

**THE HARROWING OF
HELL, A MIRACLE-PLAY
WRITTEN IN THE REIGN
OF EDWARD THE SECOND**

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The Harrowing of Hell, A Miracle-play Written in the Reign of Edward the Second by James Orchard Halliwell

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JAMES ORCHARD HALLIWELL

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THE
Harrowing of Well,

A MIRACLE-PLAY

WRITTEN IN THE REIGN OF EDWARD THE SECOND,

Now first published from the original Manuscript

in the British Museum.

WITH AN

INTRODUCTION, TRANSLATION, AND NOTES.

BY

JAMES ORCHARD HALLIWELL, Esq., F. R. S.

MEMBER OF THE ANTIQVARIAN SOCIETIES OF LONDON, PARIS,
EDINBURGH, COPENHAGEN, ETC. ETC. ETC.



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INTRODUCTION.

THOSE who take a real interest in the theatrical representations of our country, will willingly be at the pains to peruse the earliest existing dramatic composition in the English language. Such is the "Harrowing of Hell," set forth in the following pages,—a most singular specimen of the difference between the taste of our ancestors of the fourteenth century and our own. What the readers of modern comedy will say to the miserable doggerel of the contest between Jesus and Satan, I know not; but its extreme curiosity and intrinsic historical value ought to place the consideration of its poetical beauties entirely out of the scale; and I venture to hope that the modern version which accompanies this most interesting relic of our forefathers, will contribute its mite to render the history of the stage interesting, at least, to performers themselves, if not to the public at large.

It is unnecessary to enter here at length into the history of this species of dramatic poetry, and the more especially as the wide circulation of Mr. Collier's admirable work on the subject has left nothing to be wished for, save the discovery of fresh documents.* Suffice it to mention, that different

* A very curious relic—an ancient interlocutory poem—was communicated by Sir Frederick Madden to the fourth number of the *Reliquiæ Antiquæ* (pp. 145—7), from a MS. roll of the 14th century.

portions of the Old and New Testament, and of the apocryphal writings, were made the subject of popular dramatic exhibition, in more ancient times by the priests themselves, and afterwards by trading laymen. The sacred nature of the subject was, in itself, an attraction for the ignorant spectators in times of intellectual slavery; and the ridiculous poetry which graces or disgraces the several scripture characters in all these early dramas, is one proof among many of the lamentable state of mind among the large majority of the people of those days. Let us take, for instance, the following dialogue between Noah and his wife, when he is trying to persuade her to enter into the ark, which occurs in the series of miracle-plays formerly acted at Chester* :—

NOAH.

Wife, come in! Why standest thou there?
 Thou art ever forward, I dare well swear.
 Come in, in God's name, half time it were,
 For fear lest thou should'st drown.

NOAH'S WIFE.

Yea, sir, set up your sail,
 And row forth with evil hail;
 For, without fail, I will not out—
 Out of this town.
 Unless I have my gossips every one,
 One foot farther I will not go—
 They shall not drown, by Saint John!
 If I may save their life.
 They loved me full well, by Christ!
 And if thou wilt not let them go into that chest,
 Go forth, Noah, wherever you like,
 And get thee a new wife.

* MS. Harl. 2013. I have given these extracts, as much as possible, in modern phraseology.

NOAH.

Son Shem, lo! thy mother is near;
By God, such another I do not see.

SHEM.

Father, I will fetch her in, I trow,
Without any fail.
Mother, my father after thee sends,
And prays thee to go into yonder vessel.
Look up, and see the wind;
For we be ready to sail.

NOAH'S WIFE.

Shem, go again to him. I say
I will not go therein to-day.

NOAH.

Come in, wife, in twenty devil's way,
Or else stand there all day.

HAM.

Shall we all fetch her in.

NOAH.

Yea, sons, for Christ's sake and mine,
I would ye do it quickly,
For of this flood I am in doubt.

NOAH'S WIFE.

The flood comes flowing in full fast,
On every side that spreads full far;
For fear of drowning I am aghast:
Good gossips let us draw near.

And let us drink ere we go
For oftentimes we have done so;

For at a draught thou drinkest a quart,
And so will I do ere I go.

