

THE SO-CALLED MYSTERY PLAYS.

BY E. F. L. GAUSS.

THE return during the coming summer of the Passion-Play at Oberammergau in Bavaria has revived and increased the interest in this most famous of all mystery-plays, perhaps more so in this country than elsewhere. It may be timely, therefore, to inquire into the history and nature of these plays, with special reference to the one above named, which dates in its present form from the year 1633, and has since then been repeated every ten years, save when adverse circumstances prevented its performance.

While religious plays of a similar nature existed before the Christian era, and some are known of more modern people other than Christians, it may be said that the Christian mystery-plays are as old as the story of Christ. From the beginning of the Christian services, there was more or less of a dramatic element in them, which has developed with the Church. This is due to the instinct in man to express his religious sentiments and feelings by act as well as by word, and is more or less shared by all religious services. Indeed, every art of man has grown out of this human impulse and need. Architecture, as an art, began with the erection of temples to the gods, giving painting and sculpture the necessary foundation and the opportunity for development. If it were not innate in these arts to give expression to the spiritually highest conception, there would not be the revolt against the realistic tendencies of our present time.

The pure dramatic art especially, representing the highest ideal types, not in colors and dead materials as sculpture and painting, but by imitation through living figures, has sprung from the unavoidable acting in religious services. We need only point to the worship of Dionysos by the Greeks, which consisted chiefly in mimic representations of the exploits of the god.

But as the religious conceptions grew from the crude to higher ideals, culminating in the dynamic God-idea of the Christian faith, so grew the ideals of dramatic representation upon the religious field. Whoever is familiar with the services and ceremonies of the Roman and Greek Catholic Church, must have been struck by the dramatic force in them. But especially on certain holidays of the Church, such as Christmas, the Feast of the Wise Men from the East, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, the day of Christ's burial, and



1. SATAN, ATTIRED AS A BISHOP, SLAYS THE PREACHER ZACHARIJAH WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE COOK.



3. THE SON IS SLAIN.



2. SATAN APPEARS IN DISGUISE AT THE VINTAGE.



4. SATAN ANNOUNCES THE DEATH OF THE SON AT THE MOUTH OF HELL.

SCENES FROM M. JACOB RUFF'S RELIGIOUS DRAMATISATION OF THE STORY OF JOB AND THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD.

Satan is introduced as sowing the seeds of sedition in the minds of the servants of the vineyard and induces them to slay the son of their master.¹

Easter Sunday, the services have unfolded from an early date into actual dramatic plays. Particularly striking among these in some

¹ Performed at Zurich, 1539 A. D., on May 26. From Kōnnecke, after contemporaneous illustrations.

countries are the representations of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and of his resurrection on Easter Day. In the latter, priests dressed as women approach the tomb, and upon hearing the assurance of the angel seated there, "He is not here, he is risen!" return to the altar, announcing to the assembled congregation: "Christ is risen!" The great processions of the Catholic Church are to this day dramatic representations of features in the life of Christ or in the history of the Church.

The mystery-plays in all countries were largely of the same character, since they have the same foundation and the same origin, the coloring only varying in small measure with the characteristics and peculiar religious conceptions of the people. They reached their climax in the latter half of the middle ages, when the perform-



GOD THE FATHER



SATAN



GOD THE SON

THE MAIN ACTORS IN THE MEDIÆVAL MYSTERY-PLAYS.

ance of the larger plays lasted several days. Their texts, taken from the Gospels and the legends of the Church, were mostly crude and, while generally written in the language of the country, profusely interspersed with Latin words and phrases. As a rule their authors were clerics, in most cases monks or nuns. But while the poetic value of the mystery-plays was but small, we may assume that they were all most excellently presented as to acting and scenic effect.

It is a remarkable fact, that the great solemnity of these plays did not protect them against the intrusion of jokes and comic intermezzos, for which an opportunity was offered in the part played by the devil, the deeds of Judas, and the bitterness of the Jews. The latter especially fared ill in these plays, and it may be supposed

¹ From *Bilderatlas zur Geschichte der deutschen Nationallitteratur*, by Dr. Gustav Könnecke, Marburg, 1895, p. 93.

that their portraiture in them had not a little to do with the contempt in which the Jews were held in the middle ages.

The oldest of the passion-plays known is that of St. Gall, Switzerland, which came down to us from the fourteenth century. In England the mystery-plays were generally only performed in connexion with the processions on Corpus Christi day. In Austria, the Tyrol, and Germany, they were prevalent up to the eighteenth century, while in France a special community, the "Confrérie de la Passion," was founded for the purpose of producing and enacting passion-plays. From the north of France we have only mystery-plays of the fifteenth century, but these in large numbers. It is worthy of notice that while Italy is the centre of the Catholic Church, where its ceremonies are matters of daily observance and therefore most familiar to the people, we know of only one Italian passion-play, and that was published as late as 1888 at Turin.

The performance of the mystery-plays was, as indicated before, originally part of the church-services and very simple. The performers were, as a rule, either priests or members of sacred orders, monks or nuns. The latter were at one time very prominent in them, because the Virgin and Mary Magdalene were necessarily represented.

