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Popular drama and the importance of community

The popular religious and folk drama which begins the story of the English stage demands the basic elements needed for any dramatic activity: actors, spectators and a space in which the play can be performed and seen. By this a 'convention' has already been created in which the audience has access to the world of the drama and can share the experience that lies at the heart of performance. An audience needs the actor to speak for it, but an actor cannot speak for it unless he has its consent, the two making a mutual bond of the most mysterious and fundamental kind. Moreover, if shared experience is important to dramatic activity, so too is the community that makes it possible and from which the activity springs. The more closely knit the group, the better an audience it makes. Popular drama particularly serves its community, and can only be understood in its social role.

Many details in this chapter remain shadowy and conjectural, but the drama of the fourteenth century certainly served its community, while evidently enjoying the licence of art. Released to a degree from reality, it invited thinking and feeling on another level than the mundane, and wonderfully expanded the imagination. In this, it could be businesslike, seeking and supplying information, or it could be recreational, extending experience with only pleasure as its apparent purpose. The stage can teach and it can please, and still be intricately tied to the life of its community. It used to be argued that for centuries life in England was starved of all dramatic activity. It is true that the early Church decided from the first century to suppress what few vestiges of drama the Roman

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civilization had left, damning the hellish arts of feigning and face-painting, and citing Deuteronomy, for example, in support of its case against actors and their costume disguises:

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.

(22.5)

However, up to 1000 AD forms of theatrical activity persisted, and, finding its own channels, the native drama grew robust. Minstrels and strolling players, story-tellers and entertainers of every kind, needed no tradition of playwriting, no institutionalized stage, in order to flourish. The processions and pageants, tournaments and mummings, and the generous way these were presented, reflect the dramatic impulse of the age.

A sense of their contribution to the community also strengthens the view that the great Corpus Christi cycles were unique dramatic achievements in their own right. They used to be thought of as drama in a state of evolution, constituting a primitive dinosaur of human activity that had yet to be tamed, a rough and ready thing that only waited to be refined and polished to become the great drama of the English renaissance. When certain unidentified writers of the Middle Ages – probably clerics – wrote scripts for the festival of Corpus Christi, they wrote for the people they knew. The religious plays of the medieval period were indeed a legitimate drama, determined by their own content and shape. Nor did they merely wither away, but were at their height when the Church and the authorities put a stop to them. New productions of these plays in recent years have confirmed that they represented an extraordinary achievement in all departments of dramatic art: they are completely viable as good theatre and they exemplify how a community can answer its own needs in dramatic terms.

Mummers' plays and street theatre

The centre of dramatic and quasi-dramatic activity in the Middle Ages was not in London, but, significantly, in the

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country at large. The village green and town square provided natural arenas for the unlocalized *platea* [Latin: 'wide street' or open acting space] round which spectators gathered. In such acting areas the performer reckoned to hold the attention of his audience almost without scenery and with a minimum of props. As early as the tenth century elementary props and costumes were in modest use. For the *Quem quaeritis?* trope in Winchester Cathedral, the *Regularis Concordia* of St Ethelwold (c. 965) instructs 'four brethren' to wear copes and carry palms as if they were the women looking for Christ's tomb. When in later years drama was performed in the banquet hall of some great manor house, a more domestic content called for the use of simple props and settings, and the long, slow growth of drama as 'illusion' had begun. Otherwise the drama in English at its inception seemed to enjoy the freedom of creating and communicating virtually without the need of realistic illusion.

