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The Growth of English Drama

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ABSTRACT

The earliest history of English drama holds great importance to an understanding of how the instinct for dramatic expression makes itself felt in human communities. It could also make for interesting study of the workings of popular imagination and equally enlighten us on the evolution of themes and conventions prevalent in later and more mature drama. The origin of the drama is deep-rooted in the religious predispositions of mankind. The ancient Greek and Roman dramas were mostly concerned with religious ceremonials of people, which resulted in the development of drama. As the Bible was in Latin, common people could not understand its meanings. That's why the clergy tried to find out some new methods of teaching and expounding the teachings of Bible to the common people. For this purpose, they developed a new method, wherein the stories of the Gospel were explained through the living pictures.

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Introduction:

English drama, a significant part of English literature, refers to plays written in the English language and intended for theatrical performance. It encompasses various genres, from classical tragedies to modern realistic dramas, and explores a wide range of human experiences, societal issues, and historical events. Drama is defined as a form of performance that involves conflicts, emotions, and the portrayal of human experiences through dialogue and action. It typically presents a story or situation that engages the audience's emotions, evoking intense feelings such as tension, excitement, or empathy. Drama is a performing art. In England it was intended to enable people to understand the ideas contained in the Bible. Since majority of the people were illiterate they were unable to imbibe the ideas disseminated by the Holy Bible. Thus drama was introduced to convey the message to the masses which were preserved in the classics. Initially dramatic performances were performed inside the premises of the church. Even people associated with the church were shortlisted to perform different roles assigned to them. The subject matter of the drama was strictly confined to the Bible itself. Gradually a large number of people gathered inside the premises of the church to watch the

dramatic performances and it was almost impossible for the church authorities to accommodate such a huge gathering. Thus drama was set free from the shackles of church and it was staged outside the premises of the church acquiring secular credentials. The earlier forms of drama were entirely religious in nature and content. They included the miracle plays, the mystery plays and morality plays. The characters were basically round characters representing human qualities like humility, modesty, chastity and avarice.

Key aspects of English drama:

- **Performance-oriented:**

Unlike novels or poetry, English drama is primarily designed to be staged and viewed by an audience.

- **Dialogue-driven:**

The plot and character development are largely advanced through the characters' conversations and interactions.

- **Theatrical conventions:**

English drama employs specific dramatic conventions, such as stage directions, set design, costumes, and lighting, to create an immersive theatrical experience.

- **Genres:**

English drama includes various genres, including tragedy, comedy, historical drama, and more recent forms like realism and expressionism.

- **Themes:**

Drama explores a wide range of human themes, such as love, loss, power, social injustice, and the human condition.

- **Historical development:**

The evolution of English drama spans centuries, from ancient Greek drama to modern playwrights.

Like Greek and Roman drama, the origins of English drama are also linked to religion. In the early stages of all civilizations, the lives of important people were turned into "stories", and later these stories began to be performed in front of audiences. This has been the normal course of the progress of the human imagination—from life to stories, from stories to visual representations—through which artists as well as audiences relive those great lives. According to David Daiches.

“Drama and religious rituals appear to have been linked together from the early stages of all civilisations.”

Objective: The aim of this Article is to trace the dynamic socio-cultural processes involved in the emergence of English drama in its earliest form in the Medieval English period. The unit also studies in detail the heyday of this drama in the Elizabethan period and its circuitous movements in subsequent ages up to the beginning of modernity.

The fall of the Roman Empire also marked the moral decline of its citizens and their drama likewise outraged the conscience of the people. As a result, finding it irreparable, the Church banned such drama. Later all types of drama were banned. As David Daiches expresses the situation.

“The early church fathers saw the Roman stage drama in its last immoral and degenerate stage and naturally condemned it.”

It is interesting to note that the power which caused the end of classical drama was the same power which caused the origin of English drama, i.e. the Church. According to Albert.

“It is in the Church and its religious system that we find the inspiration that leads to the rebirth of drama.”

The church once again resorted to drama to convey important biblical ideas to the common people. This began with staging static scenes depicting important religious events, such as the birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Over time, these scenes evolved into acts with dialogues. Later, Old Testament events such as the Creation and the Last Judgment were also presented as cycles of plays. Thus began the miracle and mystery plays, from which Elizabethan drama evolved.

The development of drama: its stages

English drama began as a religious enterprise and continued to evolve until it transformed into a secular, artistic form.

Evolution of Drama: Its Stages

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artistic form.

Religious Period:

In the last days of the Roman Empire, corrupt drama was driven off the stage because of its immoral nature. In addition, the Church banned all forms of drama. But people loved plays, and soon the Church itself offered an alternative to the forbidden drama in the form of famous, mystical, and miraculous plays.

Miracle and Mystery Plays:

Miracle plays depicted the lives of saints, while mystery plays depicted scenes from the life of Christ or stories from the Old Testament. However, this distinction in name was prevalent in France, not in medieval England. We have records of the *Ludus de Sancta Catharina* (1110) as the first miracle play. Its author and language are not confirmed. But, early plays were generally written in Latin or French (for important events and characters), with English dialogue for minor or comical parts. Over four centuries, the miracles grew in number and popularity. The clergy would stage the plays in simplicity within the church premises. When the popularity of the miracles grew, the church premises could not accommodate the audience. In addition, the church itself presented the churchmen and characters) with English dialogue for minor or comic parts. Over four centuries, miracles grew in number and popularity. The priests would perform the drama in a simple manner in the church premises. When the popularity of the miracle grew, the church premises could not hold the audience. Moreover, the church itself staged the drama outside the church grounds because the audience could not maintain the decorum of the church due to the enthusiasm.