One of the simplest among the early plays consisted in "The Lamentations of Mary" at the death of her son, forming the lyric introduction to the celebration of Easter. Soon, however, the mystery-plays became in a measure worldly, inasmuch as they were played by worldly companies in public places, generally at fairs and marts. In fact, the name of these latter in some modern languages, particularly in German, is derived from "missa" or "mass," because they ordinarily took place in connexion with the observance of the more important church feasts.

On such occasions the mystery-plays were performed upon special stages, roughly erected in the market-places, or even more commonly in the street between the houses, extending from one side to the other. These stages ordinarily consisted of three divisions, *heaven*, *earth* and *hell*, which could be opened to rear and front, or on large places to all four sides, so that the performance could be witnessed by all the people gathered around the stage.

One of the most characteristic mystery-plays of the middle ages was that of the "Wise and Foolish Virgins," which was very popular for several centuries, especially in Germany. At the beginning of this play Christ (the "*dominica persona*," as he was called in most of the mystery-plays) appears in the uppermost part of the

stage (heaven), surrounded by Mary and the angels. Then the virgins come upon the scene in the middle part of the stage (earth). The story is played as it is related in Matthew with some additions, showing Mary interceding for the foolish virgins. Thereupon the lower part of the stage (the jaws of hell) hitherto closed, opens. Lucifer and a host of devils and of the damned are seen. They remind Christ that he had promised to be a just judge and claim



OLD ENGLISH MYSTERY PLAY.

As performed on a portable stage erected in a public market-place, usually on the occasion of some church festival.

the foolish virgins, who, after repeated vain intercessions from Mary, are delivered up to the Prince of Darkness, and are bound by the devils with chains, and dragged below. They disappear with the cry of despair, "We deserve the wrath of God, we are eternally lost!" while above, Christ, Mary, the angels, and the wise virgins are seen in blissful union. Thus ends the most dramatic of all mystery-plays of old. How powerful the effect of these plays was

upon the spectators, is shown by the case of Frederic, Landgrave of Thuringia, who, upon witnessing one of the performances of this play just described, fell into an hysterical state, which deprived him of his reason and caused his death three years after.

Aside from some minor performances connected with the services of the Catholic Church, nothing is left in our days of the old mystery-plays, except the great Passion-Play at Oberammergau, and in minor form in some other German and Swiss villages, refined and purified in conception as well as in its dramatic production. The town of Oberammergau itself is of historic interest. The Romans used the place as a trading-post and called it *Coveliaca*. It has always been a thrifty village latterly, especially in certain industries connected with the religious life of the Catholic people. It is not known whether mystery-plays were performed in the town in the middle ages or previously, but there are strong indications that such was the case.

However this may be, the fact is authenticated that in 1633 the present Passion-Play was first produced there. It came about in this wise: In the year named the plague visited that neighborhood and claimed a great many victims in the village. The inhabitants in their simple faith trusted that God would send them succor, and they made a vow to perform "the great atoning-sacrifice upon Calvary to the glory of God." The vow was enthusiastically participated in by all the people of the town and piously carried out. Miraculously—as the people looked upon it—the plague ceased, and in their gratitude to their deliverer and in their desire to perpetuate their thanks through their children, the godly peasants resolved to repeat the performance every ten years, the present year closing the twenty-sixth decade.

Originally the performances took place in the most primitive way at the cemetery of the village, but the play gradually attracted large numbers of people, who now flock to witness it from all parts of the globe, so that it soon became necessary to erect a play-house in the village and to repeat the play a number of times during the season. But not until 1890 was there anything but a board-fence surrounding the seats of the auditorium, beside the spacious stage, all uncovered. This year there is a large and commodious building, costing 62,000 dollars, with a seating capacity of from 4-5000, still partly without a roof, as is also the greater portion of the stage. The auditorium, fitted out with folding-chairs, is so well arranged that every foot of the stage is clearly in view from even the cheapest seat, and the acoustic properties of the hall are most perfect.

The stage is immense, representing chiefly the streets and buildings of Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Decorative paintings show the original "play-ground" upon the cemetery, the old commercial roads of the Germans and biblical scenes. Everything is most artistic.

The text of the Passion-Play was originally of the same crudeness that marked the early mystery-plays, and is claimed to have been written by one of the monks of the neighboring monastery of Ettal. In the course of time, however, the words were repeatedly improved, until the drama reached a high perfection in its present form, which was given it in 1850 by the priest of the village, Daisenberger. This pious man was for many years the spiritual guide of the villagers, and to his wise and energetic efforts and zeal is due the great interest of the entire world in the Passion-Play, which never fails to make a deep impression upon every spectator of whatever creed and views he may be. The performers are all people of the village, and those impersonating the more important characters generally play them a number of seasons, achieving thereby international reputation.

The present year will bring an almost complete change in the cast, and much is expected, especially of the two persons who bear the rôles of Christ and Mary. There is much music in the play, and the choruses are pronounced by experts exceptionally fine.

Oberammergau is very picturesquely situated between high mountains about 2550 feet above sea-level, and the highest of the mountains overlooking the village, the Kofel, is fittingly crowned by an immense stone-group of the Crucifixion, towering above the summit more than forty feet. This fine piece of sculpture was erected in 1875 by the admiring friend of the villagers, King Louis II. of Bavaria.