***I- M.A. ENGLISH – SHAKESPEARE***

**A Brief History of English Drama Up To Shakespeare**

***Miracle or Mystery Plays****:*

The history of English drama dates from the **eleventh century**. The earliest dramatic representation in English is believed to have been the performance of a **Latin** play in honour of **St. Katherine**, at Dunstable in **1110**. By the time of the Roman conquest (1066), a form of religious drama, originating from the rich symbolic ceremonial of the Church had already established itself in France, and as a matter of course it soon found its way into England. Its purpose was directly didactic or instructional; it was the work of priests who used it as the means of conveying the truths of their religion to the illiterate masses. To begin with, the Church had this drama completely under control; performances were given inside the church buildings themselves; the priests were the actors; and Latin was the language employed. This form of drama was known as the **Miracle** or **Mystery play**. The material for mystery plays was drawn from the Bible and these mystery plays expanded the mysteries connected with religion. Miracles consisted of the stories of saints in whose honour they were acted. As the mystery or miracle plays increased in popularity and on great occasions larger and larger crowds came to witness the performances, it became necessary to remove the stage from the interior of the building to the **porch**. Later, it was taken from the porch into the **churchyard** and finally from the church premises altogether to the **village** **green** or the **city** **street**. Laymen at the same time began to take part in the performances, and soon they superseded the priests entirely. Also, the vernacular tongue, first French, then **English**, took the place of Latin.

***The Four Great Cycles of Mystery Plays:***

This religious drama in England reached its height in the 14th century, from which time onwards at the festival of Corpus Christ in early summer, miracle plays were represented in nearly all large English towns in great connected sequences or cycles. Four of these cycles have come down to us complete: (1) The Chester Cycle of 25 plays (2) The Coventry Cycle of 42 plays (3) The Wakefield Cycle of 31 plays (4) The York Cycle of 48 plays. Each of these begins with the creation of the world and the fall of man and, after dealing with such prophetic themes as the Flood, the sacrifice of Isaac, and the exodus from Egypt, goes on to represent the last scenes in the life of Christ—the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension—and closes with the Last Judgment. In literary quality these plays are of course **crude** but here and there they touch the note of **pathos** and the note of **tragedy**, while the occasional introduction of a comic element shows even more clearly the growth of a dramatic sense. These religious performances lasted well on into the 16th century and there is good reason to think that Shakespeare must have witnessed one at least of those which, during his boyhood, were still being given at Coventry. Hamlet’s advice to the players not to “Out-Herod Herod” recalls the declamatory and rhetorical style of the Herod of the old miracle plays.

***Morality Plays:***

The next stage in the history of English drama is the **Morality** **play**. This, like the miracle play, was didactic in purpose; but its characters, instead of being taken from the Bible or from the legends of the saints, were personified abstractions. All kinds of mental and moral qualities appeared on the stage as characters in the play—Perseverance, Free Will, the Five Senses, the Seven Deadly Sins, ***good and bad*** Angels, etc. Among such personifications, there was generally a place for the **Devil** who had held a prominent position in the miracle plays. A later introduction of much importance was the so-called **Vice**, who was a humorous personification of evil taken on the comic side. This was the recognized fun-maker of the piece. This character often scored a tremendous popular success by jumping on the ***Devil’s back, sticking thorns into him, beating him with a stick,*** and ***making him roar with pain***. He is especially interesting as the direct fore-runner of the **clown** of the Elizabethan stage.

***The Interlude:***

The **interlude** was a late product of the dramatic development of the morality play. The interlude was a short dramatic piece of a satiric rather than of a religious or ethical nature, and in tone and purpose far less serious than the morality proper. This form grew up early in the 16th century and is rather closely associated with the name of John Heywood (1497-1580), who for a time was court musician and general provider of entertainment to Henry VIII.

The interludes were often acted by household servants or retainers and are important as developing the custom of a nobleman of wealth having a band of more or less well-trained actors dependent on him. In the latter part of Elizabeth’s reign, when the drama proper was full-grown, we find theatrical companies calling themselves “the Earl of Leicester’s Servants”, the “Queen’s Players”, and so on.

***The Beginnings of Regular Comedy and Tragedy:***

These early experiments in play-writing are of great importance historically, because they did much to prepare the way for the regular drama. It was, however, under the direct influence of the Renaissance (i.e., the revival of learning) that the English **comedy** and **tragedy** alike passed out of these preliminary phases of their development into forms of art.

The first real English comedy, **Roister Doister**, was written in 1550 by **Nicholas Udall**, head-master of Eton, for performance by his school-boys. It has five acts in the Latin style and deals in an entertaining manner with the wooing of Dame Custance by the vainglorious hero, his various misadventures, and the pranks of **Matthew Merrygreek**, the **Jester**. Though greatly indebted to Plautus and Terence, it shows the influence of the older humours of the miracle plays and the moralities. The first real English tragedy, **Gorboduc**, reproduces the form and spirit of Senecan tragedy. It was written by **Thomas Sackville** and **Thomas Norton** in 1561 for representation before the members of the Inner Temple at their Christmas festivities. This first English tragedy was the first English play to use blank verse which had been introduced into English poetry only a few years before.

***Shakespeare’s Predecessors:***

The quarter century or so which followed the production of *Gorboduc* was a period of vast experimentation in the English drama. There was a conflict between those who insisted on the classical tradition and those who wanted to cater to the strong national taste of the English public. In the end, the national taste won, and just before Shakespeare began his career as a playwright the romantic form of drama (as distinguished from the classical type) was definitely established. The establishment of this romantic drama was the achievement of Shakespeare’s immediate predecessors, a group of scholars commonly known as the “**University Wits**”. They include ***John Lyly, Thomas Kyd, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Robert Greene, Christopher Marlowe,*** and ***Thomas Nash***. Of these John Lyly (1554-1606) and Christopher Marlowe (1564-93) posses a special significance, and they exerted a direct influence upon Shakespeare.

***John Lyly:***

John Lyly’s dramatic work consists of eight comedies, of which the best are Compaspe, Endymion, and Gallanthea. Lyly helped to give comedy an intellectual tone. In his skill in repartee, puns, conceits, and all sorts of verbal fire-works, he anticipated Shakespeare, whose early comedies, such as *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, owe much to his example. In comedy, John Lyly was **undeniably** Shakespeare’s first master.

***Marlowe:***

Marlowe‘s historical importance is even greater. A man of fiery imagination and immense powers, he lived a wild Bohemian life. While still young he was killed in a drunken fight. His *Tamburlaine the Great, Dr. Faustus, The Jew of* *Malta,* and *Edward II*, despite their bombast and extravagance, fix the type of tragedy and chronicle play for his immediate successors. He used blank verse in these plays with great success. In fact, before Marlowe there was neither genuine blank verse nor a genuine tragedy in the English language. Marlowe created the modern English drama. After his arrival the way was prepared and the paths were made straight for Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s early blank verse is fashioned on Marlowe’s. Shakespeare’s narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, is to some extent inspired by Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*. Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Richard II* are clearly based on the model of chronicle play provided in Marlowe’s *Edward II*. Even Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* owes something to Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta.*

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