General introduction

The urge to perform – and to watch others perform – may not be as fundamental a human instinct as are eating, sleeping and making love. Yet documentary evidence harvested from the field of western European sources between *c.* AD 500 and *c.* 1550 would certainly be of considerable assistance in sustaining the thesis that histrionic aspiration is universal among humanity. The mere existence of theatre in the Middle Ages denotes a recurrent pattern of victories over adversity. For all but the latter part of the period performance conditions were rarely other than rudimentary; ignorance and misunderstanding obscured the dramatic achievements of 'insolent Greece, or haughty Rome'; a religious faith pre-eminent in every sphere of life looked askance at forms of artistic expression unconducive to the furtherance of pious devotion. Yet by the end of the first Christian millennium not only had the theatrical impulse survived in its more basic, even illicit, manifestations, but was becoming assimilated albeit unconsciously into the sanctified routines of organised worship. Five centuries later, supported through the spiritual zeal of the laity, fuelled by late Gothic or Renaissance virtuosity, it would have proceeded to register some of its most remarkable triumphs.

Art rarely thrives in tranquillity. The factors inimical to the medieval stage's outbursts of creative vitality were not those cataclysmic population shifts, recurrent conflicts (as much ideological as political), periods of socioeconomic instability, territorial disputes between secular powers, doctrinal rivalries within and between religions, manifestly characteristic of the epoch. What is perhaps surprising is that, despite a lowering background of anti-theatrical prejudice and highly articulate opposition, dramatic ventures were not only tolerated but often actively encouraged by the establishment. Generally speaking, the material chronicling stage activity during the Middle Ages offers ample testimony to the apparent indestructibility of humanity's desire to perform and to witness performances.

But indestructibility does not imply immutability. The initial reaction of terrestrial institutions, whether lay or religious, is to mistrust theatre, unless its allegedly unruly energies and disruptive tendencies can be harnessed to advance ends not of its own creation. Around the crossroads where East confronts West, and the late classical era retreats before the advancing Middle Ages, hovers the elusive figure of the Byzantine Empress Theodora (*c.* 503–*c.* 548) who epitomises the

incorporation of the wayward perversity of her twin professions into the fabric of official acceptability. Graduating from child prostitute to the erotic entertainer whose lurid routines Procopius details in his *Secret History* of *c.* 550, Theodora first became mistress to Justinian, nephew and adopted son to the senile Emperor Justin I, and then his wife. In 527 she succeeded with him to the joint rule of the Eastern Empire, a role she ruthlessly fulfilled by exercising metaphorically the same naked effrontery as she had exhibited literally in the arena.

Though Theodora's is undoubtedly an extreme case, her career highlights the perennial battle for supremacy waged throughout history between stern guardians of the spiritual, political, social and moral order, and those free spirits whose temperaments and actions lead them to subvert it unless firmly suppressed or taken into partnership. Too potent a phenomenon to be ignored, too suspect to be given its head, the histrionic appetite has often been disciplined or subdued by being tailored to suit the requirements of self-proclaimed good government or diverted into self-delineated paths of righteousness. The intermittent pulse of statutes, edicts, injunctions, and decrees emanating from bishops and burghers alike which punctuates the following pages bears witness to nervous efforts to control theatre's irreverent excesses, or to deflect its lawless dynamism into channels of which Church and State could approve.

Yet it would be unfair to suggest that medieval officialdom's suspicion of the stage was universal. Enlightened minds (which included those of Hugh of St Victor, Pope Innocent III and St Thomas Aquinas) welcomed responsible performances as a source of harmless recreational pleasure and as a vehicle of effective religious instruction, provided that they were set forth in the proper place at the proper time and in the proper manner. Sovereigns and royal personages could prove generous patrons of the players or take performers into their personal entourages; they might even condescend to tread the boards themselves provided that the company was sufficiently select. Drama presented itself not only as an accessible popular amusement for distracting the community, but as an appropriate means of upholding political, religious, ethnic and social values and continuities. Rational authority and regularised anarchy could often achieve a state of mutually supportive rapport: perhaps the best way of regarding the history of the medieval theatre is to view it as a sequence of constant readjustments between contending forces which time and again succeeded in creating conditions favourable to the emergence of great theatrical art.