Religious and community drama, as we shall see, drew upon a host of ready 'amateurs' – willing clergy and parishioners and guildsmen who became actors for the time being. But folk entertainment also flourished with the aid of many itinerant performers who may be loosely grouped according to the kind of entertainment they had to offer:

- (1) The acrobats and jugglers, tumblers and rope-dancers, wrestlers and animal trainers, were the forerunners of what is today the circus. The peddlers and mountebanks came with them, and the hawkers and hucksters who inhabit markets and fairgrounds the world over. In *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) Ben Jonson supplied a rich picture of such people.
- (2) The sword and morris dancers, the clowns and buffoons, jesters and fools, performing often scurrilous antics, are found on the doubtful margins of many forms of carnival and comic entertainment. It is interesting that the Italian word *buffa* and the early French *buffon* [jest] both also embrace the idea of pantomime and morris dance.
- (3) Ballad-singers and tale-tellers, named in Old English as *gleemen* and in Old French as *jongleurs*, were the minstrels found throughout Europe at this time. Singing and

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story-telling were from the beginning almost one and the same, and the combination of music and drama provided a mutual reinforcement of expression that magically established the imaginative tone of the performance and the spirit of its reception.

- (4) What were known later to Thomas Dekker as the ‘strowlers’ [country players] were probably early professional actors not far removed from vagrants and vagabonds. They were people who wandered the country performing as and where they could, although they survived into the nineteenth century as the strolling players of Charles Dickens’s acquaintance. These strollers and street mimes were key figures in the early history of the theatre, and, together with the performers attached to noble houses, lead us directly to the forms of established stage which made possible the rapid development of a professional drama in the sixteenth century.

Three features of medieval street theatre call attention to themselves. First, all the performers named above were itinerant and found everywhere. Rovers all, they ensured that many forms of embryonic dramatic activity should spread quickly from town to town and country to country. If music, passing beyond language barriers, is the international language, then drama had its beginnings in the same company.

Second, although the players no doubt spiced their shows with pantomime and clowning, which would have encouraged and widened their universal appeal, their work arguably fell within a great oral tradition. An oral tradition implies that, without a written script, a song or a story is passed on from place to place and age to age, and seems by such means to perpetuate itself; and the intimacy implicit in the style and nature of oral performance made it immediately responsive to its audience, encouraging rather than inhibiting change. Thus the problem, and the interest, of much medieval drama lies in its inherently *unstable text*.

Finally, street entertainment also acquired a curiously ritual quality, whereby the expectations of the people were no doubt gratified by its repetition from performance to performance. This norm of anticipation may have been apparent in

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the ceremonial events that occurred in town or village. These were the pageants or processions that attended weddings, funerals and other Church occasions, and festivities and celebrations occasioned by local legends and seasonal rites and customs. Such local and community occasions were socially distinct from the revels associated with royal visits and coronations, which were celebrated at great expense with highly ornamented carriages and floats. Extraordinary events on public record, like those of the celebration of the victory of Edward I over the Scots in 1298, the coronation of Richard II in 1377 or the arrival in London of the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon in 1501, were occasions for building elaborate symbolic tableaux.

The origins of the English folk plays are lost in time, but we have some idea what they were like because a few were preserved in written form into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: these are the secular *mummers' plays*. The phrase 'to go a-mumming' dates back to at least the fifteenth century, but the plays are certainly earlier, since in its mixture of dumb show, lively action and wild clowning mumming embodied the death and rebirth of the seasons. Mummers' plays were found with popular variations all over England and Scotland – they were so widespread, in fact, that it is impossible to hypothesize a common source for them.

Although mummers' plays were not sponsored by the Church, they were probably associated with Christmas or Easter, both festive holidays which corresponded with the seasonal changes of the countryside. A play would often begin with a cry that was partly a charge to the spectators, partly an announcement of intent: 'Ring, a ring!' (from Heptonstall, Yorkshire) or 'Room, a room!' elsewhere (Shakespeare includes the line, 'A hall, a hall, give room!' in *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.26, when Capulet welcomes the visitors to his ball). Whether ring or room, the notion of an acting space and a theatrical relationship with an audience is implicit.

In spite of the corruptions and variations of every kind that might be expected from an oral tradition, the 'plot' of the mummers' plays remained much the same. In the Oxfordshire *St George's Play* (recorded for the first time in 1853) the hero would step forward into the circle and announce himself, as

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did everyone else, in rhyming couplets of the most ragged kind:

I am St George of Merry England,
Bring in the morris-men, bring in our band.

