

the crowd. In one play Satan and a "nigromancer" dance, when the latter is suddenly tripped up and carried off bodily.* Yet the sign of the cross, or the invocation of the Virgin or the saints, immediately discomfits them; and of holy water they have a mortal terror. In the Nativity play they roar horribly when Christ is born, and make a great noise under the stage.

The various parts originally performed by the monks, came, in course of time, to be enacted by companies of the citizens. The different crafts and guilds vied with each other in the representation of the plays allotted to them. The rivalry between the worshipful tanners, chandlers, vintners, mercers, bowyers, skinnners and weavers, was keen and exciting.

When we consider how humble were the talents employed, the majestic sweep and sublime compass of these plays is perfectly astounding. They comprehend the entire drama of time from the creation of the world to the day of doom. Nay, the daring imagination of the monkish writers went back beyond the dawn of time to the counsels of eternity; and, scaling the battlements of heaven, laid bare the secrets of the skies. They shrank not from exploring with unfaltering step the regions of the damned, and depicted with Dantean vigour and minuteness the tortures of the lost. They pierced the mysteries of the future, and revealed the awful scenes of the last Judgment and the final consummation of all things.

In recording in his lofty numbers the story of the Fall of Man and Loss of Paradise, the sightless bard of English poesy, whose inner vision seemed more clear for that the outer ray was quenched forever, how far soever he may have surpassed his predecessors, could hardly be said to have pursued

"Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme;"

for not only in the Miracle Plays and Mysteries, but also in the still older legendary poem of Caedmon, the Saxon monk, is the same story related with wondrous vigour and sublimity.

* In the book of accounts of these plays some strange charges are recorded, e.g. "Item paid for mending Hell Mouth jd; for keeping fire at ditto. iij. l. — For setting the world on fire jd. ij worms of conscience, iij s; whyte or sawd sowles, and iij blake or dampnyed sowles. v. s. : baryll for ye earthquakes, ijs;" etc.