It is impossible to say to what extent the tribal migrants who swarmed westwards across Europe from the fourth century onwards nurtured the stage or appreciated its appeal. Since in many occupied territories they would certainly have confronted survivors from the Roman entertainment industry, discovery of these thespian refugees – whether *mimi*, *histriones*, *scurrae*, *joculatores* – may well have been a revelatory experience whatever talents those labels conceal. Procopius may imply as much when describing the Vandals' spectatorial tastes after gaining possession of Libya in 429:

[they] passed their time [. . .] in theatres and hippodromes and in other pleasurable pursuits [. . .] they had dancers and mimes and all other things to hear and see which are of a musical nature or otherwise merit attention among men [. . .][1]

It may have been their novelty value which enabled post-Roman entertainers to reach an accommodation with Vandals, Goths, Celts and other intruders, even if they found their natural exuberance checked, as Apollinaris Sidonius (*c.* 430–*c.* 480) indicates when speaking of restraints placed on even musical performers at the court of Theodoric II, Visigoth ruler of Gaul from 462 to 466:

the badinage of farcical jesters is certainly introduced during dinner, though seldom and only on condition that no guest is assailed by the bitterness of a biting tongue [. . .] no lyre-player or flautist, no leader of dances, no girl tambourinist or cithara-player, performs there, the king being charmed only by stringed music whose virtue delights the soul no less than its melody soothes the ear [. . .][2]

By what means theatre was kept alive through the so-called Dark Ages it is hard to say. Soon after Sidonius' death the mirror of history becomes too misted over to enable us to chart the survival of dramatic entertainments with any precision. But that the stage remained popular in the West during the early medieval centuries is undoubted, if only from the agonised injunctions which emanated from both temporal and ecclesiastical officials castigating the wanton behaviour into which performances could entice the weaker-willed clergy. The medium, whether realised in actuality or deplored as one further suspect feature of pagan antiquity, exercised the troubled consciences and occupied the legislative energies of medieval rulers and church leaders. They could argue that there had been no less distinguished a witness to the stage's harmful allure than the redoubtable St Augustine himself (354–430), whose Carthaginian wild oats were partly sown from theatrical seed. Several centuries later Hrotswitha of Gandersheim (*c.* 935–*c.* 1002) unquestionably found herself sufficiently engrossed by the classical comedies of Terence to feel compelled to transform their unabashedly secular Latinity into picquant celebrations of Christian virtue, even if performance was perhaps not her goal.[3] To churchmen and women the stage was dangerous even as an ally: under its influence the sinful pleasures of a transient existence could too easily blur humanity's vision of the life to come.

Obviously not every hostile diatribe or stern directive which Church or State launched against the allegedly damaging effects of stage performance or its presenters' presumed turpitude was based on first-hand testimony. The early medieval church in particular inherited an endemic hostility to the theatre by way of patristic prejudice stemming from at least as far back as the *De Spectaculis* of Tertullian (*c.* 155–*c.* 222), and there were few opportunities for allowing objective observation to overthrow venerable convention. We must therefore be wary of drawing any dogmatic or inferential conclusions from a range of documents inevitably coloured by doctrinaire bias.

Not that the Church set itself up as the implacable scourge of every indication

of the dramatic tendency. As passages of apparent dialogue and acts of quasi- or partial representation became drawn into the developing pattern of Christian worship, the clerisy began to acknowledge the theatre's potential for reinforcing spirituality and increasing devotion, both among initiates and aspirants. This is not to argue that participants in religious ceremonies saw themselves in any sense as performers or regarded what they presented as plays. The fluctuating line dividing religious observance from theatrical performance largely depends on contextual circumstances, though it is clear that some churchmen – Amalarius of Metz (*c.* 780–*c.* 850) and Honorius of Autun ('Augustodunensis'; *c.* 1075–*c.* 1156) among them – interpreted the Mass service as a drama with the celebrant 'playing the part' of Christ as he repeated His words during the consecration of the bread and wine. Such a conviction, while not universally adopted, may nonetheless have contributed to the constructive environment theatre required in playing its future role as an integrated element in Christian worship.

