

## *Introduction: Christian Europe and the Play of God*

Passion plays and Corpus Christi cycles, like Arthurian romances and Gothic cathedrals, are among the outstanding cultural monuments of medieval Europe. However, theatre is an essentially evanescent art form: texts and records can provide at best a skeleton of the drama which, for a brief moment, combined the verbal, musical and visual arts with the beliefs and faith of Christendom. The medieval bones of this body are plentiful and widely dispersed: play-texts and records of performances; accounts, costume lists, contracts and minutes of town meetings; contemporary reports and eye-witness descriptions. All these survive in their hundreds, for biblical drama flourished in Western Catholic Europe for more than five hundred years and its roots go back to the very beginnings of Christianity.

Like Judaism, Christianity had at its core a regular ceremonial re-enactment of the saving activity of God. Under the Old Covenant, Moses instructed the children of Israel in the annual commemoration of the Passover: 'You shall observe the rite as an ordinance for you and your sons for ever' (Exodus 12: 24). Christ took this Law and reinterpreted it in the form of the New Covenant, bidding his disciples: 'Do this in remembrance of me.' From the earliest centuries the Christian Church obeyed his commandment through the celebration of the sacrament of the Mass.

The other principal sacrament of the early Church was Baptism, for which a long preparation was required. Before being made a member of the Church each candidate had to affirm his belief in the basic tenets of the Christian faith as expressed in the Apostles' Creed. Whereas the Mass commemorated the sacrifice of God in the Passion, the Creed recorded the threefold action of God in Christ as Creator, Redeemer and Judge. In the West, its recitation was (and has remained) an integral part of the daily round of prayer and praise.<sup>1</sup>

The description of the worship in Jerusalem in the fourth century left

by the noble Roman lady, Egeria,<sup>2</sup> shows that already by that date a third element of worship had been added to the liturgy and the Mass: on major feasts the Church also encouraged ceremonial re-enactments of the events of the Life of Christ. Her description of the Palm Sunday procession makes it clear that this is not a dramatic, representational approach to the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem but an act of worship, no different in kind from the numerous processions, often with a wooden figure of Christ on a donkey, still found in parts of Europe today.<sup>3</sup> The veneration of the True Cross<sup>4</sup> on the site of Golgotha itself was likewise an act of worship that could not become drama, whereas the ceremonial interment on Good Friday, a thousand miles away and several centuries later, of a cross bearing the image of the crucified Christ, could.

Soon after Egeria's visit, the Church (like the Roman Empire itself) divided into two parts with a Byzantine Emperor and a Greek-speaking Church in the East; a Roman Emperor and a Latin Church in the West.<sup>5</sup> Biblical plays did not develop from the liturgy of the Eastern Church, which had its own 'incarnation' of the Word of God in the icons, a custom defended by John of Damascus during the eighth-century iconoclastic controversy: 'Of old, God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was never depicted. Now, however, when God is seen clothed in flesh and conversing with men, I make an image of the God of matter who became matter for my sake.'<sup>6</sup> Such a theology could not lead to representational drama, though it has been claimed that a group of Greek homilies, preserved in manuscripts of the ninth to eleventh centuries but dating back to the period before the eighth-century iconoclastic controversy, contain the relics of dramatic scenes and dialogues which together make up a considerable body of what might be considered Greek sermon-drama. The central figures of these scenes are the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and Christ, and the material covers three main areas: the Annunciation, including Joseph's doubt about Mary; the Baptism and Temptation of Christ; the death of John the Baptist and his arrival in Limbo with the patriarchs, followed by the Harrowing of Hell.<sup>7</sup> These sermon-plays, if one may use the term, are essentially dogmatic and theological in their emphasis; there is no certainty that they were ever in fact performed and they certainly did not influence the few genuine biblical plays written in Greek, such as the *Paschon Christos* and *Cyprus Passion*.<sup>8</sup>

Medieval biblical drama as we know it, therefore, developed exclusively in the Western Church. Its Bible was the Vulgate,

St Jerome's new, fourth-century, version of the Bible in Latin which replaced the *Vetus Latina* (Old Latin) translation which had become corrupt in the process of manuscript transmission, while its version of the Old Testament had been translated not from the Hebrew but from the Greek Septuagint version.<sup>9</sup> Jerome, who was a considerable scholar and translator, revised the text of the New Testament from the Greek and produced a new version of most of the Old Testament from the Hebrew original.<sup>10</sup>

