

Drama and Religion: Origins of Medieval Theatre

by Ruth E. Richardson

Music, singing, dancing, processions, mime and plays have long been linked to religious observances. They were considered necessary and they made such functions more enjoyable. Which meant that people continued to repeat them. Even today ritual involves providing a text supported by a suitable set, with the designated props and the correct costumes. Some religions, and some denominations, require more colour and a more intricate ritual, while others demonstrate their use of theatre by their very simplicity. Such an emphasis on correct observance is fundamental to human culture and has an extremely long history.

The first people that we know used any ritual were the Neanderthals, who lived about 150,000 to about 30,000 years ago BP (Before Present). They placed offerings around their dead, which in a burial in Iraq may have included flowers. The superb Upper Palaeolithic cave paintings, made by our ancestors, were created later. There are more than 200 of these caves in Europe, of which Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain are the most famous. The caves were probably temples and the paintings preserve a ritual, based around animals, which included hallucinations caused by the complete darkness. Few people lived longer than their teens, or into their twenties, so no-one would waste time on unnecessary art. Everything had a purpose. Religious ritual began in the very practical need for people to take every sensible precaution against disaster.

In Britain, our first glimpse of an extended ritual comes at Star Carr in Yorkshire, a Mesolithic campsite dated about 7500 BC/BCE. Here amongst the remains of everyday life are a number of hollowed out red deer skulls with holes to allow them to be tied on to peoples' heads. The best explanation for them is that they were used in a dance connected with the migrating deer herds. They are uncannily reminiscent of the horns, now carried on short poles, still used in the annual **Abbots Bromley Horn Dance** (Staffordshire) performed on Wakes Monday in September. The horns have always been replaced from time to time, the oldest now surviving in the church dating to 1080 AD/CE, just after the Norman Conquest. This dance is a slow, rhythmic processional dance which is almost hypnotic.

Processions are very old indeed. Processional avenues are known at Avebury, built about 2400 BC/BCE, where sitting on the huge bank of the henge allowed spectators to view the ceremonial inside the henge from a distance, and at Stonehenge, about 2100 BC/BCE, where the avenue is linked to the setting up of the bluestones from the Preseli Mountains in Wales. This suggests that these Neolithic and Bronze Age farmers were carrying out a ritual to make sure their crops grew and their animals prospered, part of their practical procedures to maximise yields. After all, if there was famine you couldn't just go to the shop or supermarket – no, you and your family starved... The enigmatic cursus sites, the longest known of which is six miles long in Dorset, are similar processional ways delimiting and involving ritual to do with the dead. There is a cursus near Radnor, which apparently ends in Herefordshire.

Masked processions are known in many cultures. They are extensively recorded on temple and tomb walls from Ancient Egypt, where processions are shown accompanied by music and flowers, and survive in stories like that of the (Greek) Minotaur, supposedly half-man : half-bull, in Crete. In Britain the **Padstow Horse** (Cornwall) is a curious character with a headdress above a circular costume five feet (152.4 cms.) in diameter. Although much changed, the ceremony concerns life and death and possibly fertility. Veneration of the horse goes back at least to the Iron Age and some of the White Horses, carved in the chalk downs of southern Britain, may date from this period. In the Iron Age too there was an enduring tradition of **bards** who recounted the stories of the tribe in verse as entertainment after feasts. These preserved, and passed on, their history

down the generations. The wonderful stories of the *Mabinogion* and of *Beowulf* are later examples of this tradition, though their core stories may date from the Iron Age.

Therefore, there was a rich theatrical culture in Britain associated with religion even before the Romans arrived in 43 AD/CE. Roman temples, such as those at Bath and Colchester, had sacrificial altars outside in the courtyards where the animals deemed appropriate for a particular occasion were brought in procession to be sacrificed. Unblemished white bulls were sacred to the god Jupiter. The Romans also had a tradition of poetry, song and dance entertainment at private dinners. They built amphitheatres, as in London and Caerleon, for wild beast and gladiatorial shows. Julius Caesar had honoured his dead father with a famous, and deadly, gladiator display in Rome.