The spectators would draw in, and the ritualistic repetitiveness of such introductions arose from the need to alert an audience to its proper reaction. St George was a Christian knight confronted by his enemy – in some plays the Dragon,

I am the Dragon, here are my jaws;
I am the Dragon, here are my claws ...

and in others the champion of the Turks,

Here come I, the Turkish Knight,
Come from the Turkish land to fight ...

The action culminated in a mighty combat, in which either George or his foe is slain. If George, he will be revived by the 'Doctor', who first announces that he can cure 'the itch, the stitch, the palsy and the gout' before working his medicine and his magic on the hero.

The occasion is magic in other ways too. An extraordinary variety of characters, some ritualistic and festive, and others touched with popular symbolism, may chance to introduce themselves in the course of the play with the same forthright announcement of their presence, and with the same blunt invitation to the crowd to take them and their disguises as it finds them. Some of these characters even become lightly involved with the more solemn issues of living and dying. In Oxfordshire an unmistakable Father Christmas was one such, and another was Beelzebub, perhaps carrying a club and a frying-pan. Giant Blunderbore, Old King Cole complete with wooden leg and Captain Slasher with sword and pistol are all good for a fight or a romp. The genial, 'come-one-come-all' spirit of the performance does not preach in any way, and taking up a collection in a frying-pan at the end of the performance must have seemed entirely appropriate.

Along with the St George plays, there were several other early forms of folk drama that also introduced a theme of death and resurrection, offered in the spirit of ebullient comic

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revelry. A *Sword Dance Play*, dating from at least the tenth century, might be seen during the Christmas season to mark the defeat of winter by summer, something in which the performers, dressed in white and splendidly decorated with ribbons, began with balletic steps dancing over and around swords laid on the ground, and ended with a fight in which one of the dancers might expect to be slain – sometimes representing the village ‘Parson’. It then took the grotesque efforts of ‘The Bessy’, a clown-figure dressed in women’s clothing, to bring him quickly to life with the help of the ever-available Doctor – in one instance by making him sneeze.

Just as popular during the May games were the *Robin Hood Plays*, performed to celebrate the return of spring. In these the colourful folk hero of legend, always on the side of the poor, was King of the May. Robin would step out and usually began his play with the lines,

Now stand ye forth, my merry men all,
And hark what I shall say;
Of an adventure I shall you tell,
The which befell this other day.

His play would enact a battle joined with the enemy for the occasion, perhaps Friar Tuck, or perhaps the infamous Sheriff of Nottingham. Every time, a rousing fight erupted at the centre of the comic action, and a violent death was followed by a rapid resurrection.

Mumming troupes travelled from village to village, creating truly an itinerant form of theatre. Everywhere the spirit of ‘let’s-put-on-a-play’ seemed to run through their entertainments, and the longevity of this curious tradition proves that the mummers’ plays contained within them the seeds of what makes drama work and street theatre successful.

The Church and its liturgical drama

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

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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 itself to encourage a new, popular and far more vigorous theatre.

The powerful ingredients of its ritual observance appeared in everything the Church did, in the splendour of its colourful robes and vestments, the glory of its processions, the beauty of its choral singing and the conduct of its forms of worship. It ordained the occasions for its ritual around the calendar, so that it might carry a significance greater than itself and belong to the life of the community in the passing of the seasons. On special occasions – and especially at Christmas and Easter – it carefully added the mysticism of its liturgies [public rites and services], already suffused with such embellishments as candlelight, incense, music and the Latin language. The structure of the building itself, designed to hold a compact congregation, with a central nave leading to a choir [that part used by the singers] and chancel [that part used by the clergy], and usually flanked by pulpit and lectern, provided an excellent natural theatre, as T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry reminded audiences in the twentieth century.

