

STAGING RELIGION: LITURGICAL DRAMA IN THE CENTRAL MIDDLE AGES

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From our modern context, the word “drama” has a very different definition than it did in Medieval Europe. In an age of drastic social and religious development, the drama of the Medieval Church was immensely important. Developed from the liturgy itself, these music-dramas depicted important Biblical events and created another way in which the public could connect with the Divine. While some historians argue that Liturgical Drama arose out of ancient pagan traditions and customs, it is clear that this dramatic form was born in the Central Middle Ages as a direct response to the changing cultural and religious conditions. Staged in cathedrals, which were important urban centers of religion, these Liturgical Dramas provided medieval people with a visual representation and explanation of their faith and served as a model for the religious dramas that became popular in the Late Middle Ages.

At the center of these drastic changes of the Central Middle Ages was the Commercial Revolution, which, according to Lester Little, “had reverberations in virtually every institution, social group, geographical area, and nexus of ideas in Latin Christendom.”¹ As a direct result of these economic changes, notions of popular piety changed. André Vauchez describes the impact of intellectual change in his book, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*: “God is presented as the creator from which whom everything originated but who has in some way moved away from his work, entrusting it to the laws which he had established to guide his operation.”² Essentially, these Christian intellectuals saw God as the object of knowledge and began to seek ways in which they could rediscover Christ’s humanity and understand the history of salvation.³ As the laity sought to understand salvation, the clergy, in light of the profit economy, found it increasingly important to “return to the common people” in order to ensure their salvation.⁴ During this time, the lay people began to involve themselves more in the Christian

religion, and as this urban religious life developed, the clergy began to seek new ways in which they could reach the common people.⁵

Several themes were central to the Christian faith in the Middle Ages: salvation, redemption, the importance of sacraments, and the notion of an omnipotent God.⁶ According to Eamon Duffy, Christian ideals were heavily embedded in everyday life:

The Christian calendar determined the pattern of work and rest, fasting and feasting, and influenced even the privacies of the bedchamber, deciding the times of the year when men and women might or might not marry, when husbands and wives might sleep together or must abstain. Everyone, in principle at least, subscribed to the Christian creed. This taught that the world was not a random heap of blind circumstances, a cosmic accident, but that it was a meaningful whole, which had been created out of nothing by a good God.⁷

In a time of increased intellectual activity and urban growth, Vauchez points out that “a new sensibility developed in the laity, making them more sensitive to the contradictions between the way of life of God’s representatives—the clerics and monks—and the injunctions of the Gospels.”⁸ Given these cultural developments, the Church began to seek new ways in which they could connect with the laity. In her book, *Medieval English Drama*, Katie Normington asserts that the Church began to use “public means to strengthen its position and promote locally based devotion,” and central to this was the ceremony of the liturgy.⁹

In order to understand Liturgical Drama, we must first understand the Christian Roman Liturgy itself. The Liturgy, the plan of public worship, was standardized in Rome and utilized in churches across Europe. The Mass itself was divided into five sections: The Preparation, The Oblation, The Consecration, The Communion, and The Dismissal. Each portion of the mass had specific movements,

words, and music.¹⁰ According to Karl Young, the Mass was essential because it came directly from Jesus' teachings: the first Mass was performed by Christ at the Last Supper, and the Roman Liturgy followed Christ's example.¹¹ As the Liturgy became standardized throughout Europe, Normington asserts that it was essential in "promoting and reflecting the central belief systems of the Church."¹²

According to Young in his multi-volume work, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, there are several aspects of the Roman Liturgy that are inherently theatrical. A large portion of the liturgy was dialogue-based, often times placing the congregation (or audience) as the second speaker. This is also apparent in the antiphonal singing of the two semi-choruses. Additionally, many of the movement patterns and gestures made by the clergymen were very presentational and performance-like.¹³ While the liturgy was not drama, its very nature served as the basis for the Liturgical Dramas that developed. Young asserts that the Mass had a celebratory, enthusiastic nature that naturally gave rise to more structured drama: "...in the Mass the celebrant as genuinely impersonates Christ as the tragic actor does the persons represented in the profane theatre."¹⁴ Young is referring specifically to two liturgical ceremonies, the *Depositio* (The Burial of Christ), and the *Elevatio* (The Resurrection), which become very important in the development of Liturgical Drama.