Formal theatres, like those known in St. Albans and Canterbury, were designed for plays. These performances, originally part of religious festivals, or competitions, dramatised stories involving the gods being honoured. An altar to the god Dionysius was usual. Early Greek theatre used a chorus in a circular dancing area at the foot of a natural, or enhanced, embankment that supported seating, and which helped to amplify the sound. One of the best examples to survive is at Epidaurus, Greece, where the acoustics are so good that a person whispering in the performing area can be clearly heard in the highest seats. Stylised masks allowing the male actors to be identified as tragic, comedic, a woman, girl, youth, an old man, or other personality even by those at the back of the audience, also provided amplification.

The theatre in Athens dates from the 5th century BC/BCE and saw the premiers of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes whose bawdy slapstick must have made the audiences roar with laughter. Such traditions were followed by Roman playwrights. Plautus wrote comedy for the masses, which probably thrilled audiences in British theatres, but Terence wrote the more subtle comedies appreciated by the educated. Both these were read and copied in monastic scriptoria in the Medieval period, though no performances were given. Other playwrights were only rediscovered in the Renaissance. Elements of Roman comedy figures would later become characters in *Punch and Judy* shows and *pantomime*.

What did survive the immediate end of the Roman Empire was the age-old performances of jugglers, clowns / jesters, and 'street' entertainment. These continued to be popular especially in the various town fairs. The Medieval period did have some fascinating theatre which has very strong connections with the past. **Mummers' Plays** are still performed throughout Britain and, although texts can be corrupt due to age, they are essentially the story of good and evil, with the hero fighting an adversary, being killed and being brought back to life by magic. It may be that ritual killing was originally involved. This is the story of the seasons' fertility and they are usually performed on Boxing Day, Twelfth Night or Plough Monday to encourage the return of the sun's power over the crops. The players have enveloping costumes.

At Marshfield, Gloucestershire, the costumes were, in recorded times, made of strips of paper which completely covered the headdress and coat. Perhaps the paper has superseded grasses or other organic material. The actors, as the characters portrayed, introduce themselves to the audience. The words are stylised and chanted, reminiscent of a chorus. There is a processional element in that performances were given in houses, or designated places, everyone moving from one venue to the next venue. There was no special lighting, few props and the action would take place with the audience standing around so exits / entrances were through the audience. Some Mummers' Plays had a comic interlude, a device to lighten the atmosphere later used by William Shakespeare as, for example, with the Porter in *Macbeth*. Other devices also used by Shakespeare included an inner curtain, as for example in *Hamlet* as a hiding place for Polonius; *Hamlet* also has a mime in it.

Rounds

Also found in the Medieval period, and later, are the **Rounds**. These were plays performed in a circular, or oval, area called the *Place*. This area was marked by a bank and ditch which may have been especially constructed, although a Bronze Age henge was reused at Castilly in Cornwall and, in 1540, John Leland noted that Truro Castle was being used as a playing place, or a *plain an gwarry*. Cornwall has more than 50 plain an gwarrys, half of which are known from field, or place, names. That Rounds were not limited to Cornwall is shown by the survival of a play *The Castle of Perseverance*, in Lincolnshire. Scripts found in Wales (now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford), are regularly performed with huge enjoyment in the plain an gwarry at St. Just, Cornwall.

In Herefordshire, Vowchurch tithe fields 69 *The Rounds* and 70 *Adjoining The Rounds* are particularly noteworthy as this name is unique in the county. The use of *The* shows that it is a specific name and not just descriptive. The field is Poston Iron Age Hillfort but no other hillfort is given a name like this. It is likely, therefore, that this was a playing area too. Indeed, field-names such as *Round Field* may well indicate playing places in other counties and shires.

