

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH
IN THE INCIPIENT MEDIEVAL DRAMA:
FROM STREET THEATRE TO MORALITY PLAYS

Although the early Church had decided to suppress any vestige of drama the Roman civilisation had left in England, up to 1000 AD, some forms of theatrical activity still persisted, and gave rise to a native drama - performed by Minstrels, strolling players, story-tellers and entertainers of any kind, in processions, pageants, tournaments and mummings.

This paper will study the paradoxical role the Church played in the incipient Medieval drama - “paradoxical” because if, ironically, the Church had tried to suppress it at the beginning, later on, as time went by, the Church realised that street drama was a very powerful means of communication, and chose to use it in order to teach people the scriptures, thus encouraging a new and far more vigorous theatre.

In order to understand to what an extent the church played a key role in the incipient medieval drama, it would be worth going back in time and presenting a brief history of the origins of Western theatre.

It is known that, from earliest times, man has sought to understand the cycle of nature, the progression from birth to death, and the forces that drive him. Therefore, although the lack of documentary evidence makes it impossible to determine exactly how theatre began, it is generally believed to have evolved from religious rituals, created symbolically to act out natural events, thereby bringing them down to human scale and making the unknown more easily accessible. People would probably express themselves through rhythmic movement, using some kind of adornment to depersonalize the

body.¹ “The natural elements were given personalities, which were in turn abstracted as spirits and gods. By wearing masks and moving in certain patterns, individuals could impersonate these deities. Sacred dances were performed to influence the course of nature - to bring rain, to facilitate a good harvest or a hunt, and to drive out evil.” (Gwinn 1990: 531).

A different theory proposes that theatre evolved from shamanistic rituals. Their main achievement was that they manifested to the audience a supernatural presence, rather than just giving a symbolic representation of it: the shaman, both as actor and priest at the same time, was able to put himself into a trance and become a medium with the other world. According to what has been stated up to now, we can affirm that religion was an essential and omnipresent element in the origins of drama.

All these ritual elements gave rise to what is known as “the demon play”, i.e. a primitive dance drama in which the force of good exorcises the force of evil.² An interesting component of this sort of play, which also occurs in later Western theatre, is the use of clowns (usually deformed) to parody the more serious characters.

Nevertheless, having said all this, the first time theatre truly freed itself from religious ritual to become an art form was in Greece, in the 6th century BC when the dithyramb - a form of choral song chanted at festivals in honour of Dionysus³ - was developed.⁴ According to Greek tradition, the actor and playwright Thespis invented the drama when he added a single actor to the chorus of the dithyramb, making him wear masks to portray several different characters. Besides, with the possibility of dialogue between the actor and the chorus, more complex themes and types of storytelling could be developed.

¹ According to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the earliest known evidence of this is “in the cave paintings and engravings at Les Trois Frères in southern France. Dating from the Late Palaeolithic Period (about 40,000-10,000 ac.), these ancient manifestations of art depict half-human, half-animal figures in animated poses. The figures appear to be dancers wearing the heads and skins of animals, suggesting the early use of mask and costume.” (Gwinn, 1990:531).

² The demon play is still performed in parts of Asia.

³ The god of wine, fruitfulness, and vegetation.

⁴ Originally, it celebrated his rejuvenation of the earth; later, it drew on Homeric legends for its subject matter.

The earliest surviving texts of plays are seven tragedies¹ by Aeschylus dating from the first half of the 5th century BC. He added a second actor and reduced the chorus from 50 to 12, which would be the foundation for an aesthetics of drama that was to influence subsequent plays, even nowadays.

In Aeschylus times it was considered that tragedy should deal with illustrious figures and significant events, whereas the plays, which were based on legends or remote history, were interpreted so as to convey some religious, moral, or political meaning. "The entire cosmos was depicted in the drama, represented on a vertical structure: above was the seat of the gods, below was the place of exile and punishment, and in the middle was the flat circle of the Earth, represented by the circular stage, where the action unfolded." (Gwinn 1990: 532).

