Chapter II

DRAMA BEFORE MARLOWE

Before studying the actual performance and achievement of Christopher Marlowe, it shall be useful to trace the origin and development of the English drama. A bird's view of the important stages of the English drama before Marlowe is provided below. The drama in England had its origins in the portals of the Church as it happened in other European countries. The English Romantic drama of Elizabethan time, one of the chief glories of our literature, did not arise from imitation of the classical drama of Greece but from purely native sources. The classical drama of Athens and of France right up to Victor Hugo strictly observed the Three Unities of Time (the action must be restricted to one day), of Place (there must be no change of scene, or only such as was evidently possible within the time allotted) and of Subject (the action must spring from and depend up on a single controlling purpose). Neither must tragedy be mixed with comedy. The Romantic drama on the other hand, which alone found favour on the English stage, obeyed no such artificial restrictions. In Faustus, for example, the story is spread over twenty four years, and the scene shifts from Wittenberg to Rome, Innsbruck etc.

As early as the reign of Edward II Miracle and Mystery plays were enacted, under the sanction of the church. They imparted moral instruction to the people, with the themes taken from the Bible and from the lives of the Saints. At first written by the clergy and performed by the choristers and others in the churches, they were soon taken up by
the Trade Guilds and were acted on the movable stage in the streets—generally at the
great Church festivals of Easter, Corpus Christi and Christmas. They were especially
popular both in this Country and on the Continent in the fifteenth century. As the ‘comic
relief’ to the sacred or legendary narrative thus represented, scenes of buffoonery and
horseplay were usually introduced. The Devil was a sort of butt, on whom saints and
scriptural characters played tricks. King Herod was another popular villain. The Miracle
plays continued in popular favour till long after the Reformation. The latest known
representation in England was that of the Three Kings of Cologne in 1599. In Germany
though not discarded by the Reformers, they afterwards led to abuses and were
suppressed by the authority.

Similar to the Miracle plays and perhaps growing out of them, were the
Moralities, in which characters were Vices and Virtues personified with Ghost as
scapegoat and general butt. As time went on, allusions to current topics crept in generally
of satirical nature like the failings of the Monks and Friars. These features became more
prominent in the Interludes—dramatic dialogues with singing and clowning interspersed
and performed at Court and the civic festivals and in the houses of the great, who were
not exempted from the raillery of the privileged jester. In all these performances—
Miracles Mysteries Interludes—there was good deal of scope for the improvisation or
what modern actors call ‘gagging’. From the Interlude to Farce or Comedy was only a
step. There was another forerunner for the Elizabethan drama and that was Mosque, a
poetical and allegorical sketch with music and dancing introduces in the reign of Henry
VIII. Mosques were usually performed during weddings, by members of the household.
Queen Elizabeth was very fond of these Mosques and several were written by Peele Fletcher and Ben Jonson. The most famous of all and probably one of the last of them was Milton's Comus performed at Ludlow Castle in 1634, to celebrate the formal entry of the Earl of Bridgewater on his official duties as Lord President of Wales and the Marches.

During the course of drama in the decades under consideration, a very important aspect to be traced is the secularisation of literature. As it is already pointed out that during the Middle Ages there was no secular literature, in the sense that all literature and especially drama, was the handmaid of religion. Drama performed the function of religion to provide sermons in a dramatised form. The plays were dramatised versions of the incidents from the Bible or the stories from the lives of the Saints. But the influence of the Renaissance brought some change in the attitude to religion, society and art. Actually secularisation means complete liberation of art from ecclesiastical and scholastic control, and its escape from the atmosphere and the prepossessions of the cloister and classroom. On this background, conspicuous among the many illustrations of this secularisation of literature is the establishment of the modern form of drama. The drama was a direct offshoot from religious ceremonial. It arose in the first instance out of the rich symbolic liturgy of the medieval church by the gradual dramatisation of important incidents. The substitution of the vernacular language for the ecclesiastical Latin originally employed and the displacement of clerical by lay actors are signs of the encroachment of the secular influences upon a domain, which was entirely ecclesiastical. In the same way when the performance of the plays passed into the hands of the trade
guilds of the different towns, the actual clerical monopoly was completely destroyed. The morality plays definitely display the advance of drama towards secularisation. Though mysteries and moralities were two vehicles of the teachings of the Church, on questions connected with man's salvation, the mystery represented the more popular thought of the middle ages, while the morality expounded its scholastic philosophy. The morality also drove the drama towards human experience and the growth of the element of individuality. The mystery had dramatised sacred history and had presented the teachings of the Church. "But in the morality doctrine was turned directly into dramatic form and the bearing of the truths involved were enforced by the action and dialogue of the characters, who were indeed the personifications of the virtues and vices but in whom the spectator might well perceive enlarged types of the humanity of which he was himself a part." The early history of the modern European drama thus shows that the rise of the regular secular drama in the sixteenth century was not so sudden an occurrence as is sometimes supposed.

None of these dramatic types required elaborate scenery or professional actors. They were performed in halls or courtyards or even in open air. Even when drama came into existence the setting and the scenery were of the simplest kind and left almost everything to the spectator's imagination:

"Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them."