Plays used *tenti*, or scaffolds with hangings which often including a curtain which could be moved aside. Tenti were placed within the perimeter of the surrounding bank and one in the centre of the area. In Cornwall between 8 (as used now in St. Just) and 15 scaffolds were required by various plays, while *The Castle of Perseverance* had 5, the central one representing a circular castle tower with a ladder so characters could speak from the 'battlements'. Sets were basically painted backdrops in ordinary light. The actors moved between the scaffolds preserving the processional element. Entrances, particularly for Death, could be through the audience, which had the affect of involving everyone in the action...

Stewards, called *stytelers / stightlers*, marshalled the audience towards the action. Some scripts have lovely poetry and among the very perceptive scenes, is the 'eternal' triangle of the Biblical King David – Bathsheba – Uriah in the Cornish Cycle, while others are sensational blood-and-horror melodrama. Some plays included stunts and pure farce, incorporating ideas of comic clowning. Themes also built on the audience's knowledge of Bible stories and the legends of the saints. However, *The Castle of Perseverance* is concerned with the problems of life and is the forerunner of the **Morality Plays** which had allegorical characters like Truth, Wisdom, Vice and Death. The most famous, surviving Morality Play is the late 15th century *Everyman*.

These, in turn, were the forerunners of the **Tudor Pageants**. In 1552, Edward Hall recorded the *Château Vert* pageant held for the royal court, which depicted 8 ladies playing the virtues of Beauty, Honour, Perseverance (thought to be Anne Boleyn), Kindness, Constance, Bounty, Mercy and Pity. They were guarded by 8 ladies (rejoicing in names such as Danger, Disdain, Jealousy, Unkindness ...). Gentlemen similarly named as Amorous, Nobleness, Youth ... attacked them with oranges and fruit. The costumes were magnificent. It was great fun and ended with dancing.

Medieval Mystery Plays

Rounds may have been common throughout rural Britain but the plays could also be performed in a town's market square, or in scaffolds placed in a line, the descendant of this being *The Passion Play of Oberammergau*. If room was limited, then plays could be given on separate carts that could be pulled through the streets. This last system preserved the processional element as each cart stopped for a performance at each designated venue. Alternatively, the audience would move. Processions continued to be popular especially at the feast of Corpus Christi – when the larger towns had magnificent, colourful, pageants featuring tableau and pantomime. For special occasions such as a Coronation, a royal wedding (a wedding, and Hereford had its own rite, was generally not a Sacrament and took place at the church door), or the reception of a foreign ruler who

needed to be impressed, the entertainments included allegorical processions and tournaments where the people were welcome spectators to demonstrate the ruler's power.

Medieval theatre had a second strand in the **liturgy of the Church**. The Church Services incorporated a set routine of standing, praying, singing, listening, reading, processing and, for the elderly and infirm, sitting ('going to the wall' meant sitting on the stone bench built around the inside of the building). Even the Mass was divided into sections. There was an introduction, then the bread and wine were brought to the priest who recited the correct prayers, partook of both elements and then gave the Communion bread to the people. The Service constitutes a story and is undoubtedly dramatic. Participants were comfortable with such a recognised, familiar and impressive procedure, which being in Latin was the same all over Europe. There was immense symbolism which 'to work', and be meaningful to members of the congregation, had to be believed by the individuals. This is how any theatre works – if a person is speaking, or performing to a group, then it is the complete concentration of that person which focuses the attention of the audience.

The whole Christian story provides a cycle of dramatic events, particularly at Easter. The most vivid ceremonials, found in Western Europe from the 10th century, were in Holy Week especially the celebration of *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*. A procession started, if possible, from a hill outside the town, symbolising the Mount of Olives, everyone waving palm branches. A choir sang when the town gate was reached and further singing occurred in the streets when cloths and palms were strewn in front of the procession which ended in the main church. On Good Friday, after Communion, the preserved Sacrament was often placed in a stone cavity to symbolise the Gospel story of Jesus being placed in the tomb after the Crucifixion. This cavity could be in the chancel or, if at the base of the preaching cross, the Sacrament was carried there in procession. Indeed, one meaning of the word 'Mystery' comes from an expression – *resurrectionis mysterium* – used in a decree of the 1316 Synod of Worms describing the subsequent taking up of the Sacrament on Easter Sunday.

