BIBLICAL DRAMA UNDER THE TUDORS

by

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To my father

and

to the memory of

my dear mother

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University College,
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PREFACE

"Search the scriptures" might well have stood as a motto for the sixteenth century. The Bible had always been the Book of Books for Christendom, but in the Reformation period its significance was enormously heightened by the bitter religious strife of the time. It was not only a sourcebook for theologians, preachers, and moralists, but also an armory of proof-texts for controversialists in the struggle between Protestant and Catholic, sect and sect. On every side it was studied, quoted, disputed, and revered.

In England, as on the continent, drama was one of the vehicles through which this intense concern with the Bible was expressed. Between about 1520 and the end of Elizabeth's reign, we know of about fifty new plays based on scriptural stories which were either produced or offered for acting on the English stage. About half of these survive. Although there are gaps in our knowledge, I shall try to discern the phases of development through which the Biblical drama passed, and its relationship to the fortunes of the Reformation. We know, for example, that while the 1520's saw only a handful of Biblical moralities and a political satire based on the book of Esther, the 1530's were remarkable for an impressive number of Biblical plays by Protestant converts, John Bale, Ralph Radcliffe, Nicolas Udall, and others. In the next decade, John Christopherson, Nicholas Grimald, and other scholars at English universities experimented with neo-classical plays on Biblical figures in the manner already developed on the continent. Their work, which was in Latin or Greek, had only a limited circulation and was the prelude to an apparent gap in the tradition during

most of Edward's years as well as Mary's. Elizabeth's accession was followed by renewed enthusiasm for Biblical drama in schools, in the universities, and on the popular stage. Just as suddenly the fashion disappeared after about 1568, to be revived briefly in the London theatre toward the close of the century. With this limited revival the tradition died, for in the seventeenth century the impulse to dramatize the Bible was much less strong and worked itself out in neo-mysteries and occasional closet plays, quite outside the main development of English drama.

Some of these plays have been studied before, but with certain limitations. In tracing the influence of continental drama on early Protestant writers, C. H. Herford [1] touched on some early Biblical plays. Hardin Craig's sketch in his *English Religious Drama* [2] is brief and tends to accept too readily the research of minor scholars. Bale's work has never been adequately related either to his medieval training or to Protestant apocalyptic. In his account of Biblical university plays, [3] F. S. Boas considers their classical features rather than their relationship to the religious history of the time. Lily B. Campbell, in her *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth Century England*, [4] does describe most of the Biblical plays, but her arrangement of them in categories, partly according to type and partly according to audience, obscures their historical significance. She is also mistaken, I believe, in claiming Biblical drama as a purely Renaissance form – early Biblical dramas have many medieval features – and in asserting that the primary aim of the "divine dramatists" was to combat the revival of pagan learning. Many of them were, in fact, deeply involved in "pagan learning" and themselves produced secular work. David M. Bevington, in *From "Mankind" to Marlowe*, [5] has many penetrating comments to make, but his chief interest is in the structure of the plays and the relationship of structure to performance. Moreover, the humanist drama of Grimald, Foxe, and

[1] *Studies in the Literary Relations of France and Germany* (Cambridge, England, 1886).
[2] (Oxford, 1955), pp. 354–389.
[3] *University Drama in the Tudor Age* (Oxford, 1914).
[4] (Cambridge, 1959).
[5] (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

Christopherson, and the Biblical plays of Lodge, Greene, Peele, and the English comedians were outside the scope of his study. T. W. Craik's *The Tudor Interlude: Stage, Costume, and Acting* [6] also concentrates on details of production, whereas I am interested in relating the plays to their historical and religious background. For my purpose, Glynne Wickham's masterly *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660* [7] was especially valuable for his chapters on "Miracle Plays" in Volume 1 and on "Reformation and Renaissance" in Volume 2. However, he mentions few of the Biblical plays I consider and treats none in detail. There still seems room, then, for a study which examines all the Biblical plays of the Tudor period and attempts to see them in the religious, political, and literary context of their time.

[6] (Leicester, 1958).
[7] (London, 1959, 1963).

