Mr. Fairholt concluded by observing that the three most interesting of these ancient shows remaining to us are, the Guild processions of Coventry, Preston, and Shrewsbury. That at Coventry has for its principal feature the exhibition of Lady Godiva according to the old legend, attended by knights and pages in fancy costume; the Woolcombers' Company exhibiting a shepherd and shepherdess attending their sheep in an arbour, Jason with the golden fleece, and other figures, including their patron, bishop Blaze. The Preston Guild had similar trade shows, including Crispin and Crispianus, for the shoemaker; bishop Blaze for the woolcombers; and a loom with a boy at work for the weavers. The tailors personated Adam and Eve, to show the high antiquity of their trade. At Shrewsbury the various trades march in procession with similar figures or emblems of their trades, and indulge in festivity in the various "arbours" appropriated to them outside the town.

Mr. Fairholt, in conclusion, remarked that it was this hearty and generous concurrence in public rejoicings and innocent celebration, that knit men in bonds of true fellowship in the olden times. And it was the same admirable feeling of mutual protection in which every one joined, that strengthened the good government of each city, and gave that noble spectacle of self-rule, consolidating the liberties we enjoy, and which each man feels bound personally to respect and defend. It is this feeling, still exerted, which has preserved our time-tried institutions intact amid the crash of surrounding anarchy.

III.—On the Chester Mystery Plays.

By the Rev. A. Hume, LL.D., F.S.A.

To the ordinary details of men and things, dramatic representations are related as a picture is to the letter-press,—they illustrate the text. Or they may be compared to the picture writing of the ancient Mexicans, effective so far as they go, but in their very nature imperfect as a means of public or private instruction. In a wide sense, the literature which is dramatic is much more extensive than it is usually supposed to be. The historian, for example, becomes a dramatist for the time, when, instead of treating of his characters in the third person, he allows each to speak for himself. The novelist is a dramatist, as his volumes frequently consist merely of a groundwork of dialogue, inlaid with description which might be equally well represented by moveable scenery. In all the varied affairs of life, too, we are inseparably connected with that which is dramatic. In the nursery, there is the doll or the hobby-horse in anticipation of mature years; by the fire-side, the old soldier varies his tale by shouldering his crutch to "show how fields were won;" and elsewhere, my uncle Toby stamps his foot, as he remarks with vehemence, that Le Fevre "shall march"—"to his regiment." Every one must feel that without that circumstance, whether recorded by Sterne or not, the idea of the benevolent old soldier would be imperfect.

Dramatic representations in this country have been said to owe their origin to the pilgrims from the holy land, or other sacred places; for the double purpose of instructing the people and securing sympathy for themselves. They said or sung through the principal streets of large towns, long accounts of their journeyings. In these orations or canticles they did not adhere rigidly to the facts, but drew more or less upon the imagination; and interwove a variety of incidents respecting Christ and the Apostles, which may or may not have happened. Their devout characters, their picturesque and flowing dresses, the solemn subjects of which they treated, and the troops of them that usually itinerated together, naturally drew the attention of our forefathers, simple artizans and husbandmen. In process of time a stage was erected for greater convenience; and at a still later period the place of the pilgrims was supplied by the ordinary clergy. In that case, the subject was necessarily of a scriptural character throughout; as many of the performers had never seen the world much beyond the precincts of their own parishes. At a still later period, when the characters introduced became numerous, the assistance of lay actors was procured; as in the play of Howleglas, quoted by Bishop Percy. At a period still subsequent, the clergy wrote the plays, and superintended the performances; but the actors were exclusively laymen. This was the case, for example, with the mysteries performed at Chester.

