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The European Middle Ages

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Context

Even after the 500s, Constantinople continued as a center of trade and civilization. Increasingly less Roman and more bureaucratized, the Byzantine Empire had a highly developed culture, one focused on luxury and one that looked east rather than west for its markets and goods.

Western Europe, on the other hand, was in increasing disarray after the fourth century, and after its collapse in the sixth century, Rome had no political successor. Some city-states of the Italian peninsula avoided the general decline by maintaining strong trading connections with Constantinople or other cultures. Western Europe however, continued to crumble as various forces that had before served to unify Europe weakened or disintegrated. The Roman system of roads and waterways fell into disrepair, and transportation and communication became at first troubled and at last almost impossible.

Laws were ignored and order broke down, replaced by the rule of force: bands of pirates and brigands grew wealthy and influential enough to challenge rulers and lords of manors. Without the support of a government, the monetary system failed, and barter, with all its cumbersome trappings, became the basis of trade. Out of this disarray emerged a different kind of Europe, one with different languages, traditions, and cultures—one that was fragmented and local, lacking the connective social and cultural fabric Rome had provided.

The prevailing social organization was feudal, in which the social base was not the town but the manor, a self-contained agricultural unit that could offer security to those within it. On the manor, each serf owed absolute allegiance to the lord, the owner or grantee of the land. Serfs worked the land and maintained the manor in return for protection by the lord, who would fight to maintain safety for those within. Just as serfs owed allegiance to their lord, lesser lords owed allegiance to more powerful ones, who could call on them to raise armies. Travel among manors was irregular, a fact that worked against unity within Europe.

The Christian church, on the other hand, was a weak unifying force because its services were conducted in Latin rather than the numerous local languages; its pope led the whole church; and its priests, especially its monks,

THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND ISLAM

While western Europe was in disarray, The eastern Roman Empire, centered In Constantinople, flourished and Traded with both Europe and Asia. After the seventh century CE, Islam Dominated the Middle East, the Northernmost parts of Africa, and Southern Spain.



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occasionally traveled among church centers. Like social organization, church organization was hierarchical, with priests reporting to bishops, bishops to archbishops, archbishops to cardinals, and cardinals to the pope. This hierarchy ensured relatively orderly governance of the church in an otherwise chaotic world, and its teachings gave it a substantial base of power.

The power hierarchies of both feudalism and Christianity were essentially pyramidal: with one man at the top, relatively few men immediately under him, and so on, until at the base of each pyramid were the peasants, that great mass of people who tilled the land and provided all those above them with the necessities and amenities of life. The life of the medieval peasant was one of work, ignorance, and want; the life of people above the peasant varied. Previous historians saw this extended period in Europe as a lesser one between two greater ones, Rome, ending in about the middle of the fifth century, and the Renaissance or “rebirth,” beginning in about the middle of the fifteenth century. Thus, they called this the **Middle Ages** or the **medieval**, meaning middle, period.

Early Medieval Drama and Theatre: 476–1200

For many years, historians believed that no theatre or drama outlived the collapse of Rome in 476 CE, but it is now certain that theatre continued in the Byzantine Empire and that remnants of professional performers traveled about in Italy, France, and Germany. Scattered references to performances called *mimi*, *histriones*, and *ioculatores* surface periodically in Western medieval accounts, but the degree to which such performers performed actual plays, as distinct from such paratheatrical entertainments as juggling, tumbling, dancing, and rope tricks, is not known. If theatre, as distinct from performance, existed at all, it was feeble.

CHURCH DRAMA

During the European Middle Ages, dramas were staged inside churches, in front of churches, and in the center of towns. Here, a scene from a cycle of plays staged in the early 1980s in the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey in York, England.



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Hroswitha in Germany and Bishop Ethelwold in England

Two almost simultaneous events toward the end of the tenth century (900s) marked the reentry of theatre into western Europe. The first, the plays of Hroswitha, offers incontrovertible evidence of continuity with Roman drama; the second, the liturgical manual of Ethelwold, shows the Roman Catholic church staging a small play as part of a worship service.

Hroswitha This religious leader and noblewoman was attached to a Benedictine monastery near Gandersheim in modern Germany. She wrote six plays in Latin (c. 950), the earliest still-extant dramas since the first years of the Roman Empire. Based on the comedies of Terence, Hroswitha's plays sought to celebrate "the laudable chastity of holy maidens" and *may* have been performed at court and at the monastery. Hroswitha is important on three counts:

- As the first known female playwright.
- As the first known post-Roman playwright.
- As proof of an intellectual continuity from Rome to the Middle Ages.

For reasons not entirely clear, Hroswitha's contributions made little impact at the time. Yet, with little to no theatre infrastructure, it is hard to imagine how Hroswitha's plays would have had influence outside her monastery. Her classically styled plays were largely overshadowed by a different strand of theatre, an ecclesial theatre that also emerged in the tenth century.

Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester, England This Bishop issued in 975 the *Regularis Concordia*, a monastic guidebook, which, among other things, described in detail how one part of an Easter service was to be performed. For about a hundred years before Ethelwold, the church had been decorating and elaborating several of its practices. Music, vestments, art, architecture, and **liturgy** (rites, public worship) had all changed in the direction of greater embellishment. Liturgy has elements that resemble the drama, including a script; costumes and props in the form of ecclesiastical clothing, incense, and the like; and a set of "performers" of the rite often on a raised podium before an audience-like congregation. But liturgy is ritual, not drama. One sort of liturgical embellishment that emerged in the early Middle Ages was the **trope**, an interpolation into an existing text. One Easter trope was sung by the choir antiphonally, a call and response, and began, "*Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, o christocole.*" Translated from Latin, the trope read in its entirety:

Angel: Whom seek ye in the tomb, O Christians?

The Three Marys: Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified, O heavenly beings.

Angel: He is not here, he is risen as he foretold;

Go and announce that he is risen from the tomb.

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The *Quem Quaeritis* is still used in some churches. It was this trope to which staging directions were added in Ethelwold's *Regularis Concordia*, which became a standard text describing the liturgy for the Christian church in England. This document added not only stage directions but also costuming and properties to the dialogue, reestablishing many of the essentials of drama.

HOW WE KNOW

Bishop Ethelwold's Stage Directions for the *Quem Quaeritis* Trope

Ethelwold's stage directions turn four lines of dialogue, with an additional line or two, into a playlet that employs all the elements of theatre. There is impersonation (the monks are pretending to be people other than who they are), costuming, props, staging instructions to the actors (theatrical "business"), and movement ("blocking").

The *Regularis Concordia* directs in part: "Let four monks enter as if part of the service; one monk, holding a palm [a traditional emblem of an angel], approaches the sepulcher [tomb] without being noted and sits quietly. Later the remaining three monks, all of them wearing copes [long cloaks] and carrying incense, follow slowly as if seeking something." These monks are imitating the angel before the tomb and the three women coming to anoint the body of Jesus, as told in the Gospel of Peter, part of the Vulgate Bible of the time.

The four monks speak or sing a slightly elaborated version of the *Quem Quaeritis*, ending with the angel's instruction to proclaim that Christ is risen. "Let the three monks turn to the choir and in obedience to the Angel say, 'Hallelujah! The Lord has Risen!'" The angel, Ethelwold directs, is to open the sepulcher. In it is only bare cloth that had robed the body of Jesus.

The Lord is risen from the sepulcher,
Who for us hung on the cross.

(Let them put the cloth on the altar. The song finished, the Prior [a high ranking member of the clergy], sharing the joy at the Lord's victory in having conquered Death, stands and starts the hymn:)

We Praise Thee, O God.

(This started; the bells are all rung together.)

Here, then, is one of the earliest known albeit exceptionally brief, extant scripts for drama since the fall of the Roman Empire. In the description of these



This illustration from an illuminated manuscript from Bamberg, now in Germany, from the eleventh century CE depicts an angel showing the three Marys the empty tomb after the resurrection of Christ. Although this is not a specific illustration of Bishop Ethelwold's stage directions, it does suggest the popularity of this now apocryphal gospel story.

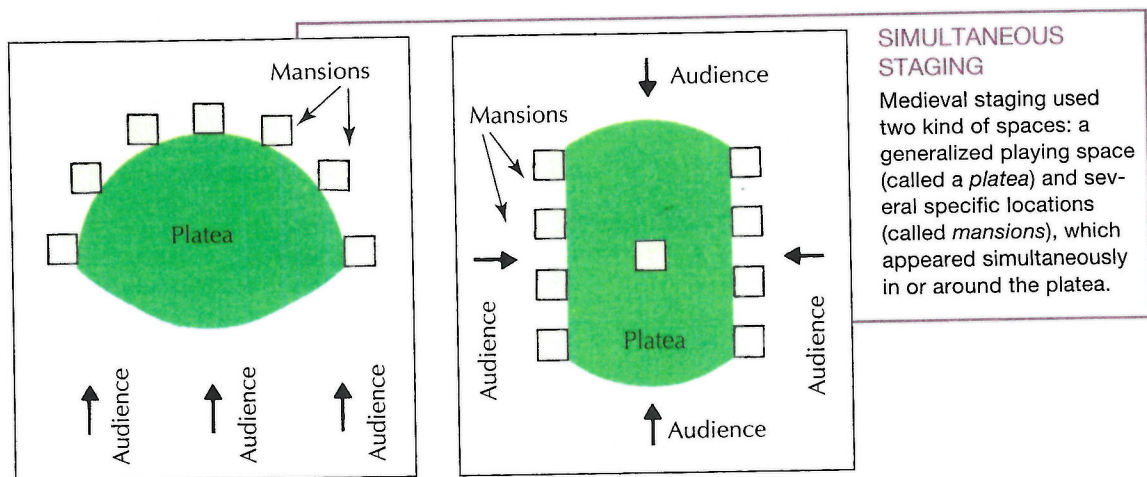
ceremonies, the *Concordia* notes that some priests "had introduced this custom, in order to fortify the unlearned people and newcomers in their faith." Here is evidence for what is believed to be the purpose of early medieval drama: it was a moving picture so that the general people of the congregation who did not speak Latin could see what they might otherwise little understand.

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Ethelwold's text (less so Hroswitha's) expresses three staging conventions that characterized much of theatre in this period and operated in European medieval theatre. Medieval staging was:

- **Simultaneous:** That is, several different locations were present in the performing space at the same time, hence **simultaneous staging**. Locations were not illusionistic. Such an arrangement meant conceptualizing two different kinds of space: small scenic structures that served to locate the specific places (eventually called **mansions**) and a neutral, generalized playing space (called **platea**).
- **Emblematic:** That is, meanings from the performance reached the audience through costumes and properties that were signs or symbols whose meanings communicated easily. They were not illusionistic. Among mansions, for example, an animal mouth signified hell and a revolving globe stood for heaven.
- **Environmental:** That is, performed in available spaces rather than in structures specially built and set aside for the purpose.

Although Hroswitha's plays had no immediate successors, from the tenth through much of the sixteenth century, many dramas such as *Quem Quaeritis* were performed inside monastic and later cathedral churches as a part of the liturgy. Thus, they are called **liturgical drama**. Such plays were chanted or sung rather than spoken and were given in the language of the church—Latin—and so are also called **Latin music drama**. They were acted by clergy, choirboys, monks, and occasionally traveling scholars, schoolboys, and sometimes, nuns; the actors, then, were almost always male except in convents.



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From the very short *Quem Quaeritis*, Latin music drama blossomed into many plays of varying lengths and degrees of complexity. The subjects of most such plays were biblical, usually drawn from events surrounding Christmas and Easter: the visit of the three Marys to the tomb, the travel of the Magi, Herod's wrath. Other Latin music dramas depicted such diverse stories as the life of the Virgin Mary, the raising of Lazarus, and Daniel in the lion's den. Almost all were serious, but at festivals like the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Boy Bishops, the usual dignity was abandoned and in its place was substituted considerable monkey business. Latin music dramas continued to be performed in churches well into the sixteenth century (1500s), overlapping other types of drama by hundreds of years.

Production inside the Church

Plays performed in the church were produced by the church. Actors were churchmen except in convents, where churchwomen performed. Costumes were based on church vestments. A key identified Saint Peter; a hood signified a woman; wings or a held palm branch meant angels; wallets and staffs identified travelers, for example.