The catalyst that was to enable the translation of the Bible into the biblical play, and was to have far-reaching consequences for both the Church and ultimately the drama, came in the following century when St Benedict wrote his *Regula* (*Rule*). Designed for the monastic order he founded in Montecassino, for the next thousand years this Rule governed the life of scores of religious communities all over Europe. At its heart was the *Opus Dei* (Work of God): a series of short services sung or recited every three hours during the day (hence the familiar name, Hours). This Daily Office which, combined with the celebration of Mass, formed the basic obligation of all Benedictine religious,<sup>11</sup> included lections (or readings) from the Bible which were gradually arranged in a sequence or *cursus* for the whole of the Church year.<sup>12</sup>

The monastic liturgical calendar based on the life of Christ laid down the structure of the feasts and fast-days of the whole Christian Church. Beginning in Advent with the prophecies of the coming of Christ and the reminder of the Second Coming on the Day of Judgement, it proceeds through the life of Christ from Nativity to Ascension, including the major feasts of Christmas, Epiphany and, above all, Easter. The Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost leads into the last part of the year, celebrating the work and witness of the Church. Like the Creed, the liturgy as a whole emphasised the triple activity of God as Creator, Redeemer and Judge through the tradition of reading the Old Testament in its relationship to the New, starting from the references to the Old Testament in the gospels (especially Matthew) and the epistles (particularly Hebrews). The prophets, especially Isaiah, form part of the lectionary (the book of readings) during Advent, and the story of the Fall of Man was read during the period before Easter, beginning on Septuagesima Sunday and continuing through Lent with the patriarchs and the story of Moses. Throughout the year the biblical lections are supplemented by readings from the sermons and commentaries of the patristic writers, especially

Augustine, but including John Chrysostom, Gregory, Ambrose and (later) Bede.

The Office was essentially an act of worship, so the readings from the Bible made up only part of the liturgy, which included sung acts of praise, intercession and repentance. Both here and in the Mass many of the texts and musical settings were arranged for antiphonal performance, with a soloist and choir or two half-choirs singing alternately. There was also ritual and processional movement. In structure and presentation, the Office and, especially, the Mass were performances. But they were not drama, for they did not have the essential audience without which there is no theatre.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless it was from this liturgy of the Benedictine communities (for drama is essentially a community activity) that there developed by the end of the ninth century the first examples of Latin drama of the type usually described as liturgical (see p. 14).

Liturgical drama remained important and widespread throughout the medieval period, but in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a series of social and religious developments encouraged the birth of what was to become the vernacular lay-drama of the later Middle Ages. The liturgical and patristic forms which dominated the first church plays were challenged by the great cultural and spiritual renaissance of the twelfth century with its stress on the primacy of the individual.<sup>14</sup> Theologically, the Church, which had been focussed on crusades against the threat to Christianity from pagan and heretical groups, began to pay more attention to the spiritual needs of its own flock at home. Regular confession, repentance and penance were increasingly stressed, first by writers and teachers like St Bernard and St Anselm, and then by the newly formed orders of friars, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, whose mission took them out of the enclosed monastic circle to preach to the laity in the towns and villages of Europe.<sup>15</sup> An additional stimulus to this new lay popular piety was given by the preaching of Joachim of Flora, who early in the thirteenth century pronounced the imminent arrival of the Day of Judgement.<sup>16</sup>

As a genre which combined art, literature and popular piety, the biblical drama could not fail to be influenced by this revival of religious enthusiasm and the movement towards greater stress on the individual, on emotions and personal relationships – a movement which was reflected in the shift from Romanesque to Gothic in art and architecture, from epic to romance in literature, from the divine *Christus victor* reigning from the Tree of Life to the agonised suffering of

the human Jesus on the cross of shame in works of theology and devotion. These changes encouraged also a growing emphasis on the earthly life of Jesus, with its natural concomitant of a growth in the role of the Virgin and a generally greater interest in the lives and feelings of the individual characters.

Two thirteenth-century Latin works exploited this new approach so successfully that they dominated popular devotion and religious drama for centuries. The *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*) by the Italian Dominican, Jacobus de Voragine, is a commentary on a sequence of readings (legends) for the different feast-days of the Church year. The *Meditationes vitae Christi* (*Meditations on the Life of Christ*) attributed in the Middle Ages to the Franciscan, St Bonaventure, were written as a devotional guide to the life of Christ.<sup>17</sup> A number of other Latin texts were also influential, including the *Postilles* (commentaries on the Bible) of Nicholas of Lyra,<sup>18</sup> and Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale* (*Mirror of History*). Vernacular narratives of biblical events, especially the Passion, became increasingly common and, enriched with stories and legends from apocryphal sources, provided many material details for the translation of gospel narratives to the popular stage.<sup>19</sup>

