



FAITH ON STAGE

The Rise and Fall of Religious Drama in Medieval England



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Religion, in some style or form, has been a part of human life for millennia. The dramatic form, the passion for story-telling, and the need for entertainment have been part of human nature since humans began to communicate. Egyptian ritual and drama spanned over a millennium between 2500 BCE and 500 BCE. Greek and Roman theatre lasted for about four centuries (two centuries for Roman drama). The Sanskrit plays spanned the second through the ninth centuries, with western liturgical drama coming into play during the tenth century AD. During the Dark Ages, the arts struggled to maintain their footing. Though the church's power decreased because most of the population was vastly uneducated, monasteries preserved education and learning. Under the reign of Charlemagne, the arts were slightly revived and increased literacy was promoted throughout the clergy. The arts were on the rise starting in the early middle ages. This paper will discuss religious drama and its role in the Middle Ages. Religious drama typically falls into one of three categories. First, there are the mystery plays that were based on biblical stories and events. Next, there are the miracle plays that are based on the lives of the saints as well as miraculous ideas/themes, such as the 'Harrowing of Hell.' Finally, there are the moralities that displayed the constant struggle of man against evil, death, and sin. Though these are the three most well-known categories of religious drama, there were many other dramatic forms during the Middle Ages that will be discussed later. This paper will seek to answer several questions. What were the roles of the church and the theatre in the Middle Ages? How did the religious drama of the Middle Ages affect the rise of secular and professional theatre? What controversies arose during this period that could have had a significant effect on dramatists of the period? What were the possible dangers of religious drama in society? Let's start with the history of religious drama.

The Middle Ages are broken into three periods: early (c. 900-1050 AD), high (c. 1050-1300 AD), and late (c. 1300-1500 AD). After the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, the only surviving theatrical elements were found in Roman mimes, Germanic minstrelsy, festivals and pagan rites, and Christian ceremonies. Once the state stopped funding these performances, troupes became nomadic and, though

they were outlawed by the Church, they were extremely active throughout the end of the Dark Ages. Since many people throughout Europe had been made Christian through the acts of the monarchy and nobility above them, many pagan festivals were usurped in favor of Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter. Once the Church became recognized as the de facto law of the land, Christian rites became more elaborate and the need to be able to effectively communicate the stories during services became more apparent. In the early Middle Ages, the masses were vastly illiterate, and since Mass and Hours services were held in Latin, many laypeople likely went to Church more out of religious obligation than out of a desire to hear the Word. Due to the importance of the Mass service, innovation was generally frowned upon. The Hours services (Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline) tended to lend themselves better to dramatization. Holidays also made for good drama since they corresponded to biblical events. Clergy would use anything from the procession of Christ into the city on Palm Sunday, to the symbolic objects and actions to communicate with their audience.

The earliest liturgical drama has been traced to tropes, melodies used to aid in memorization, that had been put in Easter services. Our Brockett text, in Chapter 4, gives the text for the oldest extant Easter trope dating around 925 AD:

Angels: Whom seek ye in the tomb, O Christians?

The three Marys: Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified, O Heavenly Beings.

Angels: He is not here, he is risen as he foretold. Go and announce that he is risen from the tomb.

French monasteries at Fleury and Limoges, though scholars are generally unsure, have been suggested as the likely origin for church music-drama. The earliest playlet was found in the *Regularis Concordia* (c. 965-975) by Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester. As monasteries were being revived in England, Ethelwold likely chose to use liturgical drama as a means to educate and stimulate the monks. Nuns continued to

revive theatre throughout Europe starting with Hrosvitha (c. 935-973), a nun who wrote religious plays based on the style of Terence for her students that were first published in 1501. Her works were followed by the Latin play *Ordo Virtutum* (c. 1155) by Hildegard of Bingen, as well as works produced by Katherine de Sutton. The liturgical drama didn't fully develop until the high Middle Ages. After the Vikings were converted to Christianity, they stopped their plundering ways allowing for the growth of cities and the possibilities of larger, more permanent structures. Around 1200, religious drama was occasionally performed outside but had "ceased to play a significant role in the development of the theatre (Brockett, p. 75)."

