

## CHAPTER III. — DRAMATIC POETRY.

THE Epic deals with the *past*, the Lyric with the *present*. The Drama unites the two conditions, and gives us *the past in the present*. Events are the epic basis; but they unroll themselves before our eyes. We have the epic *objectivity* — *i.e.*, the sinking of the author's own thought and feeling in the work itself — in the lifelike course of events; we have lyric fire in the different *characters*. What lyric can match, for example, Hamlet's beautiful tribute to friendship [*Ham.* III. 2]; what love-songs compare with the passion of the exquisite little *Tagelied*, in *Romeo and Juliet* [III. 5] where the lovers part at daybreak? What reflective lyric strikes a deeper note than Hamlet's famous soliloquy on death? — A drama, then, may be called *an epic whole made up of lyric parts*. Aristotle's definition is *imitated action*; which is about the same thing. The lyric element in the drama makes it more rapid, more tumultuous than the epic, which, at its best, holds an even and stately pace.

## § I. BEGINNINGS OF THE DRAMA.

The drama is no exception to the rule concerning the origin of poetry; it begins in religious rites. We shall here confine ourselves to the modern drama, particularly the English, and trace its beginnings and development up to the time of Shakspeare. [For a wider survey of the drama in general, see Ward's article "Drama" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*; for the

English, see the same author's *English Dramatic Literature*.]

The Greek drama began in the Dionysian feasts; our modern drama in the rites of the early Christian church. These were elaborate and impressive. By certain ceremonies — such as the Mass — effort was made to change the past history of the church into a present fact. The epic part, as Ward points out, was the reading of the Scripture narrative; the lyric was the singing; to these was added the dramatic. On certain church festivals, the clergy were wont to bring in actual form before the people the events which the day commemorated; *e.g.*, the marriage at Cana. At first the dialogue was in Latin; but little by little the speech of the folk was brought in. "The French mystery of *La Resurrection* (Twelfth Century) is regarded as the first religious drama in the vulgar tongue." Thus arose the so-called *Mysteries* and *Miracle-Plays*. (The name should be *mystery*, as it is a corruption of *ministerium*.) Later than these — which were dramatic representations either of the Gospel narrative or of legends of the church — came the *Moralities*, where virtues, vices, and other allegorical figures appeared in appropriate costume.

The only drama which our race knew before the Norman Conquest was of a rude kind. Until then, the old dialogues between Summer and Winter, and kindred attempts at dramatic representation, were all that English literature could boast in that direction. But when the churchmen brought in the Sacred Drama, there soon arose a class of secular performers. These secular performers were the successors to such as may



have presented the rude drama of heathen origin. True, a dialogue is not a drama; but there was enough action in some of the dialogues to justify, despite Mr. Ward's assertion, the adjective 'dramatic,' as applied, e.g., to *The Strife between Summer and Winter*, preserved in German folk-song. Compare, further, two fine English dialogue-ballads: *Lord Randal* and *Edward, Edward*. They are throughout in dialogue. There is no narrative verse. The two speakers bring out the whole story; though of course they do not act a story. Gervinus has shown the popular character of the English drama, and its close connection with the ballad. We know how much dialogue there is in many of our old narrative ballads: e.g., *Sir Patrick Spens*; and there are dialogues in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Ward's distinction is far too sharp to hold good, when he says: "Before the Norman Conquest there are no signs in our own literature of any impulse towards the dramatic form."<sup>1</sup>

The drama meets a popular craving; it gratifies that wish felt by all men to see their own life, its hopes and fears, pictured in the acts and life of another. So the rude miracle-plays took a human and even local coloring. The minor characters now and then bore English names; there were English oaths,—rough, popular wit,—drastic acting:—all these means were used to bring the play home to men's "business and bosoms." Shakspeare's clown, as well as the traditional 'fool' of our comedies to-day, goes back in direct line to the 'Vice,' whose business it was to plague and worry Satan in every conceivable way. The drama, so devel-

<sup>1</sup> Vol. I. p. 6, *Hist. Eng. Dram. Lit.*

oped, could not possibly continue to be a mere part of the church ceremonies. It attained an individual existence, and grew to be a department of literature.