The terms miracle, mystery, and morality, are—like the words tragedy and comedy—used somewhat vaguely; but the distinction appears to be the following:—The *miracle* plays represented, or purported to represent, impossible things, or events which cannot be accomplished by human means, viz., the creation of the world, the descent of angels, the rod being turned into a serpent, or the ascension. When these subjects became—as they afterwards did—almost exclusively applied to the story of man's redemption, they were called *mysteries*, from their evident connexion with what are called "the mysteries of our religion." The *moral* plays differed from these by introducing personifications of abstract ideas instead of real characters. Thus one represented Sottie or Folly; another the World, another Every Man, and so on. Even Good Works were represented by a human being; as were Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and the Five Senses. The Arch Enemy was sure to figure prominently; and it was the business of Vice to beat him a good deal during the performance.

One of the earliest miracle plays was performed in the middle of the twelfth century, in the French language; and from a very early period French miracle and mystery plays, of a character even more interesting than our own, are known to have existed. The places where the performances were most frequent were, of course, the cathedral towns; but other large towns, in which the clergy were numerous, had also occasional or frequent opportunities of seeing such performances. They were patronised by several of our kings, and during their reigns; but began to disappear about the time of Henry VIII., and are known but slightly in Elizabeth's time. In Chester, they were performed in the twelfth century; but from 1268 to 1577 they were nearly annual, and were attended by large crowds.

The season of the year in which these plays were performed in Chester was "the Whitsun week," as it is called—a period which is still regarded as unquestionable holiday time by the inhabitants of Cheshire and Lancashire. The plays were twenty-four in number, so that eight were performed on each of the first three days. The locality was the streets of the ancient city, in the open air; and the weather at that season of the year is usually favourable to open representation. From the peculiar structure of Chester, it must have presented unusual facilities for seeing and hearing. The auditors in the Rows were like spectators in the boxes of an ordinary theatre; they could see and hear without the necessity and inconvenience of crowding. The original account by Archdeacon Rogers, as quoted by Messrs. Sharpe and Wright, mentions the sort of stage on which the performances took place, and the general circumstances. It is as follows:—

"The time of the yeare they weare played was on Monday, Tuesday, and Wensedaye in Whitsun weeke. The manner of these playes weare, every company had his pagiant or part, which pagiants weare a high scaffolde with two rowmes, a higher and a lower, upon four wheels. In the lower they apparelled themselves, and in the higher rowme they played, beinge all open on the tope, that all behoulders might heare and see them. The places where they played them was in every streete. They begane first at the Abay gates, and when the first pagiante was played, it was wheeled to the highe crosse before the mayor, and so to every streete: and soe every streete had a pagiant playinge before them at one time, till the pagiantes for the daye appoynted weare played; and when one pagiant was neere ended, worde was broughte from streete to streete, that soe the mighte come in place thereof, exceedinge orderlye, and all the streetes have theire pagiantes afore them all at one time playinge togeather; to see which playes was greate resorte, and also scafoldes and stages made in the streetes in those places where they determined to play their pagiantes."

"The manner of which playes was this: they weare divided into 24 pagiantes, according to the companyes of the cittie, and every companye brought forthe their pagiant, which was the cariage or place which thei played in. And thei first beganne at the abbeye gates; and when the firste pagiante was played at the abbeye gate, then it was wheled from thense to Pentice, at the hyghe crosse, before the maior, and before that was donne the seconde came, and the firste went into the Watergate Streete, and from thense into the Bridge Streete; and so one after another till all the pagiantes were played appoynted for the first daye, and so likewise for the seconde and the third daye. These pagiantes or cariages was a highe place made like a howse, with 2 rowmes, beinge open on the tope; the lower rowme thei apparrelled and dressed themselves, and the higher rowme thei played; and thei stood upon vi. wheeles; and when thei had donne with one cariage in one place, thei wheeled the same from one streete to another."

The performances were managed by the members of the various guilds, or trades' unions, as we should call them, superintended by the clergy, who were supposed to have a superior knowledge of the subjects. Each trade took the performance of one play, except where the numbers were small, and then two or three acted together. Thus, the goldsmiths performed the play called the "Slaughter of the Innocents;" the butchers "Satan tempting Christ;" the skinners "The Resurrection;" the cooks "The Harrowing of Hell," meaning the descent of our Lord to rescue the condemned spirits. Sometimes there was a slight degree of appropriateness in the arrangement of these, as when the water leaders of the Dee performed the play of "Noah and his Ark." In certain cases we can only recognise the trades in the proper names of the present period, as capper,

(i.e. cap-maker,) stringer (rope-maker,) corvisor (shoemaker,) flecher (the person who feathered arrows,) &c.