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I

BACKGROUNDS

1. THE MYSTERY PLAYS

Glynne Wickham reminds us that the words "Reformation" and "Renaissance" may be dangerous. They may deceive us into thinking that the sixteenth century was "a time of far more sharply defined change ... than in fact it was ... "Mystery" and "Morality" plays are assumed to have been replaced by "comedy" and "tragedy", permanent theatres and perspective scenery to have replaced pageant waggons, inn-yards and mansions." [1] In actual fact the mystery plays, the mature fruit of a long period of theatrical development, were influential throughout the sixteenth century. "Once grown to maturity, they commanded allegiance in the theatre long after Henry VIII's break with Rome and served the drama of Protestant polemic as sturdily as its Roman Catholic predecessor". [2]

In the fifteenth century there had been a dozen or more mystery cycles. [3] In the sixteenth century, those at Preston, York, Lancaster, Chester, Coventry, Lincoln, Norwich, Chelmsford [4] and possibly Worcester and a few other towns – i.e. about two-

[1] Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1600*, Vol. 2 (London, 1963), p. 14.

[2] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 156.

[3] For convenience I use "mystery" for Biblical plays, "miracle" for plays on the lives of saints. This follows common practice but has no especial authority in medieval usage.

[4] Chelmsford seems to have been the center of considerable activity early in Elizabeth's reign. The actors performed their plays in other Essex towns and rented out their costumes.

thirds – continued to be performed, though in some cases intermittently, into the early part of Elizabeth's reign. While political pressure was certainly exerted against the performance of the mysteries – at least in their traditional forms – at York in the 60's and at Chester and Wakefield in the 70's, there was never any general proscription of the cycles under any Tudor sovereign. [5] The mystery cycle at Kendal, like the miracle plays in Cornwall, even survived into the seventeenth century, though in the less remote towns the old cycles had by then passed away. In London and other towns of the south Passion plays something like those in France and Germany appear to have been more popular; some of these, too, continued to be played. Wickham concludes (p. 117) that "on grounds of civic pride, financial gain and the spectacular achievement the Miracle plays [i.e. mysteries] commanded the allegiance of the populace to the very end". The medieval plays, then, were powerful enough to survive long enough to influence sixteenth century Biblical

[5] There is not space here to deal at length with the reasons for the disappearance of the mysteries. The question is dealt with in Father H. C. Gardiner's *Mysteries' End* (New Haven, 1946) and more recently in Wickham's *Early English Stages*, notably in Chapter IV ("Miracle Plays") in Volume I and Chapter II ("Reformation and Renaissance") in Volume II. Gardiner's assertion (p. 72) that it was "the Reformation and it alone, as a principal cause, which killed off the religious stage in England", seems to go too far and to ignore the factor of changes in public taste. His constant identification of the term "the religious stage" with "traditional Catholic Plays" is definitely misleading, for, as the following chapters will show, there was also a considerable body of Protestant religious plays. Wickham quotes Gardiner's statement (p. 72) that "the power which was really working for the ultimate extinction of the religious stage was none other than the Crown itself", working through the Privy Council and through its arm the Queen's Council in the North. Wickham points out that state hostility to the mysteries corresponds to what we know of the destruction of "other artistic manifestations of Catholic doctrine" such as statues and stained glass and might account for the disappearance of most of the play manuscripts. (There is a further account of the disappearance of the mysteries in Chapter VI). Whatever was the cause of the disappearance, it does not alter my view that the cycles lasted long enough to influence deeply a militant Protestant like John Bale, the writers of popular Biblical drama (mostly Protestant), and even the exponents of humanist drama in the classical tongues.

dramatists. For example, the first-generation reformers, rebels though they believed themselves to be, began by rewriting medieval subjects and adapting medieval forms. Bale, for example, seems to have planned a Protestant mystery cycle, Grimald a Protestant Passion play, and Foxe a Protestant Antichrist play. All three could easily have seen the medieval cycles, Bale at Norwich, Foxe and Grimald at Lincoln. Before going on to discuss their work, it may be well to recall the principal features of the mysteries.