The impulses animating the conception and growth of the Church's Latin liturgical music-dramas remain obscure and controversial,[4] but it seems at least arguable that by the year 1000 a specialised form of Christian theatre had won ecclesiastical acceptance in several parts of Europe, constituting a major new development which would eventually spread across the entire continent. With a minimum of disguise achieved through judicious use of standard church vestments and only limited attempts at impersonation, clerics had begun to present within monastic or cathedral churches elementary scenarios or 'routines' constructed from chanted texts and mimed actions adapted from their service books. These presentations were closely associated with the annual pattern of ceremonials which followed the sequence of events commemorated in the Christian year, the highlights not surprisingly being the week leading up to Easter, Easter itself, then Christmas and the twelve days which succeeded it.

The point of origin is usually acknowledged as being the Easter ceremony known as the Visit to the Sepulchre (*Visitatio sepulchri*), of which the 'script' is provided by the so-called *Quem queritis* trope. This is one of many similar tenth-century textual and musical embellishments to standard Gregorian plainchant, and takes the form of a set of alternating (antiphonal) exchanges imagined as being delivered on the first Easter morning between the three Maries seeking Christ's sepulchre and the angel seated at its entrance. Fittingly enough, it was sung as a prelude to the first Mass of Easter Day, though its place within the programme of Easter services could vary from region to region.

The *Visitatio* with this dialogue at its heart proved capable of extension to incorporate other portions of the Easter narrative: the revelation of Christ's Resurrection to the apostles Peter and John and their race to view the empty sepulchre; the lament or *planctus* of Mary the Virgin; Mary Magdalene's encounter with Christ in His unrecognised guise as a gardener – the so-called *Hortulanus*; the three Maries' purchase of spices from the merchant (the *unguentarius*), the first non-scriptural character to appear in medieval religious drama. Showing only rel-

atively minor variations one from another, numerous instances of the core version of the *Quem queritis* and its satellite episodes have come to light from across the whole of Europe.

There will always be debate as to whether the status of true drama can be claimed for the *Visitatio sepulchri*, or how far it represented a true partnership between the requirements of worship and the histrionic tendency. It was not a routine separable from its liturgical or service book context; formalised materials alone supplied its sung dialogue; 'costumes', 'props' and 'setting' were confined to the normal accessories of Christian devotion. Nor was it presented for the benefit of an audience in any real sense of that term; its participants were not called on to portray figures who required 'bringing to life' and so prove convincing human characters.

Yet the earliest version of the *Visitatio* to survive (in the *Regularis concordia* of c. 970[5]) has persuaded many that, as described, something more significant than another church ceremonial is afoot: a 'performance dimension' has appeared. For example, in this instance the *Visitatio* does not act as an introduction to the Easter Mass, but has been given its own position after the third lesson or *lectio* of the Easter Matins service. The clerics standing for the Maries may not be required to impersonate them, but they are specifically instructed to come forward 'tentatively' and wander about 'as if looking for something', suggesting that an element of mimesis, though not characterisation, is felt desirable. As for the ostensible lack of an audience, one might argue that the instruction that the Maries should display the burial cloth 'before the clergy' is a tacit admission that at this juncture non-participants briefly fulfil the function of spectators. Overall many scholars accept that, however carefully we qualify the statement, with the *Visitatio* and its subsequent liturgical extensions theatre becomes firmly identified with the furtherance of religious belief, its principal keynote thoughout the Middle Ages. The Church had acknowledged and turned to its own advantage an innate human disposition to perform while others bear witness.

Liturgical music-drama enjoyed its creative heyday in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and continued to be composed and presented until the middle of the sixteenth century, but remained essentially a preserve of the Church. Although its representation was gradually liberated from strict attachment to the appropriate season of the Christian year, places of worship remained its customary venue and Gregorian plainchant its esoteric medium. Even when in the twelfth century its executants were permitted to stage the plays outside sacred edifices, and to intersperse with the Latin texts lines couched in such European vernaculars as the *langue d'oc* of the Provençal troubadours, the laity's desire to receive divine truths through its native idiom remained frustrated. An account of a Latin play staged at Riga in 1204 illustrates both the proselytising incentive for popular religious performances – 'that those of the heathen persuasion might learn the rudiments of the Christian faith through the evidence of their own eyes' – and the potential crowd control problems inherent in couching them in an unfamiliar tongue:

The content of this play [. . .] was carefully explained through an expositor to the neophytes and the pagans who were present. However, when Gideon's force fought against the Philistines, the pagans, frightened that they themselves were about to be slaughtered, began to run away, but they were brought back again, although very wary.[6]

The duplication of Latin as a vehicle of dramatic expression parallels the evolution and spread of vernacular communication in worship. It is compatible too with the Church's thirteenth-century evangelistic mission to reach out to the non-Latin-speaking community, and to privilege the revised doctrinal thrust which placed at the heart of the faith Christ as a human figure living and suffering on earth for humanity's redemption. Such an approach was powerfully reinforced by the emphasis which Francis of Assisi (*c.* 1181–1226) and Dominic de Guzmán (1170–1221) – founders of dynamic orders of friars in the early years of the century – placed on the urgent necessity of employing the demotic tongues to preach salvation through Christ to the common people. Franciscan influence played a notable role in securing for popular Christian theatre a positive reception, not only within Italy but across the whole of western Europe.[7]

Certainly by 1350 drama was flourishing in the major western European languages, though mounted under a broad range of auspices, in a wide variety of circumstances, and in forms independent of liturgical occasion and inspiration. For most scholars these newer, freer vernacular plays represent a departure from, rather than a mere extension of, their liturgical counterparts, a view memorably expressed by V. A. Kolve in arguing that while a church play was 'simple, dignified, ritualistic, limited in its means',

When the drama moved into the streets and the market place, into a milieu already the home of men's playing and games, it was redefined *as* game and allowed to exploit fully its nonearnest, gratuitous nature at the same time as its range of subject and its cast of sacred personae grew.[8]

Clearly, in order to appeal to a broader, more variegated audience the non-Latin plays drew on a less restricted range of source materials, incorporating into their action aspects of common, often comic, everyday life largely alien to the more restricted, hieratic ambience of the liturgical stage. Probably the Church encouraged a more liberal treatment of scriptural and spiritual matters in the vernacular plays partly because it saw the necessity of appealing through them to those who might resist unembellished religious instruction. Similarly, ecclesiastics may have deliberately engineered the improved opportunities for lay participation which non-Latin drama offered the community, building perhaps on the increasing popularity of widespread public declarations of faith and of corporate expressions of urban solidarity.

One prime example is the post-mid-thirteenth-century vogue which engulfed the Abruzzi, Umbrian and Tuscan regions of Italy, where ardent assemblies foregathered to chant *laude* or hymns of praise in honour of Christ or the Virgin. Such hymns could sometimes adopt semi-dramatic form, and in these, as the fourteenth

century wore on, spoken words replaced sung melody, and striking staging effects came to assume a more prominent role. Ingenious and ambitious spectacles were certainly a feature of the notable successors to the *laude*, the *sacre rappresentazioni*, a genre which reached a peak of artistic and technological elaboration in the churches and streets of fifteenth-century Florence. Here the popular desire for expression through drama became powerfully interwoven with celebrating the splendours of the de' Medici family regime, Lorenzo himself composing at least one piece for public consumption.[9] Perhaps with the *sacra rappresentazione* the citizenry of Florence allowed an assertion of secular power and political supremacy to usurp the place formerly occupied by an act of divine worship, although the distinction is unlikely to have been preoccupied many.

Elsewhere in western Europe, Church and laity frequently blended forces to ensure that the dramatic urge could be overtly indulged at the same time as the claims of religious observance and civic pride were sincerely honoured. Such an alliance helped to create much that is artistically distinguished in late medieval culture, and it almost certainly accounts for the swift escalation of the annual summer procession associated with the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi from about 1320 onwards.[10] This festival, instituted as part of the Church's calendar by Pope Urban IV's bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo* of 1264 but not observed universally before 1317, though no longer viewed as the 'only begetter' of the high summer of medieval theatre, did offer secular officials and lay organisations the perfect chance to engage in creative collaboration with the clergy. As one of its obligations a Corpus Christi guild or fraternity might occasionally sponsor a dramatic performance, but for many companies it was enough to dress up and march alongside community leaders and ecclesiastics in the yearly eucharistic parade with the Holy Sacrament as its central focus. Thereby medieval laymen used a diluted form of theatrical activity not only to identify themselves with the upholders of the Christian religion and its hallowed ceremonies, but to affirm their place in the civic hierarchy. The spirit inspiring such an integration of motives would eventually lead members of town councils, neighbourhood groups, or trade and craft guilds (notably at British, French, German and Flemish venues) to sponsor, mount and take responsibility for communal presentations of scriptural plays, though progress from merely parading to mounting full-length performances was by no means inevitable or universal.