Paradoxically, however vast the subject and profound the content, the actual theatrical mode of presentation of drama in church by clerics in the tenth century was familiar and personal, the opposite of what might have been expected. And in the fourteenth century the pageant plays of the Corpus Christi cycles, which told the story of man's relationship with God and embraced immense issues, were played on surprisingly small stages by local players, by 'amateurs' of the best kind. As a result of this, the plays in performance retained an intimacy with their audiences which determined much of their style. The new drama of the Church thrived because it sprang from, and spoke directly to, its community, which was its congregation.

The Latin drama of the Church after the tenth century was rooted in the Mass. From another position, O. B. Hardison, Jr

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insisted in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (1965) that the Mass contained ‘all the elements necessary to secular performances,’ and he asked,

Should church vestments then, with their elaborate symbolic meanings, be considered costumes? Should the paten, chalice, sindon, sudarium, candles, and thurible be considered stage properties? Should the nave, chancel, presbytery, and altar of the church be considered a stage, and its windows, statues, images, and ornaments a ‘setting’?

(79)

He and others have found it possible to answer yes.

A ceremony which, according to Anglican literature, declared its intention ‘to show forth’ the death of Christ had already admitted to a substantial theatrical bent by using ‘show forth’ in the sense of ‘display’ or ‘exhibit’. What was sacred turned for support to secular resources and forms, while what was profane was soon to acquire strength from the mysteries of the Church. The result was a prodigious extension of its simple liturgies and liturgical tropes [in medieval drama, verbal elaborations of the liturgy] when the great Corpus Christi cycles were written.

By the sixth century, as a result of the guidelines in Pope Gregory the Great’s *Antiphonarium*, Gregorian liturgies, sung and chanted in Latin, called for the participants to take opposite sides and already gave the service a dramatic shape with two viewpoints. By the tenth century, the visual elements of procession and pageantry helped to illustrate the message of the service, and words were added to the singing in order to extend their meaning. At Christmas such a trope might tell the story of Joseph or Herod, the Three Shepherds, the Magi, and at Easter the story of Lazarus, the Three Marys or Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Each trope would end with a song of praise, like the *Te Deum laudamus*, and so the sacred drama concluded appropriately when the congregation joined in.

Since the content of the liturgy was taken from the Scriptures, it told a story as a *lectio* [lesson], and this was performed during the office of Matins [the service of morning prayer]. (The style may be heard today in modern recordings of the

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seventeenth-century Venetian Vespers [the evening prayers].) But the liturgy was *sung*, and should be thought of as musical drama, the text serving as a *libretto* to the singing, with its words carried along on the melody. The chief medium was the voice, and the drama progressed when the chanting, usually rendered by the single voice of the precentor [leader] in counterpoint with the choir, was answered by voices that were ‘responsorial’ [more supportive] or ‘antiphonal’ [more like an answer]. It then proceeded by adding to or repeating the theme. There was little attempt at verisimilitude, but some sense of difference between characters could be conveyed by modulating voices to suggest different speakers.

Over six hundred years there were hundreds of versions of the Easter trope known as the *Quem quaeritis?* or the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, which began as a monastic exercise. One example from the Swiss abbey of St Gall by Lake Constance dates from c. 950, and the earliest in England, found in Winchester Cathedral, has been assigned the last third of the tenth century. The basis is from the Gospel according to St Mark, which tells of the three Marys who wish to anoint Christ’s body after the Crucifixion:

And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were afrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not afrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here; behold the place where they laid him.

(Mark, 16.5–6)

In the simplest performance, four lines in Latin tell the story. When the Angel turns the three Marys away from the tomb with the news that Christ has risen from the dead, their grief turns to joy:

THE ANGEL. *Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, O Christicolae?*
[Whom do you seek in the tomb, O Christians?]

THE WOMEN. *Iesum Nazarenum crucifixum, O Caelicola.*
[Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, O heavenly one.]

THE ANGEL. *Non est hic, surrexit sicut praedixerat.*
Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro.