

The importance of medieval drama in its own period

The Medieval period was the age up to the 5th century. Not many historians knew much about the period, and this is one reason why it is usually referred to as the 'dark ages'. The drama of modern Europe however, did not ultimately spring up from, although it may later have been deeply influenced by the traditions passed on by wandering entertainers from imperial Rome. The source of that modern drama was from the Catholic Church. Drama developed out of desire on the part of the clergy to place the facts of Christ's life more realistically before their congregations. During the Easter and Christmas festivals in the church, plays were shown to the congregation that displayed the birth and death of Jesus Christ. These two dramatic scenes were called liturgical drama because they are still associated with the service or liturgy.

The earliest form of Easter play show priests dressed like angels being confronted by two other priests whose robes show that they are women. This was obviously meant to be the 'Tomb' scene in the Bible where the angels tell the two women that Jesus had risen from the dead. The play also showed Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus clad as a gardener with Peter and John (his disciples) running frantically toward the sepulchre, one outstripping the other. The same development occurred at Christmas, showing the birth of Christ with the Shepherds who see the star and later on the three wise Kings who come to present the new born King with precious gifts.

All of this was in Latin, but soon vernacular came to take its place, and portions of the liturgical drama as in the English Shrewsbury fragments were spoken in medieval French or German or English, for this was a movement that was traced in almost every European country. The next stage was the separation of the primitive play from the regular church services. Due to the fact that the dramas were growing so rapidly and the church was not large enough to accommodate the vast majority of people who came to see the plays, the drama had to be moved outside on to the steps of the great west door, and the spectators stood in the church yard. Then came doubt in the minds of the ecclesiastical authorities as the drama was becoming too great a force in the lives of the people and accordingly the clergy were prohibited from taking part in performances at least in such performances conducted outside the church. The drama however, had already grown and could not die and the role of the guardian was assumed by the town gilds, which at the time were the greatest of all social forces. While the subject matter of the plays still remained Biblical, they were worked up into regular mystery or miracle cycles, dealing with the entire story of the old and new testaments. Thus, they were performed by the various gilds on certain days of festival, notably that of Corpus Christi. In France the trade's folk hardly participated in the plays, their place was taken by special companies and the most important of them was the famous Confrerie de la passion, which endured to the sixteenth century. But the fundamental development was very similar.

Some centuries after the mystery cycles had been established, there arose the form of play known as the Morality, in which abstract qualities were made the dramatis personae and when the story is told of everyone's temptation fall and salvation. Some of these at least may have been professional rather than amateur in character. They were followed in England by the interludes, rude one act debates or farces, a type of comic drama which had appeared some considerable time before in France, and which may preserve relics of the Roman mime tradition.

Historians have found it quite difficult to describe the appearance of any one theatre used in medieval times. But in general, they were divided into about six groups starting off with the church as a theatre which were arrangements as said earlier made within the church for the performance of liturgical plays. The Sepulchre used at the Easter play was merely an assimilation of a sepulchre, which was a kind of symbol of a Sepulchre arranged at the high altar to the east of the church, but this soon gave way to a regularly built tomb made of wood or iron, and set usually in the north aisle. Up to the twelfth century, Christ's tomb was nearly always shown in conventional Byzantine manner as an architectural building with two arches. In these liturgical plays, there was a double arrangement with the tomb to the east, or more commonly, to the north of the church. While costume and other gestures developed rapidly, little was done at this stage to elaborate the *mise en scene* in the theatre church.

The next stage was the church like arrangement of the acting place when first the drama was brought to the open air. The Mansions (boxes or platforms) in the resurrection area were arranged in a way that the Crucifix appeared first, no doubt in the position it would have occupied in a church above the high altar. On one side (left hand) was a Sepulchre, followed by Heaven. The Mary's, the disciples must have also been on the left, and on the right was perhaps a prison hall, Pilate, Caiaphas and Joseph. The plans of the Easter play presented on two successive days at Lucerne provided a fitting parallel. The market square was used as the 'theatre' with Heaven and at the opposite end of the square to the left-hand side was a rough sketch of a many-toothed monster marked 'Die Holl' indicated the seat of Lucifer (Satan).

The principle of staging was kept also in the great stationary setting devoted in France to the mysteries. Some illustrations have given people a clear idea of their scope. Like the one by John Fouquet showing the Martyrdom of St Apollonia. In the foreground is the torturing of a Saint, and behind a series of Mansions, on the left of the spectator are a box full of angels surrounding a throne probably left vacant by the Emperor and then we come across Hell, which is divided into two parts. There is a platform where two devils are standing and below a great gaping monster's head. The Valenciennes miniature of the sixteenth century showed a very similar arrangement. This convention was very important in the development of Elizabethan stagecraft.

