

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 vigor and sublimity.

The literary execution of these plays, as might be expected, is very imperfect. The most absurd anachronisms and solecisms perpetually occur. The Old Testament characters repeatedly swear—a habit to which they are greatly addicted—by “*Sanct Peter and Sanct Poule, by Mahoum and the Sybill.*” Titles are strangely modernized. The “*Knights*” who crucify our Lord speak of “*Sir Pylate and Bishop Caia-phas.*” The devils talk of “*Sir Satan and Lord Lucifer.*” The interlocutors in the play quote from “*Gregorye, Austyne, and Sir Goldenmouth.*” The geography is inextricably confused. The local topography of England is transferred to the fields of Palestine; and London and Paris are familiarly referred to by the shepherds of Bethlehem.

The awful scenes of the Passion are most painfully realized, and are delineated with all the force and breadth of Rubens’ sublime painting. The ribaldry and scurrile jests of the rude soldiery throw into stronger contrast the dreadful terrors of the scene. The monkish authors do not scruple to heighten the dramatic interest by the introduction of legendary stories—often absurdly, sometimes with wonderfully picturesque effect. English and Latin are strangely intermingled according to the necessities of the rhyme or rhythm. The writers manifest a sublime disdain of the servile rules of syntax and prosody, and each spells as seems right in his own eyes. The same word will occur in two or

three different forms on the same page. The rhymes are frequently so execrable that in some MSS. and printed copies brackets are used to indicate the rhyming couplets. This was of course the very childhood of dramatic art, and it was therefore extremely infantile in its expression; it nevertheless gave tokens, like the youthful Hercules, of a power of grappling with difficulties, which was an augury of the glorious strength it was afterward to manifest.

With majestic sweep of thought the grand drama of the ages is enacted in these plays. All the converging lines of providence and prophecy centre in the cross of Christ; and from it streams the light that irradiates the endless vista of the future. Heaven itself seems opened, and the vision of the great white throne and the procession of the palm-crowned, white-robed multitude passes before us. We hear the “*sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies,*” the choring of the cherubim and seraphim, and the song of the redeemed in the presence of God. Anon the scene is darkened by the shades of endless gloom, is lurid with the glare of quenchless fire, and awful with the ceaseless wailings of the lost.

Compared with these lofty themes the sublimest tragedies of Greece or Rome and their noblest epics pale into “*faded splendor wan.*” What parallel can be drawn between the petty conflict round the walls of Troy, or the wanderings of Ulysses, or the building of a Latin town, and the fall of man, the redemption of the world, and the judgment day? What terrors of Æschylus or Sophocles can shake the soul like the record of the drowning of the world by water, or the vision of its destruction by fire? What pathos of Euripides can melt the heart like the tender story of the Nativity, or the awful tragedy of the Cross? The ignorant populace of a petty burgh, and the boorish inhabitants of the surrounding country, in that ultimate dim thule of the West where these plays were enacted, had brought before their minds, and doubtless often deeply impressed upon their hearts, holier lessons and sublimer truths than Plato wrote or Pindarus sung, or than were ever taught by sage or seer in