According to this, it is obvious that the Greeks were still fond of religion, the primeval motif of drama, and they got inspiration from it both for the structure and plots of their plays.

The characteristic of Greek drama that emphasizes its universal scale is the interaction between chorus and protagonist. The function of the chorus was to generalize the particular events by observing and interpreting the action of the play as a kind of ideal spectator. The visual aspect of Greek tragedy was very important, and that fact, unfortunately, is easily forgotten nowadays, as only the words survive.

Sophocles refined the conventions developed by Aeschylus: he brought the chorus up to 15 and added a third actor, thereby making possible a much larger number of characters. Euripides, on his part, brought greater realism to characterization and strengthened dramatic action by reducing the role of the chorus.

The dramatic unities of time, place, and action were usually observed in Greek tragedy by attempting to make the action complete in itself, without superfluities, within a single circuit of the Sun, and in one location. The lack of scene change and the limited number of actors available meant that much of the action, particu-

¹ The word tragedy derives from the Greek τραγος, meaning "goat"; the term tragedy may have referred to a goat as the prize or as an animal sacrifice made at the festival.

larly murders and other deaths, took place offstage. (Gwinn 1990: 533)

As time went by, the masks worn by the actors and the chorus became more expressive, and their conventionalized representation of character types meant that each character was instantly recognizable when he entered. Besides, the masks also helped to make the portrayal of female characters by male actors more plausible, as well as to make the facial features clearly discernible by the large audience.

Comedy¹ appeared in Athens in 486 BC, fusing earlier traditions of popular entertainment, mime, phallic rites, and revelry in honour of Dionysus, as well as ancient shamanistic ceremonies. Aristophanes was the chief exponent of Old Comedy, which was highly satirical.² Thus, even comedy found part of its source of inspiration in religious rites of one type or another.

The decline of tragedy after Euripides' death in 406 BC meant an increase in the popularity of comedy, which evolved from the transitional Middle Comedy to the New Comedy. Only fragments by one writer, Menander, survive from that period (about 320 BC), and they indicate a swing away from mythological subjects toward a comedy of manners, concentrating on the erotic adventure of young Athenians and on urban family life. The boisterousness, the religious influence, and the long choruses of the earlier drama were gone, to give way to a new, gentler style, reflected in the use of more realistic costumes and masks and in the increasing use of scenery.

Vulgarized public taste and a complete lack of originality were the most serious illnesses of Roman plays, which were, nearly all, imitations or translations of Greek dramas, to the extent that they were even performed in Greek costume. It seemed that, after 400 years of entertaining people with chariot races, gladiatorial fights to the death, and the sad spectacle of criminals and

¹ The word comedy comes from Greek κῶμος, meaning "revel".

² Widely imaginative material, in which the chorus might represent birds, frogs, wasps, or clouds, was blended with a grotesque, vulgar, and witty tone, which could still accommodate poetry of great lyrical beauty. As in a tragedy, masks are worn, though exaggerated for comic effect. Obscenity was emphasized by the actors' costumes, which featured jerkins with padded stomachs and large phalli.

Christians being torn apart by wild animals, theatre had come to an apparent end.

Among the factors which must be taken into account in explaining why this happened, perhaps the main reason lays in the political cynicism with which Roman authorities used circuses and public games, at which theatrical performances took place, to divert the public from economic and political dissatisfaction. Besides, the number of official festivals proliferated, and, being most of them secular, theatre soon lost its close ties with religious ritual, degenerating into theatricality and mere spectacle for its own sake. That is, the decadence of theatre occurred when it drew apart from religion.