The central theme of the cycles is the redemption of man through Christ Incarnate. Rooted in the services and holy days of the Church, the cycles center on the Nativity, the Passion, and the Resurrection. While the cycle may begin with the Fall of Lucifer and end with Judgment Day, the focus is on Incarnation and Atonement, and the Old Testament incidents dramatized were chosen because they were believed to have some special significance in relation to Christ's work of salvation. For example, the fall of Adam is shown because Christ was regarded as the "second Adam" whose atoning power would heal the breach between God and man caused by the first sin. The sacrifice of Isaac was a favorite subject because it was thought to prefigure the sacrifice of Christ. The fact that every episode was thus closely related to the grand theme of salvation, with the telescopic use of history which is more than history, does give unity and depth to the cycles. This effect is reinforced by the frequent comments which point out these relationships. A sort of continuous recapitulation and anticipation goes on. Cain speaks of the lost grace which the second Adam will restore, Abraham's blessing for Melchizedek points forward to the Eucharist, Noah recalls the fall of Lucifer, and Jesus (in the Harrowing of Hell) His own birth, so that one is continually seeing the present in terms of past and future. The Prophet plays are the classic example of this technique, of which Bale was to make effective use.

This underlining of the unity of history is only one example of the didacticism which is characteristic of the plays. Every occasion for direct homily is seized upon. Thus Lucifer's fall becomes an occasion for a talk on pride; Mary Magdalene's con-

version suggests repentance; the Resurrection, immortality; Anna and Simeon, prayer; and so on. The Hegge plays are especially notable for dry but earnest and pithy speeches on serious topics. Mors reminds Herod that death comes even to kings; John the Baptist preaches on repentance and the dangers of over-confidence and despair; while Jesus' conversations with the doctors, which in other cycles is merely a display of memory work in His recitation of the Commandments, is here adroitly made to cover five theological points concerning His nature and person. This didactic habit, fused from time to time with Senecan moralizing, continues right through the century and demonstrates the moral earnestness of much Tudor writing.

Sometimes the agent of the religious or moral teaching was some kind of commentator – a preacher, prologue, doctor, or presenter, who explained and interpreted the action or even described it if the dramatist felt that he was unable to represent it. Such a presenter was used by Bale in his Protestant Biblical plays and was still a subject for ridicule in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (V, 1). Often, too, one of the chief characters takes over the task of explanation. In the York plays, for example, God Himself comes forward at the outset to list His attributes and indicate His intentions in history; Noah describes the evil in the world; and Christ expatiates on the necessity of His suffering. Occasionally the wicked characters declare themselves: Satan unfolds his villainy; Pilate boasts of his pomp and power; and Herod proclaims his lust for blood with many swearings "by Mahound", a dignitary his namesake and other unbelievers continue to invoke even in the plays of sophisticated humanists. Such comment and soliloquy pass into general use.

Subtler forms of teaching such as political and social satire are much rarer than homily in the cycles, appearing chiefly in the work of the Wakefield Master, who in the *Piers Plowman* tradition attacks false witnesses, swindlers, slanderers, mean landlords, and crooked lawyers, and mocks at male and female vanity, social climbing, and simony. He was to find fellow satirists in the writers of popular Biblical drama under the Tudors and in the innumerable tract writers of the sixteenth century. Religious con-

troversy is, naturally, not found in medieval drama, and there is little religious satire, except for an occasional liturgical parody, like the Mock Mass in the Digby *Magdalene*, or a slighting reference to "Master Lollar". When controversy displaced simple doctrinal teaching we find that satirical elements became enlarged into abuse and polemic. Liturgical parodies are sometimes found in Protestant plays.

In a more important way some of the mystery writers prepared the way for dramatic satire. It was natural to them to present their characters as everyday people and to make their actions understandable in terms of contemporary life. There is little attempt at local color or historical objectivity. Cain prodding his stubborn mule is a foul-mouthed north-country yokel, his language brutal, unimaginative, and obscene; Caiaphas in the garments of an English prelate a fighting bishop, like Spencer, who would rather beat up an enemy than reason with him. The audience would feel at home with Adam and Eve spinning and digging, Joseph and Mary in a mild domestic brawl, and the shepherd grumbling at the weather, the crops, and the landlords. Other instances of this striving toward actual life include the functional ship in *Mary Magdalene*, the nautical talk of "ruff ... ruff, spyer, sprund ... sprot" in the Newcastle Noah play, the real flames and chains in hell, the "chawbone" [jawbone] for Cain and the famous "Rybbe colleryd Red" from which Eve was made. The gruesome tortures in the Crucifixion and St. Erasmus plays, the fanciful attempts at appropriateness in matching guild to subject – the Bakers to the Last Supper, the Goldsmiths to the Magi, the Butchers to the Crucifixion – which seem to us grotesque illustrate the same naïve literalism. Perhaps, though, this presentation of the Biblical narratives through contemporary eyes yielded the most important legacy to the new Biblical dramatists. They made it easy to see Haman as Wolsey, the cruel debtor as a bourgeois social climber, the prodigal son as an Elizabethan schoolboy; they made possible, in fact, a great variety of religious, political, and social satire.

