

The Return of Morality Plays in England: Unexpected Inspirations in Conan Doyle

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ABSTRACT

The revival of medievalism originated in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Morality plays like *Everyman* received its first recorded modern performance in July 1901 by William Poel. One of the unexpected authors of Modern morality plays was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who turned from his own disappointment (he was upset because of the raging popularity of his own crime fiction) to transport medieval ideas and forms to the twentieth century. My paper focuses mainly on the stage works by Doyle, specifically two out of his fifteen, *The Fires of Fate* (1909) and *The Journey* (1922), where he talks about the (late) Victorian/ early modern crisis of faith and how pain, grief and suffering serve a useful purpose in the larger design of the universe. The Victorian conflict between faith and reason travelled through ages (from last years of Queen Victoria's reign to the Edwardian era and finally to the early modern period) and settled as strong moral and allegorical elements in Doyle's plays, similar to medieval moralities. The dissonance between logic, spirituality and empirical progress is addressed through the allegorical characters of Inspiration, Sorrow, Faith, Reason, and Science. The decadent moralities and crumbling beliefs of the late Victorian and early modern era are inscribed within the conversations between The Man and The Woman which sway between despair and hope. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection (1859) challenged

the existing religious belief in God as an Absolute. It provoked a wave of pessimism and skepticism challenging the historicity of the Bible. In this paper I have tried to demonstrate how Conan Doyle has used an antiquated form of allegorical drama to portray his own concerns about morality, or rather, the apparent lack of it in his age and times. The paper deals with how the concept of morality plays has been revisited during the Edwardian era and how writers have tried to revive the existing 'Moralities' as well as problematise the concept by showcasing the conflicting emotions of a late-Victorian mind triggered by Darwin's doctrine: the blooming faith in Britain's industrialisation and scientific progress and the crawling sense of doubt in authorities and absolutes that ultimately lead to a crisis of belief in the modern age.

Keywords: Medievalism, Morality plays, Revival, Late-Victorian crisis, Allegories, Conflict.

Afterward I remembered these things very clearly, with that longing we feel sometimes to recover a state of life that we have lost forever, though perhaps that we have lost it is all its value. (Unsworth, *Morality Play* 97)

The morality play, associated with the Middle Ages in England has always been regarded as a genre related to medieval drama that introduced allegorical themes of virtues and vices to teach its audience about the proper conducts of Christian life and how to attain salvation. It flourished in England in the fifteenth and sixteenth century and then gradually faded into obscurity mainly because of its deep roots in Catholic theology. This kind of drama depicting rigid personifications of religious faith and beliefs was gradually rejected as the country experienced a major religious shift to Protestantism. It subsequently faced political suppression as well: in 1558 Queen Elizabeth I officially banned religious drama to censor religious propaganda-driven plays being staged.¹ The genre gradually absorbed into Elizabethan drama

1 It was a method of state intervention against growing civil unrest in England.

as the psychological conflict of morality plays blended into secular stories following a nuanced structure and organic growth of complex human characters like Doctor Faustus and Macbeth.

Like other forms of medieval English drama such as the miracle and mystery plays, moralities became obsolete as its characteristics were entirely unsuitable for the contemporary viewers. In *Mediaeval Drama*, Alexander Manson Kinghorn wrote how morality plays “no longer answered the questions which were being asked by educated people.” (Kinghorn 125) The simple characters, lacking in psychological depth discouraged viewers who were looking for character-growth instead of allegorical personas featuring as wooden abstractions who never evolved throughout the play. The predictability of the plot and unappealing didacticism made it less of a play and more of “a sermon cast in dramatic form.” (Kinghorn 112) The Protestant Reformers saw the Middle Ages as the dark period of ignorance which was dominated by papist dictatorship that needed reformation. Voltaire in his *Essay on the Customs and Spirit of Nations* (1756) fiercely critiques the Middle Ages as an “era of anarchy, disorientation and foolishness supported by the Catholic Church.” (Bartlett 12) However, numerous eighteenth-century writers, including Voltaire, were inspired by the medieval times and revived the ethos of the era in their plays and novels. David Matthews notices how the final decades of the eighteenth century “saw a Europe-wide turn to the primitive in all its forms.” (Matthews 6) This resulted from the general longing for the lost simplicity² and made artists like the Pre-Raphaelites or writers like Sir Walter Scott or Victor Hugo fascinated in reworking medieval themes and forms.

Queen Victoria's death in 1901 escalated the national doubt regarding the future of Britain as an international superpower. The agitation was mainly regarding the country's military and economic conditions which were viewed as outdated, backward and insufficient

2 To understand the nature of Romanticism or the spirit of Gothic Revival, one needs to have “knowledge of the rediscovery of the Middle Ages that began in the 1760s.” (Matthews 7)

when compared to dynamically developing younger nations like Germany. The extensive amount of public concerns in Edwardian England covered a large number of areas: the trade union movement, labour unrest, class consciousness and the education of women to name a few. Richard Hyman observed how Britain as a country had always displayed an exceptional degree of class struggle, which by the beginning of the twentieth century inspired socialist propaganda among numerous union leaders and followers, and which at the time of the Great War made many unions express “an explicit commitment in their rules to the socialist transformation of economy and society.” (Hyman 68) To understand the reasons behind the return to medieval theatrical forms in English drama one must understand how these areas of considerations enhanced the Morality Play Revival in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The first years of the post-Victorian era were marked by a rising class conflict, as concepts like New Liberalism and Trade Unionism escalated, and socialist thoughts made the working class restless.³ Since one of the ideological goals of socialism was social and economic equality, the Morality Play Revival perfectly inscribed itself into its theoretical framework. In medieval plays, this concept was realised through the motif of “danse macabre”, which represented death as the final equaliser. In Modern Moralities, where the threat of death was usually eliminated, this concept was realised through the suggestion that everybody had the same chance at happiness as long as they made appropriate ethical choices. Modern Moralities related to the idea of equality not only in their content, but also through the fact that this new century welcomed them as plays addressed to all

3 The Labour Movement culminated in the success in the general election in 1906, after which the Labour Representation Committee was re-named as the “Labour Party” and had twenty-nine MPs.

4 The term is French for “Dance of Death” and is a late medieval artistic and literary allegory where Death is personified. It acts as a reminder to humanity of the fragile, temporary nature of earthly existence.

of the society, and not any particular group.⁵ This can be concluded from the fact that these 'modern' plays were written by authors from different literary and amateur circles. Next to historical revivals like William Poel's *Everyman* in 1901, and serious plays written by well-established poets like W.B. Yeats (*The Hour Glass*), one may find numerous moralities written by amateur writers as well.⁶

In some ways Modern Moralities were an attempt to challenge the class-consciousness of the British society as they were plays meant for everyone. William Poel's production of *Everyman* in July 1901 reminded other British and American dramatists about the existence of moralities. Although the general feeling among the English people at the beginning of the new century was "unease at the way the world was going" (Read 20), Edwardian era, created by the horror of the Great War and its aftereffects, was gloomy as well as nostalgic reminiscing of a lost age with "quiet country life, peaceful downland, gentle horses, affectionate families, and deferential servants, all bathed in golden memory." (Read 27-28) Modern Moralities explored the complexities of daily life in a rapidly changing socio-political scenario and guaranteed an optimistic ending. This blend of seriousness and positivity made them a convenient theatrical choice for the Edwardian audience. The morality play, like the Edwardian society, also became largely secular. Secularised moralities often addressed current topics of social controversies: instead of teaching people how to die well (like their medieval prototypes), the characters of Modern Moralities tried

5 Marion Jones explained in *Early Moral plays and the Earliest Secular Drama* that the didactic messages in these medieval plays are "used by people who know all the answers, to enlighten those who might otherwise neglect to ask all the questions." (Jones 247)

6 To cite some examples of plays by amateurs, *Work and Wealth* (as presented by students at the 'Southern Summer School' for 'Women Workers') and W.F. Almond's *Everychild* (performed in churches on specific occasions) can be mentioned as noteworthy.

to instruct how to live ethically (their ‘preachings’ were secular and acceptable to the middle-class audience).⁷

When William Poel requested to stage his resurrected play in a church, it was declined by both Westminster Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral. In the end he settled for the Master’s Court of the Charterhouse which was built as a monastery in the fourteenth century. It was there, in the central courtyard, that the first modern revival of *Everyman* was presented on July 13, 1901. (Kuehler 5) The success of the play was gradual, huge and unexpected; a play which originally was staged because Poel “wanted to do a morality play to show the beginning of drama” (Kuehler 5), it faced initial commercial failure. However, later interventions of the American Press managed to secure audience and by default, money.⁸ The success of *Everyman* restored faith in the ‘saleability’ of revived morality plays and inspired writers to produce more such plays for early twentieth century British theatre.