Leaving aside the lack of originality shown by dramatists, there were a number of native comic traditions,¹ and burlesque plays of mythology and daily life (*phlyax*), as well as a long tradition of farces, parodies, and political satires influenced by Greek models (*fabula Atellana*) that played an important role in the shaping of the style of Roman comedy, whose most important writers were Plautus and Terence, in the 2nd century BC.²

Unfortunately, little by little, the stages became trivial and degrading, to the extent that serious people avoided the theatres and writers were alienated from them. Intellectuals reacted reading tragedies aloud in select gatherings,

¹ "The Fescennine verses (*fescennia locatio*) were bawdy, improvised exchanges sung by clowns at local harvest festival and marriage ceremonies. There are thought to have combined with a tradition of performances by masked dancers and musicians from Etruria to form *saturae*, medleys consisting of jests, slapstick, and songs. The historian Livy says that in 364 BC these players were summoned to Rome at a time of pestilence to appease the gods with dancing and music." (Gwinn 1990: 533).

² A literary genre also related to satire and mischievous intentions is the "fabliaux", which, in a way, as it has been suggested by Gabriela García Teruel, is one of the precedents of drama: "La intriga constituye una parte fundamental de los "fabliaux". Va emparejada claramente con el engaño. Pero subrayar esto no es el mayor mérito de esta definición. Nykrog se detiene a describir los 'fabliaux' desde el punto de vista formal: van escritos en verso, pareados de ocho sílabas, y en ello está de acuerdo con los demás críticos citados hasta el momento; pero, además, expone su carácter eminentemente narrativo (cuentan una acción, no son piezas puramente descriptivas ni contienen elementos líricos) y nos pone en guardia sobre la presencia de diálogos. En efecto, la esencia de los "fabliaux" se resume en las intervenciones de los personajes de los mismos y en las del propio narrador ante un público, incluso se cree que el empleo de voces diferentes por parte del narrador para introducir a los distintos personajes en la historia podría resultar un antecedente de la aparición de varios actores en las escenificaciones teatrales." (García-Teruel 1990-91: 12).

and that might have been the purpose behind the tragedies of Seneca, since there is no record of any of his works being produced.

Eventually, the old Roman Empire was Christianised and split into two: one based in Rome, and the other in Constantinople. At that time, semitheatrical religious festivals, magnificent rituals, and processions became, once more, the principal means of community celebration, because there was no other outlet for the expression of the supernatural and the cycle of the seasons.

Meanwhile the mimes dispersed. Although the church did its best to prohibit them through the Middle Ages, they managed to carry on their intriguing art illicitly, finding audiences wherever they could. Mime, therefore, preserves the only dramatic continuity between the classical world and modern Europe. Gabriela García Teruel (1991: 53) insists on this attitude¹ the church originally manifested against theatre:

Unido a la decadencia natural del género teatral por falta de cultivadores en los primeros siglos de nuestra era, los ataques de los más importantes pensadores cristianos (Tertuliano en *De Spectaculis*, San Agustín en *De Civitate Dei*) contribuyeron al total abandono de este arte literario.

Nevertheless, she goes on to comment on the paradoxical role the Church played in the incipient Medieval drama “que no se recuperó hasta que, de la mano de la misma Iglesia que lo había condenado seis o siete siglos antes, renace en forma de drama litúrgico en los siglos XI y XII, orientado hacia la expresión popular de los misterios y episodios bíblicos.”

¹ "This hostile attitude of the rulers of the Church is not quite explained by anything in the poetry of the scôpas, so far as it is left to us. This had very readily exchanged its pagan for a Christian colouring: it cannot be fairly accused of immorality or even coarseness, and the Christian sentiment of the time is not likely to have been much offended by the prevailing theme of battle and deeds of blood. The probable explanation is a double one. There is the ascetic tendency to regard even harmless forms of secular amusement as barely compatible with the religious life. And there is the fact, which the language of the prohibitions themselves makes plain, that a degeneration of the old Teutonic gleemen had set in. To singing and harping were now added novel and far less desirable arts." (Chambers, 1967[1903]: 32-33).