Perhaps the medieval drama's greatest significance lay in the fact that it was theatre. It did expose countless communities to

the delight of absorption in dramatic experience Audiences learned to enjoy spectacular effects, to suffer and rejoice with their heroes and heroines, and to appreciate the subtle enhancements of song and music. Some of the spectacular devices of the medieval stage – burning bushes, burning swords, burning worlds, the fall of Lucifer, hell mouth, fountains, and "fyne flowers" springing up – were hardly excelled by the professional companies later. And many scenes in the medieval drama are true theatre. We still feel the pathos in the Abraham plays and the laments of Magdalene and the disciples, horror in the Crucifixion, suspense in the Raising of Lazarus, the Setting of the Watch, and some of the trials. An Aeschylean effect not always marked is the silence of Jesus in the long scene before Herod. The plays about saints (for example the Digby *Magdalene)* – the long meandering tales, full of vicissitudes and miracles, incredible sufferings and happy endings – join with the Resurrection plays and indeed the whole sweep of the cycles in creating the certainty that though weeping may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning. The pattern of sin and sorrow turning to joy and redemption buds in the midcentury *Susanna* and flowers in *The Winter's Tale*. The use of song often enhances these emotional effects. The Coventry songs are probably the best known and include the charming "As I outrode this enderes night", and the tender "Lully, lulla, Thou littell tyne child" which are still deservedly loved and sung. Sometimes Latin hymns were used, such as "Veni creator spiritus" and "Surge proxime mea columba" (both in the York Plays) and the *Te Deum* in the Croxton Sacrament and the Digby *Magdalene*. Other dramas with songs include the Hegge *Noah*, the Chester *Resurrection*, the York *Coronation of the Virgin*, and the Norwich Paradise play, which closed with a male quartet. Instrumental music was also common, as stage directions and numerous records of payments to minstrels attest. Bale, Grimald, and other early Protestants continue to use songs and hymns for a variety of effects, much in the manner of their predecessors.

One quality of the mysteries apparently died with them, the peculiar charm of unaffected devotion, a simple directness of religious feeling. It is expressed particularly in scenes touched with

the numinous: God walking in the garden while Adam and Eve hide like frightened children, the shepherds listening to the angels, the Magi in wonder at the star, and the simple, natural appearance of the Virgin to St. Thomas of India. The spirit of these plays has seldom been recaptured, certainly not by the early Protestant dramatists. It is not a question of faith or sincerity; Bale and Foxe were men whose passionate convictions led them to risk exile and death; but they could not have written scenes like these even if they had wanted to. They were too busy with argument and citation, attack and defence. A new world was coming into existence, where sects would multiply, loyalities be divided, and change be the only constant. In these winds of controversy something irreplaceable was blown away.

2. MORALITY PLAYS AND ALLIED FORMS

In this new world, the medieval morality play was to prove a more adaptable species than the mystery. This was probably because it was by nature a more flexible kind of drama, combining easily with other forms and taking on fresh meanings which would have surprised the pious authors of *The Pride of Life* and *Everyman.*

The traditional morality is allegorical in structure in that the external plot represents the inner history of the soul, its moral struggle and final salvation or damnation. It is a product of the same habit of mind that saw, for instance, the progress of the human soul toward God mirrored in the wanderings of Abraham. The protagonist is a universalized type, standing for mankind or human nature, as such names as Humanum Genus and Everyman indicate. Other generalized types such as Taverner, a Prince, or a Beggar may appear, along with personified abstractions like Lust and Greed, or Mercy and Peace, which are often symmetrically paired. The war between the Vices and the Virtues, the debates of opposites, the coming of Death (together with the machinations of the Vice and Devil) provide the major part of the action.

Common to all these plays in one form or another is a basic

plot pattern in which one historian of the form [6] distinguishes five stages: (1) State of Innocence, (2) Temptation and Fall, (3) Life in Sin, (4) Repentance, (5) Pardon. Omissions and variations in this pattern do occur – in *Everyman* the early stages are left out, whereas *The Castle of Perseverance* goes through all the stages twice – but in some form it provided the framework of scores of plays.

Stock devices recur over and over. Bad characters are disguised as good and vice versa, heroes and heroines are clothed in the garments of evil or innocence, and named and renamed to indicate various stages in their moral progress. Good and bad characters debate and compete, Vices fall out, and Virtues are set in the stocks and have to be rescued by their fellows. Temptation scenes and scaffold repentances recur *ad infinitum*. Preachers and commentators come forward to point the moral and admonish the audience. Obscenity, invective, and coarse humor cling to the morality throughout its life.

Thanks to its flexible character, the morality was easily adapted to the complex needs of the new century. Although it retained its allegorical structure, its types, characters, and abstractions, its debates, disguises, imprisonments and changes of name, the whole machinery – which after all is a basically sound conflict plot – was made to serve a variety of needs, educational, political, and social as well as theological and moral. The stock devices are given new meanings. Chastity imprisoned (in the person of Susanna) is rescued from the Vices, not by Mercy but by the Righteous Judge, the Vices in *King Darius* are given names and personalities appropriate to a heathen court, the debates concern secular as well as doctrinal matters, the pope reveals himself as Antichrist, and the preacher-commentator is more than likely an ardent Protestant. [7]

[6] W. R. Mackenzie, *The English Moralities* (Boston, 1914), pp. 1–17. It is he who makes the distinction between "abstractions" and "universalized types".

[7] Wickham, p. 28, comments on *God's Promises* that the morality play was "adapted to Protestant purposes in a stream of anti-Catholic polemic interludes... The vitality of this subject matter, a positive contribution of the Reformation drama, can scarcely be stressed too strongly, for it gave to English drama of the time a relevance to daily life".

The allegorical habit of mind, combined with increasingly realistic treatment, produces a great variety of "applications". Everyman himself becomes Magnificence or the Prodigal Son, or the frivolous student Wyt, or Respublica or Ecclesia or a specific repentant sinner such as the Magdalene. Abstractions tend to become professional or class types. Hypocrisy may be a priest or monk, Pride a great prelate, Lechery a prostitute, and the Vice a city gallant. All this facilitates social and political satire.

Sometimes a converse process takes place and historical characters are seen as types or abstractions. A traitorous monk in King John's time is Sedition, the elders in the Susanna Story are Sensualitas and Voluptas, and the Pharisees eternal representatives of cant and hypocrisy. Such identifications led people to see direct analogies between past and present, and history sacred and secular was combed for episodes which seemed to typify or prefigure contemporary events.

The morality, then, had infinite potentialities which writers of Biblical drama were quick to exploit. Bale, for example, seeing the history of his time as part of an ongoing struggle between Christ and Romish Antichrist, uses in new ways the battle of the Vices and Virtues, the abstractions and types, and the preacher-commentator. His successors often combine a straight Bible story with a morality subplot in which abstract figures comment on the main action. This is very cleverly done also in both *Godly Queen Hester* and *The Cruel Debtor*, where the abstractions represent aspects of the main characters or problem. Sometimes, as in *King Darius*, morality features are just thrown in as a makeweight.

In the twenties and thirties the devices and tendencies just described crystallized into three main trends, all with some bearing on Biblical drama. There are the evolution of what we may call the "youth play", the appearance of a Biblical political satire in *Godly Queen Hester*, and Bale's invention of a hybrid form combining morality play and sacred history and intended as Protestant propaganda. *Hester* and Bale's work will require separate treatment, but the youth play may be briefly treated here.

Early in the sixteenth century the salvation-of-Everyman morality