One of the authors of Modern Morality Plays who was unexpectedly inspired by the emerging trend was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who was widely known for his immortal creation of the sleuth-character Sherlock Holmes, and certainly not known at all (to his own disappointment) for his fifteen stage works. The thematic elements of

7 Secular Moralities were performed to depict the challenges that were faced by ‘every-man’ in everyday life. For example the life of a young clerk (in *Insomnia*), a workaholic (in *Life’s Measure*), an atheist teacher (in *The Hour-Glass*), or a child (in *Everychild*) – all of them portrayed life from the perspective of a specific common man.

8 The play also set off on a tour to other cities and was thus performed in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Indianapolis, Hartford, Pittsburgh, Toledo and St Louis. As time went by, more and more changes were introduced and many of the play’s didactic elements were cut out. The production returned to America in 1904 and 1907, and it was revived numerous times in London. It is also worth mentioning that *Everyman* made it as far as Hollywood, where it was presented as a charity event at the Hollywood Bowl and directed by Johannes Paulsen, a famous Danish actor and director who came from Copenhagen to work on the piece. Charlie Chaplin himself allowed the use of his studios for rehearsals of this play.

morality and redemption have, however, always been an integral part of his broader bibliography. In the Sherlock Holmes canon we find in short-stories like *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* or *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange* how the rational detective-figure had his own kind of 'higher morality' as he offered 'justice' to the society by sometimes letting go of the criminals if the cause behind their crimes was just and driven by genuine passion. In his later works like *The Land of Mist*, Doyle used the setting of science-fiction to explore themes of human actions and how they are connected to morality through the character of a skeptical scientist, Professor Challenger who investigated the world of Spiritualism (a concept which was one of Doyle's own personal obsessions).

Doyle's most direct connection to morality being depicted on stage is his 1909 stage production, *The Fires of Fate* which was a dramatised version of his novella, *The Tragedy of Korosko*. The subtitle of the dramatic piece was "A Modern Morality Play" and one may find evidences in his historical letters how Doyle defended this specific subtitle against critics who felt the play was packed with action and that its adventurous tone was a complete antithesis to what was traditionally expected of a religious drama.

Well, the reason is that the whole action of the play is to illustrate a philosophic theory of life as laid down in the first act. I suppose many plays are morality plays. In a sense, the old British melodrama was one, for its essential point was that virtue should triumph and vice be defeated. But it seemed to me that there was room for something which dealt with modern problems and apply more to life as we know it. What is the philosophy? Well, it is as old as the hills, and yet needs to be restated and revendicated with every generation. It upholds that optimism which I believe to be supreme human wisdom, and that faith which will enable the man to be optimistic upon general principles, however much the particular instance may seem to be an exception to his scheme of philosophy. (Doyle, "A Modern Morality Play" 3)

The story of the novella as well as its dramatic form is of Colonel Egerton, who learns that he suffers from an incurable spinal disease which must result in paralysis and death within a year's time. The only known treatment which gives a slight chance of recovery is experiencing a considerable shock. In his hardship he is supported by two brothers: a famous physician, who tells him the diagnosis, and the clergyman who dissuades him from suicide. Instead of ending his life, Egerton sets off with the brothers on a journey to Egypt. There he falls in love and is cured from his condition by a blow to the head received during a fight with Dervish extremists in Egyptian Sudan. The play explores the philosophical themes of Divine Intentions, concepts of free will and redemption that comes after hardships. It rejects nihilism and defends how life's purposeful struggles are not random but a design by the Divine Providence to restore faith in endurance of pain: physical and emotional torments are vital, rejuvenating forces that make people better human beings after they have achieved salvation from sufferings.

The play premiered at the Lyric Theatre on June 15th, 1909 and in December 1909 at the Illinois Theatre in Chicago. It was filmed twice, in 1923 and 1932. In London the play ran for 125 performances. It definitely did not enjoy the level of popularity that the Modern Morality Play *Experience* achieved in the USA, but it attracted crowds, probably in part due to Conan Doyle's popularity as a crime fiction writer. In many ways it was not a proper Modern Morality Play either. Oscar Parker from *The English Illustrated Magazine* mocked Conan Doyle's application of the term to his own play: "It is a safe description, for it may serve to cover more than one dramatic sin." (Parker 422) Moreover, he called *The Fires of Fate* a psychological comedy converted into a thrilling drama and reproved its excessive luridness which apparently can only be justified by the fact that a Modern Morality Play "may be a law to itself ... [i]t is quite the scheme of a Modern Morality Play that the 'comic relief' should save the situation." (Parker 422) The review discarded the showiness of the

piece and its attempt at humour: “If Sir Conan Doyle had developed his story among less lurid lines he might have given us a masterpiece but he chose the more showy path ... and so we have *The Fires of Fate* as it stands; popular it is sure to be, but as a play, neither fish, flesh nor fowl, only a ‘Modern Morality Play’” (Parker 424). *The Fires of Fate* certainly lacked the features of a prototypical morality play, such as the employment of abstractions as characters. It was also too realistic, too action-packed and not allegorical enough to claim its place among Modern Moralities. However, Parker’s judgement was rather harsh: the play had a clear moral, a journey towards death/redemption motif and an indisputable didactic setting where Doyle talked about the late-Victorian crisis of faith and how pain, grief and suffering served a useful purpose in the larger design of the universe.