There was no direct correlation with the length and/or complexity of liturgical plays and the time periods in which they were developed. According to Brockett, of the extant plays, some of the simplest date to the fifteenth century and some of the most elaborate date to the eleventh century. The majority of these plays, and some of the oldest deal with the three Marys at the tomb. In comparison, the Crucifixion, despite being a major event within the Christian belief, was rarely dramatized. Next to Easter, Christmas was the next most dramatized holiday. The *Carmina Burana* from the Benediktbeuren monastery of the thirteenth century contains two crucifixion plays and united all the episodes of the Christmas story into a single drama. A drama that was also popular during the Christmas season was the nonbiblical Prophets play that came from a fifth/ sixth-century sermon that criticized the Jews in their handling of the coming of Christ. Other biblical materials were also dramatized during services, such as the Raising of Lazarus and Daniel in the Lion's Den.

Though most church performances were serious in nature, the clergy found ways to poke fun with some of the plays during the Christmas season during what was called the Feast of Fools. There came to be a tradition where roles were flipped and elements of "buffoonery" slipped into some of the plays. The Feast, well established by the end of the twelfth century, was very important in the development of comedy. "Lesser" clergy took the feast as a way to ridicule their supervisors and church

life. Day-to-day tasks were done improperly or with an element of humor, such as the ringing of the bells or the use of the sensor. A sense of burlesque and comedy crept into the content of the plays and over time, the Church sought to suppress the Feasts, though they weren't wholly successful until around the sixteenth century.

By 1300 AD, the Church saw its power threatened. As cities grew and feudalism, the social system that allowed nobles to act as lord over land and people, declined, the interest in secular learning increased. Though religious drama continued to be the main theatrical element through to the end of the late Middle Ages, religious performances were now commonly held outside of churches during spring and summer months and were put on by guilds. Between 1200-1350 AD, religious drama had transitioned from short shorter, sometimes simpler, Latin liturgical plays to longer and more elaborate cycle dramas that were spoken in the common vernacular. Motivated by the desire to make the Church more relevant to the ordinary person, the Feast/Festival of Corpus Christi (c. 1311 AD) was created in celebration of the Eucharist, the coming together of the human and divine aspects of Christ, and the redemptive power in the sacrifice of Christ. Due to the broadness of the subject matter, just about any biblical story or event was fair game to be included in the dramas presented. During this period, plays were being written and produced all over Western Europe. Of the extant English plays, they can be sorted into four cycles: York (48 extant plays), Chester (24), Townley/Wakefield (32), and N-town (possibly Norwich [Moorman, p. 125]; 42). During the lifespan of each cycle, plays were produced, edited, and rewritten, though the actual authors of the pieces are mostly anonymous.

Religious drama and medieval theatre reached their peak between 1350 and 1550. Production arrangements for the plays had moved from the control of the Church by the end of the fourteenth century. As productions grew, the need for more staff and organization increased. Plays would be put on by groups with pageant wagons and a pageant master, who acted as a medieval director and/or stage manager, managed productions. As the number of roles increased, so did the number of actors. As the

number of actors increased, so did the seriousness of the situation. Townspeople would be put in charge of holding auditions of sorts. Actors had around 14 days to accept roles, but when they did they would have to sign contracts to be there for all rehearsals and performances, sometimes in the presence of a notary. Most actors were selected from merchant or working classes, and though most of the actors were male, women and girls appeared occasionally. The doubling of roles was also very common and scenes of violence would use humanlike effigies substituting for real actors.