Some historians contend that these dramas were simply an extension of pagan rituals, drawing connections between the festivals of the Medieval Church and ancient pagan rituals. For example, Rainer Warning asserts that the crucifixion draws specifically from a pagan model of the scapegoat ritual, and that medieval religious drama was "placed in non-clerical rituals that can be found in many different cultures."¹⁵ However, despite a few outliers, most historians seem to agree that these dramas were something entirely separate from pagan rituals. Young is adamant in his assertion that Liturgical Drama was born in the Middle Ages, stating in his introduction, "The dramatic manifestations to be considered in these volumes were the independent creation and possession of the medieval Church in Western Europe."¹⁶ Liturgical Drama, then, developed out of the Roman Liturgy, and it specifically intended to provide medieval people with a living, breathing representation of their faith. According to Pascal in his article, "The Origins of the Liturgical Drama of the Middle Ages,"

these dramas were developed "from the desire to fortify and clarify the faith of the believers, by representing in a show what was otherwise abstract and remote."¹⁷ Pascal builds upon Young's ideas, explaining that these dramas developed out of the Canonical Office as "embellishments." Therefore, these dramas could not possibly be anything but a "spontaneous new birth" that took place within the confines of the Church.¹⁸

As emphasized by both Young and Pascal, the most important events depicted in Liturgical Drama had to do with either Christmas or Easter. Most dramas avoided depictions of the Passion because they were wary of portraying Christ's suffering.¹⁹ By examining three dramatic texts, *The Shepherds*, *The Visit to the Sepulcher*, and *The Lament of Mary*, we can see how the clergy sought to depict Biblical events pertaining to the Nativity and the Resurrection, and how each play had a specific message that became apparent through its performance. In his work, *Medieval Church Music-Dramas*, Fletcher Collins compiles a complete repertory of Liturgical Drama, drawing from a variety of texts of each play to present the best possible version. Collins also provides English translations of the original Latin texts, along with a modern transcription of the music to which the play would have been set. Despite some of the woes associated with transcribing medieval music, Collins' presentation of these plays provides an accurate depiction of the important themes present in each dramatic episode.

The Shepherds, a drama associated with the Nativity, was traditionally performed at the "beginning of Lauds, early Christmas morning," and depicts an Archangel visiting the Shepherds, who then travel to the manger to see the Christ-Child.²⁰ Collins presents the text from a Rouen Cathedral Manuscript, dating from the thirteenth century. The play begins with the Archangel appearing to the Shepherds, proclaiming, "Do not fear! For behold I bring you great joy which shall be to all people, for there is born to you today the Savior of the world, in the City of David, and this to you is a sign: shall find the child in swaddling clothes wrapped, and lying in a manger."²¹ From this point, the joy and elation of the Shepherds is apparent as they look upon their new-born savior, and offer thanks to the Virgin Mary: "Praise to the birthing by the Virgin!"²² Young describes the impact of this drama: "The action inevitably chosen was the visit of the shepherds, the description of which forms the most conspicuous part of the only circumstantial account of Christ's

birth given in the Gospels, that in the second chapter of St. Luke.²³ Through this specific drama, the congregation is able to experience the excitement of Christ's birth and celebrate His glory by watching the Shepherds learn of His arrival.

