Drama through the Ages

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INTRODUCTION

This edition of Drama through the Ages is one of the Cambridge School Anthologies. This series has been written for students and teachers who want to engage with literature in an active and varied way.

All of the authors included in this book were born before the 20th century began. The collection covers the period from 1400 to 1900. The scripts were written by a range of famous and less well-known writers from Britain, Ireland and France. You may already know the plots of some of the plays and we hope you will enjoy getting to know some new ones.

Wherever possible, the scripts are grouped together by theme or genre so that you can compare how different writers deal with similar ideas or topics. The four sections are in date order, starting from the Middle Ages, so you will get a sense of drama’s development through time.

The scripts are printed on the right-hand pages with suggested activities on each left-hand page. You do not have to do all the activities: they are simply a range of possible ways of becoming actively involved in the drama. You can work on some activities on your own or in groups. Many of the instructions – such as suggested group sizes – can be altered to suit your particular needs.

We hope you will find this collection of pre-twentieth-century drama both fascinating and challenging. It is intended as an introduction, to help you discover playwrights, plots and characters that you like and to encourage you to read and perform more of your own choice.

As you read these scripts, you will find many echoes of modern life. People of past times were much like we are today: they enjoyed seeing family arguments, comedies, mysteries, murder stories and interesting reflections of daily life.

We hope you enjoy engaging with and performing these scripts too. Have a good read.

Mary Berry and Alex Madina
MYSTERIES AND MIRACLES
(14th- and 15th-century drama)

The beginnings of drama in Britain

Drama in Britain began in the churches. Services in the Middle Ages were spoken in Latin, which most ordinary people did not really understand. So the priests acted out small scenes from the Bible for the congregation to watch.

After a while, these drama scenes moved outside the churches to the courtyards and streets. Ordinary people took over the acting roles and as they acted out the scenes from the Bible they began to alter them a little. They sometimes added extra scenes to their favourite stories so that they could present interesting characters like the evil King Herod or the Devil. These dramatised stories were called Mystery Plays and became popular in many towns.

The Mystery Play Cycle

In some towns, the organisations or guilds which controlled the medieval trades (like goldsmiths, carpenters, shipwrights, weavers) got together to put on different episodes from the Bible one after the other, in a series or cycle of plays. Often a guild would choose an episode linked to their trade, so the shipwrights presented the Noah’s Ark story and the shepherds performed the shepherds’ story from the Nativity.

A Mystery Play Cycle was performed during the summer on moving carts (called pageant wagons). Each wagon would show a different Bible scene. They would assemble about 4.30 in the morning and move through the town, stopping at different points to perform their part of the Bible story. People would stand in the street or look out from their windows to watch each wagon as it came past (see the illustration on page 7).

The most famous Mystery Play Cycles were staged in York, Coventry and Chester. Although the practice of putting on these plays died out many years ago, the York Mystery Plays were revived in the twentieth century and are still performed today.

Street Plays, Miracle Plays, Morality Plays

Acrobats, singers and musicians also performed in the streets in the Middle Ages. There were also Miracle Plays which dramatised the lives of favourite saints, and Morality Plays which told stories of how people are often tempted to do evil. The story of Everyman is the best-known example of a Morality Play.
Performances of the Mystery Plays

A drawing of a Mystery Play being performed in Coventry. The scene on stage shows Noah urging his wife to come into the Ark (see extract on page 9).

Death on the Cross was a common punishment for criminals in Roman times – a slow and agonising way to die. The story of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion by the Romans was one of the central scenes dramatised in the Mystery Plays. Part of the script from the York Crucifixion Play is printed on pages 13–15.
Mysteries and Miracles

Husband and Wife

The story of Noah and his Ark was a favourite topic of the Mystery Plays. In the Bible, God becomes so displeased with all the sinners in the World that he decides to send a Great Flood to drown every living thing. Noah and his family are the only human beings to be allowed to survive. God tells Noah and his family to make an Ark ‘of gopher wood’ large enough to take his family plus two of every living creature.

Although nothing is said about Noah’s wife in the Bible, the tradition arose in medieval Europe of portraying her as a shrew (an aggressive and argumentative woman).

In this extract from the Noah’s Flood Mystery Play, Noah’s wife refuses to go into the Ark unless she can bring her gossips (friends) with her.

1 Quick, before it’s too late! (small groups)

Improvise two scenes where one of you refuses to join the others in some activity. One situation could be relatively trivial (such as going to see a particular film), while the other could be much more serious (for example, you are trapped by a fire and have to escape over the roof, but one of you is too scared to move). Then talk about the different ways the group tried to persuade the reluctant one.

2 I’m not going! (groups of six)

Rehearse this extract from Noah’s Flood. Think about how Noah and his sons might plead and beg with their wife/mother. Show your play to the rest of the class. Think about how you might create:

- the Ark with its gangplank, the wind, rain and rising floods
- the comedy of dragging the reluctant? drunken? wife into the Ark
- the change of mood in the final moments (lines 38–59)
From the Chester Noah’s Flood Mystery Play

[As the flood waters begin to rise, Noah and his family go into the Ark – all except Noah’s wife]

NOAH Wife, come in! Why standest thou there? Thou art ever froward, that dare I swear. Come in, for fear lest that we drown.

NOAH’S WIFE Yea, sir, set up your sail, And row forth with evil hail, I will not out of this town. But I have my gossips every one, One foot further I will not go, If I may save their life. They loved me full well, by Christ; 5 But thou wilt let them in thy chest, Else row forth, Noah, wither thou list, And get thee a new wife.

NOAH Shem, son, lo! Thy mother is wrow: Forsooth such another I do not know. 10

SHEM Father, I shall fetch her in, I trow, Without any fail.

[He goes to his mother]

Mother, my father after thee sent, And bids thee into yonder ship wend. 15

NOAH’S WIFE Son, go again to him and say I will not come therein today. 20

NOAH Come in, wife, in twenty devils way, Or else stand there without.

HAM Shall we all fetch her in?

NOAH Yea, sons, in Christ’s blessing and mine; I would you hied you betime, For of this flood I am in doubt. 25
3 Produce a radio play (groups of six to ten)

Rehearse and record a version of Noah and his Wife for broadcasting on the radio. Write an introduction and include sound effects (wind, rain and animals) to make your radio play effective.

‘And God told Noah to build an Ark, a huge ship that would hold his family and two of every animal on Earth. And Noah built the Ark just in time, for the rains came down and the floods grew and grew. It was time for Noah and his family to go on board, but when...’

4 A picture-book Noah for 10-year-olds (in pairs)

Imagine that you have been given the job of creating a picture book aimed at children aged about 10 which tells the medieval story of Noah and his stubborn wife. Include some of the original medieval English words. Here is how you might start.

‘God sent down a great flood. Noah knew he had to set sail or drown. All he had to do now was get his wife on board. The problem was that she was a froward awkward lady!’