The semi-dramatic procession was at all events an integral part of the medieval theatrical scene, supplying a cogent outlet for the prevalent spirit of festivity and celebration. The occasion might be secular, marking a coronation, a royal visit, the signing of a treaty, or a popular victory in war, while the Church's extensive calendar of festivals also offered ample opportunity for parades through the streets, Corpus Christi being only one such opportunity for communal rejoicing. The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, for example, was observed throughout western Europe with sumptuous perambulations, many of which became associated with theatrical performance; the citizens of Lincoln celebrated the Feast of

St Anne by the same means, as did those of Florence in commemorating their patronal saint John the Baptist. Medieval street pageantry deployed a wide variety of devices to create the ambience deemed proper to the occasion: public monuments including bridges, conduits and fountains were decorated; triumphal arches erected; static or mobile floats bearing *tableaux vivants* displayed; banners, torches, candles, and simple devices such as wheeled ships or costumed figures paraded through city or town thoroughfares. But the scope of such activities never embraced full-scale drama except at a relative handful of locations.

Only here and there did the ambience of the festive occasion allow the theatrical imperative to develop a more prominent role. From the welter of processional activities feasible by the end of the fourteenth century, a less haphazard pattern of procedures seems to emerge. The likeliest conjecture is that as the processing vehicles, the static tableaux, the walking characters' costumes became more elaborate, so the dramatic dimension became more pronounced. No standard method of evolution predominated, and practices clearly differed from place to place. At some centres live performers in costume presented short scenes at ground level or on stages along the processional route; elsewhere participants in static or mobile tableaux who might have initially mimed the building of the Ark or the Visit of the Magi began to deliver passages of dialogue from the moving floats. In one city wagons might stop at designated 'stations' to allow the crowd to watch and listen; at another, street-level performances took place while the procession was actually in slow motion, as appears to have been the practice by 1558 at Draguingnan in southern Provence:

> [. . .] the Corpus Christi play [. . .] shall be played along with the procession as heretofore and also as many shorter plays [episodes ?] as possible. The latter shall be performed as the procession moves on, without anybody who is acting stopping, in order to prevent things becoming too long drawn out and to prevent confusion both in the procession and in the performances [. . .][11]

At many centres religious processions never generated a literal drama of any kind; even when they did, there was no uniformity of presentation. At Bologna, for example, the only Italian Corpus Christi text to survive was set forth in the streets on wagons, but was also accompanied by tableaux and walking figures. In Bruges the processing floats supported tableaux alone, while dramatic performances were presented by players on foot; at Zerbst in 1507 actors displaying texts appear to have mimed a sequence of episodes alongside portable tableaux. In Brussels players probably gave mimed performances along the route taken by the *ommegang* in the morning, presenting the plays proper that afternoon in the Nedermarkt. In some countries the plays would be staged in church before being taken on to the streets; at certain centres the performances were even executed on a different day from the sacramental procession.

Despite popular belief, not every play set forth was part of a 'cycle' of integrated biblical episodes. France and German-speaking areas tended to focus on

the life and death of Christ; of the thirty-three plays performed processionally in Toledo between 1493 and 1510 none formed part of a cyclic sequence. In 1549 craft guilds in Béthune, the ancient seat of the Counts of Flanders, near the present Franco-Belgian border, mounted a processional presentation consisting of twenty-eight episodes stretching from the Annunciation to Doomsday, but it was not a recurrent event. Only at certain centres in England were nurtured the growth and the regular production of that idiosyncratic succession of connected scriptural plays which encompass the Christian vision of human history from Creation to Doomsday, and of which the cycles of York, Chester and Wakefield (and in a limited sense the N-Town Plays) furnish the best extant examples. Two at least of these were shaped into literary texts late in their existence; all are best regarded as relics of an amorphous, fluid, fluctuating repertory. Only at York, Coventry and Chester were plays now extant indubitably mounted processionally, and even in this limited context their relationship with and their relevance to the Feast of Corpus Christi has been much debated, as has their mode of presentation.

