

The Drama as an Educator in Morals.

Our subject, as to whether the drama has been and is an educator in morals, is one that is quite intricate to consider. From the fact that there are different types of morality relative to different stages in history; and also from the fact that the drama has been variable in form and nature, it seems evident that the fairest way to judge its influence, would be to compare certain periods of history, certain parts of the life of humanity with the drama written for that particular time. By doing this we may fairly decide whether its moral tone would be an educator in morals for the people of that particular time, whether it has been a curse because it has been indifferent or hostile to morals; or a blessing because pervaded by a moral sentiment, and guided by a moral law. In this comparison we shall deal more particularly with the English drama and the English speaking people. First let us consider the drama as an educator in morals during the time in which it was exhibited in the form of miracle plays. This would be from the beginning of the twelfth to the middle of the fifteenth century.

At the beginning of the twelfth century the people were not much more than emerging from barbarism. They would no doubt be near the lowest type of morality. They were illiterate, and exceedingly depraved. These miracle plays which were written by the clergy, had quite a variety of subjects, such as relate to the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Resurrection, the purpose being to impress upon the minds of that people the fundamental doctrines of the Bible. But there was so much irreverent element mixed with the most solemn scenes and incidents of the Gospel history, such as the Last Supper and the Crucifixion, that we are led to question whether even these plays, notwithstanding the moral and religious purpose in view were an educator in morals. Although it may be that those exhibitions so revolting to modern taste, breathed a moral influence upon that particular class of people.

Secondly, let us briefly consider the drama as an educator in morals during the period in which it was exhibited in the form of moral-plays, from the middle of the fifteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century.

The aim of these moral-plays was not to teach theological doctrines, but to illustrate and enforce the virtues that refer directly to the practical conduct of life. This change from their original sphere of revealed religion into that of natural ethics, was due to the thirst the people had for novelty and variety. So much humour and wit was introduced that the moral purpose became so obscure that we are inclined to believe that the people received very little else than amusement.

The third and last form of the drama is tragedy and comedy.