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Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker

Excerpt

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## I FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO A GOLDEN AGE

## I Early stages

Although the great mystery cycles that flourished elsewhere in Europe during the Middle Ages seem not to have taken root in Scandinavia, the development of other forms of medieval drama and theatre there followed a traditional pattern. The genesis of that development was the *Quem queritis* trope, the announcement by the angel of Christ's resurrection on Easter morning, which was prescribed by Bishop Ethelwold for the Benedictine order in his tenth-century *Regularis Concordia*. A direct parallel to this basic trope is found in a thirteenth-century Easter sequence from Linköping in Sweden. In this brief liturgical play, performed during the service on Easter morning in front of a crypt representing the holy sepulchre, three priests wearing headdresses enacted the encounter of the three Marys with the angel at the tomb – in this case two angels, played by acolytes seated inside the crypt. In a later version of the same text, from about 1300, this basic dramatic situation was expanded to include the appearance of Simon Peter and John, whose Gospel tells of the footrace of the two disciples to the grave. From these early sources we can trace the gradual growth of a more elaborately conceived Easter performance.

Resurrection plays eventually became as popular in Scandinavia as they were in France and Germany. Within the confines of the church itself, episodes derived from the Gospels were enacted by the priests for the pleasure and edification of their congregations. Hence we find that in 1475 a so-called Marian Chapel was erected in the Church of Our Lady in Flensburg, where four priests known as Marians “acted . . . during Lent the tragedy of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and laid Him in a walled-up grave.”<sup>1</sup> This practice persisted until 1527, while the holy sepulchre itself, covered by a large stone, could be seen in the Marian Chapel at Flensburg as late as 1864. A Swedish *ludus resurrectionis*, acted by the teachers and students of

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the Latin school in Söderköping, is mentioned in a letter written by the parish priest, Hans Jacobi, in 1506. Even as late as 1635, the records of a Danish town refer to a mummer who had “for two days acted in the town hall the story of Christ’s Resurrection.”<sup>2</sup>

Often richly carved and ornamented, the structure used in these Easter dramas to designate Christ’s tomb became the midpoint of other related rituals as well. Sometimes this crypt was carried in solemn procession before being placed beside the altar on Good Friday evening. A Swedish eyewitness also speaks of seeing carved images of Christ being placed in such a sepulchre and anointed with fragrant balsam for the Easter service in the Uppland churches of Vada and Vester-Löfsta. Around the tomb at Vester-Löfsta, which is now preserved in the Nordic Museum in Stockholm, parishioners crawled on their knees to obtain forgiveness for their sins. In Denmark, a similar practice prevailed at the Church of Saint Peter in Næstved, where seventy days’ indulgence was granted to anyone who walked around Christ’s tomb “praying for peace, for good weather, for the welfare of the Danish kingdom, and for those buried here.”<sup>3</sup> The ceremony of the burial of the cross, which was the real purpose of these sepulchres, was particularly frowned upon by the Reformation, and for this reason zealous Lutheran prelates did their best to banish such structures from the churches. A Swedish church edict from 1591 expressly prohibited the ritual known as *Depositio Crucis*, in which a crucifix kissed by the congregation would be first wrapped in a cloth representing Christ’s grave clothes and then symbolically “buried” in the sepulchre. During the state visit of the Polish king Sigismund to Sweden in 1594, great public indignation was aroused when Roman Catholic priests persisted, despite the edict, in burying a picture of Christ that was subsequently taken up from the grave on Easter morning.

The coming of the Reformation, which reached Denmark in 1536, had a similarly repressive effect on the popular Epiphany plays that celebrated the second great feast of the Catholic Church. The action of this liturgical form was universally familiar. In solemn procession the priests who impersonated the three wise men would move up the center aisle of the church; one pointed with his scepter at a star that was carried on a pole or was moved through the church on a wire. At the altar the procession halted before the manger, where the Magi sacrificed to the newborn babe. As they fell on their knees in prayer, an angel appeared before them in the shape of a boy clad in white. As the drama developed in complexity, the

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tyrannical Herod began to make an appearance, causing the three kings to pause at his throne on their way to the crib.

