



The Chester Mystery Plays

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ON Tuesday, November 20th, 1906, Prof. H. Gollancz, the well-known authority on early English literature, gave a lecture at the Museum, before the Chester Archæological Society, on "The Chester Mystery Plays." The Archdeacon of Chester presided, and a large audience included Sir Horatio Lloyd, the Mayor of Chester (Mr. F. F. Brown), Mr. Mond, M.P., Dr. Bridge, &c.

The Chairman, in introducing the Lecturer, said had he not believed that the Plays could be listened to in a reverent and religious spirit, he should certainly never have fostered the reproduction of them. He did believe that that could be done, and he earnestly hoped it would be done, and that those who listened to the Plays would be carried back by the accessories of those 300 years or more to the time when they were last produced; and would also feel that those things which were represented had a personal and an individual influence upon their own lives. They would, therefore, appreciate to the very full the spirit in which they would be represented, and the ideas presented in the Plays themselves.

Professor Gollancz said that, hundreds of years ago, Chester folk, aware of the fact that Chester Plays were

about to be performed, were all full of interest, and full of charming expectation, and that expectation was fostered by announcements made publicly in the streets some weeks before, bidding Chester folk be ready by the day, in right good mood, to welcome the players.

He (the Professor) was a sort of herald that evening, announcing that there were to be reproduced, after a lapse of 300 years or more, certain famous Plays closely identified with the early history of this great and noble City. He deemed it a privilege, the more so as it was by the wish of the honoured Member for Chester in the House of Commons.

The herald, in former days, was often inclined to refer to the early history of that kind of drama, and associate the beginnings of the religious plays in Chester with a great name, honoured by those who knew the literary associations of Chester, Ralph Higden, the author of the "Polychronicon," a name great in English literature, and great in the history of the religious house of St. Werburgh, Chester. He lived in the early part of the 14th century, and all evidence available tended to associate the real foundation of the Chester Plays with about the first quarter of the 14th century.

By that time religious drama had developed a long way forward from its very simple beginnings. The early Christian Fathers, in trying to win the newly converted from the gladiatorial shows, pantomimes, and other spectacles, wisely borrowed the great lesson that it was easier to appeal to the eye than the soul or mind. There were early developments of so embellishing the liturgy as to produce what might be called liturgical drama. In the Church service, though in Latin, there were elements of a very dramatic character; and, in the

9th century forms of dramatic service were included in the services at Easter.

The liturgical drama became rapidly secularised by the introduction of the vernacular; and, in the end, it became too secular to receive any longer encouragement from within the Church.

In the monastic schools a freer development took place. It was customary on the eve of the saints' days belonging to the saints to whom the schools were dedicated, for the scholars to enact some story associated with the history of the patron saints. This development took place on the Continent rather than in England.

It was seen that in Saxon England there was a certain amount of antagonism to anything dramatic, which had shewn itself from time to time in the history of religious and secular drama in England generally. We could find nothing in Saxon England intentionally dramatic; and that was all the more surprising when they bore in mind how the drama became the great crowning glory of English literature.

One of the gifts of the Norman conquest was the Church drama, and when once it became established the English people did very much to develop the French drama, so that we found many of the French plays that had come down to us were written by Englishmen who were half French.

There were from fifty to seventy places throughout England where plays were enacted; but only a few had been fortunate enough to rescue from oblivion those most interesting relics of old mediæval days, and Chester was among the most fortunate places in England.

London, which must have had a wonderful cycle of plays, had now no single play preserved that belonged peculiarly to it. Chester had a "cycle" or sequence of twenty-five plays, beginning at the very beginning of Bible history, and going on to the crack of doom.

In the 14th century interesting developments of mediæval life did very much to foster the development. The Church recognised that a very strong force had come into being in the form of the Trade Guilds, between whom and the religious life there was a close connection, and in the Church itself, in the year 1311, occurred the foundation of Corpus Christi day. That was a Church festival outside the church walls, and a festival that meant a procession in the streets. There came the opportunity of joining the interesting side of trade-life of the Guilds with the Church, and of associating with Corpus Christi day the festivals of the various Guilds.