By the end of the 13th century the drama had passed out of the hands of the church and was eagerly taken up by the trade guilds. According to Albert:

“Control passed from the clergy first to religious and social guilds, and then to trade guilds, which were under the general control of the city council.”

Different guilds were assigned particular scenes, which were performed on large movable stages, called *tamashas*, which were pulled by horses to different locations throughout the city. By the beginning of the 14th century, these plays were integrated into a cycle of plays, starting with Creation and ending with the Final Judgment. Only four cycles of these plays have survived, namely the York plays, the Wakefield plays, the Coventry plays, and the Chester plays. These plays were initially written in Latin, then translated into French and finally into English. Despite their predominant religious tone, they did not lack humor and fun represented by characters such as Noah's quarrelsome wife, the tyrant Harold, and Satan.

Morality plays:

In the later Middle Ages, when miracles were still at their peak, another dramatic form emerged known as the morality play. These plays were different from miracle plays in that they did not deal with biblical stories but with humanised abstract portrayals of virtues and vices such as life, death, repentance, goodness, love, greed, etc. who struggle for the human soul. This struggle, called 'psychomachia', the battle for the soul, was a common medieval theme.

Morality plays have made a different progress from miracle plays, as it provided free scope for imagination for new plots and incidents. While miracles were created for the purpose of educating people about important facts of the Bible, morals taught lessons on right living—a kind of dramatic sermon. The most typical figures of morality were the devil and evil, who provided humor to the common people. Morality usually ends with the victory of virtue. The devil is thrown into hell with evil on his back.

The most famous of all morality plays is *Everyman*, which dates back to the 15th century. Other famous morality plays are the *Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*, *Everyone*, the *Four Elements*, the *Trial of Treasure*, the *Pride of Life*, the *Castle of Perseverance* etc. Two of the best known writers of morality plays are John Skelton and David Lyndsay. He was a pioneer in introducing satire into his plays, which he used to satirise or denounce abuses of church and state, making the stage a medium for correcting abuse for the first time.

Interval:

At the end of the 15th century, a morality play emerged that dealt with general moral problems in the same allegorical way. However, the realistic and comic elements in these plays were more pronounced. These were called interludes. By the 16th century, interludes began to include scenes that were far removed from the

themes and atmosphere of medieval morality plays. The term 'interlude' can be used, in its simplest use, to refer to playlets (short plays) performed between banquets or longer plays. However, literary historians now use the term to refer to plays that mark the transition from medieval religious drama to Tudor secular drama. In its fully developed form, the interludes greatly advanced morality, as it introduced 'real' characters, usually of humble rank such as citizens and monks, rather than allegorical characters. It also contained broad but bawdy humour and good songs. A new feature in English drama was set scenes. John Heywood was the most important writer of interludes. His famous *The Four Pies* depicts a contest of wit between a pardoner, a palmer, a peddler and a potter. Other important interludes written during this period are *Johann Johann*, *The Four Elements*, *The World and the Child*, *The Play of the Weather*, and *Thersites*. These early plays were written with their own specific purposes.

Though they did not contribute much to English literature, they prepared the ground for the 'artistic drama' that was to come. As W.J. Long has commented:

"His great work was to train actors, keep alive the dramatic spirit, and prepare the way for true drama."

Artistic period:

Artistic drama is the last stage in the development of English drama. It differs fundamentally from the other two in that its main purpose is not to point out morality but to present human life as it is. The aim of artistic drama may be no less than that of miracle drama, but the representation of human life is always given more importance than morality. The first true play in English with a regular plot, divided into acts and scenes, is probably the comedy *Ralph Royster Doyster* (about 1553), written by Nicholas Udell, headmaster of Eton, and later of Westminster School, which was performed by the boys of his school. Based on Plautus' classical comedy, *Miles Gloriosus*, it offered a model of clear plot and natural dialogue—an important contribution to English drama. The next play, Gammer Gurton's *Needle* (c. 1562) is a domestic comedy. It is a true piece of English realism, representing the life of the peasantry.

The classical influence became even more visible in the first English tragedy, *Gorboduc*. It was written by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton under the influence of the Latin playwright Seneca and performed in 1562. It is notable for being written in blank verse, a style of verse more suited to English dramatists. It follows Seneca's classical rule. There is little action on stage and the bloodshed and war are announced by messengers. It also included a chorus made up of four old men from Britain. According to Moody and Lovett:

"It is a brilliant composition, and deserves respect as the first regular tragedy written in English."

Conclusion:

In short, English drama was born in the hands of the clergy. Starting from 'frozen' scenes, action and dialogue were added to it, it passed from the stage of 'miracle' to the stage of 'morality' and passed from the clergy to the hands of the common people. Gradually, the plots and themes shifted from biblical 'religious' stories to stories teaching 'moral' lessons and eventually to stories depicting 'real' human life. It also changed its tone from serious and solemn to comical and humorous. The interregnum marked the latest development before the advent of 'real' secular drama. University intellectuals took up the responsibility of enhancing the drama with their university education, skills and personal talents. He prepared the ground for up-and-coming playwrights such as Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, creating an audience for their romantic comedies. Finally, in Shakespeare's hands Elizabethan drama attained maturity and unleashed the true potential of English drama:

"To present human life, human psychology and its joys and sorrows in their true and vibrant colours."

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