

Some other Senecan tragedies which followed Gorboduc were Thomas Hughes' The Misfortunes of Arthur (Gray's Inn, 1588), Robert Wilmot's Tragedie ofTancred and Gismund (Inner Temple, 1567-68), and George Gascoigne's Jocasta (Gray's Inn, 1566).

The Beginning of Regular Comedy:

Plautus and Terence influenced English comedy to a lesser extent than Seneca the English tragedy, for the reason that English comedy had a well-rooted native tradition. The first regular English comedy was Ralph Roister Doister written about 1550 by Nicholas Udall, head-master of Eton. It combined well the native comic tradition with the Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence. It is written in rhyming couplets and divided into acts and scenes after the Latin plays. The plot is laid in London, and with some humorous dialogue and a tolerable variety of character, affords a representation of the manners and ideas of the middle classes of the time. The hero of the comedy Ralph Roister is a vainglorious fellow of the nature of Plautus's Miles Gloriasis. He imagines a merchant's wife to be in love with him and is confirmed in his stupid belief by the pranks of Matthew Marrygreek. After many misadventures and follies he comes to his senses and recognises the harsh reality. Broadly speaking, the comedy of the play turns on the same pivot as that of The Merry! Wives of Windsor. The play has the merits of racy dialogue and delightful unfolding of comedy, but its versification lacks the vigour of Hevwood's metre in The Four P 's.

Greatly inferior to Roister Doister is the comedy Gammer Gurton's Needle dated about 1553, and generally ascribed to John Still. It is a crude presentation of low country life. It does not have a well-organised plot, which turns on a single incident-the loss of her needle by the country housewife Gammer Gurton. In search of her needle she disturbs the peace of the entire village. Peace comes back when she discovers her missing needle stuck in the breeches of Hodge, her farm-servant. The whole thing is crudely farcical. There is nothing Plautine about the play except its Latin structure. What recommends the play to us today is, in the words of Ifor Evans, "a rough, native realism."

Conclusion:

From such works as Gorboduc, Ralph Roister Doister, and Gammer Gurton's Needle it is evident how far the drama has advanced from its state of the liturgical play. We find in the progress of the drama, especially comedy, a gradual gravitation towards the realities of the life of the day. What is lacking still is not arresting vitality but literary power and grace. These qualities were to be supplied later by "the University Wits".

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