

entirely to the clergy, and the ignorant masses could only vaguely comprehend the dull homilies they heard; but the public representation of the Nativity, the Passion, or the Resurrection, at the appropriate seasons of Christmas, Good Friday or Easter, was easily understood and vividly remembered.*

But these sacred representations soon became subject to abuse. Droll characters, comic scenes, and ridiculous speeches, were introduced in order to excite mirth; and a flippant and irreverent treatment of the most sublime themes became a prevailing vice. Many of the clerical performers degraded themselves to the level of buffoons, and the Miracle plays, originally intended to communicate religious instruction, frequently degenerated into broad and indecent farce. The lower clergy adopted this vehicle for the abuse of their superiors; and the rude populace found in them both subjects for burlesque and caricature. Thus the most sacred associations of religion became degraded into objects of vulgar mirth. The language even of the female characters—who were generally represented by boys, however—was frequently exceedingly coarse, and gives us a low opinion of the manners of the age. The devils especially, or "tormentors," as they were called, were the clowns of the play; and caused infinite merriment by their rude jokes and buffoonery.

The stage was divided into three parts, to represent heaven, earth, and hell; and very intricate and ingenious machinery was often employed to produce proper theatrical effect. These stages were frequently on wheels, so that they might be drawn about. The gross ideas of the age concerning the material torments of the damned were faithfully delineated. The

* A Passion-Play is still represented every ten years at Oberammergau, in Bavaria, in fulfilment of a vow made on the cessation of a pestilence in A.D. 1633. As many as 500 peasant performers take part, and the spectacle is witnessed by thousands of visitors from all parts of Bavaria, Tyrol, and more distant places. The rehearsal lasts several days, and, like the Greek drama, is performed in the open air. It partakes of a highly religious character, and the representatives of sacred persons are selected for their piety of life, and are set apart by prayer. Similar plays, but of inferior merit, are also performed in the villages around Innsbruck.

monks doubtless thought a very salutary lesson was inculcated when a man who refused to pay his tithes, or a woman who adulterated her ale, or sold too scanty measure, was dragged off forcibly by demons to Hell Mouth. The devils wore flame-colored and grotesque clothing, and carried clubs of buckram stuffed with sawdust, with which they most vigorously belabored each other and the crowd. In one play Satan and a "nigromancer" dance, when the latter is suddenly tripped up and carried off bodily. The moral always is that of the Scotch proverb: "He needs a lang spoon who wad sup wi' the de'il." Yet the sign of the cross, or the invocation of the saints or the Virgin, 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, skiners and wavers, 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 vigor and minuteness the tortures of the lost. They pierced the mysteries of the future,

* In the book of accounts of these plays some strange charges are recorded, e.g.: "Item paid for mendyng Hell Mouth ijd.—For keepyng fire at ditto. iijjd.—For setting the world on fire jd." The price of robes and wings for angels and charges for still more irreverent or blasphemous "properties" also occur. In a Mystery of the Creation at Bambar, in the last century, Adam wore a wig and brocade morning gown, and the angels the wings of geese.