Although Epiphany plays were unconditionally banished from the churches by the Reformation, their popular appeal remained undiminished. Gradually it became customary at Epiphany time for students from the local Latin school to impersonate the three wise men, marching in procession from house to house in search of donations. Always dressed in white, these scholar-kings wore high paper caps lavishly decorated with gilt to emphasize their regal state. Often they were joined by a crowd of other recognizable biblical figures. In Bergen, Norway, where these processions survived almost to our own day, the Magi were accompanied by “Mary with the child in a little cradle, Joseph with an axe in his hand,” and “some secondary figures.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, one also encountered such characters as Herod, old Simeon, and a Judas in whose conspicuous purse the coins of the onlookers were collected. In Sweden, folk figures became part of the spectacle. Occasionally a fool would also join the motley troupe. In fact, the star processions of the Bergen students were commonly referred to as “farces” or, as a diary entry from 1665 calls them, “*ludos comicos*.”<sup>5</sup> Always at the head of these processions, however, was the indispensable symbol of the star, held aloft on a pole for all to see.

The most tangible evidence of the original form of the Epiphany ritual in Scandinavia stems from Halland, where even the strictures of the Reformation failed to drive the star processions from the churches. Three very short Epiphany plays from this district of Sweden are extant, two from Falkenberg and a third from Laholm. All three texts, which appear to stem from a common source, mingle dialogue with incidental songs, fragments of old Epiphany melodies sung in part by the performers and in part by the audience in unison. The Falkenberg texts are essentially similar. The Magi are summoned to appear before Herod, a focus of dramatic interest in these plays as in so many other liturgical dramas of the Middle Ages. Ordering the wise men to go and seek the newborn King of the Jews, this ferocious theatre tyrant warns that if they are not back within three nights and three days, they will pay with their lives. The wise men set off, but Herod, sensing treachery, decides to saddle up and ride to Bethlehem himself. The slaughter of the Innocents is related in a song, after which Herod’s servant returns to assure his master, by way of conclusion, that he indeed “took the newborn babes, pierced their hearts and crushed their bones.”

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It is safe to assume that the staging of this drama was simple in the extreme. Even the slaughter of the Innocents, so often a cherished opportunity for medieval realism, was kept off stage. The only prop mentioned in these Swedish plays is a chair for Herod, perhaps a reminiscence of the tyrant's lordly throne in the older church ceremonies. To the compact cast of characters in the procession, however, the Laholm text adds the figure of the Virgin Mary. When the wise men ask her about the newborn king, she replies with a fragment of a Christmas song that is her only speech in the drama. In other Epiphany plays from Bergen, probably based on scholastic traditions of German derivation, Mary is also joined in the procession by her husband Joseph, who serves as the source of rather irrelevant comic relief.

When such a play concluded, the moment came to address a tactful reminder to the audience that art deserves its reward, usually gathered up by Judas in his purse. In one instance, however, we find the villainous Herod himself rising from his chair to address the spectators directly:

Your pardon that I am so bold  
 To step before you here;  
 My question to you now is this:  
 Will there be some cheer?

When the players had finished passing the hat, they sang a song of thanks, sometimes cleverly contrived to become less complimentary if the take did not meet expectations.

### Miracles and a morality

There is every reason to believe that miracle plays dramatizing the lives and deeds of the saints enjoyed as much popular appeal in Scandinavia as they did in other parts of Europe during the Middle Ages. Concerning actual performances of these plays, however, very little evidence survives. In the preface to the *Tobie Comedie* (1550), the first drama printed in Sweden, the anonymous author (assumed until quite recently to be Olaus Petri, the biblical translator and influential spokesman for Luther's teachings) argues that performances of moral comedies and tragedies have long been used to instruct the common people about right and wrong in the world. "Our forefathers," the writer adds, "had done the same in this country as in other countries since the coming of Christianity, with songs, rhymes, and comedies about holy men."<sup>6</sup> A sample of such a work, regarded

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Plate 1 The familiar biblical image of Simon of Cyrene bearing Christ's cross is juxtaposed with the figure of a prancing, performing stage fool leading the procession to Golgotha. Fresco in Bellinge Church, Odense (1496).

as the oldest surviving Swedish play, is *De uno peccatore qui promeruit gratiam*, performed in the latter half of the fifteenth century during one of the countless Maria festivals of that period. This simple little exemplum depicts a sinner's forgiveness through the (initially reluctant) intercession of the Virgin Mary. The fact that it was intended for performance is indicated by its stage directions and by a prologue in which the speaker greets the audience and calls for silence.

