

INTRODUCTION

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Faced with the almost unimaginable accumulations of modern learning, most scholars have become specialists who restrict their professional researches within comparatively narrow fields. This method of strip-cultivation has produced bountiful harvests of knowledge, but it is not without danger when rigidly applied to such subjects as English medieval literature and church imagery. These arts were developed as closely integrated parts of medieval culture, and if they are studied separately there is a grave risk that problems may remain unsolved in one or other field of expertise because the answers to them lie on the further side of the professional fence. A single example may here illustrate both aspects of this danger. The architectural experts who have solved every problem of style and structure are baffled by such a strange subject as the angel in the choir of Lincoln Cathedral who is holding out to an alighting hawk the leg from some large bird. No explanation is to be found in the normal source-books of medieval iconography, yet the carving cannot be dismissed as a mere babery, since all the other angels hold attributes which clearly refer to the Passion of Christ or the Last Judgment. The specialists in medieval literature, on the other hand, probably know the poem in a fifteenth-century manuscript in the British Museum which makes the falconer who

. . . when his hawk fro him does flee
Shows to the hawk red flesh to see,
And when the hawk looks thereunto
Fast to his master he hastes to go . . .

a symbol of Christ who hung bleeding upon the 'tree' to win back the soul of man,

The whilk fro hym by sin does flee away¹.

They are not, however, sufficiently interested in church imagery to

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recognise the allusion in carving to the same simile, although it might help them to determine the original date and provenance of the poem. So the Lincoln 'angel with a hawk' appears to many people a curiously incongruous feature in the majestic scheme of iconography of which it really forms an integral part, symbolising the mystical contemplation of Christ's Passion by which a man's soul may be called back from sin and escape eternal condemnation.

It is in relation to medieval drama that this arbitrary division between art and literature is most hampering to our full understanding of either. In an age when few of the laity could read, various forms of spoken drama played an important part in their religious instruction. Long before the first plays were performed, dramatic elements had been introduced into the ritual of the Church, and later medieval congregations were made familiar, through sermons and readings from vernacular texts, with those lively apocryphal expansions of the Scriptures, the legends of the saints and moral allegories, which were the raw material of the first English playwrights. As the imagery of the churches was intended to convey precisely the same teaching to the same illiterate public, the development of its iconography (which was then literally 'picture-writing'), naturally followed lines parallel to that of the drama. It is the purpose of this book to consider these parallel developments more closely than has hitherto been done, in the hope of establishing that, in some cases at least, there was direct interaction between these two forms of popular instruction. It is obvious that they would not have been allowed to differ very widely in their presentation of religious lessons, since this would have confused those whom it was intended to instruct, and the basic assumption that there was such agreement is the starting point of our present study. The most ambitious use which can be made of the evidence of imagery is to argue that, when a theme which we know to have been dramatised from records only is clearly illustrated in contemporary imagery, the latter is worthy of careful consideration as possible evidence of what the lost plays were like. As this is a possibility which we cannot hope to prove (or disprove) absolutely, those who prefer a blank to a hypothesis will find more rewarding

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material in the minor details of imagery which almost certainly record stage effects.

This book is intended primarily for the unspecialised reader who can rely upon the general certainty that medieval drama and imagery reflect the same traditions of theology, mysticism and popular instruction, and who dares to enjoy an occasional conjecture which is frankly admitted to be far-fetched. The subject is one on which it is impossible to write without including some conjectures, for proven certainties are very rare while interesting possibilities, most of which are totally ignored in specialised books on either subject, abound. I am in the position of an advocate who seeks to make out a good case for a cause which has hitherto been lost by default, so some degree of bias must be forgiven me, but I will try to state honestly with what degree of confidence I regard each suggested parallel. The final judgment in each case must rest with my readers, and more particularly with those who have made a special study of drama or imagery. If they reject as too doubtful some cases which I consider probable, I would suggest that even these risky hypotheses deserve to be weighed against alternative theories, equally unproven, which are based on possible documentary references, in order to achieve a well-balanced decision. For even the most scholarly theory as to the origin of some iconographical oddity in medieval imagery, or the nature of lost plays, is, by the standards of scientific proof, only well-informed guesswork.

