Moralities

Moralities are a development or an offshoot of the Miracle Plays and together with these form the greater part of Medieval drama. They were popular in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and existed side by side with the Miracle Plays of that date. A Morality has been defined by Dr. Ward as "a play enforcing a moral truth or lesson by means of the speech and action of characters which are personified abstractions — figures representing vices and virtues, qualities of the human mind, or abstract conceptions in general", and, on the whole, that definition comprehends the main features of the Morality proper in its most characteristic form. Miracle Plays and Moralities existed throughout Europe, especially in France, and had various features in common while the manner of their presentation, at least in the early stages of the Morality, differed hardly at all — the performance being out of doors upon movable scaffolds with all the usual "properties". The aim of both was religious. In the Miracle Play the subject-matter is concerned with Bible narrative, Lives of Saints, the Apocryphal Gospels, and pious legends, a certain historical or traditional foundation underlies the plot, and the object was to teach and enforce truths of the Catholic faith. In the Morality the matter was allegorical rather than historical, and its object was ethical; the cultivation of Christian character. The intention of both Miracle Plays and Moralities, as we have said, was religious; in the one it aimed at faith, the teaching of dogma, in the other morals, the application of Christian doctrine to conduct. In the one medieval morality at all well known to the general public, that of "Everyman", this is clearly illustrated — a human life is brought face to face with the imperative facts of the Christian faith. It is not difficult, therefore, to see that the Morality is not only a development from the Miracle play but also its complement.

It is the custom with many dramatic and literary historians to decry the Moralities, especially in comparison with the Miracle plays, as unutterably dull, and, to place them in the lowest rank of dramatic art; yet that does not seem to have been contemporary opinion, for the multitude of extant printed editions of Moralities is stated by Mantzius to exceed by far that of the Miracles and farces. Mr. Pollard is, moreover, of the opinion that in its earlier days the Morality was not wholly unworthy to be ranked with the Miracle Play. It is, of course, clear that the substitution in the moralities of abstract ideas (Love, Friendship, etc.) in place of the human personalities of the Bible or legendary narrative, would tend to produce a less real effect if acted carelessly, or if the audience did not thoroughly comprehend, or was out of sympathy with, the meaning of the play.
(and this is practically the position of the modern reader, especially if non-Catholic). But the abstract ideas, after all, were represented as human beings (though typical human beings) on the stage, and if we put ourselves even slightly into the Catholic, religious, and moral atmosphere of the medieval audience (to which the ethical bearing of the play was not naturally dull but vivid, because of the tremendous human issues it was concerned with), we should be able to understand why the Moralities were popular not only in the Middle Ages but on into the time of the Renaissance. Besides this, in many Moralities the characters were not all abstract qualities — there were angels and devils, priests, doctors, and, especially in English plays, the fool, under various names, chiefly that of the "Vice". The versification of the Moralities was, too, on the whole, more varied than that of the Miracle Plays. One of the latest and most thorough of English writers upon this stage of the drama points out that four main plots can be distinguished in the earlier Moralities, sometimes occurring alone and sometimes in combination: the Debate of the Heavenly Graces; the Coming of Death; the Conflict of Vices and Virtues; and the Debate of the Soul and the Body.

In England, however, we have not extant examples of all the four, though the Morality Play is well represented in our literature. The earliest English Morality of which we hear is a play of the "Lord's Prayer" of the latter half of the fourteenth century "in which all manner of vices and sins were held up to scorn and the virtues held up to praise". This play is lost, but it must have been much thought of, for a Guild was formed in York (where it was played) with the special object of maintaining it. Also lost is another early and highly interesting Morality of the "Creed". The earliest complete Moral play extant, leaving out the still earlier fragment of the "Pride of Life" (ed. Waterhouse, see below), is the "Castell of Perseverance", 3650 lines long, and written perhaps in the early fifteenth century. This "traces (to quote Mr. Pollard's skilful summary) the spiritual history of Humanum Genus [Mankind or the typical man] from the day of his birth to his appearance at the Judgment Seat of God, personifying the foes by whom his pathway is beset, the Guardian Angel by whose help he resists them, and the ordinances of Confession and Penance by which he is strengthened in his conflict". Dramatic power is shown in this Morality; the plot forms a unity, and is developed in logical sequence. It must have been a thrilling moment for the audience when Humanum Genus after hearing the persuasive arguments of his Good and his Bad Angels, hesitates which to follow:
"Whom to folowe, wetyn I ne may; I stonde in stodye, and gynne to rave; I wolde be ryche in gret aray, And fayn I wolde my sowle save As wynde in water I wave. Thou (to Bad Angel) woldyst to the world I me toke; And he wold that I it forsoke. Now so God me helpe, and the holy boke I not (know not) wyche I may have."

Other early Moralities approaching the same type are "Mind, Will, and Understanding"; "Mankind" (these, with the "Castell of Perseverance", included in one manuscript and named in modern times after a former owner, the "Macro Moralities ", ed. Pollard and Furnivall, see below); "Everyman" (London, 1902), a translation from a Dutch original; the "World and the Child" (Mundus et Infans; ed. Manly, see below). All the above plays are lengthy and belong almost certainly to the fifteenth century. About the same date we may place two plays which though not pure Moralities are yet much influenced by the Moralities, "St. Mary Magdalene" (ed. Furnivall, see below), and what is known as the Croxton Play of the "Sacrament" (ed. Waterhouse, see below). About the end of the fifteenth century a new kind of Morality play appeared. In the earlier Moralities of which we have been speaking, time was not an object, nor was there need to limit the number of actors, but little by little, as performances began to take place indoors, in the hall of a king or a noble, and as they passed into the hands of professional actors, compression began to be necessary both in time and in the number of personages introduced. The aim of the play, also, became gradually more secular. The result was a modified and shortened Morality known as an Interlude. The meaning of this term is not yet clearly defined. Its primary meaning according to Mr. Chambers is that of a play in dialogue between two or more performers, but its secondary meaning, that of a dramatic diversion in the pause or interlude between the parts of a banquet or other entertainment, which has been generally given to it, may still stand. The nature of the Moral Interlude and its close connection with the earlier Morality proper is, however, clear. It deals with portions only of a man's life; and the ethical teaching, in some Interludes, is mainly limited to warnings against certain sins (especially those of youth) and in others to exhortations to learning and study. "Hick Scorner". (ed. Manly, see below) and the Interlude of the "Four Elements" (Hazlitt, "Dodsley's Old Plays", London, 1874) are early examples. This type of play was often used as a means of asserting Protestantism against Catholicism. Among the writers of this later type of Morality we find John Skelton in his "Magnyfycence" (ed. Ramsay, see below), and John Heywood, the dramatist, who was especially noted for his Interludes, some of which, however, are more like plays proper having a satirical rather than a definite moral aim, and leading to another development of the drama. Some of the Interludes are lively enough, but in
others there appears something of the dramatic lifelessness which has been, perhaps rashly, attributed to Moralities in general. When we find an Interlude on the subject of Love, in which the characters are named "Loving not Loved", "Loved not Loving", "Both Loving and Loved", "Neither Loved nor Loving", it is plain that this type of work is reaching its end, or if it is to continue must take on a more living character. John Heywood's work, however, on the whole, brings us, in Interludes such as "The Four P's" and "The Pardner and the Frere" (both plays to be found in Hazlitt's "Dodsley"), to the threshold of real drama. Allegory has passed away, together with the recognized Moral plot, and the characters are drawn from contemporary life. This "transformed morality takes its place as one of the threads which went to make up the wondrous web of the Elizabethan drama".


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