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THE RELIGIOUS DRAMA OF THE MIDDLE AGES: MYSTERIES AND MORALITIES.

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The Mysteries and Miracle Plays of the middle ages present a rich mine of poetical material for the modern explorer. His labor will be rewarded by not a few nuggets of virgin gold, although he may have to sift a large quantity of worthless ore to find them. The gems of thought he may discover are in the rough, it is true, unpolished and unwrought, yet they are often precious gems notwithstanding.

These plays are interesting, too, as giving vivid illustrations of the manners of our forefathers, and of the condition of mediæval society. They exhibit, also, the conceptions of religious truth then entertained, and the mode of its communication to the people. But they are chiefly important as containing the germ of that noble dramatic literature which so wonderfully blossomed forth during the Elizabethan era, in the writings of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Their origin is somewhat obscure. According to Voltaire, they first came from Constantinople, where the Greek drama was Christianized in the fourth century. They were probably brought thence by returning palmers and pilgrims during the Crusades. In France, indeed, there was an order of pilgrims called the Contraternity of the Passion, from their representation of that subject. In England, these religious plays seem to have been first exhibited at the universities, and were written in

Latin. The monkish influence is very strongly marked on every page. They were afterwards written in the vulgar tongue, both in France and England, and are among the earliest relics of the vernacular literature of those countries.

This olden drama is of three sorts: the Mysteries, the Miracle Plays, and the Moralities.

The first represented the principal subjects of the Christian faith, as the Fall of Man, and the Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ.

The second exhibited the Miracles of the Saints, and their astounding adventures.

The third were, properly speaking, purely allegorical representations of vices and virtues. They sometimes set forth the parables of the New Testament, and the historical parts of the Old; then, however, they become indistinguishable from the Mysteries. The voluminous religious plays of Calderon and Lope de Vega partake largely of the allegorical character of the Moralities.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries these plays were performed in the churches for the instruction of the people; but the monks, finding that the exhibitions of the jugglers at the Easter revels drew the populace away from the churches, gave their plays a more attractive character, and performed them in the open air. Reading was an art confined, of course,