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MORALITY PLAYS AND THE INTERLUDE

Morality Plays

Right when the Miracle plays were at their prime, another medieval form of drama known as the **Morality Play** began to emerge. It was of a greater length than the former and was divided into Acts and Scenes as in the Senecan tradition. In this sense, the Morality play established a more direct connection with the Elizabethan dramatic tradition. Many Morality pieces were written to be performed for more aristocratic audiences and they were mostly enacted by professional actors. They are also important because it is in the Moralities that we find for the first time, indications of individual authorship and the **humanistic** zeal of the Renaissance. The Morality plays further differ from the Miracle plays in that they do not deal with Biblical or even pseudo-Biblical stories, but create personified abstractions like Life, Death, Repentance, Goodness, Love, Greed and such virtues and vices in the main. These human qualities are shown as struggling for supremacy over the soul of man. The Moralities may therefore be regarded as the dramatic counterpart of allegorical poetry that was the common norm in medieval England. These plays handled subjects that were popular among religious preachers and they relied considerably on contemporary homiletic (methods used to impart lectures on moral themes) techniques. Though there are references to Morality plays in the 14th century itself, the 15th century seems to have been the period of its full development. The earliest complete extant Morality play is *The Castle of Perseverance*, written probably around 1425; while the best known and perhaps the most appealing of the surviving 15th century Moralities is *Everyman*, In this play the action is developed with simple dignity and personified abstractions play their parts with forceful dramatic logic. Critics are of the opinion that the play has some links with a Dutch Morality play and might as well have been a translation from the original Dutch.

The Interlude

The last stage in this process of the metamorphosis from the Miracle to the drama proper is the **Interlude**; a type of Morality play equally allegorical but with more pronounced realistic and comic elements. An Interlude was a kind of a short play having real characters, employing

broad farce and using set scenes -a unique feature in English drama. In this sense, the Interlude could be considered as advancement upon the Morality play.

The most gifted writer of Interludes was John Heywood, one of his best plays being **The Four P's**, composed in doggerel (an irregular metre mostly used to produce comic effect) verse describing a lying match between a Pedlar, a Palmer, a Pardoner and a Potycary.

On close examination it will be found that the political, ethical and. Religious Moralities of the early Tudor period show a movement from presenting allegorical personifications of virtues and vices to the fates of individual characters. This is indeed a movement towards dramatic maturity, in keeping with the emergent humanistic spirit of the Renaissance. This transition however was not a singular event, nor did it occur suddenly. In fact, allegorical, Biblical and historic Morality plays existed well into the 16th century and we have *Respublica*, probably by Nicholas Udall, which is a mix of older religion with new political themes. At this time Classicism began to exert its influence on emerging English drama, and the results of this new combination are evident in Udall's play **Ralph Roister Doister** which came about in 1553. It is an adaptation from the Roman playwright Plautus' play *Miles Glorfasits*, and introduces the figure of the braggart (loud, arrogant boaster) soldier into English drama. It is commonly felt that Shakespeare might have had this tradition in mind when he created the character of Falstaff in several of his plays. The next important play of this kind, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, in 1562 probably by William Stevenson, is a domestic comedy representing the life of the English peasantry. This first wholly English comedy abounds in fun and humour (though coarse) and is for that very reason, wonderfully true to (the-life that it represents. Here again we find Plautine themes and characters domiciled in a comedy of English rural life.

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