In England the stationary setting, except in the form of rounds, didn't seem to have been common. The guilds preferred to stage their plays on Pageants. These were separate Mansions of the stationary or standing plays placed on wheels. They were apparently drawn round a particular town when a mystery cycle was being enacted, various individual plays taking place together. The Pageants were made of wood and most were made in the representation of some object for particular scenes etc. Like in Coventry the 'Cappers' Pageant possessed a 'hell mouth'. There was a means of showing fire coming from the mouth. There is evidence that drama Pageants were made to a shipwright for clinking Noah's ship in 1483, while some years later further money was expended on making Noah's ship and rigging Noah's ship. The methods used in the Pageants corresponded exactly to those of the stationary setting.

In France employment was occasionally made of the still standing Roman theatres, such as those of Nimes, Arles and Orange, and it is possibly the ancient Roman tradition which explains the 'rounds' in which the Cornish mysteries and some other Medieval dramas were performed. The

most important of these two amphitheatres can be seen at St Just and at Perranzabuloe in Cornwall. The arrangement of Heaven and hell was the same as in the Resurrection play.

With the passing away of the miracle cycles came the curtained platform which contained movable properties such as 'stole' (Nature), a 'thron' (the play of the weather), or a fireplace (lohan lohan). The Platea in other words existed without the Mansions. In the latter drama six main localities each subdivided were placed before the audience. First came the set used for Biblical scenes, including the Castle of Maudelyn and the seats of the Emperor Herod and Pilate; second was Hell in two parts; next was Jerusalem with a tavern, the House of Simon Leprous and an arbour; then Marcyllle possessing a Castle, a temple and a sea coast; Heaven above with a wilderness below was nearby and the Holy land which contained a separate mountain.

Countries like France, Italy and England during the medieval stage did not lack machinery. This was proved by stage directions and by eye witness's accounts. In France for instance a head of St. Peter, severed, jumped thrice upon the stage and at each jump flowed a fountain. There too the Holy Ghost descended like a firebrand artificially made by spirits, while a virgin moved her head and arms and raised her eyes to heaven. It was said that in Italy, one of the early masters of Italian perspective, Filippo Brunelleschi, invented the mechanical arrangements for a Paradise. Effects of a similar kind were also in England. The plays showed a Heaven that would open (St Mary Magdalene). The Cornish ones showed GOD in a cloud, and when he spoke leaves opened. There was a Paradise like that of the French and a fountain. In many of the English mysteries ascents and descents of angels were frequent and the costumes of the medieval devils were exceedingly interesting.

The gilds, having taken over the management of the cycles in England, provided the actors from among their own members. These actors were paid a small fee. At Coventry for instance, one man received three shillings and four pence for playing GOD and another four pence for hanging Judas. While the parts of many morality plays were still performed by amateurs, professional and semi-professional performers were coming to take their share in the development of English drama. Conditions were somewhat similar in France with town gilds playing a large part in the organisation of the mysteries. The Confreries Pieuses played a prominent role in the management of the cycles, most famous of all being the Confrerie de la Passion established at Paris by letters patent of Charles VI, on December 4 1402. Alongside of these Confreries Pieuses, there existed a number of peculiar groups of actors, professional and amateur. Finally, there was the Mant Confreries des tons, which derived from the notorious Feast of Fools. The fool tradition was important in many ways, because not only did it pass on to add gaiety to one great comedy of Shakespeare's and profoundly to a great tragedy, but it gave us one link between the theatre of the middle ages and the mimic entertainments of Greece and Rome.

In presenting their performances these medieval entertainers having no newspaper press in which to advertise themselves, made full use of the crier cry. Most of the parts were however taken by men especially in England but in France, records have shown that women participated in the plays but their parts were minor compared to the men. The ground level of performance, no doubt was crude but a devout air of seriousness pervaded the whole. The whole acting business was so obviously not just a game but something of great importance to the world. Most of the plays had to be exact with reality and so blood was shown or displayed on stage; and the actor who played

Christ had to suffer on the cross. It was also claimed that the man who played Judas whilst being hung passed out, that in order to revive him, other actors had to sprinkle him with vinegar and water. Such was the reality in these medieval dramas, that it was a great impact on the people who watched them.

In conclusion, we can safely say that medieval drama and medieval theatre were a result of two forces – the traditionally preserved relics of Roman mimic displays and the new spirit which sprang independently from the church and inspired men toward a form of art entirely different in spirit and in aim from anything which had been seen in classic times. It was obviously very important to the church during this period, because it was one major way of getting its message across to the masses. As we have carefully noted, the church was very clever in adapting to the customs of the people, and celebrations were frequent with the church. They (the church) did not object to show GOD on stage at all and as mentioned earlier, a lot of stage effects were used which must have had an influence on modern theatre. People used their imaginations, and at least had an idea of how evil the Devil was. The medieval theatre also brought the people together and actors devoted to the presentation of the plays. A thing not of class, but of the whole community – these were features which the middle ages possessed in common with Athens of the age of Aeschylus.