Staging depended on existing church architecture. For example, the choir loft might represent heaven, the crypt hell, and the altar the tomb of Christ. For elaborate plays, special mansions might be constructed, some small but others large enough for several persons to hide inside. Special effects required machinery capable of flying objects and actors in and out of the playing area. For example, angels and doves flew about, Christ rose to heaven, and the three kings followed a moving star that led them to the stable of the Christ child.

Although early audiences consisted only of those residing in the monasteries or convents, when the plays began to be performed in cathedral churches as well as monastic ones, general audiences attended.

Later Medieval Culture and Theatre, c. 1200–1550

Several shifts within medieval culture began to coalesce by 1200. Population increased rapidly. Towns grew up around monasteries and manors to provide goods and services, serving as centers of trade. Towns allowed for a third lifestyle, neither serf nor lord, but tradesman and professional, that is to say, a middle class. Increased trade encouraged the development of still more towns, many now located where goods that

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had been shipped by water were transferred to land. Water was preferable because roads were mostly terrible. The names *Oxford* and *Cambridge* reflect this origin. ("Ford" means a river or stream shallow enough to cross.) Trade expanded again when a series of crusades against Muslims and others, including inhabitants of Constantinople, prompted new shipbuilding, opened new sea routes, and established new trading ports and new markets, all aided by improved sea manuals and the invention of the compass.

Commercial theory changed. Early medieval theory was grounded in theology. Usury, now meaning an exorbitant rate of interest but then referring to all lending for interest, was condemned; merchants were supposed to work for the benefit of society; and profit was considered a kind of parasitism. No more. Merchants began to form monopolies; maximum profit rather than a just price became the goal. Modern commercial structures emerged, such as banking and partnerships. Because merchants and tradespeople lived outside the feudal system, they gradually undermined it by providing refuge for serfs seeking to escape their lords. Towns sponsored fairs to bring people from great distances and so facilitate trade. Thus, towns and commerce competed directly with manors and agriculture for social leadership. The growth of a middle class in the growing towns of Europe undermined the pyramidal structure of the Middle Ages.

At about the same time, the domination of the church and its monopoly on matters of faith began to erode, with Martin Luther later posing the most direct threat (1521). The separation of religion from everyday life was under way.

As religion became somewhat less central to the culture, the allegiance to kings and country grew. With the decline of feudalism and the authority



MEDIEVAL PLAYS IN MODERN PRODUCTION

Since 1951, the York mystery plays have been produced in York, England. Now the plays are staged periodically by the National Centre for Early Music at St. Margaret's Church in York. Performances are given both at single locations and on pageant wagons, like the *Noah and the Flood* shown here.

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of the church, and with the emergence of towns and nascent nationalism, the era was metamorphosing into a new kind of culture: That is, after about 1200, western Europe was in a transition between medieval culture and a new one that would coalesce by 1550 as the Renaissance. (The Renaissance began one hundred or so years earlier in Italy.)

Religious Drama outside the Church

After about 1200, medieval drama reflected these cultural shifts in several ways. New kinds of religious drama appeared. These dramas differed from Latin music drama in several ways:

- They were performed outdoors rather than inside churches.
- They were spoken rather than chanted or sung.
- They were in the vernacular (e.g., French, English, or German) rather than in Latin.
- Laymen, rather than priests and clerics, served as actors.
- The stories and themes, no longer limited to liturgical sources, became more far-ranging.
- The performances tended to cluster in the spring and summer months, especially around the new Feast of Corpus Christi, established in the fourteenth century, rather than spreading throughout the church year, as before. They became known as **Corpus Christi plays**.

Of these changes, the most significant was the shift from a universal language—Latin—to the various national tongues because with this shift came two things important to the future of both theatre and drama: the beginning of several national dramas and an expansion of the potential audience and subject matters for plays.

The plays remained decidedly religious, if not always scriptural. In general, they were:

- **Mystery plays** or mysteries: events in the life of Christ (e.g., *The Second Shepherd's Play*) and stories from the Old Testament (e.g., *Noah*).
- **Passion plays**: the trial, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- **Miracle plays** or *miracles*: the lives of saints, both historical and legendary.
- **Morality plays** or *moralties*: didactic allegories, often about the struggle for salvation (e.g., *Everyman*).

