

MEDIEVAL DRAMA: THE SOCIAL USE OF RELIGION

The whole frame of the world is the theatre, and every creature the stage, the medium, the glasse in which we may see God.¹

It is, in my opinion, very obvious that even a superficial study of Medieval Mystery Plays reveals a rich gamut of social references and pursuits which demonstrate their being eminently a popular social product, apart from being deeply religious. But perhaps, better than any other literary genre, drama proves that our conception of man in Western society has a Christian-religious starting point.

As Rosemary Woolf points out, the Christian Church possessed:

The outward phenomena of a theatrical performance, a building, an audience and men speaking or singing words to be listened to and performing actions to be watched.²

This paper will not deal on the acceptance or not of a single explanation of the rise of Medieval drama, a topic which, I believe, is neither simple nor easy; but on how a ceremony which was purely liturgical -thus with a mere religious concern and content- had of necessity, to develop some social characteristics in order to fulfill that very important concern of all established Religions: *the social dimension of man* and the need of attracting the common man making liturgical ceremonies "palatable".

As a part of a longer work, I am going to center this paper on the study of what could be the first attempt at dramatising a part of the official liturgy of the Christian Mass.

¹ Easter Day Sermon; Preached in 1626 by John Donne.

² *The English Mystery Plays*; Rosemary Woolf 1972.

"Quem-quaeritis in sepulchro christicolae
Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum: coelicolae
Surrexit, non est hic sicut praedixerat
Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit a mortuis."

"Quem-quaeritis" - "Who are you looking for?". As a liturgical sentence, it is a question of faith. The first question of this short dialogue is addressed to the Christians. There are three instances of the use of the latin verb "quaeris" in "The Gospel according to St. John" referred to Jesus Christ, and in the three examples the aim is to draw a confession of faith from his interlocutors. Here the question is intended to support and develop the faith in Christ as God, and find a justification for this fundamental article of faith. There are many passages in the whole Bible and above all in the New Testament to prove the divine nature of Christ, this is, in fact, the purpose of all these texts: to state that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the God, the most decisive proof of this statement is the greatest event of religion which is being celebrated at Easter Mass.

The full question of this first verse of the trope is: *"Quem-quaeritis in sepulchro christicolae?"* "Christicolae": that is followers of Christ. The question is clearly addressed to the believers. Christicolae is a latin compound of the word "colae" from the verb "colere", which means, cultivate, dwell, pray, deal with; the other part does not need an explanation, it is simply the direct object of the verb "colere".

The third element of the question is "sepulchro". The Christians (the followers of Christ) have come to look for their God to a place that is far from being a symbol of light or life: the God of the Christians is no longer to be found upon this world of seemingly living human beings. The intention of this first verse of the drama is to awake the faith of the Christians towards a hidden God (as they are used to worshipping him hidden in the altar of the Christian churches) dead and buried but who, paradoxically, is Life itself.

Once the question is settled the drama intends to open the way to the foundations of Christian faith. The answer, which is naturally in the Accusative is the name of a person given also in three elements:

- a) The proper name of the person: Jesus

- b) His birth place: Nazareth
- c) The most important characteristic of His mortal life and that has become the symbol of a whole Religion: that the man has been crucified.

"Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum: coelicolae". In *The Gospel According to St. John*, he uses the word Nazarenum as an adjective of "Jesum". The meaning here seems, on first reading, to be purely geographic, but on other passages, St. John remarks on the fact that the inhabitants of that part of Israel were not very well appreciated by their countrymen.

*"Art Thou also a Galilee? Search and look for out of Galilee ariseth no porphet"*¹ and in John 7,41 even the common people state their poor opinion about the Galileans: "Shall Christ come out of Galilee?"

But the title of "Nazarenus" reminded St. John's contemporaries of the "Nazareus": a sort of holy men mentioned in *Judges* 13,56 and 13,75 and *the Acts* 21,23-26 and to medieval Christians, used to reading the Latin *Vulgata* this name suggested the idea of these people, consecrated to God in a very special way. Thus, for the audience (that is the *chresticolae*) this word was not a mere geographical reference, in all probability the Christians who attended Easter Mass (that is the *Quem-quaeritis* audience) thought that "Nazarenus" rather than the reference to a little village in Galilee meant "Man of God".

"Crucifixum": In order to understand this second adjective applied to Jesus, we must go back to the Gospel. There are many references to Christ as "crucifixum", no doubt, the best known one is the passage of St. Paul: *"For I am determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified: Nisi Jesum Christum et hunc crucifixum"*.² For St. Paul this is Jesus's greatest qualification. But in this trope it seems to keep, in some way, the negative implication of the original meaning of the word (that of a man who had had an infamous death in the gallows)

Now following the movement of the trope, we can observe that it has developed from liturgy, as a part of the Mass, into a direct appeal to the

¹ King James Bible -American Bible Society, New York, 1955- St. John 7, 52.