In the Middle Ages, theatre began a new cycle of development that paralleled the emergence of the theatre from ritual activity in the early Greek period: if the Greek theatre had grown out of Dionysian worship, the medieval theatre originated as an expression of the Christian religion.

Between the classical and the medieval periods, theatre¹ was kept alive by the popular entertainers who had dispersed to wander, alone or in small groups, throughout Europe: mimes, acrobats, dancers, animal trainers, jugglers, wrestlers, minstrels, and storytellers.²

In the mummers plays that emerged during the late Middle Ages both ritual and mimetic dance came together. The plot was always about some kind of combat in which one of the fighters was killed, and then revived by a healer or doctor. The cycle of death and rebirth suggested they might be inspired in Christ's resurrection, but that is also a subject which may indicate that the origin of those plays could be much older.

When Christianity spread through Europe, missionaries had great difficulty discouraging the wealth of local folk traditions that flourished in rural communities. Eventually, the reforming bishops decided that it was better to regulate than to prohibit them, so the Roman Catholic Church³ began incor-

¹ "A further, though minor, influence on the development of theatre was the folk play. This dramatic form had two main sources. One was the symbolic ritual dramas of the seasons such as the Plow Monday play (English Midlands), in which a plow was decorated and pulled around the village (thought to have originally been a fertility god carried around the fields on a plow), or the European folk drama of the Wild Man of the Woods, in which a figure covered with leaves, representing winter, was ritually hunted and killed. The other source was the mimetic elements in dances held at village feasts." (Gwinn 1990: 535).

² Gabriela García Teruel (1990-91: 53) points out that: "las figuras de los mimos e histriones, cantantes y bailarines, supervivientes y continuadores de los cómicos clásicos, también influyen decisivamente en el desarrollo posterior del género, asegurando la continuidad de una vía alternativa al drama religioso. El juglar, 'fingidor' encargado de 'recitar', y, en algunos casos, de 'representar' el texto con escasísimos o contados medios, se convierte en factor fundamental de la evolución del teatro profano en este periodo de la Edad Media."

³ "The Church stood at the centre of life in the Middle Ages, like the church building itself in town or village. It spoke for the community, and only through the Church might the people know something of music and painting, literature and drama. It is a matter of great importance for the history of the English stage that the Church recognized drama as a force to be harnessed and chose to use it to teach the people about the Scriptures and to glorify God. It is a pleasant irony that the very institution that had stamped out the vestiges of drama left by the Roman occupation was

porating pagan festivals into its own liturgical calendar and remythologising local rituals: for example, the spring cycle of festivities based on fertility rituals, or the rebirth of summer was adapted to the Christian version of death and resurrection, while Christmas absorbed celebrations around the winter solstice such as the Saturnalia. Christian churches were built on the sites of pagan temples, and folk plays were even organized as part of the village church activities.

Folk theatre was not a literary genre; its prime concern was to fulfill a communal function in the village. However, its significance in the development of the theatre was that, being a style with which everyone was familiar, it could provide a rich stimulus for the more serious theatre that supplanted it. Many farcical scenes from folk dramas were included as interludes in the later religious plays, making them more vigorous and balancing entertainment with didacticism. Divorced from their validating mythology by the domination of Christian myths, the pagan celebrations soon began to lose their primary function, and eventually their true meaning was forgotten.

A consequence of the Roman Catholic Church's choice of Latin as the language of the liturgy was that classical texts continued to be read, and Terence, whose moral tone made him the least offensive of the Roman dramatists, acquired new popularity among a small scholarly elite.

The tradition of medieval religious theatre stems directly from the mass itself, a complex ritual containing many theatrical elements in its function as a visible reflection of the invisible world. It was believed that harmony expressed religious values, thus, from the 9th century, an attempt was made to increase the musical effectiveness of the plainsong of the Roman Catholic Church by developing antiphonal singing in which the choir was divided into two parts. From this came the trope, a musical addition or embellishment to certain parts of the liturgy, as, for example, to the final syllable of the Alleluia.