Although the plays differed in subject matter and form, they shared several characteristics. First, they aimed to teach or to reinforce belief in church

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A SAINT'S PLAY IN PERFORMANCE

Scholars believe the central figure holding a book and a baton is the master of secrets who appears to be cueing the musicians on an upper level. This engraving, from a miniature painting in a medieval manuscript by Jean Fouquet of *The Martyrdom of St. Appolonia*, dates from about the mid-1460s. Note in the background the audience under the scaffolds that perhaps hold musicians and other performers. The color image is an enlargement of a section of the original miniature. It shows more clearly the master of secrets in a blue robe and the hell mouth, to the right.

doctrine. Second, they were formulated as melodramas or divine comedies—that is, the ethical system of the play was clear: good was rewarded, evil punished. Third, the driving force for the action was God and his plan. This is different from the driving force of, say, the drama of Sophocles, focused as it was on the choices of human beings. To a modern reader, the plays often appear episodic, with their actions unmotivated, their sequences of time and place inexplicable, and their mixture of the comic and the serious unnerving.

In fact, their traits expressed the medieval view. The plays presented the lure and strength of sin, the power and compassion of God, and the punishment awaiting the unrepentant sinner. They called for all people to repent, to confess, and to atone for their sins.

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THE PLAY'S THE THING

The Second Shepherd's Play, Anonymous

The town of Wakefield, England, presented a cycle of thirty-two short mystery plays based on bible stories yearly during the late Middle Ages through 1576 CE. In its complete form, the Wakefield Cycle survives in a single manuscript, now the property of the Huntington Library in California. This manuscript was written in the fifteenth century (1400s) but the individual plays are believed to have been written over a long time, perhaps over a century or two.

Of the thirty-two plays, the best regarded is *The Second Shepherd's Play* because of its fresh invention on a familiar story, its humor, and its social comment. Author unknown, it is the *second* shepherd's play because there are two other shepherds' plays in the Wakefield Cycle. At heart, *The Second Shepherd's Play* it is a variation on the story of shepherds in the fields with their flocks to whom an angel appears, heralding the birth of Christ and urging the common shepherds to follow the star to the manger in Bethlehem.

The Story of the Play Three shepherds, as night falls, complain of the weather and their fate to be poor commoners. The shepherds are met by a local character of questionable virtue, Mak. When they fall asleep, Mak makes off with one of their sheep. At Mak's rude hut, Gil, his shrewish wife, connives with him to prevent the shepherds from discovering the animal should they come look. She wraps the lamb as an infant in a cradle. The shepherds come and search for their lamb but do not find it.

Starting to depart, the shepherds realize they have offered no gift to the newborn. They return with a coin for the baby only to discover the missing lamb. Says a shepherd, "Let me kiss him... What the devil is this? He has a long snout." Mak and Gil claim the child just has a birthmark. The shepherds are unconvinced. Mak and Gil then claim the child was bewitched by an elf. Upon closer examination of the "babe," the shepherds recognize their owner's mark, clipped in the lamb's ear. Although the shepherds could do far worse to Mak, their only punishment is to toss him in a blanket, until Mak is sore all over and the shepherds' muscles ache.

As the shepherds depart from Mak and Gil's hovel, an angel appears, singing beautifully, "Rise, gentle shepherds, for now he is born..." Singing and rejoicing, the shepherds follow the star, come to Mary and the Christ child, and offer three gifts: a bunch of cherries, a bird, and a ball.

The creativity and mixed but integrated comedy and drama are the wonder of this unknown author's work, distinguishing this version of the shepherds' story from other similar ones in graceful ways. The lamb disguised as a child in a cradle is a comic mirroring of baby Jesus, the Lamb of God, asleep in a manger. The shepherds' gifts echo those of the wise men and symbolize the blood of the crucifixion in the red cherries, the holy spirit often represented as a dove shown by the bird, and the child's kingship in the ball, an orb in miniature.