The elements of this new drama were all present in these old Miracles and Moralities—but sadly confused, and jostling each other in a now intolerable fashion. Tragedy and Comedy were not sharply defined. "*The Murder of Abel*" is in subject a tragedy; half the action, even in the critical part, is roughest horse-play. The miracle of "*Noah's Flood*," however, was nearly all comedy: the patriarch flogs his wife because she will not go into the ark. Finally, there is the drama often called Reconciliation-Drama, because a *threatened danger* is suddenly and unexpectedly removed. Of this class was the play "*Abraham and Isaac*."

If imitated human action alone made a drama, a prize-fight would come under that head. But the mind of the spectator craves more: he demands that the actors shall be *individuals of a sharply marked character*. The action and the characters are the two great elements of the drama. In the best plays there must be a thorough blending of the two; the action must at once shape and be shaped by the characters that take part in it. A distinction is usually made between the classical and the modern drama in this respect: in the former, we see a gigantic action, a manifestation of fate, dragging along with it characters whose struggling is in vain; in the latter, the individual characters are the central interest, and the action seems more the result than the cause of the characters. Shakspeare alone unites the advantages of ancient and modern drama.—In the old plays from which the Elizabethan drama



sprang, there was a rude but marked distinction on the above principle: where the action took precedence, the play was called a *Mystery* or a *Miracle*; when the characters attracted the main interest, the result was the so-called *Morality* or *Moral Play*.

### § 2. MIRACLE-PLAYS AND MYSTERIES.

The highest form of the drama, the tragedy, is where human will and human action come in conflict with a higher power. Rough as they were, the Miracle-Plays fulfilled the demands of such a drama; for there were both elements — human action and divine interposition. The fault was that this latter element was enormously exaggerated, and the only way to retain human interest was to introduce the low comedy noticed above. Still, there were many human attributes. The biblical heroes were human enough, and the interest of the spectators was easily aroused by the rude pathos of Abel's death, or by the edifying spectacle of a quarrel between man and wife. Scenery, too, was attempted; and the costumes were regulated by dramatic consistency [*cf.* the word *properties*]. There are three well-known collections of these plays: the Towneley, the Chester, and the Coventry collections. From various sources we compile the following brief notice of the plays — their manner and matter.

Each play was called a "pageant"; such was the name of the vehicle on which the play was exhibited (Ward). In Rogers' Account of the Chester Plays, written about the end of the Sixteenth Century, we are told that "every company had his pageant, which pageants were a high scaffold with two rooms, a higher and a lower, upon

four wheels. In the lower they appalled themselves, and in the higher room they played, being all open on the top, that all beholders might hear and see them. The places where they played them was (*sic*) in every street. They began first at the Abbey gates, and when the first pageant was played, it was wheeled to the high cross before the Mayor, and so to every street." As to costumes, the good souls wore white; the condemned, black ("Black is the badge of hell" says the king in *Love's Labour's Lost*); and the angels wore "gold skins and wings." The sacred personages had golden beards and hair. Hell-torments were represented with considerable effect; and mechanical devices were known — as where the cherry-tree miraculously bends down its branches at the command of Mary.

As to the contents, actual stories from the Bible, or else legends of the church, were the common material to be dramatized. The action was not well knit together into a harmonious whole; but tended to be a mere series of situations. Thus in the murder of Abel, the tragedy does not from its central point spread over the play, in anticipation and result, but is confined to the scene where Abel is killed. Cain and his ploughboy indulge in comic dialogue after the murder; there is allusion to the constable; and the play ends with a travesty of an English royal proclamation. The *Harrowing of Hell* was one of the earliest subjects treated by the Miracle-Plays, — the well-known story, founded on the false gospel of Nicodemus, how Christ went down to hell, subdued it (harrow = harry), and released the patriarchs. The metre of these plays is rough; and is often full of the old alliterations: *e.g.*,



the opening passage of Parfre's *Murder of the Innocents* — for Candlemas Day —

“ Above all kynges under the clowdys cristall,  
Royally I reign in welthe without woo,  
Of plesaunt prosperytie I lakke non at all;  
Fortune I fynde, that she is not my foo.  
I am kyng Herowd ” —, etc.