Perhaps the most famous Liturgical Drama, *The Visit to the Sepulcher*, has a vast amount of adaptations. Collins has transcribed the St. Quentin version, which originated from the Abbey of Origny-Sainte-Benoite. In this drama, the Three Marys (Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary among them) visit the tomb of Christ, only to find it empty. Christ, disguised as a gardener, appears to Mary Magdalene and tells her to spread the news of his resurrection. The tone of this play is significantly different from *The Shepherds*: rather than beginning with a triumphant, angelic announcement, this drama begins with much lamenting: "Now slain, alas! O Shepherd, the sheep wander in misery! And the master having gone, confused are the disciples. And so we, in His absence, make moan very much."²⁴ Here, similar to *The Shepherds*, travel becomes important as the three Marys travel to the sepulcher. What is interesting in this drama is the description of Jesus. He is described as "seemly, fair, and full of kindness," and "our true savior and dear love."²⁵ The Marys encounter a merchant near the sepulcher, who sells them ointments to anoint Christ's body. His appearance seems to be particularly significant as he represents a large majority of the urban population in Medieval Europe. At first, the merchant is depicted as a greedy man, obsessed with money: "This fine ointment that you do cherish, five golden coins will make it all for you. Otherwise I just can't let it go, no, I can't."²⁶ However, upon further interaction with the Marys, the merchant sees the importance of following Jesus Christ, and says in parting, "He has given to freely of His love. He has saved us from the torment of death in Hell."²⁷ To an audience of merchants, this play would have been particularly significant, for it demonstrates the importance of following Jesus Christ rather than becoming obsessed with money. The next portion of the play focuses on Mary Magdalene and her personal suffering. Devastated by the loss of her Lord, Mary laments: "Woe is me! Your death plants grief deeply in my heart."²⁸ At this moment, Christ appears to her as a gardener, telling her to rejoice, for he has risen. The rest of the drama takes on a more triumphant, joyful tone, much like in *The Shepherds*. Angels, Apostles, the Three Marys, and Christ rejoice in the resurrection, their

words underscored by the Chorus singing joyfully "Alleluia!"²⁹

The Lament of Mary, a play associated with the Passion, precedes the events of *Visit to the Sepulcher*, though this drama is less famous. Translated from the Cividale Basilica version, this drama takes place at the cross on Good Friday. It is significant because it is less presentational and features a predominantly female cast. The play opens with Mary Magdalene turning to the congregation, crying "O brothers and sisters, where is my hope?"³⁰ From the very beginning, the audience is invited to lament with Mary over the loss of Jesus Christ. As the drama progresses, Mary Magdalene, Mary Major, Mary Jacobi (the Three Marys featured in *Visit to the Sepulcher*) and John comfort each other as they cope with the loss of their Lord. They consistently address either Christ on the cross or the congregation, making the spectators part of the lamentation. What is significant in this play is Mary Magdalene's role as a reformed sinner. Beating herself before the crucifix, she begs, "On this sinner, cast a glance, You who me have redeemed."³¹ Mary Major (The Virgin Mary) then says to her, "Who for all your sinning, he forgave you."³² This emphasis on sin remains the focal point throughout the rest of the drama. The play ends with a condemnation of the congregation, which solidifies this theme. Rather than depict Christ's personal suffering, the drama instead focuses on the suffering of those who loved Christ, and blatantly reminds the congregation that sinners who do not repent are responsible for Christ's death and deserve punishment. Mary Major turns on the congregation, the crucifix behind her, and proclaims, "O minds perfidious, and double-talkers, O witnesses sly, and false judges, old and young alike usually, though of greater crimes guilty, they require payment by hanging for sins!"³³

The manner in which these plays were performed was drastically different from our modern understanding of theatrical conventions. As previously mentioned, the term "theatre" cannot apply to Liturgical Drama. Thus, our modern perception of actors, costumes, and performance space are drastically different from what these words entailed in the Middle Ages. Today, an actor is someone who can effectively and convincingly become a character, an identity separate from his own personal self. In Liturgical Dramas, the roles were played by members of the clergy, and no attempt was made to delve into the psyches of the characters they were portraying. According to

Pascal, "the priests re-enact the central event of their religion; but acting meant for them something very different from its modern significance."³⁴ Dunbar H. Ogden explains in his book, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church*, the difficulties associated with trying to understand the art of acting in the Middle Ages, claiming that "it is the least possible for the historian to capture."³⁵ Despite these difficulties, Ogden, as well as other historians, have uncovered the basics: all roles in Liturgical Drama were sung by the male clergy, including female roles. The only exception was when a Cathedral had a chapter of canonesses, and even then, *Visit to the Sepulcher* was usually the only drama to be performed with women playing the three Marys.³⁶ This indicates that these dramas were not meant to be forthright imitations of life, rather they were representations of dramatic episodes that were presentational in nature. Pascal solidifies this idea, claiming, "Their aim was not mimicry and they did not employ realistic methods, for the function of ritual drama is not imitation, but the reawakening of belief and energy."³⁷