A new community now became associated with the biblical plays: the laity, whose involvement in drama first burgeoned in the thirteenth century. In different parts of Catholic Europe neighbourhood groups, trade guilds, literary societies and pious confraternities, began to create a lay religious theatre that was to spread throughout Europe; but it was above all the inhabitants of the centres of commerce whose growing civic self-awareness encouraged them to celebrate with processions, and eventually plays, their new pride and status.<sup>20</sup> They had watched (and built stands for) the jousts and *pas d'armes* which were the preferred amusement of the fighting aristocracy, but though the tales of chivalry and courtly love which inspired the entertainments and maskings in court and castle remained popular reading, they were apparently considered inappropriate to the public spectacles of a merchant class and had only a limited appeal to the growing urban communities.<sup>21</sup>

Instead, inspired by the plays they saw and heard in church on the feast days of obligation, and especially by the new feast of Corpus Christi with its obligatory civic procession, the merchants and trade guilds began to present biblical and hagiographic plays, whose setting in the urban and pastoral life of the Holy Land made them peculiarly suitable material for the towns which still retained close links with their surrounding countryside: seed-time and harvest were still significant in

the life of the most urbanised merchant or mastercraftsman. The courts of Arthur and Charlemagne which, in an age of warfare and disorder, could provide little comfort for the inhabitants of a besieged city in a wasted countryside, were replaced by the Court of Heaven with its more powerful and, hopefully, more merciful rule. If the Kingdom of Heaven seemed a long way from the daily horrors of fourteenth-century Europe, at least the new Jerusalem was awaiting the faithful hereafter.

In parts of Europe, especially northern France and the Netherlands, this period of expansion in urban and civic drama suffered a set-back during the wars, plagues and famine of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. But in the century that followed the end of the Hundred Years' War in 1450, it was in the credal cycles, especially those associated with the feast of Corpus Christi, and in the big cyclic passion plays where Church and laity combined in an act of theatre which was also an act of worship, that the genius of the medieval biblical drama found its ultimate flowering.

'The emphasis of Jesus' teaching is upon God, rather than upon man – upon what *God* has done, is doing, and shall do for His people.'<sup>22</sup> Medieval biblical plays were essentially theocentric, presenting the two Testaments as the total work of God: Creator, Redeemer and Judge. The chronicler who recorded the performance in Latin in Cividale in 1298 of a sequence of scenes from Passion to Judgement, gave it the name *Ludus Christi* (Play of Christ).<sup>23</sup> Six years later, when the same clerics performed a full credal cycle from Creation to Judgement, they might have called that *Ludus Dei* (Play of God) for this was the title used two hundred years later in the prologue to the *Mons Passion* – a cycle from Creation to Pentecost – whose author declares they intend to present the acts of Christ:

*en la forme tres belle  
 Que le Jeu de Dieu on appelle.*

(In the very beautiful form which is called the Play of God.)<sup>24</sup>

The Play of God is peculiar to Western Christendom, and especially to those parts of Constantine's Christian empire that had been occupied and civilised by his Imperial pagan predecessors. France and Germany, Italy, England and the Low Countries were the heartlands of the biblical plays, a remarkable number of which were performed in or on the ruins of Roman cities from the Coliseum to York Minster, beneath whose crypt lie the Roman barracks where Constantine himself was proclaimed Emperor.



From the dramatic point of view, the historical geography of Europe was primarily one of frontiers – linguistic and religious rather than political. Plays were particularly common along the border areas between France and the Holy Roman Empire which dominated the areas east of the Rhine. By the end of the fifteenth century, the map shows concentrations of drama records in the trading centres of the Netherlands, Dutch-speaking Antwerp and Brussels, francophone Mons, Lille and Valenciennes. Like shrines on the Road to St James of Compostella, play-performing towns are spread along the route which led between the Rhone and the Rhine through Lorraine and Burgundy towards the south, where the towns of Savoy and Dauphiné on the west and the silver-rich Tyrol towns on the east kept the passes into Italy along which travelled an endless river of traders, travellers and troops.

On the south-western edge of Catholic Europe, Catalonia, though it had lost its Mediterranean trading pre-eminence and its political independence to the united crowns of Aragon and Castile, kept its traditional plays and processions, especially in Elche, Barcelona and Valencia. The absence of liturgical and early vernacular drama in the rest of Spain and in Portugal is a consequence of the Moorish occupation and the late restoration of Christianity. By the end of the fifteenth century there was a flourishing tradition of Corpus Christi drama and court theatre throughout the Peninsula.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the liturgical drama of the Western Catholic tradition, the Byzantine sermon plays never inspired vernacular civic drama, which is unknown in the towns of Eastern, Orthodox Europe till after the end of the medieval period. This was partly because many of the towns themselves were stunted in their development by the Turkish invasions of the fourteenth century. The clearest example here is the dual tradition in the two Balkan states of Serbia and Croatia. The latter had been part of the Roman *imperium*, was Catholic and remained virtually free of Turks. It also had strong trade links with Venice; examples of both Latin liturgical and vernacular civic plays survive there. Serbia was Orthodox and overrun and had neither.<sup>26</sup>