Dramatising the Easter story action led to texts known as **tropes**, one of the earliest being sung questions and answers between the *Angel and the Three Marys* who visit the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. This is preserved in a 10th century manuscript in the Benedictine monastery of St. Gall in Switzerland. These little playlets, originally given in the choir, became more elaborate, with additional lines and increasingly defined characters, from the 11th to the 13th centuries. They were then 'performed' in the nave, often from the top of the pulpitum, a name preserved in 'pulpit', meaning a scaffold, or stage, or platform for public shows. This explains the width of the tops of rood screens which often served this purpose. At first the priest and deacons were the actors and people enjoyed these dramatised stories so much that other tropes were gradually added:

- Christmas was celebrated with ones such as *Three Shepherds greeting Christ and his Mother*.
- Epiphany was celebrated with the *Three Wise Men* and, since they were led by a star, this was known as *Officium Stellae*, the Office of the Star.
- *The Massacre of the Innocents* included a long lament by Rachel, from the Old Testament, and other characters trying to comfort her, a pertinent device to personalise tragedy, highlighting the raw emotions involved.

Eventually, there were separate little plays telling Biblical-based stories from the **Creation** to the **Last Judgement** and the texts began to change from Latin to English. Once this occurred further supporting detail was included such as Mary Magdalene being shown, singing, buying cosmetics and, as supposedly a prostitute, entertaining a lover. The seriousness was overlaid by fun! Church authorities were outraged, considered such action inappropriate for the church building and performances moved outside.

The plays were immensely popular and so the staging was taken over by the Trade Guilds. Every craft was governed by the relevant guild and a boy entering a craft would initially be apprenticed to a master craftsman who oversaw his training for a fee. He lived with the master's family and servants, being given his bed and board. When trained, he could become a paid journeyman for the master, which meant he was an employee still living in the house / workshop but was now paid a few coins. If he could save enough, had his master's recommendation and produced a masterpiece to show his skill he could become a master in his own right. Each guild's craft was also described as its *mystery*, which gives an additional meaning for the designation 'Mystery' for the plays. Each guild had its own hierarchy and had its own chapel, or chantry, in the town churches. Therefore, these guild members were very involved with everything to do with the towns and it is because of this support that the Mystery Plays were so popular in England.

Once this scenario was the norm the Mystery Plays were performed annually, in midsummer and often at Corpus Christi (a moveable feast, end of May - June), in all the major towns. Only four cycles have survived. The most complete is the York Cycle with the texts of 48 plays surviving. Of the Chester Cycle 25 plays have survived, while 32 plays are known from the Towneley Cycle – named for the family who preserved the manuscripts – which were probably performed in Wakefield, Yorkshire. The N Town Cycle, sometimes called the Coventry Cycle, has 42 plays surviving. The texts could vary in length, although the shorter ones could make up the time by additional action. Performances took place on elaborately decorated carts / pageant wagons, which either stopped in turn at designated places and then processed to the next venue, or the audience moved from one to the next. Indeed, it is possible that some plays were performed in the round on fixed stages perhaps in the market place. Action was not limited to the carts. 'God' was usually on an upper stage and the ground area in front of the carts could be used. Scenic, and sound, effects were widely used. With performances beginning at dawn and ending at dusk, daylight being the main light source, the full York Cycle took three days to complete.

Each guild vied for the best production and the sets and costumes, which were kept from year to year, could be magnificent, even using real gold-leaf. It was an honour to take part – in York at one time a quarter of the population of about 8,000 was involved. However, it is also likely that 'professional' actors took the most demanding parts. Each guild, by tradition, performed a particular play which had a connection, however vague, to their trade:

- *The Expulsion from Eden* was performed by the Armourers because of the Biblical text that God stationed an angel with a sword at the gates of the Garden of Eden.
- *Abraham and Isaac* was performed by the Parchmenters and Bookbinders because God provided a ram caught in a thicket for the sacrifice and parchment was made from sheepskin.
- *The Building of the Ark* was performed by the Shipwrights.
- *Noah and his Wife* was performed by the Fishermen and Mariners.