The way in which the great cycles of mystery plays were written and produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is an important aspect of literary history, not only because the plays themselves have a natural reverence and warm humanity which can still capture the imagination of a modern audience, but because they prepared the way for some of the greatest masterpieces of our language. If these anonymous authors, producers and actors had not created a public for him, Shakespeare might have chosen another profession. As the imagery of a medieval church reflects the ideas and traditions which were present in these men's minds as they planned or played, it would be worth studying, in order to gain a clearer understanding

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of their aims and difficulties, the sources from which they drew fresh 'copy' and the various ways in which their art developed, even if it did not offer us fresh evidence unobtainable from other sources.

Enough textual evidence has survived to show us what an important part drama played in the social life of medieval England, but much more has been lost. Considering how many play books must have been burned, torn up or allowed to moulder into decay when the Guilds were dissolved and their plays ceased to be performed, we are lucky to have the texts of four complete cycles, the *Chester*, *York* and *Towneley* (or *Wakefield*) *Plays* and the cycle known traditionally as the *Ludus Coventriae*², which is now generally ascribed to Lincoln. It is certainly not the cycle of the Coventry craft guilds, for two different plays from this cycle have been preserved³. Fragments of other cycles, single plays, and records of performances given or properties paid for, indicate the widespread popularity of religious drama in the later medieval period, and, compared with the number of places at which we thus know that plays were given, the number of texts surviving is pitifully small. Our knowledge of how these plays were staged or dressed is even more incomplete, and, as it is unlikely that much more written evidence will now be brought to light, it is surely time that the imagery of contemporary churches was carefully studied in relation to the existing texts and records, in an attempt to establish how far its iconography can be admitted as evidence of stage conventions.

The deliberate destruction of both play texts and imagery at the Reformation, followed by centuries of neglect, has robbed us of a wealth of comparable material upon which such a study might once have been securely based, but although the odds have been thus heavily weighted against the survival of both the documentary records of some distinctively unusual feature in a play and of imagery which repeats this exactly, such parallels are sometimes found. This seems to indicate that the relation between drama and imagery was once very close indeed, and it was only natural that this should be so. If we imagine ourselves in the position of a medieval producer (in the interests of brevity I shall use this anachronistic term for the

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unspecified person, or persons, who directed a play), as he tried to decide how Old Testament patriarchs, or the Jewish officials in a Gospel scene, ought to be dressed, we shall realise that the imagery of local churches was his most accessible guide. His audience would have recognised the characters impersonated, having seen them so depicted in the windows and wall-paintings of their parish churches, and no one would have questioned the authority of the Church as to what kind of hat Abraham, or Caiaphas, would have worn. Unfortunately, our few records of stage clothes are so vaguely worded that we cannot hope to prove that any existing play based its costumes on the imagery of a particular church, although a general probability that this was sometimes done may encourage modern producers of medieval plays to seek potential designs in stained glass windows.

For my present purpose the reverse flow of influence is more important. If, after seeing a majestic theme such as the Creation, the Flood or the Last Judgment, presented upon the small stage of a pageant cart, the carver of an alabaster panel or a roof boss was called upon to depict it within an even more restricted space, he would naturally have tended to reproduce the tableau which he remembered. By doing so he saved himself the labour of eliminating inessential details and achieved a design which his own experience had proved to be impressive. If we accept the probability that medieval craftsmen were thus inspired by the plays, it is certainly likely that what they show us in their work is some sort of a record of what they had seen on the stage. In some cases this impression is so definite that it seems possible to reconstruct a lost play as we decipher the design of a royal seal upon the lump of blackened wax attached to some ancient charter.

The evidence of imagery is generally reliable in inverse ratio to the iconographical importance of the subjects represented. Thus most of the complete apocryphal incidents which sometimes figure in Biblical subjects might equally well have been suggested by a play or by some text known, if not to the craftsman, at least to his clerical employer. These are not usually to be considered as safe evidence of theatrical inspiration. But when carvers in alabaster, or glaziers, repeatedly