In Liturgical Dramas, costumes played an important function, though not the same function that modern costumes tend to do. In the modern concept of theatre, costumes are used to create characters; however, in these medieval Church dramas, costumes were used more symbolically. According to Ogden, there were three specific types of costumes: sacred and royal figures wore ecclesiastical vestments, other characters wore the clothing of daily life (for example, Christ dressed as the gardener in *Visit to the Sepulcher*), and special characters wore exotic costumes (such as angels, who were often equipped with wings).³⁸ Ogden points out the importance of costumes: "If the production took place in a cathedral, we can be sure of a display of silks, satins, brocades, and the precious embroidery that constituted one of the finest crafts of the medieval world."³⁹ This seems particularly significant, as the performers of these holy dramas incorporated the material culture that arose due to the societal changes of the Commercial Revolution. Collins, in a companion text to his translations of Liturgical Dramas, discusses the costumes in *Visit to the Sepulcher*, noting that the costumes in this particular drama tended to be more realistic than in other plays.⁴⁰ He describes these costumes as contemporary to the time in which the drama was performed, with the only exception being Christ's costume. Rather than wear the clothes

of a medieval gardener, he dressed in a long robe and bare feet, a more symbolic costume so that he may be readily identified as Christ.⁴¹

Cathedrals as a performance space were pivotal to Liturgical Drama. According to Pascal, "the setting of these plays, or rather the various loci at which the different parts of the more developed plays were sung, were not constructed like a modern stage, with the object of showing an action to the people."⁴² The architecture of the cathedral made it an ideal space for these dramas, and the absence of fixed pews made it possible for the congregation to travel with the actors rather than act as a passive audience. Normington discusses the importance of the cathedral in drama, explaining that as urban centers of religion, these churches represented the positive values of medieval society and created a vast amount of opportunities for Liturgical drama to develop: "The complexity of the medieval Church space provided a vast arena in which dramatic celebrations and ritual could be enacted, and it appears as if the multi-faceted architectural space of the church influenced the types of dramas that were produced within medieval Churches."⁴³ Moreover, the cruciform pattern of the Cathedral suggests an intertwining of Christ and the human body, which was an important concept in Liturgical Drama, as it sought to solidify and strengthen people's faith.⁴⁴

In his book, Ogden provides an in-depth analysis of the Cathedral as a performance space, using *Visit to the Sepulcher* as his primary example. He explains that the placement of the most important set piece, the tomb itself, dictated how the cathedral would be used for this particular drama.⁴⁵ Though the placement varied, "as of the late eleventh or early twelfth century, we also find the placement of the action in the nave, and in several works...the whole interior is incorporated in the play, just as the entirety of the church was used in the processions and stations of worship."⁴⁶ Another important aspect of the cathedral as a performance space, was the availability of material wealth and visual reinforcement. Stained glass windows and sculptures depicting important religious events and figures could have reinforced the dramas being acted in the cathedral, and the presence of Holy Relics added yet another layer of connection to the Divine.

Liturgical Drama served a very important function in Medieval Europe: according to Theresa Mason, these dramas "transformed existing worship and art forms from their culture and traditions to bring a fresh, vital interpretation to

worship."⁴⁷ Essentially, these dramas created a new way in which the urban laity could connect with their faith. By bringing to life these important Biblical events, the Church was able to strengthen the common people's connection to God. Most importantly, these dramas "contemporized" themes of salvation, redemption, and faith, making it easier for the laity to understand their importance. In her book *Sacred Players*, Heather Hill-Vásquez claims that medieval religious dramas were immensely influential in "making contemporary the events of salvation history enacted throughout the pageant and implicating its audience as participants in those events."⁴⁸ However, it is important to note that these dramas were still very presentational and formal. Pascal notes that it was not until after the twelfth century that "humorous, realistic elements enter."⁴⁹ Because these dramas created another opportunity for the expression of the Christian faith, they eventually became secularized, which marks an important societal shift.