These rude plays utterly failed to satisfy the higher dramatic laws. As moving situations, as a patchwork of bald conversation, stiff action and occasional pathetic elements, they show a beginning, — but nothing more. The most wonderful fact in Elizabethan literature is the sudden leap made by the drama from such depths to the height of *Edward II.*, of *Lear* and of *Hamlet*. The miracle-plays satisfied only the rudest dramatic instinct. Higher in every way was the effort made by the so-called Moralities—a second step toward the finished drama of Shakspeare.—The Mysteries flourished chiefly from the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Century, and were mostly presented by the different guilds or trading-companies.

### § 3. MORAL PLAYS, OR MORALITIES.

What the didactic allegory is to the epic, so is the morality to the drama. There is a decided attempt to portray *character* and to enforce a moral. But we find the same defect as in the Miracle-Plays. There we saw that bald representation of events satisfied the demand for action; we look in vain for the finer art of a connected plot, a thread of purpose running through all the sayings and doings of the play. So, too, here; instead of *a person with a character*, there is simply an

*abstract character* or *quality*. Take the well-known Morality called *Every Man*.

*Every Man* is one of the best of the Moral Plays. It is purely didactic, and shows, as the messenger or Prologue announces, —

“ how transitory we be all daye.  
Her shall you se how Felaweship and Jolyté,  
Bothe Strengthe, Pleasure and Beauté,  
Will fade from the as floure in maye;  
For ye shall here how our heven kynge  
Calleth every-man to a generall rekenynge.”

Then God appears, calls “*Dethe*,” and bids him go summon *Every-man* to make his pilgrimage and bring with him his ‘reckoning’—*i.e.*, of good and evil deeds, etc. *Every-man* is fain to evade this command, but cannot. Fellowship, called to help, promises to do anything and go anywhere; but when he learns what the journey is, utterly refuses. Kindred; likewise, will not venture on such an expedition. “*Goodes*” is summoned; but he lies in chests and bags and cannot stir. *Every-man* is desperate, but bethinks himself of “*Good-deeds*.” *Good-deeds* lies ‘colde in the grounde’ on account of *Every-man*’s sins, and cannot move; but *Good-deeds*’ sister, *Knowledge*, goes with *Every-man* to that holy man *Confession*, who dwells in the ‘*hous of salvacyon*’; *Every-man* confesses his sins, does penance, and so releases *Good-deeds*, who can now ‘*walke and go*.’ *Discretion*, *Beauty*, *Strength*, are called together, and also *Five-wits*. But they all refuse to go with *Every-man*, although they give good advice enough; for *Beauty* and the others run as fast as they can when they see *Every-man* begin to fail in death. *Good-deeds*,



however, remains ; Knowledge carries till the last moment. Every-man, after commending his soul to God, dies (on the stage) ; and there is an epilogue which further enforces the very palpable moral.<sup>1</sup>

Not so good is the Moral Play *Lusty Juventus*, which attacks the church. Among the characters are *Abominable Livyng*, *God's Merciful Promises*, and the like. It was written under Edward VI., for whom *Good Council* makes a prayer at the end of the play.

The Moralities are an advance on the Miracles ; they humanize the characters to a considerable degree, and the nature of the play makes consistency of action more imperative than in the loose progress of a Mystery, where a serious character may suddenly wax comic. The development of the drama was now rapid : action and character were to be woven together and made into a dramatic unity. A step in this direction is a sort of *historical morality* called *King John*. It has been attributed to Bishop Bale. King John is asked by the widow England to help her against her oppressors. Other characters are Sedition, Clergy, etc., but it is important to note that now and then a real name is used instead of an abstraction. Thus, Sedition becomes Stephen Langton. Compared with Shakspeare's play of the same name, *King John* is crude to the last degree. But it is an advance from the older plays. There is still a yawning chasm between it and the Elizabethan drama ; to bridge this chasm, materials were soon supplied. Chief of these are the *foreign impulses and influences* and the *Interlude*.

<sup>1</sup> For the subject and sources of this play, see an interesting treatise. *Every-Man, Homulus und Hekastos*, by Carl Goedeke, Hanover, 1865.