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introduce into some Gospel scene the same curious feature, for which there seems no literary authority, and which may even be contrary to the usual conventions of medieval imagery (such as making the principal character smaller than the others), and when this feature could be easily materialised as a stage device for suggesting supernatural phenomena (see page 152), then it is a reasonable assumption that they are reproducing a theatrical effect. In general it is this factor of practical stage necessity, over-riding the purely pictorial considerations of religious exposition, which most strongly indicates stage inspiration. It is most clearly seen when a long series of illustrations to one story includes those moments of unimportant action which inevitably linked the consecutive scenes of a play but would hardly have been described separately in a book, or illustrated in a manuscript. An outstanding example of this occurs on the transept bosses of Norwich Cathedral where we see Gabriel proceeding *on foot* from the gates of Heaven to the house of Mary (Plate 10). These particular bosses show us so many dramatic parallels that they can only be accounted for by assuming that the carvers were recording what they had seen played. Such virtual certainty of connexion is unique in English imagery so I will discuss these bosses (see page 89) very fully as a framework within which the more fragmentary evidence found elsewhere may be usefully considered. For instance, some of their details, which almost certainly record stage devices, although unimportant in themselves, should be carefully noted by students of medieval drama because, if they occur elsewhere in any full series of paintings or carvings illustrating a theme known to have been dramatised, it is particularly well worthwhile to compare such imagery with contemporary play texts. If no comparable documentary evidence survives in England, we may fairly admit that of Continental plays, which sometimes prove that incidents, or effects, shown in English imagery were certainly staged abroad.

The richer records and more perfectly preserved imagery of France enabled M. Emile Mâle to establish many concrete proofs of the influence which religious drama exercised upon French ecclesias-

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tical craftsmen. Very little use has been made of comparable material in England, probably because the incomplete state both of our imagery and of our knowledge as to how it was produced makes it much more difficult to achieve certainty. So, as the attempt which I now propose to make is admittedly perilous, it seems prudent to take stock of the chief obstacles which lie ahead.

The evidence of imagery is not easy to collect for, with such notable exceptions as the stained glass of York Minster and Malvern Priory, the roof bosses of Norwich Cathedral and the collection of alabaster panels in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the kind of imagery in which we can hope to find distinctively theatrical features is thinly scattered over the whole country. A specialist in medieval drama who undertook a search for it among the parish churches of England would find this a laborious, and often unrewarding, task. A precious scrap of evidence *might* be found in any village church, unmentioned in even the fullest guide book because its literary significance had not been recognised; but hundreds of such churches can be visited without finding anything of the kind. I therefore hope that this attempt to co-ordinate what I have observed in the course of a life-long interest in the imagery of British churches may have some practical value as furnishing a basis for further research.

An even more serious obstacle is the difficulty of determining whether some distinctive feature appearing in both drama and imagery was suggested to the craftsman by a play or a text. In a previous book⁴ I discussed the influence upon English church imagery of the contemporary vernacular texts, which was undoubtedly very great. Lengthy paraphrases of Biblical history like the northern poem *Cursor Mundi*, c. 1300⁵, include a great deal of apocryphal and legendary material such as the incident of Joseph throwing chaff into the Nile in order to summon his kinsfolk to buy corn in Egypt, which is carved inside the Chapter House at Salisbury. *The Northern Passion*⁶ contains many unusual motifs which recur in drama and imagery and the inscriptions which explain the panels illustrating the Fifteen Signs of Doomsday⁷ in a window of All Saints, North Street, York, are closely connected with the widely

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known poem *The Prick of Conscience*⁸. Because people naturally thirsted to know more about the earthly life of Christ than was told them in the canonical books they drew extensively upon the apocryphal Gospels and legendaries. From narrative poems and pious meditations, this material passed into plays and imagery. The visions of medieval saints who felt that they had been participants in the events of Christ's earthly life were treated as authoritative records. Those vouchsafed to St Bridget of Sweden in 1370 changed the pictorial convention of the Nativity; instead of the Christ Child lying swaddled in a manger He is shown lying naked on the ground in a glory of light, as, for instance, in the *Magnificat* window of Malvern Priory. Artists also responded to the vivid descriptions given in such works as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* of the pseudo-Bonaventura which was translated into English by Nicholas Love in 1410⁹. His charming account of how the Blessed Virgin suckled the Child to still His weeping at the pain of circumcision is illustrated on a wooden roof boss at Salle (Norfolk) and in a window of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich. No one would question that such works were the principal source of many of the legendary, or even purely imaginary, motifs which appear in medieval imagery, but unless we take into consideration what proportion of these were also used by the playwrights and could therefore have been *seen* by the craftsmen, we shall be in danger of exaggerating the part played by literature in the evolution of their designs, and consequently the extent to which this was probably controlled by their literate employers.