The subjects are all of a scriptural character, commencing with the "Fall of Babylon," "Adam and Eve," and so on through the ordinary scriptural subjects, till we reach the "Coming of Antichrist" and the "General Judgment." One circumstance is somewhat remarkable in the Chester Mysteries. It was not unusual for the plays of this kind, and of this period, to be founded on stories of the Apocryphal New Testament, and other works that are now known only to the antiquary and the virtuoso, while the stories from the canonical scriptures occupied, by comparison, a small space. Now, in the Townely Mysteries, which are also extremely curious, and the MS. of which belongs to a gentleman in this county, the apocryphal stories are numerous—whereas in the Chester plays, which are attributed to an earlier period, the "Descent into Hell" is the only one not founded on actual scripture.

The number of performers seldom exceeded 12, the names of some of whom would sound strangely to modern ears,—as Dominaciones, Principates, Potestates, Thrones, God, Cherubim, Seraphin, Balaham's asse, &c. The Latin of the monks is sometimes amusing, as *Primuz Mulier*, *Secundus Mulier*, &c. In their addresses the utmost regularity is preserved, until the dialogue becomes peculiarly artificial. Thus, in the third play, the order in which they speak is, *Noye*, *Sem*, *Cam*, *Jaffett*, *Noye's Wiffe*, *Sem's Wiffe*, *Cam's Wiffe*, *Jaffett's Wiffe*. In another, four boys, three shepherds, and a servant follow in a similar rotation.

The directions to the actors give us but an humble idea of the imagination of these craftsmen. The following are a few specimens, taken almost at random:—

"Heare Adam and Eve *goe out tell* Cayme *hath* slayne Abell." "Then Noye, with all his familie, shall make a signe, as though the wroughte upon the shippe, with divers instrumentes." "Heare Abraham doth kisse his sonne Isaake, and byndes a charschaffe about his heade: let him make a signe as though he would cut of his heade *with his* sorde; then let the angell come and take the sorde by the point and staie it." "Then Balaham shall strike his asse, and remark, that *here it is necessary for some one to be transformed into the appearance of an asse.*"

The scenery and other stage furniture must have been of the most primitive kind, probably inferior to that of the penny and twopenny shows that still figure occasionally in our streets. Thus, in Noah's Flood, "the arck muste be borded round about, and one the bordes, all the beastes and foules painted." Again, when the star appears in the east, it is made to move, by a little angel carrying it away in his arms; and the kings follow it by coming down from the stage, mounting on horses in the street, and riding round for a few minutes among the spectators.

The language in which these plays seems to have been written originally is French; but they have evidently existed for a long time in English, and several of the obsolete words and phrases are still retained in the provincialisms of this district. Thus, "dig," "crache," "losel," "clear or file," "delve," "sleech," "hilling," &c. will be recognized at once. In some

instances the directions to the performers are given in Latin, and occasionally a verse of scripture, with the reference, is quoted in Latin. They are full of the most ludicrous incongruities, two of which are the following:—In the play of Noah, he and his family go into the ark, except his own wife, who is a little obstinate on the occasion: yet the dialogue is never for a moment interrupted between the parties within and without, and all are equally visible to the auditors on the street. Again, in the "Play of the Shepherds," they are obviously supposed to be tending their flocks in Cheshire; they amuse themselves by wrestling—(then as now a favourite game in Cumberland)—and in eating their supper, they have "butter that was boughte in *Blackon*," "ale of *Halton*, and whotte meate," and a jannacke of *Lancaster* shire. Yet almost immediately after, when the star appears, we find them entering Jerusalem, as if it had been about as distant as Eaton Hall, and presenting their humble gifts,—a bell, a spoon and bottle, a pipe, a nut-hook, &c.

