

Г. Г. Банникова, О. А. Есенина

### Драма среднеанглийского периода : мистерии, миракли, моралитэ

Средневековая английская драматургия играет важную роль в истории английской литературы. Единой точки зрения по поводу того, какая именно драматургическая форма является наиболее ранней в английской литературе, что легло в основу самых ранних драматургических произведений, не существует. Период расцвета средневековой английской драматургии приходится на XIV–XV вв.; довольно многочисленные тексты пьес сохранились до наших дней и могут служить основой для различных форм литературоведческого и лингвистического анализа.

**Ключевые слова:** мистерия, месса, священное писание, светский (нерелигиозный), миракль, цикл, апокрифический, развлечение, сюжет, мистерия, грех, добродетель.

G. G. Bannikova, O. A. Yesenina

### Early English Dramatic Forms: Mysteries, Miracles, Moralities

Medieval English dramatic forms play an important part in the history of English Literature. There is no unanimous opinion either concerning the earliest type of English dramatic form or its origin. Medieval English drama flourished in the XIV–XV centuries and rather numerous extant texts can be used for different types of analyses.

**Keywords:** Mystery, Mass, Scriptures, vernacular, miracle, cycle, apocryphal, entertainment, plot, Morality, vice, virtue.

Drama is defined as “the art of representing, for the pleasure of others, events that happened or that we imagine happening” (4, p. 1). From the beginning drama has had the capacity to hold up an illusion of reality, which is sometimes compared to the reflection in a mirror (4, p. 2). Different ages and peoples had different approaches to representing reality on stage.

After the fall of Rome the classical artistic traditions in Europe were lost. Yet a number of scholars consider it certain, that in one shape or another “the drama, acting with or without written words, is always in existence... even among the rudest peoples” (2, p. 153). J. B. Grapp also mentions “secular forms of popular and courtly entertainment... – games festivals and perhaps, folk rituals with the act of professional minstrels” (6, p. 363). J. B. Otis points out the importance of traditional festivals and folk plays, such as “St. George and the Dragon” mummeries and “The Hock and Tide” festival and later on – “The Robin Hood plays” (3, p. 103). All these seem to have played their part in the formation of English dramatic forms. So, it would be exaggeration to say, that in the early medieval times European drama all “but disappeared for five centuries” (4, p. 256).

Most scholars agree that the starting point of medieval drama was the Latin of the Mass: “Within the early Christian Church in its religious functions and in its dramatization of liturgy are found the germs of the European drama (3, p. 103). J. B. Grapp points out “the daily re-enactment of the Passions of Christ, essentially dramatic in its performance” (6, p. 363). A. Lang is also sure that “the

Church permitted a kind of half-ritual half-dramatic representation at a very early period...” (2, p. 153). Some authors even define the exact time of its beginning: “Liturgical drama began as parts of the Mass (4, p. 256). At the same time, we agree with the opinion that many of the steps by which this reverent form of dramatic representation developed into the vernacular spoken play, performed in the city, are still not clear (4, p. 256; 6, p. 363).

Another point of view, that has lately appeared is that though the vernacular drama “was once thought to have evolved from the liturgical, passing by stages from the Church into the streets of the town, “the mysteries – the earliest vernacular dramatic form, – represent an old and largely independent tradition of vernacular religious drama” (5, p. 308). Though, no ultimate proof of it has been produced.

We are inclined to support the traditional point of view. The earliest dramatic forms appear to have developed out of the Church ritual, “to have been represented at first by ecclesiastics and within the church buildings” (1, p. 82). They were always in Latin with subjects drawn from the scriptures.

In the XII century by the order of Pope Innocent III (1210) drama was to be performed outside the church buildings (3, p. 31). Probably, the audience grew so large, that the performance had to be moved into the churchyard. Perhaps, the dramatic moments inside the church began to demand more elaborate equipment and settings.

The institution by Pope Urban IV of the Festival of Corpus Christie probably compelled the moving of the

performances into the market place “where laymen replaced clerics as performers” (1, p. 31). The authors of the famous “Oxford Anthology of English Literature” are also of opinion that now, outside the church, the performance of the plays was “generally the prerogative of associations of pious laymen” (6, p. 364).