Another difficulty is the lack of reliable information about the ways in which medieval craftsmen got their designs. Modern research has swept away the romantic nineteenth-century conception of them as ebulliently creative artists glorying in their freedom to do original work. We now know that many of them were willing enough to make use of any ready-made model which came their way, adapting it freely to their own needs and transposing designs from one medium to another. We cannot tell whether the circular drawings on the *Guthlac Roll* (c. 1200) in the British Museum (Harl. Roll Y.6) were intended as designs for stained glass, enamel plaques, or reliefs in

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precious metal. They could equally well have been expressed in wall-paintings such as those at Brook (Kent), or carved within a containing arch over a doorway, as at Higham Ferrers (Northants.), both dating from the thirteenth century when the fashion for such roundel designs was at its height. Moreover, from any such rendering, a craftsman working in another medium, and perhaps several generations later, might still have produced an identifiable copy. For example, it is accepted that some thirteenth-century typological designs in a manuscript at Eton College (MS. 177) were based upon the lost twelfth-century wall-paintings of the Chapter House at Worcester, and these same strange and distinctive designs reappear, not only on the twelfth-century enamelled Balfour and Warwick Ciboria (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum), but on the fourteenth-century misericords of Worcester Cathedral¹⁰. This group of widely differentiated works of art linked by a common model, gives a clear impression of the way in which designs were repeated and interchanged in the workshops of a great religious community like Worcester Priory, at a period when these workshops were the chief training centres for craftsmen. Such transpositions of design are more rarely found in the later periods when craftsmen were often trained on secular buildings, or even set up as specialised tradesmen, sending out carvings or glass from their own workshops.

Because we still possess more illuminated manuscripts than any other form of medieval art, and because the styles of various *scriptoria* can sometimes be recognised in other media, there is a tendency to exaggerate their direct influence upon the makers of church imagery, while perhaps underestimating that of the goldsmiths and workers in enamel, most of whose work has been lost. Ordinary glaziers, or carvers, would not have been allowed free access to precious manuscripts, and we have no examples of the processes which must have intervened if their miniatures were to be copied; small sketches on scraps of parchment, or full-sized cartoons drawn on plastered boards. The influence of a famous manuscript was not always applied in the same way. The miniatures of a twelfth-century manuscript of Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert*, formerly in the monastic library

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of Durham and now in the British Museum (Add. MS. 39943), were apparently copied by the late fifteenth-century artist who painted scenes from the life of this saint in the north ambulatory of Carlisle Cathedral. In all but four of these paintings the manuscript shows us almost identical designs, and since ten of the miniatures have been lost this correspondence may originally have been complete. Richard Bell, who was Bishop of Carlisle when the paintings were probably being planned, and was specially interested in St Cuthbert, had been Prior of Durham, so he may have borrowed the manuscript in order to guide the painter. We know from the Durham Library catalogue of 1416 that the manuscript had previously been in the possession of Archbishop Scrope of York (d. 1405), and it has been suggested that this earlier loan was made to facilitate the designing of the St Cuthbert window in York Minster. Since this window cannot have been made before c. 1440, this seems a remote association, although the donor of the window, Thomas Langley, also had Durham connexions. If the manuscript had any influence upon the York glazier, it was confined to the choice of subjects, for only one panel, that of the horse uncovering the food hidden in the thatch, shows any appreciable resemblance to the corresponding miniature¹¹.

From the late fifteenth century onwards, woodcuts and the ornamental borders of early printed books were added to the craftsmen's sources of ready-made designs and there is ample proof that they made use of them. Woodcuts from the blockbook *Biblia Pauperum* and the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* were copied by woodcarvers, and, still more extensively by glaziers. We can compare adaptations by three different carvers of the same grotesque ornamental design used by Parisian printers c. 1500, on misericords in Bristol Cathedral and at Throwley (Kent) and on the stone screen of the de la Warr chantry at Boxgrove (Sussex). This development increased the likelihood that a craftsman might have based his designs upon a picture, so that we cannot safely limit our search for his model to his own time, district, or even country, since many books and engravings were imported from the Continent. On the other hand it supports the argument, otherwise based only on psychological probability, that