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Medieval Theatre: Mystery, Miracle and Morality Plays

Dr Jyoti Kala, Department of English

Medieval Religious drama flourished from about the ninth century to the sixteenth.

Mystery plays

1. Mystery Plays originated in the Middle Ages, during the **twelfth century**.
2. It began with subtle changes to the services for religious holidays such as **Easter and Good Friday**, that involved bringing down the cross for all to see; and expanded to the Christmas service with the scene of Christ's birth in the manger.
3. These early performances were given in **Latin**, and were preceded by a vernacular prologue spoken by a herald who gave a synopsis of the events.
4. One of the first liturgical performances -An example of a mystery play was the Easter Trope performed in the **10th Century**. It was also called **Quem Quaeritis?** (Whom do you seek?)
5. Mystery plays were dramatizations of both the Old and New Testament miracles (**The Biblical Stories**).
6. In **1210 A.D.** there was a **ban** of Mystery Plays by Pope Innocent III, which caused the plays began to perform in small town guilds.
7. There were the four most prominent collections of mystery plays, the **York cycle** with **48** pageants, the **Towneley plays** with **32** pageants, the **Chester cycle** with **24** pageants, and the **Wakefield (N-town) plays** with **42** pageants.
8. In **1311**, with the introduction of the **Corpus Christi festival**, that takes place 57 days after Easter, these cycles were often being performed during the **Feast of**

Corpus Christi and their overall design drew attention to Christ's life and his redemption for all of mankind.

9. The performances were grouped together and consisted of plays such as, Noah and the Flood, and The Creation of the World and the Fall of Adam, popular topic was Christ and his crucifixion and resurrection.
10. The traveling stage was used for the performance of a Mystery Play.
11. The term "Mystery was derived from the Latin word ministerium, meaning **craft**, or an association of clergy from different religious groups.
12. By the time of the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the Reformation, in England, the Mystery plays started to die down and were replaced in popularity by Morality plays.
13. One of the most widely known Mystery plays is *The Second Shepherd's Play*, which puts three shepherds at the birth of Christ in Bethlehem.
14. **Some common Mystery Plays:**
 - ~ Birth of Jesus
 - ~ The Wise Men
 - ~ Flight into Egypt
 - ~ The Second Shepherd's Play, written in late 15th Century
 - Fall of Lucifer
 - Cain and Abel
 - Noah and the Flood
 - The Nativity
 - The Passion of Christ

Miracle plays

1. Miracle Plays, also called **Saint's Plays**, were plays dedicated to the lives of various saints.
2. Miracle plays, or *Saint's plays*, are now distinguished from mystery plays as they specifically re-enacted miraculous interventions by the saints, particularly St. Nicholas or St. Mary, into the lives of ordinary people, rather than biblical events;
3. Like Mystery Plays, the Miracle plays originated to enhance the liturgical services and were later separated from the church.

4. They were performed in town festivals in the **thirteenth century**.
5. A miracle play presents a real or fictitious account of the life, miracles, or martyrdom of a saint.
6. Most Miracle plays are performed about either **St. Nicholas** or **the Virgin Mary**.
7. Almost all surviving miracle plays concern either the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas, the 4th-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. Both Mary and Nicholas had active cults during the Middle Ages, and belief in the healing powers of saintly relics was widespread. In this climate, miracle plays flourished.
8. During the **sixteenth century** there was a **ban** on Miracle Plays by King Henry VIII.
9. Some Examples-
 - The Conversion of St Paul
 - Mary Magdalene
 - The Play of the Sacrament

Morality Plays

1. Morality plays stemmed from Mystery and Miracle plays.
2. These plays were allegorical dramas that **personified the moral values** and **abstract ideas** to teach moral lessons.
3. Moralities were popular during the **fifteenth and sixteenth century** in Medieval Europe as didactic, informative or educational, plays.
4. The most common and famous play is **Everyman**, an English version of the Dutch Play about the inevitability of death.
5. Morality plays are the result of Christian symbolism.
6. **Some common Morality Plays:**
 - ~ *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1425)
 - ~ *Hickscorner*
 - ~ *Everyman*(1500) (The Somonyng of Everyman, The Summoning of Everyman)

The Interlude

- A short, **humorous play** presented between the parts of a miracle play or morality play.
- A playlet actually performed between the courses of the cycle of the plays.
- A short play of a sort popular in the Tudor period, either **farcical** or **moralistic** in tone and with a plot typically derived from French farce or the morality play.
- Variety of short entertainments, including secular farces and witty dialogues
- May include any performance **between** the acts of a play.

- Presented for the **comic relief**
- John Heywood is a popular writer of interludes during this period.

Mystery and Morality Plays-MCQs

1. The *Miracle Plays* principally deal with the miracles performed by –
 - a. Magic
 - b. Supernatural powers
 - c. Saints and Sages
 - d. Personified vices and virtues

2. The *Mystery Plays* deal with-
 - a. The life and deeds of the saints
 - b. Biblical themes
 - c. Heaven and Hell
 - d. Moral values

3. What is the most significant feature of the *Morality Plays*-
 - a. They present Biblical figures
 - b. They present saints and sages
 - c. They present vices and virtues as personified figures
 - d. They symbolize Christian moral values

4. Why were the *Interludes* introduced-
 - a. They had better theatrical effect
 - b. They pleased the common class of the spectators
 - c. They provided comic relief
 - d. They dealt with the real problems of the life

5. Biblical themes were enacted in-
 - a. The Morality Plays
 - b. The Mystery Plays
 - c. The Miracle Plays
 - d. The Interludes

6. The *Resurrection of Lazarus* was a very popular play in the fifteenth century. It was a-

- a. Mystery Play
 - b. Morality Play
 - c. Miracle Play
 - d. An Interlude
7. *Everyman* was the most famous play of the 15th Century. It was a-
- a. Morality Play
 - b. Mystery Play
 - c. Miracle Play
 - d. An Interlude
8. Virtues and vices are personified in-
- a. The Moralities
 - b. The Mysteries
 - c. The Miracles
 - d. The Interludes
9. There were four famous theatrical Cycles enacting the Morality Plays. One of the following four names is wrong. That is-
- a. York Cycle
 - b. Towneley Cycle
 - c. Chester Cycle
 - d. Charles Cycle
10. John Heywood's *Interlude* entitled 4PP (or 4P's) caricatures four professionals whose profession begins with P. In the four professionals listed below, one is wrong. That one is-
- a. The Palmer
 - b. The Pardoner
 - c. The Piper
 - d. The Pedlar
11. What type of play is *Christ's Nativity*?
- a. A Miracle Play
 - b. A Mystery Play
 - c. A Morality Play
 - d. An Interlude
12. The characters represent abstract qualities in-
- a. Morality Play
 - b. Mystery Play
 - c. Miracle Play
 - d. An Interlude
13. In subject the Miracle Plays were essentially-

- a. Historical
- b. Social
- c. Theological
- d. Political

14. The *Betraying of Christ* is a-

- a. Miracle play
- b. Morality Play
- c. Social Play
- d. Political Play

15. *The Castle of Perseverance* is a significant-

- a. Morality Play
- b. Interlude
- c. Miracle Play
- d. None of the above

16. The Morality Play *Everyman* belongs to the –

- a. 14th Century
- b. 13th Century
- c. 15th Century
- d. 16th Century

17. John Rastell is a famous writer of-

- a. Interludes
- b. Miracle Plays
- c. Morality Plays
- d. None of the above

18. *The Merry Play* is written by –

- a. John Heywood
- b. John Rastell
- c. Sir Thomas Moore
- d. None of the above

19. Miracle Plays were based on-

- a. Stories from the Bible
- b. Stories from the lives of the saints
- c. Concept of Christian theology
- d. None of the above

20. *The Birth of Jesus* is a famous-

- a. Morality play
- c. Mystery Play

b. Miracle Play

d. Interlude

21. The play of *The Sacrament* is a well known-

a. Miracle Play

c. Morality Play

b. Interlude

d. Mystery Play

22. The earliest known religious play is –

a. Noah

c. Adam

b. Nativity

d. None of the above

23. *The Four Elements*, a well known Morality Play is written by-

a. Sir John Lyndsay

c. John Bales

b. John Skeleton

d. None of the Above

24. The Miracles were well established by-

a. 16th Century

c. 17th Century

b. 15th Century

d. 18th Century

25. The York consists of-

a. 40 plays

c. 35 plays

b. 42 plays

d. 48 plays

26. A good example of pathos in Miracle play *Abraham and Isaac* is when Abraham offers to sacrifice his-

a. Brother

c. wife

b. Son

d. daughter

27. The earliest Morality Play was-

a. The Castle of Perseverance

c. The Trial of Treasure

b. Everyman

d. New Custom

ANSWERS- (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8) (9) (10) (11) (12) (13) (14) (15) (16) (17)
(18) (19) (20) (21) (22) (23) (24) (25) (26) (27)