The festivals of the Guilds were constantly taking the form of dramatic shows; and the happy thought seemed to have occurred to someone to let each Guild have a Play, and to have the Plays acted on two or three days in sequence, so as to have a connected story of Bible history.

There was a certain appropriateness in the choice of a Play by a particular Guild. The story of Noah would naturally be taken by the Water-drawers, and the story of Abraham and Isaac naturally by the Bookbinders, who worked on parchment, which was obtained from rams. "The Harrowing of Hell" was most appropriately assigned to the craft of the Cooks.

The Corporation took an interest in superintending the Plays. The Guilds had to make representations to

the Corporation to be allowed to enact the Plays; and, no doubt, the Corporation had certain powers to see that the Plays were properly conducted with due decorum in all that belonged to the serious side of religious drama.

We were told that the author of the Plays translated them into English, which would seem to imply that they were originally in some other language, probably French. If that were so, we could understand the close connection between certain parts of the Chester cycle and certain plays preserved in French.

There were many points of interest in regard to the beginnings of the Chester Plays. One monk, Francis, went to Rome and obtained not only permission for the acting of the Plays in Chester, but indulgence for, he thought, one thousand days from the Pope, and forty days from the Bishop of Chester, for those who attended the Plays with proper decorum, and a proper sense of the reverence due to them.

During the Reformation varying attitudes were taken by the authorities in regard to the Plays; but, on the whole, so strong was the enthusiasm of Chester folk, that it was impossible to prohibit the acting of the Plays. On one occasion the Mayor was summoned to the Privy Council for having allowed the Plays to take place. Nothing seems to have happened, for the Corporation supported the Mayor. On another occasion the Archbishops of York and London, together with the Bishop of Chester, tried to stop the Plays, but without effect.

It was noteworthy that in the second half of the 16th century, the time when the drama elsewhere was shewing such wonderful development, that in Chester

the old Plays were still being acted, although, occasionally, a holy and pious Mayor tried his best to stop them. In the year 1600 a holy, righteous, and pious member of the Corporation did succeed in stopping not only the Chester Plays, but also the equally interesting and important aspect of mediæval life in Chester, the mid-summer procession, which probably, in its history, went back a couple of thousand years, if not more, and which contained some of the oldest elements of folk-lore that could be found in these islands.

The Plays of Chester had come down to us in five manuscripts, and they all belonged to the 16th century. The student of Shakesperian drama, of drama in its highest and greatest and noblest form, had to recognise the great debt that Shakespeare as a boy, and as a man, and as a master-mind, owed to those simple mediæval dramas still current during the time of his activity.

The Plays of Coventry, to which Shakespeare referred more than once, had very much the same character as the old Plays of Chester. He thought no Plays had a more refined element in them than the Chester Plays; none of them seemed to have a greater sense of the dignity of the subject; and none were less offensive to the modern taste, than were the Chester Plays.

Let them imagine themselves attending the Chester Plays three hundred years ago or more. It was Whitsuntide, for the Plays associated with Corpus Christi day were soon moved to Whitsuntide. They rose pretty early, for there would be crowds at the various stations of Chester watching the scaffolds, prepared weeks and weeks before, on which the various scenes were to be shewn. The people made a three days' holiday, nine plays being acted on each of the first

two days, and seven on the third. The great scaffolds on wheels were called "carriages," and in other places "pageants," a word which was reserved in Chester for the Plays themselves. The carriages had two divisions, the lower for dressing, and the upper for the stage. They would be wheeled up first to the Abbey Gates, and then to other parts of the City; and seats were provided at various places, so that the crowd might witness the performances.

The people were to be edified by the Plays; but the writers and the actors remembered that they had also to interest the people; that they were dealing with simple folk and not the select few; not the learned people, who were superior to those folk-plays. The writers learned that in order to edify people they need not always be solemn and severe. They also knew that unless people were amused they would stay away. Whether they did wisely was a matter he was not going to discuss.

What fine material they had in the Bible story, with all its possibilities, its pathos, its serenity, its tragedy, its melodrama, and, not least, its lighter side. Let them think of the old writers trying to use that great story-book of the world so as to make it a living thing to those 14th century Chester folk, who had not then the advantages of free circulating libraries, or even "Times'" Book Clubs. Let them think of such an audience, and then consider whether the 14th century dramatists took the right course in dealing with the subject they had in hand.