E.K. Chambers describes this secularization of Liturgical Drama in his book, *The Mediaeval Stage*: "From ecclesiastical the drama had become popular. Out of the hands of the clergy in their naves and choirs, it had passed to those of the laity in their market-places and guild-halls."⁵⁰ As Liturgical Drama began to pass into the hands of the laity, Easter became increasingly important, and Passion Plays began to develop. This, according to Chambers, marks an important transition, due to the fact that Liturgical Drama abstained from dramatic representations of the Passion.⁵¹ One of the most important developments was the York Mystery Cycle, which in many ways solidified these cultural changes. As these Mystery Plays gained popularity in the Late Middle Ages, the clergy had a negative reaction, which is the major reason that these plays were no longer performed in Churches:

The writers upon Mystery Plays agree with great unanimity that the plays were driven out of churches by the disapproval of the higher clergy. It is stated that the introduction of lay actors, of the vernacular speech, and above all, of burlesque and comic episodes, scandalized the devout and provoked the prohibitions of popes and councils.⁵²

Additionally, as commercial interests grew, Mystery Plays, generally performed on portable stages in urban areas, became closely associated with religious festivals and feast days.⁵³ For these reasons, the subject matter of the York Mystery Cycle, while

still focused on Biblical episodes, became drastically different from Liturgical Drama.

Each play in the York Mystery Cycle is named for a profession, such as *The Cardmakers*, *The Fullers*, *The Masons*, *The Goldsmiths*, and so on. Where Liturgical Drama strove to recreate important Biblical events, the Mystery Plays adapted these events into modern cultural contexts. Rather than representing the mindset of the clergy, these plays represented the mindset of the common people, and did not possess the formality of Liturgical Drama. In *The Wynedrawers*, the same Biblical event is depicted as in *Visit to the Sepulcher*. Mary Magdalene, sick with woe, is met by Jesus Christ, who is disguised as a commoner. In this text, the language is much less formal, and seems far less presentational. When Christ appears to Mary Magdalene, they are alone, making the scene much more intimate. He says to her, "Come near me not, my love; let be, Mary, my daughter sweet, to my Father in Trinity because I rise not yet."⁵⁴ What is also important to note in this text is the talk of Christ's suffering. In the plays preceding this one, the entire Passion is presented, including a confrontation between Christ and Satan, as well as plays featuring Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate. In *The Wynedrawers*, Mary notices how "thy wounds have made thy body wet with blood,"⁵⁵ which is drastically different from *Visit to the Sepulcher*, which makes no mention of physical harm to Christ's body.

In order to adapt to the ever-evolving social, political, and religious climate of the Central Middle Ages, the Church developed a new means in which they could guide the common people toward salvation. Liturgical Drama provided the public with a tangible way to access their faith: with the cathedral as a backdrop, the laity was able to connect on a more personal level to different Biblical events. The development of these dramas indicates an important change in the Church and its practices, and demonstrates one of the many ways the clergy sought to maintain the people's faith in the period following the Commercial Revolution. It is clear that these religious plays arose from Liturgical practices, and eventually paved the way for different types of religious drama that became popular in the Late Middle Ages. As popular piety changed these Liturgical Dramas gave birth to more secularized forms of drama, ones that were controlled and performed by the common people, rather than the clergy.

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- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid., 34.
- ⁵ Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, 113.
- ⁶ Katie Normington, *Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 5.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Vauchez, *The Laity in the Middle Ages*, 19-20.
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- ¹⁰ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), 19.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 16.
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- ¹³ Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Vol. 1, 79-80.
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- ¹⁶ Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Vol. 1, 1.
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²⁰ Fletcher Collins Jr., ed., *Medieval Church Music-Dramas: A Repertory of Complete Plays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 92.

²¹ Ibid., 93-94.

²² Ibid., 97.

²³ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951), 3.

²⁴ Collins, *Medieval Church Music-Dramas*, 8.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ Ibid., 33.

²⁹ Ibid., 33-41.

³⁰ Ibid., 47.

³¹ Ibid., 54.

³² Ibid., 55.

³³ Ibid., 62.

³⁴ Pascal, "On the Origins of the Liturgical Drama of the Middle Ages," 378.

³⁵ Dunbar H. Ogden, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 143.

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³⁷ Pascal, "On the Origins of the Liturgical Drama of the Middle Ages," 381.

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⁴¹ Ibid., 80-81.

⁴² Pascal, "On the Origins of the Liturgical Drama of the Middle Ages," 379.

⁴³ Normington, *Medieval English Drama*, 38.

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⁴⁵ Ogden, *The Staging of Drama in the Medieval Church*, 39.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 40

⁴⁷ Kevin J. Wetmore, ed., *Catholic Theatre and Drama: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2010), 149.

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⁵³ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁴ J.S. Purvis, ed., *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957), 326.

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