The following specimen of the dialogue is below the average, but it is characteristic in more respects than one:—

Noye.—Wiffe, come in; why standes thou their?
Thou arte ever frowarde, I dare sweare;
Come in one Godes name! half tyme yt were,
For feare leste that we drowne.

Noyes Wiffe.—Yea, sir, sette up youer saile,
And rowe fourth with evill haile,
For withouten faile
I will not oute of this towne;
But I have my gossippes everyechone,
One foote further I will not gone:
They shall not drowne, by Sainte John!
And I may save ther life.
They loven me full well, by Christe!
But thou lett them into thy cheiste,
Elles rowe nowe wher thy leiste,
And gette thee a new wiffe.

Noye.—Seme, sonne, loe! thy mother is wrawe;
Be God, such another I doe not knowe!

Sem.—Father, I shall fetch her in I trowe,
Without en anze fayle.
Mother, my father after thee sende,
And byddes thee into yeinder shippe wende.
Loke up and see the wynde,
For we bene readye to sayle.

Noyes Wiffe.—Seme, go again to hym, I saie;
I will not come therein to-daye.
* * * * * *

Sem.—In faith, mother, yett you shalle,
Wheither thou wylte or note.
(*Forces her in.*)

Noye (*saluting her*).—Welkcome, wiffe, into this botte.

Noyes Wiffe (*giving him a smart slap in the face.*)—Have
thou that for thy note !

Noye (*rubbing his cheek*).—Ha, ha, marye this is hotte !
It is good for to be still.

There are those who will misunderstand the uses of these relics of our old English literature, but the scholar knows their importance. It is only the literary fop who will tell you that the popular poem of the "Children in the Wood" is but a vulgar ballad; the student of human nature knows its influence on minds to which it is adapted, and is aware that it has often moved to tears of sincere sympathy the milkmaid and the country hind. The child loves the extravagant picture books, that can never be thoroughly driven from his nursery; the boy delights in tales of excitement and danger; and the adult man should not undervalue either of these, inasmuch as it has its uses. Now there is in society an infancy as well as in human life; and when we look back at their primitive thoughts and feelings as shadowed forth in literature like the Chester Mysteries, let us not sneer at the generations past, which are still as stones in our present building, but let us be duly thankful for all that is really improvement in our present state.

In the South of Europe, and in the Spanish portions of South America, there is much that resembles that which I have thus hastily described. The imagination is influenced on religious subjects, through the medium of the senses; and those who study the temperaments of mankind in various climates say that the general effect is very different from what we suppose it to be.

But to the present hour, the miracles and mysteries of five centuries ago are still performed in some of the byways of European residence, with a deep devotional feeling, and an increase of knowledge and good habits. At Aberammergau, in Upper Bavaria, they are performed every tenth year; they were so in 1840, and they will be again in 1850. The performance lasts for ten days on each occasion; so that the whole is a sort of religious decameron. The scripture narrative is shewn in act and scene from the earliest time; the tribes of Israel appear upon their march; the manna is made to fall before the wondering multitude, and the types and figures of the olden time are shown in regular order. Thousands of spectators are assembled, some of them from hundreds of miles distance; and not the slightest appearance of levity or impiety is tolerated. An account of the last performance at this place was given by Joseph Brooks Yates, Esq., F.S.A., first at the Literary and Philosophical Society of this town, and subsequently in the *Prospective Review*.

The more one knows of the subject the more he feels disposed to look with kind indulgence upon the past, especially when we recollect that the Chester Mysteries were actually composed "to the honour of God," as we are told; and that "a moonck of the monastray gat of Clement, then Bushop of Rome, a 1000 dayes of pardon, and of the Bushop of Chester at that time, 40 days of pardon, graunted from thenceforth to every one resorting, in peaceable manner, with good devotion, to heare and see the sayd plays from tyme to tyme."