As religious drama bloomed, so did secular dramatic forms, though a secular dramatic form wasn't evident until the thirteenth century. The earliest extant drama dates to around 1276, but most secular works appear after 1400. The secular works can be split into six categories: the farces; the mummings, tournaments, and disguisings; the Royal entries and street pageants; the interludes; the moralities; and the Chambers of Rhetoric. The farces showed the imperfections and failings of humanity, especially within the social order. Tournaments, mummings, and disguisings were public events held throughout the year. Whereas tournaments usually featured nobility engaging in staged battles, mummings and disguising featured characters in masks who either engaged in silly plays or masked laypeople taking to the streets during Carnival. The Royal entries and street pageants were ceremonial displays in honor of people or celebrations, usually nobility. Interludes were plays that were part of the indoor entertainment at court and were associated with the rise of the professional actor, as small troupes were often hired as entertainment. The Moralities, though classified as religious drama, were the secular link to the cycle plays. These plays originated due to the church's concerns with the seven deadly sins, the seven cardinal virtues, and life after death. The oldest extant morality play is *The Pride of Life* (c. 1350) and the best known is *Everyman* (c. 1495). The Chambers of Rhetoric were, in general, devised morality plays. A prompt of sorts would be sent out and different groups would devise a type of morality play around that theme.

During the sixteenth century, religious theatre almost completely disappeared. Due to inner turmoil within the church (at one point there was 3 man who claimed the papacy), reform in the church was imminent. The rise of universities encouraged a national spirit of questioning, thus transitioning education from religious to secular. Henry VIII officially broke with the Roman church in 1534, and drama became a weapon used to attack or defend different principles and beliefs. After a tumultuous period consisting of much religious back and forth between the Protestantism of Henry VIII and Edward VI and the Catholicism of Mary (known as Bloody Mary), Elizabeth I entered the scene with the Elizabethian settlement. Eventually, Elizabeth I forbade all religious plays in 1558 and the cycle plays were eventually silenced by 1588.

Often when religious drama is studied, attention is given more to how the dramas of the day affected future theatrical elements rather than how they affected the people of the day and of later periods. In the Middle Ages, as well as throughout the Renaissance, it was impossible to separate religion from one's political stance for religion was heavily political. As the masses were vastly illiterate, a simple and effective means of communicating ideas and beliefs were through entertaining plays and dramas. In order to convince the people of the redemptive power of Christ, clergy created a Festival for plays ironically putting on the same sort of entertainment that they outlawed in the name of the Church. The most controversial possibility regarding how the public received these plays is the simple fact that a layperson virtually had no choice but to take the words that were sung or spoken, as well as the action happening before their eyes as a factual representation in biblical events. For people of the time, pieces like *The York Crucifixion* were taken as true accounts of the faith (Prosser, p. 14). Cycle plays were used to push and educate the masses in religious doctrine. The authors of pieces of religious drama took liberties in their writings that could possibly have been dangerous in the public perception of religion. Even then, writers realized that drama could be very effective at swaying public opinion.

As secular drama increased in popularity, interludes were used as propaganda to bring attention to and/or force opinions on different topics varying from national sentiment to the exposing of corruption within government and the clergy. In 1543, the parliament of Henry VIII enacted the first legislation concerning theatre in response to the vehemently politically dangerous interludes. In 1553, Queen Mary issued the First Proclamation About Religion which prohibited unauthorized interludes (Bryant, p.45).

Eventually, the Middle Ages fully gave way to the Renaissance and Catholicism in England gave way to the Church of England. Religious drama was outlawed and all but lost. However, dramatists such as William Shakespeare and John Bale before him still used their works to express often explicit opinions concerning the church and the politics of the day. Bale, a propagandist for the Reformation, could be noted for his polemic against the clergy in his play *King John* (Bryant, p. 47). Shakespeare similarly had a sense of good and evil having likely seen the Coventry plays that were performed during the Feast of Corpus Christi. Those themes, while not explicitly religious, are prominent in his plays, especially works such as *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Shakespeare, possibly taken with the idea of the interludes being used to sway public opinion, even used characters to advocate for the use of the language of the land during religious services as well as in the possible translation and availability of what is probably one of the most important books in history, the Bible.

Religious and liturgical drama is rarely studied for its artistry, rather being researched for its contributions to theatre. It's been argued that, often, the religious drama is seen as a simple stepping stone to Renaissance theatre, however, it is so much more. Religious and liturgical dramas are artforms that deserve to be studied for their dramatic structure and content. Even still, the subjects of liturgical drama and medieval theatre have enough content to make studying them a daunting task. Even this small survey of the topic barely struck the surface.

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