

## MORALITY PLAY MAKING

A PLAY whether moral or otherwise is a plot, an action in which one human force is pitted against another to culminate in victory or defeat. It is not a reality of human ambition, joy or suffering, but a figure, a picture, a statement of it, a thing made for presentation by actors to an audience. It is, therefore, conditioned by the language, knowledge and experience of those for whose delight or instruction it is performed. Not only each word and action but all costume, properties, lighting and scenery should be designed to develop or explain the plot. The author, the producer and the actor must know why a character is "garbed in black tights, dull red jersey and black cheese-cloth veil," or in khaki and a steel helmet; why the Lighting plot is for "Red and blue Foots and Borders" at the rise of the curtain; and why a Castle of the World is made of silver blocks in the form of a triangle.

A Morality Play has to conform to theatre conditions. It has also to instruct and refresh the soul of the hearer by a reminder of the truth. This is achieved by a process of incarnation—abstractions have to become flesh—reversing the usual order in which human characters are endowed with supernatural powers or natural vices and virtues highly developed.

There is doubtless as much need for Morality Plays at the present day as in the fifteenth century, indeed the problems arising at the collapse of the Feudal System have many points in common with those presenting themselves at the break-up of the civilization which followed it. And those authorized to teach will do well if they secure the public ear and eye with dramatic representations of Truth . . . but their language and their pictures must be in current coin. They do not meet the need by reviving an old play unless, in doing so, they are able to transmute it into terms acceptable to the age. *Everyman* can be reproduced, and is actually constantly in being, whether under Reinhart's direction at Strasburg or broadcast or televised, or as a local product

## MORALITY PLAY MAKING

of an amateur dramatic society. It has the note of the universal which is necessary in any work aiming at permanence; but it is treated as a museum piece, a survival from the past which it is "interesting" to know about. Protestant and agnostic actors will repeat its prayers to Our Lady—and the audience will hear them—with much the same enthusiasm as a man of taste will secure a refectory table (genuine antique) for his dining room or the Folk Song society will receive some newly-discovered setting to an old carol. This means that *Everyman* has ceased to be a morality play for it has no longer any more to do with Morals than the Glee Club's inclusion of *In Dulce Jubilo* at its Christmas Concert has to do with praising God.

Similarly any copying of the *Everyman* technique will fail as a Moral play no matter how well it be acted or with what enthusiasm it be received. It is this truth which Father Graves, O.S.B.,<sup>1</sup> has failed to recognise. He has a theatre sense, his stage directions are better informed than those normally provided to a producer, his sets, costumes and lighting could be easily accepted and, sympathetically produced, provide a spectacle which would "hold" an audience. But with the lowering of the final curtain emotions would return to normal. God would not be more greatly feared nor His commandments shine with revitalized splendour upon the day's work of those who had witnessed it. I am of course simply repeating the truth that new wine must not be put into old bottles. If we want to make a play

That of our lives and ending shows  
How transitory we be all day

it must convey the new wine of Truth (intransitory except in renewal) into our changing, passing, ephemeral lives.

Miracle and Mystery plays were designed to bring the Saints, biblical characters and Our Lord himself into a modern world, they were history illustrated. The Morality play was a homily illustrated. Both taught through the

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<sup>1</sup> Dramas for Lent (1) *Everyman*, (2) *The Great Theatre of the World* (adapted from the Spanish of Calderon de la Barca), (3) *Man goes on Trial*, by Rev. Clarus Graves, O.S.B., St. John Abbey, Collegeville, Minn., U.S.A. (50 cents. each).

## BLACKFRIARS

senses of hearing and seeing. They were amateur performances of professionally prepared material coming into being much in the same way, and for the same reasons, that Study Circles, Evidence Guilds and other parochial activities now emanate from the presbytery. Laymen were given opportunities to learn, to teach and to practice truth on a plane which would be inadequate as well as inappropriate for the clergy. A Fraternity may profitably meet once a week to study on lines which would be absurd in a seminary.

With these considerations in mind how should a modern morality play be designed? Should it be a thing like the *Miracle* produced by the expert in theatre, or a *Satin Slipper* written by a poet, or an *Upper Room* or a Shavian *St. Joan*? Has Henri Ghéon the secret, or is it to be found in the Chelsea Palace where an annual Nativity Play is given to exquisite music but clothed as by Boticelli out of Derry and Toms? Is *Murder in the Cathedral* the type of play we should emulate . . . or are we prepared to resign ourselves to the film?

I should not have mentioned the film (it is a medium, not an end), but for its advent in Chichester Cathedral. The only thing modern about it is *movement*, for there have been pictures of stone, wood, glass, paint and mosaic in our churches for some time. But it is movement which enables it to rank as drama for drama is, essentially, action. The Morality Play was a sermon acted, the film of it is a sermon acted, have we then arrived at the modern equivalent which the Church should seize upon for teaching purposes? As there is no medium which the Church can despise there is presumably no reason why she should avoid the film, but, in this particular discussion we have to decide that the film fails to meet the need precisely as a "read" sermon composed by somebody else fails to water the arid wastes in a congregation. It is to be noted likewise that the plays just mentioned fail in the same way. They were, of course, written for the theatre and do not claim to be morality plays, I mention them only to isolate the matter before us.

And that seems to be this. There are fine modern plays of the *Miracle* or *Mystery* order, but none of the *Morality*. I

## MORALITY PLAY MAKING

know, for instance, of no more moving drama than *L'Annonce faite à Marie*; there Paul Claudel has given an exquisite theatre piece to the theatre, but it is not what we now seek—the moving sermon to warn man of sin and to direct his steps heavenwards. Such must be inspired by those who business it is to make sermons! As it is a task waiting, presumably, for the editors of BLACKFRIARS it is hardly my duty to tell them how to do it. I will merely suggest a return to the method by which morality plays were once put on the boards: the preacher discovers what the people need and orders a poet or one acquainted with the stage to supply a play—exactly as he orders a sculptor to give him a set of “The Stations of the Cross.”

He is aware that he can only teach people what they already know by means with which they are already familiar. While the lot of the working man is “little better than slavery itself,” while we groan under the imposition of the usurer and heap up burdens of debt to pass on to our children “Good Deeds,” “Strength,” “Beauty,” “Knowledge,” even “Death, that mighty Messenger,” bring no counsel, comfort or warning to the sick and isolated soul. He must find other characters. Let him look at the dramatic activities of the Communist if he is ignorant of the language now spoken in slum and factory.

The modern morality play is needed and will come, but I do not expect to see it noticed in these pages nor reviewed in the daily press. I expect it to be a parochial affair, inspired from the altar and acted by amateurs in the market place or at street corners.

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