² *Ibid.*- St. Paul: 1st. *Letter to Corinthians*, 2, 2.

audience and, like all good drama, it needs a response, the audience becomes involved in a kind of catharsis. The response should be the realization of the Christians who are watching the play of the apparent opposition between two true articles of faith.

- a) That on this Easter celebration they are looking for Christ who is their life and light.
- b) That this life and light they are looking for is -paradoxically- in a sepulchre that is: in the place of darkness and death.

There are, in the answer, various elements of faith: in the first place the name of Jesus: that is the Saviour, second His special character of Man of God, and third that he, has been crucified. As men of faith they would see here the first sign of glory that would be stressed by the final vocative addressed to the inhabitants of Heaven: "Coelicolae" this word is both grammatically and etymologically parallel to that used in the first verse "christolae". "Coelicolae" includes, again the verb "colere" here with the meaning of "inhabitants of" added to the word "coelum" heaven. It is also in the vocative case, thus clearly stating that the followers of Christ -the "christolae"- are fully aware of the celestial personality of the guardians of the sepulchre. This is another confirmation of faith; they believe that -under their human appearance- their interlocutors are heavenly beings in disguise.

The climax of the drama is a hymn of Glory, the movement of the dialogue has been taking the believers from the historical fact of the death of Christ to the spiritual meaning of an article of faith. The phrase is directly taken from Mark 16,4-6.

"Surrexit, non est hic sicut praedixerat". It is the proof that the man who had been lying in the sepulchre is the God because He has risen from the dead. There is, besides, a third element: why should the Christians believe that from a sepulchre -a clear symbol of death- would emerge a new life? The reason is that Jesus had proved his divinity because his resurrection had been prophesied: "Sicut praedixerat". There is a difference here between St. Mark and our trope: in the former we have "Sicut dixit" in the latter the "praedixit" stresses on the fact that it was a prophesy, thus linking the passage to the Old Testament.

But in the Christian conception of life during the Middle Ages, faith was not enough, action was for them as essential as faith; the acceptance of the belief in Christ as God brought the natural consequence of the duty of transmitting the knowledge to the rest of humanity. Outside the theatre (that is the church) is the wide world that is entitled to receive the message.

"Ite nuntiate quia surrexit a mortuis". The final song is purely dramatic (there is no song in the Gospel according to St. Mark), it is symbolic of the unity of all Christians who join together in the joy of a faith that illuminates their lives in the understanding that darkness can turn into light, a belief that gives the Christian consolation in the security of life after their own death.

Dramatically -if we consider the trope merely as a literary work- it consists of a very simple dialogue with very few and simple literary devices. But under the historical and doctrinal viewpoint the play is very rich. Its main device consists in the paradoxical fluctuation between the Cross, the Sepulchre, a country man (from one of the most despicable villages of the Israel of the epoch) and a new life: the Resurrection. These two aspects (literary and doctrinal) cannot be separated if we are to understand the full meaning of the play.

Our twentieth century prejudices might lead the modern reader to believe that the common Christian attending the Mass would not understand Latin, the vernacular being by now well extended and established (in all probability even in other kinds of plays); but this is only an apparent truth.

When it is true that Latin has been the cultural and scientific language throughout the centuries of Western civilization to very recent times, and that during the Middle Ages monks, priests and all students at monacal schools would understand the dialogue in all its implications, we are not to believe that the audience (which would, naturally, be composed of common villagers with little or no education) would not understand the meaning of the words. Even in countries where Latin was not the basis of the vernacular, the dialogue would be very well understood; firstly because it is composed of very simple words and sentences, and secondly, because it follows -almost to the letter- the Holy Writ which was continuously used in everyday liturgy and sermons by monks and priests who, even when preaching in the vernacular, would quote, profusely, from the Bible in Latin.

This play or "Trope", which might be the first modern drama, is a mixture of a simple but beautiful literary dialogue and a scenification that is the result of the understanding that our Western civilization has of man; a creature created to the image of God thus with a spiritual dimension but living upon this mortal soil and with a need to live with his fellow creatures that is: with a social dimension. In other words, during the Middle Ages the concerns that to our twentieth century prejudices might seem merely social, were, in reality, religious: vices were not a private matter as they affected the social body: thus when the best lay writers of the age described their society they were concerned (perhaps unconsciously) with religious topics.

And -as our trope proves- when the religious authors wrote, even of purely religious topics, they had to be concerned -very consciously- with society as *Religion was social*.

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