(Shakespeare's, Henry V)
It was not till the middle of the sixteenth century that drama proper developed out of these crude beginnings which had at any rate familiarised the people with scenic representations. Cultivated writers under the influence of the Renaissance now made an attempt to introduce a more literary form of drama. The earliest plays properly so-called in the English language are the two comedies or farces, Ralph Roister Doister by Nicholas Udall headmaster of Eton about 1540 and Gammer Gurton’s Needle (1566) by Bishop Hille. The first original tragedy was Gorboduc (or Forrex and Perrex) acted before Elizabeth by law students of the Temple in 1562. It was written, in collaboration with Thomas Norton, by the accomplished Thomas Sackville, a cousin of the Queen. The play was founded on an old British legend from Geoffrey of Monmouth. This play like many others later was moralised at intervals after the fashion of the old miracle plays by a Chorus. ‘Gorboduc’ was not only the first regular English tragedy but it was also the first play written in blank verse, which became the main medium for the future tragedy and serious comedy. But it must be noted that court writers like Sackville regulated the English stage by their strict obedience to the classical rules and models and their dramas predominantly appealed to the educated or cultured few, and not to the general audience. But the true Elizabethan or the Romantic drama which did not follow any classical rules nor imitated any previous models, began in the last quarter of the sixteenth century with the writings of the brilliant group of young Oxford and Cambridge men like Greene, Peele and Marlowe. Then came the great age of Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher, Ford Ben Johnson and the master of all Shakespeare.
The group of dramatists consisting of Greene, Peele and Marlowe is called ‘the University Wits’. These young men had high university education and imbibed the spirit of the Renaissance. Over and above they were the product of the new nationalism and patriotism which was the outcome of the Spanish Armada of 1588. These young dramatists were careless of form and not always controlled by taste or judgement. But they exhibited unrivalled dramatic vigour, variety and poetical force. Their new drama “sprang direct from the spirit of the English nation, awakened from intellectual slumber by the broad light of the Reformed Religion and the penetrating influence of the New Learning, and roused to high enthusiasm and self-confidence by the deadly and glorious struggle with Spain for the opening of the New World, for the mastery of the sea and for the very existence of England”. The Romantic drama was the best outcome of the Renaissance in England and the founder is Christopher Marlowe.

The materials of this Romantic drama were drawn from the most various sources—from old chronicles and histories (Geoffrey of Monmouth, Stowe, Holinshed), from Italian story-books (especially Boccaccio’s Decameron), from the writers of antiquity (particularly Plutarch’s Lives) and from any quarters—not least from the contemporary events. The age was one of eager interest in every branch of thought as well as in adventurous action. “The one point which the playwright kept steadily in view was to sustain the interest of his audience by a succession of entertaining incidents... His paramount object was to feel and make his audience feel the reality of life, and to evoke living men and women from the miscellaneous mass of fables which lay open to him in classical, medieval and modern literature” (J. A. Symonds)
The performance of the other dramatists of this group called the ‘University Wits’ may be presented in a succinct fashion. These dramatists also were called the University wits because of their educational background. It is of interest to know that the English literary Renaissance had its greatest impetus in the Universities. Thomas Kyd, Lyly, Peele, Greene, Thomas Lodge and Thomas Nashe, and all of them were playwrights and also actors. Lyly who was famous for his ‘Eupheus’ presented dramas on the romantic subjects chosen from the Greek and the Roman mythologies. They were also the first to present the models of refinement. The reputation as the author of ‘Eupheus’ was an added advantage for him and he became the favourite of the court. His first play was performed in the Blackfriars, before it was presented before the Queen on 31st December 1581. He wrote to attract the attention of the Queen and the courtiers, and naturally he seems completely indifferent to the general tastes of the common public. “As a refined, even a mannered writer, he addresses himself to fine lords and fair ladies. He gives them the treat of hearing, on the stage, the antithetic style and decorative similes of that prose which was, and which remained for some ten years, the admiration of the fashionable world”. His ‘Campaspe’ “Sapho” and ‘Phao’ were based on the Greek themes and they were composed to eulogise the Queen. ‘Endymion’ was based on an ancient myth and it is the most poetic of them. His other plays are ‘Midas’ ‘The Woman in the Moon’ and ‘Gallathea’. His ‘Mother Bobbie’ is a fine romantic comedy on the lines of the Italian models and it was composed very artistically. However his plays have no force, depth and true passion; he mingled the serious and the comic. His plays as his prose style were
artificial. The greatest contribution of Lyly to the English drama is that refined prose highly ornamental and decorative.

George Peele also had a flair and fascination for the ornamental and polished prose style, like Lyly. But he was primarily a poet, and shared the bohemian and libertine way of life with people like Marlowe. 'The Arraignment of Paris' is a Greek theme and the 'Old Wives' Tale' was a satire on the romantic comedies. However as a dramatist he was very defective and it is stated that he was a poet who was not fitted to write plays for the stage. But Kyd was a better artist whose genius suited to the composition of dramas. His 'Spanish Tragedy' was produced 1586, a year before Marlowe's Tamburlaine. Actually Kyd is credited with the success of the Senecan type of bloody and violent tragedy on the English stage. It was pointed out by Legouis that Kyd "bled Seneca white". The Spanish Tragedy was based on some original and it also became the base for Shakespeare's Hamlet. Its hero is Hieronymo and it stated that all the important actors of the day were eager to enact this role, as the publics were very much interested this play. It may be noted that these dramatists contributed very little to the Elizabethan drama, but it also must be acknowledged that they paved the way for the glorious age of drama. For example Lyly provided the decorative and the witty prose, Green and Peele showed the way to mould drama out of the mythological and historical material, and Kyd showed the way to make violence and bloodshed appealing on the stage. Still their contribution is dwarfed by the mighty work of Marlowe.