Something of the style and imagery of the traditional miracle performance is revealed, albeit indirectly, in the matchless ceiling and wall frescoes that have now been uncovered and restored in many medieval Danish churches. The figures and situations depicted in these church frescoes call to mind their counterparts in the living theatre of the later fifteenth century. In a painting in Bellinge Church on Fyn, dating from 1496, the procession to Golgotha is led by a prancing stage fool blowing a curved horn. In Skiveholme Church an unknown artist has left a fresco, from 1503, depicting another fool playing two instruments at once, a medieval characteristic that reappears in the Elizabethan theatre. Many of the localities shown in these paintings are closely related to the mansions that stood on the polyscenic medieval stage. Chief among them, of course, is the hell-mouth, shown in Selsø Church on Zealand as a dragon's head combined

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Plate 2 An elaborate fresco in Tybjerg Church, near Præstø (c. 1450) depicts horned, winged, and claw-footed devils driving the cowering figures of the damned into a gaping hell-mouth.

with a castle-like prison. Vivid depictions of naked souls being thrust, dragged, or even ridden into the gaping hell-mouth by winged and horned devils are common to several Danish churches. The same dragon mouth would, as in a fresco from Vallensbæk Church, serve equally well as the setting for Christ's harrowing of hell. In Tybjerg Church, meanwhile, we find a more cheerful vision of whiter and more fortunate souls with folded hands being led into the city of eternal bliss, reached by a short flight of stairs. In much of this iconography, masked devils in the shape of hairy animals with talons for feet wage a ceaseless struggle for the soul of Man. On the vaulted ceiling of Sæby Church in Jutland, a particularly dramatic episode depicts a devil snatching the soul of the deceased from under the very noses of his wife and her lover, while a sorrowful angel and a crowd of faithful in the walled city of God watch helplessly.

The best example of an authentic miracle play in Scandinavia is the *Ludus de Sancto Canuto duce*, a dramatization of the life and death of Knud Lavard, a Danish saint who was murdered in 1131. Legend has it that a well sprang up from the spot in a forest near Haraldsted where the Holy Duke Knud was slain, and that miracles took place at his grave. The martyr soon became a folk hero, and to the great joy of the Danish people his son, King

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Plate 3 Christ's harrowing of hell, as depicted in a fresco in Vallensbæk Church, near Copenhagen (1450–75). The two figures pleading for mercy are undoubtedly Adam and Eve, traditional supplicants on this occasion. The dramatic postures and expressions of the three figures convey a sense of actors playing roles.

Valdemar the Great, succeeded in having him canonized in 1169. A play based on the incidents of Knud's life and martyrdom seems to have been a very old tradition in Ringsted, the place of his burial. This verse drama, dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century and preserved in a later transcription, was itself an outgrowth of two twelfth-century Latin masses celebrated each year in the Church of Saint Bendt in Ringsted to commemorate the anniversaries of the murder and the saint's later interment before the high altar.