The greatest poet of the 14th century, *Chaucer*, in one of his tales referred to the way in which the

story of Noah was treated in the words: "Have ye not seen the trouble Noah and his fellowship had before they could get the wife to enter the Ark"? In many other departments they had similar possibilities. The Shepherds waiting for the Star of Bethlehem suggested possibilities of lighter treatment that were rarely missed. Supposing well-known Chester folk had been waiting, what would they have done? The Shepherds' Play in various cycles was full of lighter passages, which set into heightening effect the appearance of the Star and the Gloria in Excelsis.

They could only learn by reading, or by seeing, that there was nothing incongruous in the natural actions of those rustics with the serious design that original writers had in dealing with such a theme. Let them think of the possibilities of the melodrama in such a character as Herod. Did he not rant and strut about in his vain-glory? Shakespeare referred to the Herod of those plays when he made Hamlet instruct the players not to rant too much lest they out-Herod Herod. Did not Shakespeare seem to take a delight, great mind as he was, in looking back with loving affection on everything associated with the simplest and crudest form of that type of literature with which he identified his genius? Then, the possibilities of pathos were brought out by the story of Abraham and Isaac, which seemed to have had an irresistible charm for mediæval England; so much so that five different versions of the Abraham and Isaac Plays had come down to us.

Prof. Gollancz read an extract from the Chester Play on the subject, and said that even in the 20th century

the lesson of that 14th century Miracle Play would not prove amiss or in any way jar upon our most religious and most refined feelings.

There was a great deal of scenery and elaborate machinery in connection with the Chester Plays, and some of the entries in the accounts were, perhaps, strange and curious. There was an entry of sixpence for a "pair of angel's wings"; or for "mending Hell's head"; or for the "rope for hanging Judas"; or for the "fire for setting the world aflame."

It was a mistake to imagine that in the 14th century people went through a long course of training to take part in the Chester Plays as amateur actors. The Corporation generally made the condition that the Plays were to be acted properly; and amateur acting did not seem always to have been countenanced. Bands of players were hired and paid for the purpose; and they must not take a strong standpoint and imagine that any harm would come in respect of the revival of such a Play as that of Abraham and Isaac, even if it were entrusted to professional players and not to choristers or high ecclesiastics associated with this Cathedral city.

We now recognised that God, in His inscrutable way of doing great work, had used the player to teach some of the greatest lessons that the modern world had ever learned from any man.

There were proclamations of the Chester Plays in various forms; and one written in 1572 would serve as an epilogue to the prologue he had put before them. In 1572 the people of Chester were in some doubt.

Some people were superior, and thought the old-fashioned Plays were not altogether worthy of their attention. The proclaimer pointed out the Chester Plays were not contrived "in such sort and such cunning and by such great players of price as at this day good players and fine wits could now devise; but by craftsmen and mean men, these pageants are played to commons and countrymen accustomedly before. If better men and finer heads now come, what can be said? But of common and country players take thou this story, and if any disdain these Plays, why, here open is the door; then let him in to hear, pack away at his pleasure; our playing is not to get fame or get treasure."

The Archdeacon of Chester proposed a vote of thanks to Professor Gollancz.

The Mayor, in seconding, said the difference of opinion on the Plays had shewn they might be entering a course of some difficulty, but Prof. Gollancz had shewn that they might safely go on, feeling that they should do no harm, but that they should do good to many. A great part of the Bible was historical. The people that were spoken of in it were men of like passions to ourselves, and why they should not be put on the stage he failed to see. Of course, there were many points which must be treated with great care.

The motion was acknowledged by Prof. Gollancz, who said the revival of the Plays was being watched with interest all over England. They were trying to bring into modern life something a little more picturesque something which might appeal to the imagination, and

they could not do better than foster an interest in the old life of England in localities where there was material for looking back on the wonderful attractive past. The present would receive great aid by looking back, because in each different part men, women, and children, would take a pride in their locality, and would become more enthusiastic and understand better the wonderful history that had gone to the building up of our noble and great country.

