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**B.A. Part-I, English (Hons.), Paper-I**

**MIRACLE PLAYS**

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.

As with the early stages of most civilizations, drama and religious ritual were inextricably bound up in England too. The history of English drama thus begins, in its most rudimentary form, with the elaboration of the ecclesiastical (related to the Church) liturgy (series of rites to be followed in any public Worship) in catechistical dialogues. As a medium of oral instruction, such mutual question -answer pattern simplified the understanding of religious doctrines for the common man; from the perspective of enactment, it brought about the first inklings of an emergent dramatic repertoire. Thus two very integrally related aspects of social life came to be connected with each other as a matter of natural choice.

The rituals of the Christian church with its major festivals like Christmas and Easter, along with the observance of the significant points in Christ's life was inherently filled with dramatic potential. The ceremonies with which these events were celebrated lent themselves naturally to dramatization of scenes. This could be anything between simple antiphonal chanting between priest and choir to more vivid acting out of scenes by sets of characters. These 'tropes' or dramatic elaborations of the liturgy significantly mark the earliest beginnings of medieval drama.

Quite naturally, the tropes began to gain increasing popularity by virtue of being a live visual medium; and soon the original devotional ritual of the feast days started getting overshadowed. The elaboration of the plays necessitated first, the introduction of minor clerics; and then laymen as actors - all this in addition to the choir that had been enacting till then through songs. In keeping with the demands of common understanding, vernacular gradually began to replace Latin as the language of the plays. Till a time, the church premises sufficed to accommodate the audience, but once they began to attend in burgeoning numbers, the

performances started moving out of the precincts of the church into the marketplace or a convenient meadow. This change, of space was much more, than just a physical reality; the liberation of liturgical drama from the church premises brought forth plays in English that did not have much to do with liturgical representation per se. For their subject matter they did retain the semblance of a religious nature but/and elements from minstrel performances to folk idioms all began to co-exist with stories of the Old Testament and lives of Jesus and the saints. The 'theatre' of this time came to be known as the **Miracle Play**.

From the clergy, control over these performances passed first to the religious and social guilds and then to-trade guilds under the supervision of the Town Council. Since these performances were held in open-air stages, they had to take note of the seasons and so, most Miracle cycles attached themselves to the feast of Corpus Christi in May/June. At this time of the year, the weather would be favourable and the hours of daylight long. The shows were staged on 'pageants' or wagons with wheels that could be moved from one place to another. The most important cycles were **Chester** with 25 plays, Wakefield with 30 plays, **Coventry** with 42 plays and **York** with 48 plays to their oeuvre. By modern standards, a wagon stage could not be considered any more than primitive, but facts show that considerable ingenuity was exhibited in the arrangement of the superstructure and the stage properties. It may rightly be said that the Miracle play contained the seeds of both serious and comic drama that, flourished in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17th centuries.

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