

**ENGLISH MIRACLE
PLAYS AND
MORALITIES**

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English Miracle Plays and Moralities by E. Hamilton Moore

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BY

E. HAMILTON MOORE.

Author of "Ygraine," "Etain and Otinel," &c.

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FOREWORD.

The present volume is gratefully dedicated to those members of the Theatrical Profession who have attempted, during recent years, the revival of our early Drama. That this attempt has not achieved much more than a *succès d'estime* is not to be laid to the charge of those enthusiastic students and sincere artists who, at the cost of loss and disappointment, strove to re-awaken, to the light of modern day, the Sleeping Beauty of mediæval art.

Those who saw the presentation of *Everyman* by the Elizabethan Stage Society, of the *Chester Mysteries* by the English Drama Society, will not forget the reverent unclosing of that door, symbol-inscribed, and how long closed! through which came sounds and rumours of no fairylands forlorn, but the authentic voices of our own and Chaucer's fellow countrymen.

In an age like the present, it is well, now and then, to look back to the beginnings. The Theatre is a topic for all, a pastime for most, an experiment for some, a sincere enthusiasm for, alas, how few! The majority of those who deplore, the mass of those who defend its modern development, are equally ignorant of the processes by which it has been evolved, are almost unaware that such processes are implied.

What is a Morality? What are these Mystery Plays? Are they English or foreign? Who wrote them? Who

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acted them, and how! What are they all about!— These questions may be heard repeatedly even among those who attend such performances as those already mentioned.

To answer them as simply and intelligibly as may be, and thus to help, in however small a degree, to interest a larger public in the serious study of our Theatre, has been the object pursued in the following pages.

The book is intended mainly for those who have neither time nor inclination for private research, and is thus rather popular than scholastic, in view of which fact, the majority of extracted passages have been modernised in spelling and occasionally in phrase.

At the same time, for the benefit of those who wish to further investigate the subject, a short list of the best authorities on English Mysteries and Moralities, will be found appended at the end of the volume.

E. H. M.

I.

THE LITURGICAL DRAMA.

The Bible is the most dramatic book in the world, and its characters are the most splendidly pictorial and theatrical: Shipbuilding Noah, Joseph, the visionary statesman, priest-haunted Saul, beautiful, psalm-singing David the giant-killer, proud, painted Jezebel, Solomon wise and weak, dancing Salome, prophets and warriors, humble fisher-folk, virgins and Magdalens and nameless queens succeed and jostle one another in these pages as in life, and quickly as they pass us, we never forget them again. All life is there; its mysterious beginnings, its cruelty and greed, its ambition, national and personal, to which success is the smile of God, defeat, the desertion of Heaven; its joys and sorrows, its increasing perception of some deeper purpose out of ken of the present, something unknown, perhaps unknowable, in knowledge of which alone is happiness. How great, simple, and unconscious are the heroes of this narrative! How interested in life! To the Preacher even his ennui is worth experiment and record! How immense is their vitality that reaches us even to-day!

Wherever the Bible has been freely placed in the hands of the people it has become a folk-book, and its influence over the popular imagination would be difficult to estimate. Every art has helped to foster this influence; music, poetry and painting have derived, and yet derive, great inspiration from their unwearied attempts to interpret and pourtray and illustrate even the most transcendent teachings as well as the actual records of the Scriptures; and there was a time when the dramatic, most living and most popular of arts, was recognised, not as a desecration, but as a legitimate and helpful exponent of religious truth. That time has passed: the religious theatre is no more. How did it come to be? What were its characteristics? Why is it now among the things remembered or forgotten which are dead? To these and related questions the following pages attempt some sort of answer. There is only one form of answer possible: to tell the story of the Miracle Play.

The Miracle Play came into being at a time when the Bible was a closed book, and it sprang directly out of the service of the Mass. Very early plays exist, written on Scripture subjects: one by a Jewish author, Ezekiel, composed in Greek iambics shortly after the destruction of the Temple, and possibly intended to reanimate in his countrymen the ancient patriotism; another, the *Christus Patiens*, long but erroneously attributed to Saint

Gregory Nazianzen, and like the first, on the model of the classics. These early dramas, however, in no way influenced the growth of the Miracle Play proper, and it is a mistake to regard them as origins. They are, at best, imitations of Greek Tragedy, and the Miracle Play everywhere, smacks of the soil.

It is quite possible that the Miracle Play would never have come into existence, if the services of the Church had been conducted in the vernacular; but they were, instead, conducted in an unknown tongue, symbolic language of things far from daily life, things beautiful, lofty, strange, yet dimly apprehended through the dramatic symbolism of the Mass. The altar is there, the victim, the broken body, the hush of death, the triumphant Alleluia. In itself the Mass is a drama, nothing easier than to illustrate it, to explain it to the popular imagination for which seeing and believing are the same. If the device seem childish, it is equally true that mysteries so transcendent can be grasped only by the childlike spirit, and the child learns best by pictures. The divinely ideal must submit to the interpretation of the material, the abstract of the concrete; symbol and sign spring up to shadow forth and finally to overshadow that which in its ultimate truth is inexpressible, capable of approximation, but not of entire appropriation by the mind of man. The announcements of Christianity, so daring and un-