The scripts are marvellous, ordinary Medieval speech mixed with Church dialogue giving a directness and a poignancy that is absolutely unexpected. They are often very funny - *The Second Shepherds' Play*, from the Towneley / Wakefield Cycle, concerns the hiding of a stolen sheep in a cradle and ends with gifts being offered to the baby Jesus...

The Mystery Plays were hugely popular and only ceased when Puritans thought them too disrespectful. However, the various strands incorporated in them continue to delight different audiences. Everyone enjoys a good story, with plenty of action often in a colourful setting, only now we see them on television and other media. Every film, T.V. show, funeral procession, wedding, advertisement, even supermarket layout has elements of the theatre. The *Star Wars* films are the story of good and evil, exactly the same as *Beowulf* – and of today's soap-operas!

The surviving York Cycle / with Guilds (from Gassner)

- 1) *Creation and the Fall of Lucifer* - Tanners
- 2) *Creation up to fifth day* - Plasterers
- 3) *Creation of Adam and Eve* - Cardmakers
- 4) *Adam and Eve in Eden* - Fullers
- 5) *Fall of Man* - Coopers
- 6) *Expulsion from Eden* - Armourers
- 7) *Sacrifice of Cain and Abel* - Glovers
- 8) *Building of the Ark* - Shipwrights
- 9) *Noah and his Wife / Flood* - Fishers, Mariners
- 10) *Abraham and Isaac* - Parchmenters, Bookbinders
- 11) *Departure of the Israelites from Egypt / Ten Plagues / Crossing of the Red Sea* - Hosiers
- 12) *Annunciation and Visitation* – Spicers
- 13) *Joseph's Trouble about Mary* - Pewterers, Founders
- 14) *Journey to Bethlehem / Birth of Jesus* - Tile thatchers
- 15) *Shepherds* - Candlemakers
- 16) *Coming of the Three Kings to Herod* - Masons
- 17) *Coming of the Kings / Adoration* – Goldsmiths
- 18) *Flight into Egypt* - Grooms (horses)
- 19) *Slaughter of the Innocents* - Girdlers, Nailers
- 20) *Christ with the Doctors* - Makers of spurs and horse bits
- 21) *Baptism of Jesus* - Barbers
- 22) *Temptation* - Smiths
- 23) *Transfiguration* - Men who dress leather
- 24) *Woman taken in Adultery / Lazarus* - Capmakers
- 25) *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem* – Skinners
- 26) *Conspiracy* – Cutlers
- 27) *Last Supper* – Bakers
- 28) *Agony and Betrayal* - Cordwainers
- 29) *Peter's Denial / Jesus before Caiaphas* - Bowyers, Fletchers
- 30) *Dream of Pilate's Wife / Jesus before Pilate* - Makers of tapestry and carpets, and Couchers
- 31) *Trial before Herod* - Dyers
- 32) *Second Accusation before Pilate / Remorse of Judas / Purchase of the Field of Blood* - Cooks, Water-leaders
- 33) *Second Trial before Pilate* - Tilemakers
- 34) *Christ led to Cavalry* - Shearmen
- 35) *Crucifixion* - Pinners, Painters
- 36) *Mortification of Christ / Burial* - Butchers
- 37) *Harrowing of Hell* - Saddlers
- 38) *Resurrection* - Carpenters
- 39) *Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene* - Winedrawers
- 40) *Travellers to Emmaus* - Sledmen
- 41) *Purification of Mary / Simeon and Anna* – Hatmakers, Masons, Labourers
- 42) *Incredulity of Thomas* - Scriveners
- 43) *Ascension* - Tailors
- 44) *Descent of the Holy Spirit* - Potters
- 45) *The Death of Mary* - Dealers in cloth and dry goods
- 46) *The Appearance of Mary to Thomas* - Weavers
- 47) *Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin* - Stablemen, Hostlers
- 48) *Judgement Day* - Dealers in textiles