At the same time, the themes of the plays continued to be religious (1,3,4, 6), and the plays were devised and probably written by clergy. It was now, that “English superseded Latin as the language of the plays” (1, p. 31)

The extant link between the liturgical drama and the vernacular drama seems to be “Le mystere d’ Adam (1150) – a semi-liturgical drama, a dramatization of the fall. Its occasional deviation from its biblical source and relative elaborateness of action and composition (1, p. 31) can be considered a transition between the liturgical play and the secularized play.

To denote vernacular English plays the term “Mystery” is usually used (1–6). Some authors also use the term “Miracle” (1; 2; 6), though sometimes they are somewhat mixed up: the title of the chapter in the “Oxford Anthology of English Literature” is “Mystery Plays (Miracles)”. Some authors are sure, that in English the term “Mystery” does service for both (1, p. 31). We are of the opinion that “as the term “Miracle” exists, it is a serviceable one” (1, p. 82) and we allow ourselves to make use of it.

Mysteries and Moralities are essentially of the same dramatic type; it is impossible to say which was the first to appear. “It is likely that Mysteries represent the earlier stage of development” (1, p. 82). But the earliest known dramatic work to be associated with English literature “Ludus de Sancta Katharina” (1110) is probably in Latin. (3, p. 31) Yet, the text of the play not being extant, some authors consider the incomplete play “Le mystere d’ Adam” (1150) to be the earliest (1, p. 105). Others refer to the earlier extant plays dating back only to the XIV century, probably, meaning only complete plays (6, p. 364).

There are several explanations of the term “mystery” as applied to medieval dramatic forms:

a) “a name derived from old French “mester” (a trade) – in association with the trade guilds who performed them” (3, p. 82).

1) Coll. Lord, what these weathers are cold,  
And I am ill happed;  
I am nearhand dold,  
So long have I napped;  
My fingers are chapped.  
It is not as I wold,  
For I am all lapped  
In sorrow:  
In storm and tempest,  
Now in the east, now in the west,  
Woe is him that has never rest  
Midday nor morrow (5, p. 320).

b) “Drama was the “quick” (i. e. living) book in which the ordinary Christian might read the mysteries of his faith. Hence the name “mystery by which the play came to be known” (6, p. 363).

c) “The word “mystery” was used to describe the skill or trade known only to a few, who mastered its special techniques... It also referred to religious mysteries” (4, p. 256).

Mysteries occur mostly in long cycles of plays (up to 48), dealing with successive steps of the Bible history. Four of these cycles have survived complete: the Chester, York, Towneley (Wakefield) and N-town cycles ( see 5; 4; 6).

Most of our knowledge of those cycles of plays (apart from the texts themselves) comes through “municipal records” (5, p. 308). From these we know, that the performance of the plays was in the hands of trade guilds – “pious laymen” (6, p. 364). The cycles were played from dawn to dusk in the open and set points of the city on special platforms on wheels (1; 4; 6). As for the authors of the plays they remain anonymous. We agree with the authors of “The Oxford Anthology of English Literature” that the plays “were devised and probably written by clergy, who retained at least a guiding hand on the cycles” (6, p. 364). The plays were presented on the days of Christian holydays (4; 5) and served both as entertainment and instruction.

All the cycles, even the shortest, present the history of mankind as a progress towards salvation and end triumphantly. Incidents from outside the canonical books of the Bible (the so called “apocryphal gospels) were added to the plays. Incidents from independent invention were also added. As the authors of “The Oxford Anthology of English Literature” point out: “There was much room for improvisation” (6, p. 365). For instance, in “The Wakefield Second Shepherd’s Play” the shepherds Coll, Gib and Daw are more like shepherds on the Yorkshire moors than those keeping their flocks near Bethlehem. The characters’ feelings and opinions are expressed vividly in the following examples:

2) Daw. Such servants as I,  
That sweats and swinks,  
Eats our bread full dry,  
And that me forthinks.  
We are oft wet and weary  
When master-men winks,  
Yet comes full lately  
Both dinner and drinks (5, p. 324–325).

3) Coll. We are so hammed,  
Fortaxed, and rammed,  
We are made hand-tamed  
With these gentlery-men (5, p. 320)

The shepherds complain of being poor and hungry, cold and wet (ex. 1, 2). Working from morning till night they have to pay very high taxes and to be humiliated by the gentry (ex. 3).