Here is a bottle full of malmsey good and strong,
It will rejoice both heart and tongue :
Though Noah think us never so long,
Yet we will drink alike.

JAPHAT.

Mother, we all of us beseech you—
For we are here, your own children—
Come into the ship for fear of the weather,
For his sake that died for you.

NOAH'S WIFE.

That will I not for your call,
Unless I have my gossips all.

SHEM.

In faith, mother, thou shalt,
Whether thou wilt or not.

NOAH.

Welcome, wife, into this boat.

NOAH'S WIFE.

Take that for thy note !
(Slaps his face.)

NOAH.

Ha ! ha ! Marry, this is hot.—
It is good for to be still.

Can anything more grotesque or absurd be imagined?
And yet this is a genuine specimen of what were the leading
and grand tragedies of the time,—spectacles that served to

impart to the populace some idea of those divine histories, from the perusal of which they were precluded owing to their ignorance of the Latin language.

The legend of the descent of Christ into hell to rescue thence the souls of the good,—founded upon the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus,—was a very favourite subject for illustration throughout the middle ages; and we, accordingly, find that it forms one of almost every known series of miracle-plays, generally under the title of the “Harrowing of Hell.” On this legend the following play is founded. In the Townley mysteries a similar performance is entitled “*Extractio Animarum ab Inferno*;” and, as this differs altogether from the other, a short analysis of it will not be irrelevant in this place.*

Christ descends to the gates of hell, stating the object of his visit,—“to chalange that is myne.” Adam perceives the “glame” of his coming, and announces it to Eve and the prophets, who sing for joy,—“*et cantent omnes Salvator Mundi*.” Rybald, one of the demons and porter of hell, is in great alarm, and calls out to Beelzebub to prepare for resistance:—

“Since first that hell was made and I was put therein,
Such sorrow never ere I had, nor heard I such a din!
My heart begins to start, my wit waxes thin;
I am afraid we can’t rejoice—these souls must from us
twin [go].
Ho, Beelzebub! bind these boys, such noise was never
heard in hell.”

The terror becomes general, and “Astarot and Anaball, Berith and Belyall,” together with Satan and Lucifer, are summoned, while watches are set on the walls. Satan threatens to beat out Beelzebub’s brains for disturbing him. The devils refuse to open the gate, and Christ exclaiming,

* Collier’s History, ii. 214—6. At p. 213, Mr. Collier has given a short analysis of our miracle-play of the “Harrowing of Hell.”

"*Attollite portas, principes, vestras et elevamini, portæ æternales, et introibit rex gloriæ,*" they burst; Beelzebub exclaiming,—

"Harro! our gates begin to crack;
In sunder, I trow, they go,
And hell, I trow, will together shake.
Alas! what am I, wo!"

Satan, from below, orders his fiends to "dyng the dastard downe;" and Beelzebub replies, "that is soon said." Satan ascends from the pit of hell, and Christ tells him that he is come to fetch his own, and that his father sent him. Satan answers, that he "knew his father well by sight;" and reasons with Christ on the impolicy and injustice of releasing those already damned. Argument failing, he entreats Christ to take him out of hell also; to which our Saviour replies, that he will leave him some company, Cain, Judas, Achitophel, Cato, and some others who had destroyed themselves: he adds, that such as obey his laws shall never come to hell; which rejoices Satan, as he congratulates himself that hell will soon be fuller than ever, intending to walk east and west in order to seduce mankind from obedience. Christ replies,—

"Nay, fiend, thou shalt be fast,
So that thou shalt not stir."

Satan then sinks "into hell pyt," and Jesus frees Adam, Eve, Moses, David, Isaias, and others, who conclude by singing *Te Deum laudamus*.

Of a similar nature with the above is the exceedingly curious collection of Latin mysteries published by Mr. Wright in 1838, which belong to the twelfth century. "They afford us," observes the learned editor, "by far the earliest specimen of a series of consequent plays founded on subjects of Scripture history, and are, doubtlessly the first draughts of what afterwards produced such collections as the Towneley, the Coventry, and the Chester Mysteries." In simplicity, in-