

**THE OLD CORNISH DRAMA:
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM
ANCIENT CORNISH SACRED
POEMS AND MIRACLES PLAYS**

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The Old Cornish Drama: With Illustrations from Ancient Cornish Sacred Poems and Miracles
Plays by Thurstan C. Peter

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THURSTAN C. PETER

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THE OLD CORNISH DRAMA

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ANCIENT CORNISH
SACRED POEMS AND MIRACLE PLAYS
OF OTHER LANDS

(A LECTURE)

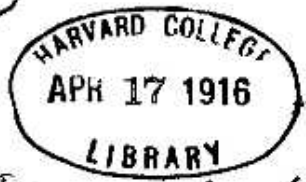
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Denny Fink

THE OLD CORNISH DRAMA

IF you take up an ordinary history of English literature you will find a more or less complete notice of the mystery and miracle plays, followed by a remark to the effect that there are some in the ancient Cornish tongue, but otherwise similar to those found elsewhere. As a matter of fact, however, our Cornish plays have their own characteristics, and even were they identical with the more celebrated ones of England would nevertheless deserve our attention. Before noticing them in detail, I would warn you of what seems obvious, but which nevertheless we are all very apt to forget—namely, that these plays were composed at a time when the humour of the people was very different from what it is now. Nothing changes more than the sense of humour from age to age, and, indeed, people in different stages of culture look on things from entirely different points of view. It is the same in everything. Neither art, nor literature, nor the events of daily life can be understood by us so long as we look at them merely from our own point of view without making an effort to grasp the points of view of their authors.

Most of our quarrels, especially on religious and political matters, have little in them beyond a difference of temperament and a want of the dramatic capacity that would enable us to understand each other's point of view. Accordingly, when we find in the religious drama of the thirteenth and three following centuries passages of deep pathos or of great religious fervour in the close juxtaposition with comic passages that now seem to us vulgar, and others that depart so far from our modern standard of reverence as to seem profane, we must recollect that the audiences for whom they were intended heard them in a different spirit from that which we feel possible. As to the apparent indelicacy and profanity of some of these plays, as often as not they are merely the effect of outspokenness, and are far less objectionable than the innuendoes frequent in modern literature. The simple untrained mind, moreover, can pass from grave to gay, and from gay to grave, with an alacrity that is to others impossible.

In Chaucer, as in our modern Shakespeare, these opposite elements are fused, but Chaucer is the *only* medieval writer who succeeded in doing this. In the miracle plays they are distinct, and to pass—as, e.g., in the Towneley play—from the vulgar jesting of the shepherds, one of whom has stolen a sheep and hidden it in a cot, pretending that it is his wife's new-born babe, to the angels' song of *Gloria in excelsis*, gives to the modern mind a painful shock. Even in the Chester plays, which are far more refined than most, the nagging of Noah's wife jars when mixed with the speeches

of the Almighty. In some plays Noah thrashes his nagging wife ; in others she knocks him down. In one Cornish play she sets a better example: 'Oh, master dear, I will do all you wish.' There is, indeed, but little coarseness and profanity in our Cornish plays, and this alone entitles them to more consideration than they have generally received. I only know two passages that I would not read aloud in the family circle—only two places where the writers can be censured for 'kissing carrion.'

Another marked difference between our ancestors and ourselves is this: we judge a play by the manner in which it is put on the stage, laying such importance on the management and stage carpentry that we really care very little for the meaning of the play itself. Our ancestors were in that happy stage in which are still many of our less 'cultured' brothers, and could enjoy and learn lessons from the thing signified, no matter how grotesquely it might be presented.

I may say at once that I do not purpose making any distinction between mysteries and miracle plays, the former dealing with scriptural subjects, the latter with the lives of saints. The distinction is hard to keep up, as in England and Cornwall the same play will often partake of the character of each. I may remark in passing that the name 'mystery' has nothing to do with the mysterious ; the word should properly be spelt with an 'i,' being formed, as it is, from *ministerium*, and meaning a performance by the ministers of the church ; for the plays in the beginning were an

outcome from ceremonies in the church itself.* This is not the time to trace the varying attitude of the church towards dramatic performances, at times shrinking from them in horror at their degradation, at other times endeavouring to purify the stage and make it useful for the spread of truth and knowledge, at times yielding to ill itself, and permitting and assisting at performances that would disgrace any age. But it is easy to exaggerate this last phase, and I think anyone who has studied the subject must conclude that, on the whole, the attitude of the clergy was based on a desire for good.

At Yuletide and at Easter ceremonies took place in church—and in many places do so still—which, to my mind, were both picturesque and edifying, such, for instance, as the laying of the crucifix beneath the altar, or in a special sepulchre on Good Friday, and its elevation on Easter Monday, while clergymen, representing the three Mariæ and the angel, sang appropriate verses.†

What can be more picturesque than the coloured illuminations that may still be seen near the altars of some churches at Yuletide representing the infant Saviour in His cradle, with Joseph and the Virgin Mother watching Him, while an ox and an ass are feeding close at hand? Some seven centuries ago that most interesting of the medieval saints, Francis of Assisi, represented the same scene by his forest altar, but his child, his men,

* A platform behind the altar of a church in Norfolk is believed to have been used for stage purposes.

† At Stratton is an Easter sepulchre, date *circa* 1540.

his women, his ox, and his ass were alive. To many, perhaps, the simplicity of mind that can get profit from such a scene is a subject only for contempt; for my part, I confess, it is a simplicity I should be glad to be able to regain.

We read of rustic places in Italy where children join the Corpus Christi day procession, some toddling along in skins and with staff to represent the Baptist, others in sackcloth as the Magdalene, some in blue robes and tinsel crown as the Virgin, while some do not hesitate to wear aureoles and personate the infant Saviour. At Norwich, in the fifteenth century, a boy—or, as the old book says, 'a knave child innocent'—was led through the town carrying a candle to represent the child martyr St. William, alleged to have been murdered in the twelfth century by Jews—a strange story which has played a prominent part in the massacres of Jews in Russia.

The first appearance of dramatic dialogue in the services of the church has been traced to the ninth century, when 'tropes,' as they were called, were introduced into the music of the antiphons and elsewhere in the service. From the *Concordia Regularis*, drawn up about A.D. 959 by Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester, I quote the following as translated in Mr. Chambers' book, 'The Medieval Stage':

'While the third lesson is being chanted, let four brethren vest themselves. Let one of these, vested in an alb, enter as though to take part in the service, and let him approach the sepulchre without attracting attention, and sit there quietly