#### § 4 FOREIGN MODELS.

The revival of learning found a hearty welcome in England. Greek and Latin were carefully studied ; and under Henry VIII., men like Erasmus, Colet and Sir Thomas More made the " new learning " famous. The *Latin plays of Plautus and Terence*, — comedies, — and the *tragedies of Seneca*, were studied, translated, and even acted in the original before the universities. The *Italian imitations* of these plays were likewise read with interest. The Mysteries and Moralities ceased to please. A better taste arose. General history was eagerly studied. People demanded that the drama should treat of human life in a concrete way. But not only *subject-matter*, — the *form and style* of the drama were greatly influenced by the study of foreign models.

Here, then, was a public with its insipid miracle plays ; a learned class with its foreign dramas. Neither was national. But working mightily in both classes was the strong intellectual life that rose with the English national spirit and reached its height under Elizabeth. The task was to find a common ground for the learned and the popular taste. This was found in the *Interlude*.

#### § 5. THE INTERLUDE.

John Heywood was the genius of the Interlude. It was a play performed, as its name implies, in the intervals of feasts or other entertainments. It was of a light character. Take, for example, Heywood's *Four P's*. A *palmer*, a *pardoner*, and a *'pothecary* meet and, after some dialogue, contend who is the greatest liar of the three. The *pedler* is judge. Each tells his test-tale :



the 'pothecary wins the prize, for he says he has seen hosts of women, but never one out of patience. Here at last are actual human characters, with a thoroughly human action.

This is not very high comedy, it is true; but it is a great advance upon the fleshless abstractions of the moralities, from which the comedy is really descended. Further interludes of later origin are such as Shakspeare introduces in *The Tempest*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Some of these interludes are called "Masques" or Masks. The Mask proper was an Italian importation, brought over early in Henry VIII.'s reign. Men and women, disguised as shepherds, shepherdesses, and the like, went through a certain amount of acting, mixed with a great deal of dancing. Often classic deities were represented. The Mask as developed by Ben Jonson became very elaborate. The greatest English Mask is, of course, Milton's *Comus*.

These Interludes and Masks raised the popular taste. Now that the public demanded such work, the playwright could avail himself of classical models, and put into English settings the jewels of Seneca and Plautus. *The dividing lines of tragedy and comedy were now sharply drawn*. Tragedy appears in its first English guise in the play (about 1562) by Thomas Norton and Lord Buckhurst, called *Gorboduc* or *Ferrex and Porrex*. The characters are human, the interest human. The plot is from the (mythical) history of Britain. The play resembles the old miracles in its rough action, its love of violence and blood; it differs from them in its carefully drawn and consistent plot, its division into acts, its more elaborate form. As in Greek plays, the mur-

ders are here announced by a messenger. There is a dumb-show prefixed to each act, showing what is to follow; and at the end of each act is a chorus. (For the dumb-show, compare the play in Hamlet, where the poison is poured into the ear of the player-king.) — *Gorboduc* is an imitation of Seneca. Plautus's well-known comedy of "The Braggart Soldier" (*Miles Gloriosus*) is imitated in the *First English Comedy*, entitled *Ralph Roister-Doister*, written by Nicholas Udall, of Eton, about 1550. But the names, scenes, etc., are all English. There is an elaborate plot and spirited action. A pretty song is woven into the play, — forerunner of those exquisite lyrics that sparkle in the drama of Shakspeare and Fletcher.

We have thus come to the threshold of our national drama. The task before its early artists is plain enough. All the rude remnants of the old plays must be worked out; simplicity, vigorous action, whatever was best in the old must fit itself in the new to a finished art, a sympathetic study of human nature. Marlowe, Shakspeare, Fletcher and Jonson tell how this was done. — We can, therefore, now treat the finished drama, its forms and rules.

#### § 6. THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF DRAMA.

First, however, a word about certain *general rules* for the drama. The drama is imitated human action. Now, human action is a complex affair; it is by no means the province of a dramatist to imitate any action or series of actions just as they occur in daily life. A confused mass of human action may be subordinately used — as