Yet such spiritual festivities occasioned that characteristic fusion of local and ecclesiastical resources which is the hallmark of so many medieval play performances. Inseparably intertwined with genuine religious devotion, a strong sense of corporate identity and communal pride gave a vital impetus to the mounting of productions, and is particularly characteristic of some of the ambitious French civic *mystères*. Typical is the justification given for performing the *mystère* of St Martin at Seurre in 1496:

> [. . .] so that on witnessing it acted the common people would easily be able to see and understand how the noble patron of the said Seurre lived a holy and devout life. [12]

One of the numerous strengths of medieval performance is that its roots plunge deep into the soil of its immediate surroundings, and are fed from indigenous resources. These plays represent community drama in the best sense of the term.

Nevertheless we should not assume that willing assistance was spontaneously made available or that the entire populace could be relied on to give a production its unquestioning support. The existence of a whole reef of contracts and regulations, sureties and recognisances which legally bound participants, both performers and labour force, to honour their pledges shipwrecks these sanguine beliefs. When setting up a presentation, authority could obviously not rely on the histrionic impulse alone to promote cooperative cohesion; organisers could never afford to leave recalcitrant human nature out of the reckoning.

By way of counterbalance, however, given that presentations were expected to constitute a justifiable cause for local pride and satisfaction, they could act as a very effective form of social cement. The desire to perform creditably must be accompanied by a parallel desire to watch creditable performances, or theatre perishes. So the irksome labours undertaken and the copious sums laid out to ensure that dramatic offerings did not forfeit the approval of spectators or incur the derision of

rivals represent not only the desire to fulfil what may be a basic human need, but also a determination to create an experience which would cast reflected glory on those under whose auspices it had been conceived and executed. Undoubtedly in certain instances the profit motive also inspired town and city traders in particular to see that performances worthy of patronage attracted audiences with money to spend.

The immense organisational demands made on urban dwellers, let alone the residents of villages and hamlets, cannot be overemphasised. Even when the incentive or invitation to perform came from church officials, regional magnate or the local council, from the entire community or from individuals within it, this was only a preliminary to setting up an appropriate command structure, selecting adequate supervisors, raising the requisite funding, securing the needful permissions or accepting the stipulated conditions from the secular or religious authorities, and persuading sufficient personnel to contribute to the proceedings in whatever capacity they could and would. As the Church's grip loosened on the logistics of staging drama outside its own buildings, so teams of lay persons assumed at least joint responsibility for the multiple facets of public performance, and at many venues even took complete control. The existence of religious, trade or craft associations such as the town and city guilds in England considerably facilitated the organisation of performances; where no such ready-made cooperatives could supply the requisite degree of cohesion and dedication, analogous structures and systems had to be put in place. Groups like the *puys* of France and French-speaking areas of the Low Countries, the Parisian *Confrérie de la Passion*, and Rome's *Gonfaloniere di Santa Lucia* banded together with the presentation of plays as one of their principal aims. Of all such play writing and producing organisations which came into being, the amateur literary guilds of the Low Countries – the Chambers of Rhetoric or *Rederijkerskamers*, with their highly organised competitions – are perhaps the most remarkable. But in many other places secular authorities mounted drama as one of their public responsibilities.

The general pattern emerging from the plethora of records which survive is that while the ruling power in a region was usually the ultimate source of permission and appeal, bishop or city council, cathedral chapter or local nobleman, would almost invariably delegate the detailed aspects of presentation to reliable deputies acting as either administrators or executives. Their number might include local government officials, prominent members of town or city councils, and individuals chosen for specific experience or expertise. Occasionally, as at Valenciennes in 1547, the players themselves elected some of their number to exercise absolute jurisdiction over proceedings, with powers to fine their fellows for any misdemeanours. Elsewhere one or more directors would be appointed to supervise the entire project, not excluding the off-stage arrangements: it was not for nothing that Lucerne selected their meticulous town clerk, Renward Cysat, to take charge of their Whitsun Passion play in 1583. Payments to organisers were not unusual: Alonso del Campo who supervised the arrangements for the Toledo Corpus Christi