Native biblical drama generally developed late in the vernaculars of the Catholic countries of Eastern Europe – Poland, Bohemia, Hungary – which were for a long time dominated culturally and politically by the mainly German-speaking Holy Roman Empire. Bohemia was the first to produce native drama, and a number of Czech plays survive from the fourteenth century, but the Protestant Hussite movement (which was opposed to drama) gave a new direction to the expression

of nascent nationalism.<sup>27</sup> Hungary's earliest vernacular drama from the fifteenth century includes some Christian and biblical elements but retained also much of its unique pagan folklore.<sup>28</sup> Russian drama did not develop till the end of the seventeenth century<sup>29</sup> and Slavonic Catholicism found its chief exponent in the late medieval period in Poland. Many medieval Latin texts survive but the earliest extant text in Polish is from 1580 though it may have an older source. The *History of the glorious Resurrection*, as its title implies, is an Easter play and includes also the Harrowing of Hell; there are directions for staging it between Easter and Ascension (with the permission of the ecclesiastical authorities) either in church or in the graveyard. The thirty-five characters may be played by only twenty-one actors, and a number of mansions are required, especially a substantial Hell with a solid door, fire and a horrible smell.<sup>30</sup>

The importance of not only the Roman liturgy but also the Roman *civis* and the political ethos of the old Roman empire in the development of religious drama, shows up also in the Celtic countries of the far west of Europe. In Ireland, the most politically and culturally isolated of the group, never influenced by Roman occupation or the Roman Church, only Dublin (founded by the Vikings and already an English outpost in the twelfth century) and the Anglo-Norman settlement of Kilkenny have records of liturgical and civic drama. Vernacular biblical drama is also unknown in the other Celtic territories; no biblical plays are recorded from Wales or Brittany till the very end of the medieval period, when they evidently came under the influence of their more powerful neighbours. Cornwall, smallest and least independent politically of them all, had a trilogy of plays, somewhat on the French model, the *Ordinalia*, known to have been composed and performed *c.* 1376.<sup>31</sup> Scotland has no Gaelic drama from the Celtic Highlands but a flourishing tradition in the Scottish dialect of English survives from the Lowlands and the towns of the East coast.<sup>32</sup>

There is a similar absence of biblical drama in the Scandinavian countries, partly due to the late date of their conversion to Christianity. Perhaps also the strong tribal and family traditions of the Northmen were less suited to community drama than to poetry and saga. The court and aristocracy were well versed in the popular epics and romances of the day, and the Church, at least in Sweden,<sup>33</sup> has some dramatic forms of its own, but once again the Roman 'civilisation' in its most literal sense of the *civis* or town is absent.

From whatever part of Europe they came, the medieval writers did



not limit themselves to simple transfers of biblical stories, characters and dialogue to the stage. Their approach was essentially theocentric but for them the Word of God was the incarnate Christ, the Logos, not simply the Holy Scriptures in which his acts were recorded. In the preface to his *Monologium* or meditation on the being of God, St Anselm explains the method he has been following: 'that nothing in Scripture should be urged on the authority of Scripture itself, but that whatever the conclusion of independent investigation should declare to be true, should . . . be briefly enforced by the cogency of reason, and plainly expounded in the light of truth'.<sup>34</sup> The biblical drama of medieval Europe was not a meditation on the *being* of God but a representation *par personnages* (as the French dramatists put it), of the *doing* of God. The authors freely adapted and altered the Scriptures, adding characters and emotions, commentaries and debates to create plays which, lacking the brevity advocated by Anselm, have yet often the 'cogency of reason', while the modern parallels adduced and the use of contemporary settings gave a unique opportunity for independent examination within the framework of the Christian Church.

Such freedom of thought and personal interpretation could not survive the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century. In the age of reform and counter reform, the medieval emphasis on God incarnate in contemporary society was replaced on the one hand by the Inquisition-enforced authority of the Church and on the other by the equally strict control of the ministers of the Word of God and a fundamentalist approach to the Bible.<sup>35</sup> The results, reflected in the differences between the medieval and the later biblical plays discussed in the conclusion, pose the question: could the Play of God exist outside medieval Europe?

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## PART ONE

*The theatrical community*

We do not ask that a play communicate for ever; we do ask that a play communicate in its own time, through its own medium, for its own community.

(J. L. Styan, *Drama, stage and audience*)