Consequently a certain number of secondary fictitious characters are included: the sheep-stealer Mak and his wife Gill in "The Second Shepherds' Play". We consider Mak to be one of the best humorous characters of this period. In the following conversation they are discussing what to do with the stolen sheep:

Gill. A good boud have I spied,  
Sin thou can none.  
Here shall we him hide  
To they be gone,  
In my cradle. Abide!  
Let me alone,  
And I shall lie beside  
In childbed and groan.  
Mak. Thou red,  
And I shall say thou was light  
Of a knave-child this night (5, p. 330).

The development of the comic subplot of the play can be observed in this dialogue: the stolen sheep will be wrapped up and put in the cradle as if it were their newborn baby. We can't but agree that "no one will fail to observe the parallelism between the stolen sheep, ludicrously disguised as Mak's latest heir, lying in the cradle, and the real Lamb of God, born in the stable among beasts" (5, p. 319).

In Morality plays characters of personified virtues, vices, mental attributes or of universalized types are set in a framework of allegory. The purpose was "to impart a lesson for guidance through life" (3, p. 107). The performances were generally given by semi-professional actors. We think it to be logical to divide the moralities into 2 groups:

1. universal Morality Plays
2. limited Morality Plays (3, p. 117–118).

Plays of the first group are concerned with the discussion of moral problems common to all humanity. "The Castle of Perseverance" (1415) is usually considered to be the earliest extant full-scope English Morality. It is also the most typical in its medieval ecclesiastical teaching and spirit. "Mankind" (1470) is characterized by comparative avoidance of pointing a moral and is sometimes called "the foreshadowing of the Interlude" (3, p. 108). "Magnificence" (1515–1523) is famous as the first of early English plays, whose author – John Skelton (1460–1529) is known. As a literary work it isn't highly esteemed, being "prompted by personal satire" (1, p. 88).

The most popular and finest Morality play is considered to be "Everyman" (printed in 1529). Here the character represents general human nature and the other characters are Five Wits, Knowledge, Death, Kindred, Gold, Confession, Beauty, Strength, Fellowship and Good Deeds.

Limited Morality Plays are concerned with the discussion of moral problems less common to "universal humanity", less limited in scope (1, p. 85). The most famous of them belong to Henry Medwall – chaplain and playwright. "Nature" (1495) is characterized by time-to-life dialogue and humorous realism. "Fulgens and Lucrece" is probably the earliest known purely secular English play. It is divided into 2 parts, but has only 7 characters. "One of the latest Morality plays "Hychescorner" (end of 15<sup>th</sup> or beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> c.) is frequently classed as "an interlude with morality elements".

Miracle play means dramatization of incidents in the life of a saint or a martyr (3, p. 31). This type of play flourished in France, but there are few examples of it belonging to English literature. Besides the non-extant play "Ludus de Sancta Katharina" in Latin "Mary Magdalene" (1500) can be named. It is included in the so-called "Digby Mysteries" (1, p. 106). Scenes from the life of the Saint mark it as a miracle. At the same time elements of the mystery play are also present as it contains Biblical episodes from the life of Christ. It is also pointed out that the play is the first in English to include allegorical characters which marks it as transition to the later dramatic form of Morality (also called "Moral plays") (1, p. 106). Here the characters are personified abstractions, and the plot is centered around the eternal struggle between Vice and Virtue for man's soul. Like the earlier dramatic forms morality has much in common with didactic literature – "the literature of moral instruction" (6, p. 367). They are not so numerous as Mystery Plays, there are about 30 extant (1; 2; 6). The only morality play that still retains popularity is "Everyman" (about 1485) (6, p. 367). In general, all early English dramatic forms have one common feature of primary importance: their theme is inevitable punishment engendered by revolt against Divine Guidance.

### Bibliography

1. Crawshaw, W. H. The Making of English Literature. – Boston; New York; Chicago: Heath & Co publishers, 1927.
2. Lang, A. History of English Literature. – London; New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1922.
3. Otis, W. B. Outline-History of English Literature. – New York: V. I. Barnes & Noble Inc., 1967.
4. The Bedford Introduction to Drama. – Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's; 6th edition, 2008.
5. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 9th edition. – New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.
6. The Oxford Anthology of English Literature 2nd edition. Vol. I. – New York; London; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002.