The Victorian conflict⁹ between faith and reason also served strong moral and allegorical elements in his 1922 play *The Journey* which was a lesser-known work but very much similar to medieval morality drama in temperament and structure. In 1859, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection had already challenged the existing religious belief in God as an Absolute. It provoked a wave of pessimism and skepticism challenging the historicity of the Bible and authority (authenticity) of the Church. We find these prevalent elements of decadent moralities and crumbling beliefs of the (late) Victorian and early modern era (post World War I) inscribed within the conversations between The Man and The Woman in Doyle’s play which sway between despair and hope. The dissonance between logic, spirituality and empirical progress was also addressed through

9 Doyle’s life’s journey is in itself a classic case of Victorian crisis of faith. Born Catholic, educated at Jesuit schools, he rejected strict religious dogmas in his youth. While studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh, he was deeply interested in the writings of Charles Darwin. He later embraced agnosticism and instead of blindly believing in any faith, sought scientific evidence and abandoned orthodox religion. However, after losing his own son and brother in World War I (1914-1918), he found solace in Spiritualism (which he viewed as an empirical science and not a religious doctrine).

the allegorical characters of Inspiration, Sorrow, Faith, Reason, and Science. Doyle's obscure dramatic piece is a one-act dramatic dialogue between a weary traveller and a mysterious stranger and their brief conversation reflected deep-rooted interests in morality and spiritualism. As an allegorical morality play, *The Journey* was structured like *Everyman* with personified archetypes instead of characters representing human existence, faith and ethics. The set-up of the play reflected Doyle's own philosophic theory of life as he transitioned into Spiritualism in his later years and used the theatre to guide humanity towards enlightenment and spiritual salvation.¹⁰

It would seem that Conan Doyle was too lenient in saying that "many plays are morality plays." (Doyle, "A Modern Morality Play" 3) Any play that explored some philosophy or had a moral cannot be categorised as a morality play. His interpretation however gave us an idea of what was understood by the term of 'morality play' in the beginning of the twentieth century and how significantly the original medieval meaning of this term was expanded. French philosopher Nicolas Caritat in his posthumously published work *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) stated about the Middle Age: "It was the general character of this epoch, that it . . . prepared the soil which the following ages were to cover with so rich and so abundant an harvest." (Caritat 144) In the later years, the scholarly fascination and general interest in medieval achievements and its twentieth-century revival had eventually created a new academic interdisciplinary field called 'Medievalism'.

The ghosts of the Middle Ages are unquiet. (Matthews 1)

The recycling of the spirit of the 'Dark Ages' is an ongoing process "our modern view of the Middle Ages is in itself the product of

10 The play was never given a standalone theatrical run and it was tucked away inside his wartime and historical verses published in a volume in 1922, titled *The Poems of Arthur Conan Doyle: Collected Edition*. It was largely overlooked by contemporary critics as during the time of its publication Doyle was more focused on his public lectures on Spiritualism and as a result the play was pushed aside as propaganda rather than mainstream drama.

many centuries of development and debate.” (Bartlett 9) Today, ‘Medievalism’ has finally been acknowledged as a legitimate discipline. It has found its place among university courses in the UK, the USA and Australia. Regular medievalist sessions are organised in Kalamazoo, Leeds, and at the meetings of the Medieval Academy of America and the New Chaucer Society. This field of study has now its own offspring, namely ‘Neomedievalism’. In the preface to his book, Alexander writes that when early medievalism developed in the 1760s, with revivals realised in literature and architecture, it was “experimental and uncertain.” (Kingham xii) In many areas of artistic activity it is no longer so, which is evidenced by many examples of medieval themes in films, novels, games or comic books. The reception of medieval culture is inescapable in the twenty-first-century reality with its plethora of works available plenty in both print and digital media. The American film industry relies heavily on its fascination with the Middle Ages: *Robin Hood*, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, BBC’s *The White Queen* or *Game of Thrones* are only a few examples to showcase the range of medieval influence that is continuously being imprinted on the contemporary Digi-modern culture.

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