It was precisely in the trope of the Easter mass, recorded in a 10th-century manuscript from the Monastery of St. Gall in Switzerland, that the union of action, impersonation, and dialogue originated. Taken from various sources in the Bible, that trope dramatizes the visit of the three Marys to the tomb

itself to encourage a new, popular and far more vigorous theatre." (Styan, 1996: 7-8).

where Christ's body had been buried. The three ladies find the sepulchre empty and an angel guarding it. One section of the choir, representing the angel, asks, "Quem quaeritis?,"¹ to which the other half responds, and a short dialogue follows. In later versions the angel was represented by the priest in white robes and the Marys by three choirboys. Directions were added, dictating particular actions, and precisely how the performers should move. In turn, a spice merchant (the first secular character, who was strikingly similar to the doctor figure of mummers plays and folk dramas) was added to haggle with the three Marys about the price of the ointment. The *Quem quaeritis?* soon spread throughout Europe (more than 400 versions survive), and by the end of the 10th century it had become a self-contained liturgical drama.

From then onwards, during the 11th and 12th centuries, the Nativity, along with other biblical themes, received similar treatment. Therefore, the playing areas had to be extended from the altar to various locations throughout the church to accommodate these dramas. Sometimes scenes were suggested by raised platforms, and machinery was developed to facilitate special effects, such as angels ascending and descending. The clergy's intention of making the key episodes of the liturgy as vivid and accessible as possible to an illiterate congregation was so successfully carried out that by the end of the 12th century the plays incorporated spoken dialogue, partly in the vernacular language, and were moved outside in front of the church to be performed independently of the liturgical service. One of the first of those plays was *Adam*, performed before a French cathedral about 1170.

It is worth pointing out that, once the theatre had been moved outside the church,² production of the plays was gradually taken over by the laity, and performances were given entirely in the vernacular. Consequently, the number of short plays proliferated until they were organized into great cycles covering the whole biblical story from the creation to the Last Judgement, though centring on the Passion and designed to express the humanity as well as the divinity of Christ. In England, they become known as mystery plays - later mystery cycles. Comprising up to 50 short plays, these cycles were

¹ "Whom do you seek?"

² Liturgical dramas, however, continued to be presented inside the church until the 16th century.

sometimes performed over two or three days. In England the cycles of York, Wakefield, Coventry, and Chester survive. As the presentation of these plays grew more elaborate, and special organization took over their staging. Each guild would take responsibility for a particular play, usually related to its work: the shipwrights, for example, would stage the building of Noah's ark. Church vestments were replaced by appropriate contemporary costumes, and, because many of the plays called for complex and realistic effects - e.g. appearances from Hell's mouth - sophisticated properties and machinery were devised to achieve them.

Paradoxically, after the earthy humour and simple devotion of the mystery cycles, the morality plays that appeared during the 15th century show theatre taking what at first seems to be a step backward. These plays, however, reflect the dark worldview of a people that had experienced recurrent plagues and had begun to regard human destiny as "worm's meat", presenting the skeleton figure of death as a potent emblem, which, by the way, was also constantly alluded to in sermons. Morality plays were virtually sermons dramatized through allegory. They portrayed the span of human life in abstract terms, i.e. Mankind setting out on a pilgrimage in which he encountered a whole range of vices and virtues such as, for example, Ignorance, Humility, and the Seven Deadly Sins who contended for possession of his soul.

To conclude with, and after all which has been alleged, we can state that religion has been nearly omnipresent in the history of drama, from its very beginning, and that the Church, especially, played an essential, though also paradoxical, role in the incipient medieval drama, to the extent that it went on exerting its influence until the end of the 16th century, when, at the height of their aesthetic achievement, morality plays were suppressed in England, mainly because religious drama was beginning to degenerate into an instrument of politico-religious propaganda under successive Roman Catholic and Protestant governments.

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