In addition to the thirty speaking roles found in the *Ludus de Sancto Canuto duce*, a large number of supernumeraries – privy counselors, courtiers, and citizens – swelled the processions and tableaux of this colorful outdoor spectacle. At the center of this historical pageant stood Duke Knud, the image of the good and pious leader who dies young, and his envious assassin Magnus, boldly drawn as the embodiment of godlessness and



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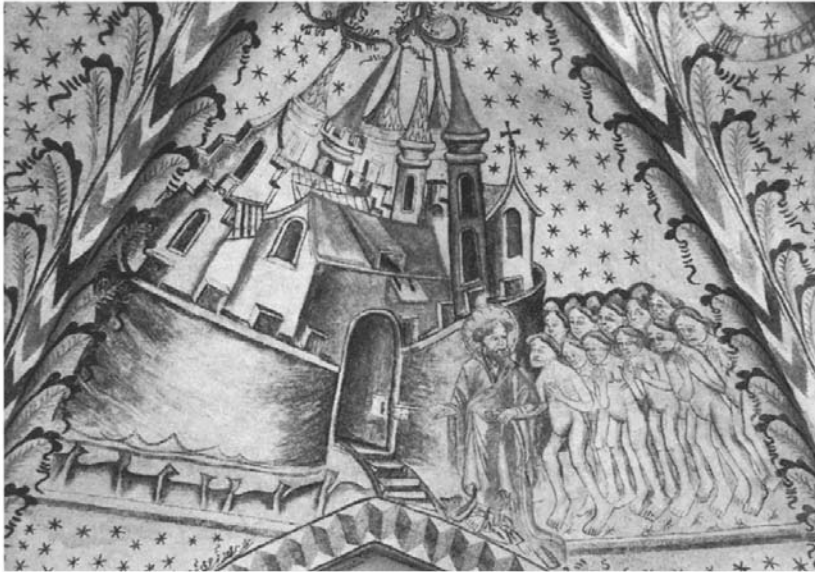


Plate 4 The frescoes in Tybjerg Church offer a glimpse of paradise, shown here as a walled city on a raised platform to which Saint Peter is about to admit an eager crowd of the blessed.

virtually demonic malice. The framework for this epic clash of the forces of good and evil was an elaborate one, spanning thirty years and exploiting the medieval principle of polyscenic mansion staging to the fullest. The herald Preco, speaker of the prologue, asks the spectators to “hold their peace and make room,” thereby implying that, as the space for performance was not clearly marked off, the sprawling action to follow would likely have used an open, simultaneous acting area rather than a raised stage. The mansions or localities needed for this production were probably set up around the largest square in Ringsted, close to the church where the martyr was held in special veneration – a practice entirely consistent with both the Villingen passion play and the Lucerne Easter play. Chief among these mansions was the royal court at Roskilde, which would have had a central position in the square. In addition, the audience would have seen localities representing the Danish Privy-council chamber, sundry castles and manors, a gallows, and the fateful grove where Knud is killed – all grouped topographically, with localities on Zealand gathered in one part of the performance space and Knud’s castles in Jutland and Slesvig in another.

Characters and processions moved freely and frequently from one such mansion to another, both on foot and even on horseback. Messengers

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Plate 5 In this miniature drama, painted on the ceiling of Sæby Church in Jutland, devil and angel compete for the soul of the man in the bed, while his wife and her lover appear otherwise preoccupied. Behind the angel, the averted faces of the inmates of paradise express their grief, while the devil makes haste to convey his victim to the hell-mouth seen at the left.

journeyed ceaselessly from castle to castle. When the Privy-council meets in its mansion and reaches a decision it wishes to convey to the wicked King Harald, a stage direction indicates that the counselors “journey to Harald’s castle,” where one of them simply shouts to the king: “Harald, look out and go here forth, the Privy-council has arrived.” While at his castle in Ribe, Knud is named Duke of Slesvig, whereupon he promptly “rides to Slesvig, takes up residence in the castle,” and delivers an address to the inhabitants there.

As we might expect, this period’s taste for bloodshed and cruelty on the stage found ample expression in this Danish miracle. Medieval audiences relished scenes of torture and execution, familiar to them from a daily life in which the hanging, drawing, and quartering of a criminal was a source of public entertainment. To this category belongs the highly realistic execution of a thief in the play. The Latin legend relates that, after having been sent to Slesvig by King Niels, Knud demonstrated his righteousness by dealing strictly with the many criminals who ravaged and plundered the country during this restless age. In the drama, in what must have been a lively chase sequence, “the thieves are pursued, one of them is