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"English Drama"

It is very difficult to trace the beginning of drama in England because it has sunk into obscurity. There are evidences of the establishment of amphitheatres by the Romans but these amphitheatres took their leave with the departure of the Romans. During middle Ages, the acting was not concerned with plays but with individual players, who happened to be clowns, jesters, minstrels etc. Of these persons minstrels were very important. The minstrels were supposed to be a link between the Anglo-Saxon 'scop' and the later theatre. The 'scop' used to sing long poems about the heroes. Throughout the middle Ages the minstrels were seen at the King's court in their multicoloured coat. They were also welcomed at the palace and at the market place also where they

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gathered crowd by singing their stories. It is a recorded fact that a minstrel was in the army of William the Conqueror who died reciting the lay of Roncesvalles. Some of the minstrels had become rich because they threw on their rich patronage but most of them led a wretched life. They were virtually tramps, exposed to weather and were dependent upon the generosity of the audience. The church was against these minstrels, it looked down upon them and said that nothing could save their souls from damnation. In spite of hatred for the minstrel it saw that the songs of the minstrels used to encourage the travellers in their weary journey. Some of the clergies then imitated the minstrels and mingled words of religious guidance with their secular stories. It is interesting to note that the church

was not sympathetic to these minstrels but then it was the church which brought back drama in England. The rituals of the church had something dramatic in it and by the end of the tenth century the rituals developed into the rudiments of a play.

It is some three or four hundred years after the death of Roman stage that bits of drama started appearing in the church services. It is very difficult to pin point the date with regard to the beginning of dramatic performances in the church. It seems that these dramatic performances were natural developments of church services. Uncertainty hangs around these performances, but it is certain that the church had not anticipated the development of liturgical play in the way it had developed. In the beginning the liturgical play was a part of

the church services but by the end of the thirteenth century the church premises were converted into one stage and the audience included the actors as well. The higher authorities were not well-disposed towards these performances. The church had started these dramatic performances with some religious purposes but later on they found that the dramatic element had become stronger than the religious purposes. Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the dramas became secular. On finding that the dramatic performances had become an embarrassment to the ecclesiastical authorities, the performances were shifted to the precincts of the church. Due to a number of changes brought about these performances the dramas became elaborate and secularised. Now Latin passages were being translated into

English and long dramatic scripts arose out of the Biblical passages. How the actors were no longer the clerics but were the members of the medieval guilds. People began to think that drama was a social activity, a co-operative enterprise maintained by guilds of craftsmen. The dramatic activity now became widespread. The number of dramas, which have survived, is very limited. Four main cycles have been preserved. They are Chester, York, 'Towneley' or Wakefield and Coventry. Coventry is more complete. It goes through a series of plays, presents stories of the Bible from Creation to the Day of Judgement. The plays of the four different cycles differ in technique and skill though they all show sincerity on their part. There is an element of pathos also as in the play of Abraham's sacrifice

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of Gita. Later on comic scenes were also introduced in the dramas. These religious plays formed a great national tradition.

The end.

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