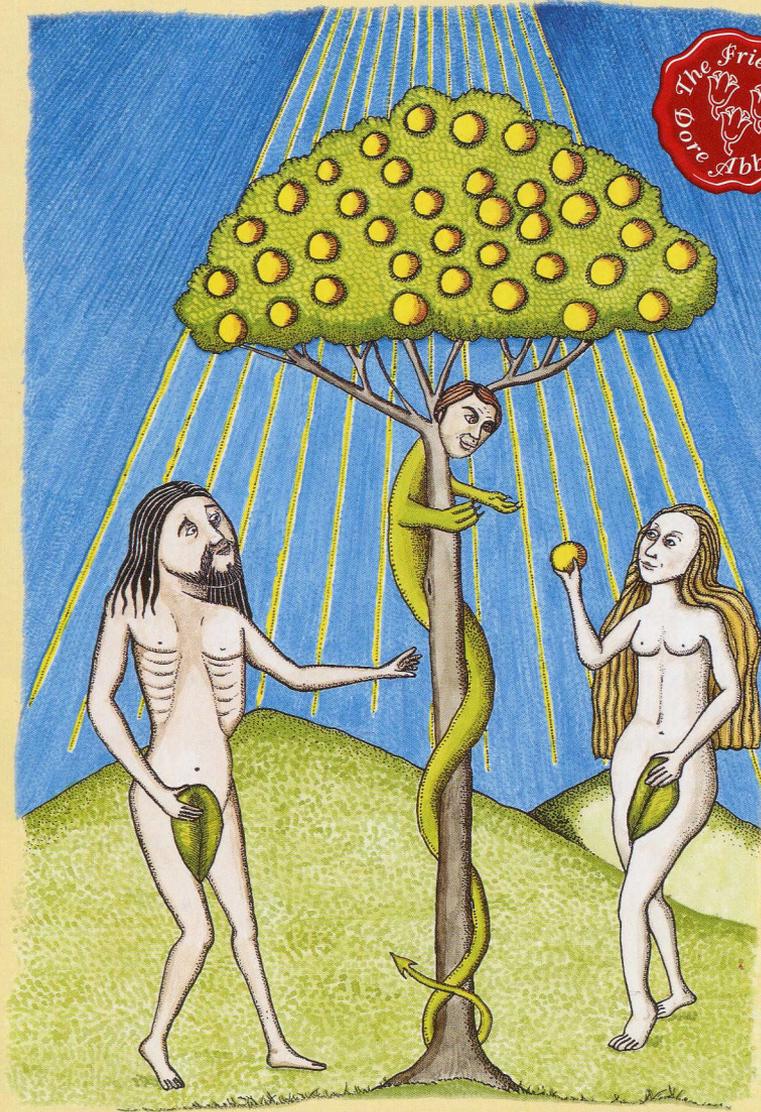
Further Reading:

- John Gassner, *Medieval and Tudor Drama*, published Bantam 1963
Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vols 1 and 2, published Clarendon Press 1961
Margaret Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre*, published Princeton University Press 1961
Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*, published Faber 1964
Richard Southern, *The Staging of Plays before Shakespeare*, published Faber 1973
Jean Wilson, *The Archaeology of Shakespeare*, Sutton Publishing 1997

A love of dramatic order is a part of all of us and it is wonderful to have the opportunity to see a few of the productions that so delighted our Medieval ancestors all over Britain in towns like Hereford. The monks of Dore Abbey certainly performed tropes, using the choir and the beautifully sculpted pulpitum.

In the Beginning... A Medieval Mystery Play,

was staged by the Maddogs Theatre Company in Dore Abbey, Herefordshire, 17th-27th May 2000. The audience was directed to each playing area / stage in turn. It was a marvellous experience to celebrate the Millennium with a selection of plays from the Mystery Cycle. They were very, very much enjoyed...



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Profits from this event will be put towards the charitable causes championed by the two groups, namely the upkeep and restoration of Dore Abbey and furthering the theatre education of young people in Herefordshire.