

Origin and Growth of Early English Dramas from the Pre-Dramatic Stage to the Advent of Christopher Marlowe

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Abstract — Before the rise of proper drama in English literature people entertain one another through mimicry and make beliefs. The Church had objections to dramatic performances at first. Eventually and ironically that very Church became the great force to bring into existence proper dramas, in the precincts of the Church. Then we find minstrels entertaining people and village festivals and folk-plays also contributed to the growth of drama. Lastly, town-guilds took over the representation of plays and the large number of people took interest in such plays and their knowledge about basic things in their life consequently increased.

Keywords — *Mimicry and Entertainment; Church and Drama; Role of Minstrels; Origin of Drama from Church; Religion and Drama.*

1. Introduction

For the understanding of the origin of the British drama, we have taken the account of Pre-Drama in Britain and other countries in the Middle Ages [1][2]. We have also taken account of minstrels, village festivals and folk-plays in the early stage of dramas.

For the discussion of Pre-Drama we want to refer to mimicry and make-believe. These are universal human impulses responsible for human behaviour and action. So, drama has developed naturally and independently at different times and places in the world. Among the Greeks dramas had been very popular forms of entertainment and as such had attained distinction. But it was less popular among the Romans. The Roman empire had been in a turmoil and the general public tended to shout and cheer at the chariot races and gladiatorial combats of the circus and amphitheatre instead of watching a play quietly in the theatre [3]. In those days the theatre had no attraction for the literary artists of high standard in Italy. Virgil, Horace, Livy attempted the forms of literature other than dramas. Seneca's dramas had been closet dramas, meant to be read. The most popular theatrical entertainments were the performances of mimes in which coarse humour and indecency joined together to catch the attention of the vulgar. The hordes of barbarians moving into Rome from outside could give no help. Drama had not developed among the Teutons also. Witty dialogues had been wasted on the speakers of the unfamiliar tongue. With the advent of Christianity the Theatre ran into other difficulties. The Church was opposed to the theatre's link with paganism. It also made a protest against the immorality of performances and performers. With the fall of the Roman Empire, all Roman dramas disappeared, and for five hundred years only a faint tradition of drama may have survived and passed on from mimes to the medieval minstrel [1].

2. Objectives

This paper actually talks about several aspects but not limited to following aims and objectives :-

- To know a brief about native tradition of English drama.
- To know how Pre-Dramas play great roles in moulding the theme of the modern dramas.
- To know about the need and potentiality of the proposed paper as the integral part of Christopher Marlowe's dramas.
- This paper unfolds the inner thoughts and ideas in the major dramas of Christopher Marlowe.

3. Methodology

This is a conceptual study on the art of Christopher Marlowe's dramas and hence the main approach is shown as case studies with a review of information from materials such as books, journals in this regard. An attempt has been made to show how Christopher Marlowe's dramatic art in the perspective of social, cultural and religious issues. These extant dramas of Christopher Marlowe will focus on his dramatic art.

4. Discussion

It is ironic that the Church, the great force, that had once done most to drive the Roman drama out of existence, should have been the institution in which modern drama was to take its rise.

But the drama of the Middle Ages was not a continuation of Roman drama. It developed from entirely new beginnings in the services of the Church- Mass and Matins. With the chants came into existence the tropes with

which we are now most concerned. The word 'trope' is derived from a Greek word, meaning 'turn'. It still denotes any rhetorical or figurative device, but during the Middle Ages the word came to be applied to a verbal amplification of the liturgical text. The Intraït or opening chant began with the words '*Resurrexi et ad huc tecum sum*' [1]. About 900A.D. we find it prefaced by a trope, which is translated into English thus:

*"Whom seek ye in the sepulchre, O Christians?
Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, O angels.
He is not here; he has arisen as he foretold.
Go, announce that he has arisen from the grave."*

These lines are a paraphrase of the dialogue between Mary and the angels at the Tomb of Christ as written in the Gospel of St. Matthew [3]. Sung antiphonally, the tropes constitute a dialogued chant. They never become much more as long as they were linked to the Mass. But they are the germ out of which modern drama took its rise.

There is a lack of evidence about secular entertainments in the semblance of drama in the Roman Britain or in Anglo-Saxon England. But the fragments of primitive forces in the literature of medieval Germany and France have survived the onslaughts of time. In England there existed the *Interludium de Clerico et Puella* [1][2], which was a very elementary dramatisation of the tale as contained in *Dame Siriz*. The *Interludium* is Interlude. The word is ambiguous in that it is understood variously. It may be something played between the parts of something else like a light musical and dramatic performance between the acts of a play called 'musical intermezzo'[1][3]. It may also mean distributed dialogue between performers; it is not solo recitation. Such description applied to those compositions that had secular characters giving secular instruction and diversion. In the absence of strict definition of *Interludium* people spoke of the miracles as Interludes. So Interlude is the name of any kind of play. Thus the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe as contained in "*Midsummer Night's Dream*" was presented by Peter Quince and his Athenian amateur was an Interlude. In England, the minstrels had been the successors of the Northern bards or scops [4]. They acted as common medieval entertainers. In France, people distinguished between the Norman trouvères who sang of war, and the Provençal troubadours who sang in the softer south their songs of love. The Norman Conquest brought into England not only reputable minstrels like Taillefer and Rature, but entertainers of many kinds [5]. In this period, the English singers had loss of reputation and so they appealed to the despised countrymen. Thus a higher and lower class of entertainers existed side by side – the Norman trouvère and the English minstrel. In some obscure way the minstrels helped to keep alive the elementary notion of dramatic entertainment. By the fifteenth century the religious drama

had passed from the Church to the amateur performers of town or guild and the minstrels stood apart as professional actors. Then they formed a guild of their own for self-preservation. Then they became Interlude players. The wealthy patrons hired the professionals but towns encouraged the amateurs. Then by a natural process the troupes of Interlude players developed into the regular dramatic companies, such as "My Lord, Chamberlayne's Menne" in the reign of Queen Elizabeth [6].

The folk-play had also an obscure influence on drama. Symbolical performances developed from primitive rites of spring and winter, celebrating fertility in land and beast. The Maypole still recalls the dance around the sacred tree. Sword dances are other remnants of old rites. Another instance of folk-festivals turned into play is the development of the May-game into the Robin Hood play. The 'Whitsun pastorals' in "*The Winter's Tale*" was the 'May-game' already denounced by the clergy as early as the thirteenth century [7]. According to Sir E.K. Chambers, Robin Hood became a popular national hero of ballad and elementary drama [3].

The foregoing discussion leads to what Allardyce Nicoll observes in "British Drama" (p. 20): "The indigenous dramatic activity took its rise, as did the drama of the Greeks, from the religion of the tree" [1]. He goes on to state that the drama remained for long "distinctively a creation of the Church". Despite corruption among the priests, the Church was a place of rest for the worn-out people and gave solace to the suffering, bread to the hungry and succour to the afflicted.

It was at once "the school, the meeting-place, the centre of art and culture and, still more important of amusement"; to quote Nicoll. (British Drama, p. 20) [1]. By degrees, the English drama becomes connected with the lives of the people. About the stages of dramatic development, E.K. Chambers writes: "First, the dialogue and the action gradually developed into little Latin playlets.... In the second step, the vernacular was introduced. Now, drama moves slowly towards people. In the third step, we notice purely vernacular plays written and acted in the Church precincts by the monks, the priests and choirboys in Church service. The next movement of drama was towards secularization. The introduction of the vernacular and the change of locality were the main causes of the drama breaking away from the service of the Mass. Eventually, the town guilds took over the representation of the plays and carried on the tradition to the sixteenth century" [3].

The English drama is linked up with the whole continuing tradition of the Theatre and human psychology. We shall better understand the plays and playwrights if we take account of the history of drama in England as linked

up with the whole continuing tradition of the Theatre. Despite the fact that the playwright has created, he depends largely upon the other constituents such as actors, producers, designers and technicians for success. But conditions of the happy integration of these elements have rarely been obtained in the history of the English theatre, except in Elizabethan times when the said conditions prevailed. The integration of the elements became easier because many of the Elizabethan dramatists and managers controlling the production had also been actors [2]. About the unknown portion of Shakespeare's life it can doubtlessly be stated that he was an actor, engaged in theatrical enterprises, thus passing his considerable time in the theatre.

The excessive attachment of criticism to the dramatist leads to many unhappy consequences, an utterly false illusion that drama can be comprehended and appreciated independently of the theatre has been created.^[4] Unfortunately, two of the noblest names in English literature aside from Aristotle, have helped perpetuate this heresy as found in Milton's "Samson Agonistes" and Thomas Hardy's "The Dynasts"[5]. It is well known that Milton's early interests in drama passed through modification because of his growing hostility and natural hatred of the kind of comedy popular in the Restoration theatre. We also find Thomas Hardy speculating in his preface to "The Dynasts" :- "Whether mental performance alone may not eventually be the fate of all drama other than that of contemporary or frivolous life." The author's disconnection from the living world of the theatre accounts for the fact that the English literature is strewn with many unactable plays associated with the great names of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Swinburne.

In many schools of different countries, we find the tradition of teachers interpreting plays through a network of notes, ignoring the speaking of verse of life presentation of the play as in the theatre. Scholars are found writing learnedly on different aspects of Shakespeare's dramas and age except the production of his work. Prof. Mahimohan Ghosh was aware of this anomaly and writes in "Calcutta Essays on Shakespeare",[8] edited by Amalendu Bose :- "Three great teachers of Shakespeare who taught Indian students over long years and at whose feet I sat – P.C.Ghosh, H.M.Perceival and J.C.Scrimgeour – made constant use of the dramatic methods in teaching, the first and the last to such a degree that at times they were too overcome by their sheer method to continue their classes".

In great dramatist like Marlowe and Shakespeare, we mark harmony between visual and auditory aspects of dramas [9][10]. They insist on harmony between what we say and what we do as we hear Hamlet speak [11] :

"Suit action to the words, the words to the action with this special observance that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature."
(Act III Scene II, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*)

5. Significance and Relevance of the Paper

The present paper will be beneficial in many ways. It will look into the main stream of drama neglected so far. It will help to understand the needs and requirements for the researchers. It will create awareness.

6. Conclusion

The points referred to above lay emphasis on Pre-Drama in Britain and other countries alongside of the roles of minstrels, village festivals and folk plays to pause the birth of drama proper in Britain.

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