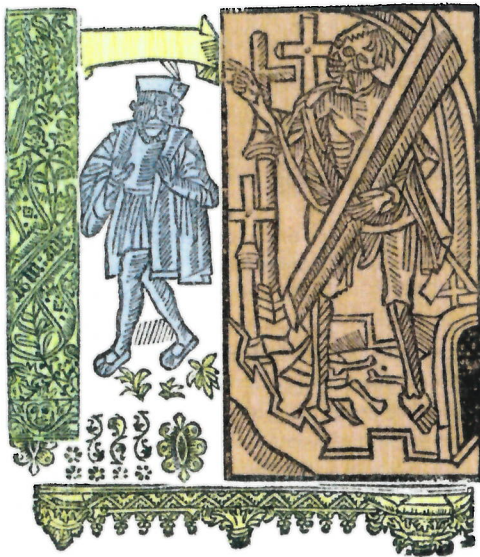
Because history was God's great lesson to humankind, the drama that expressed his plan was nothing less than the entirety of human history, from creation to doomsday. Any combination of events, any juxtaposition of characters, and any elasticity of time or place that would illuminate God's plan and make it more accessible and compelling was suitable drama. The great dramas of the 1400s and 1500s that showed this history are called **cycle plays**, or **cosmic dramas**, and some took days, even weeks, to play from beginning to end. Cycles would be made up of a number of plays of varied lengths and different Biblical subject matters. Existing manuscripts show the number of texts in one cycle ranging from twenty-two to forty.

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THE PLAY'S THE THING

Everyman, Anonymous, c. 1490

Everyman, a popular morality play rediscovered in 1900 after a lapse of more than four hundred years, is simply structured: Everyman is called by Death to the next world. Everyman then searches for a friend to accompany him on this journey. All but one forsake him. Each character is a personification of an abstract quality—Knowledge, Beauty, Strength, and so on. *Everyman* is an allegory, then, a story where abstract ideas are represented as characters. The play's structure is a string of episodes rather than a causally organized progression



This woodcut from a printed edition of *Everyman* from the mid-1500s shows *Everyman* (left) and *Death*.

of incidents. Today *Everyman* is the most often produced of medieval plays.

The Story of the Play God sends Death to summon Everyman, who must bring a “sure reckoning.” When Death gives the message to Everyman, saying he must “go on a long journey,” Everyman cries that he is not ready; he begs for time; he tries to bribe Death, who tells him he must make the journey and should find what friends will go with him.

Everyman asks various friends—Fellowship, Kindred and Cousin, Goods—to go with him, and they agree until they learn what the destination is; then they depart.

Good Deeds speaks “from the ground.” He cannot go because he is too weak to walk, but he calls his sister, Knowledge, who says, “Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide.”

Knowledge takes him to Confession; after confessing, Everyman whips himself as a penance, and Good Deeds is able to rise and walk.

Knowledge gives Everyman a “garment of sorrow” to wear instead of his worldly clothes. She tells him to call his Five Wits, his Beauty, his Strength, and his Discretion. Everyman receives the sacrament and then journeys to his grave, where Beauty refuses to enter with him; then Strength, then Discretion, then Five Wits desert him, but Good Deeds remains at the graveside. They pray, and then Everyman goes into his grave alone.

An angel appears, saying his reckoning is “crystal-clear,” and a doctor (learned man) gives a short speech to explain the play.

Why such dramas came to be done outside the church building has been endlessly debated. Some thought the plays had been forced out of the church because of abuses such as those at the Feast of Fools, in which young people impudently impersonated important clerical positions, such as the archbishop, bishop, or abbot. Others argued that the plays' appearance outdoors merely reflected the changing needs of the plays and their audiences for more space and freedom. More likely is the increasing power of towns,

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YORK MYSTERY PLAYS

This series of forty-eight plays is contained in a version that dates from 1475. Most of the plays deal with the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here, a scene from a modern production staged in York in and around the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey.



which fastened on plays and other public shows as expressions of their new status. Play production also drew new business to the towns in the form of audiences from neighboring areas. Before substantial towns existed, the only locus for performance was the church or the manor of a lord. Whatever the reason for the development, records of religious plays given outside of churches appear by 1200 and are common by 1350.

Staging Religious Plays outside the Church

Although churches continued to produce Latin music dramas throughout the period, other religious plays had different producing arrangements. Sometimes town officials took charge; sometimes special committees did the job. Sometimes labor and religious organizations, **guilds** or **confraternities**, assumed responsibility, often under the town's protection. A guild is a group of craftsmen in a single trade, operating as a mix of a trade union, a standard-setting body, and a secret society that preserved the methods of the trade.

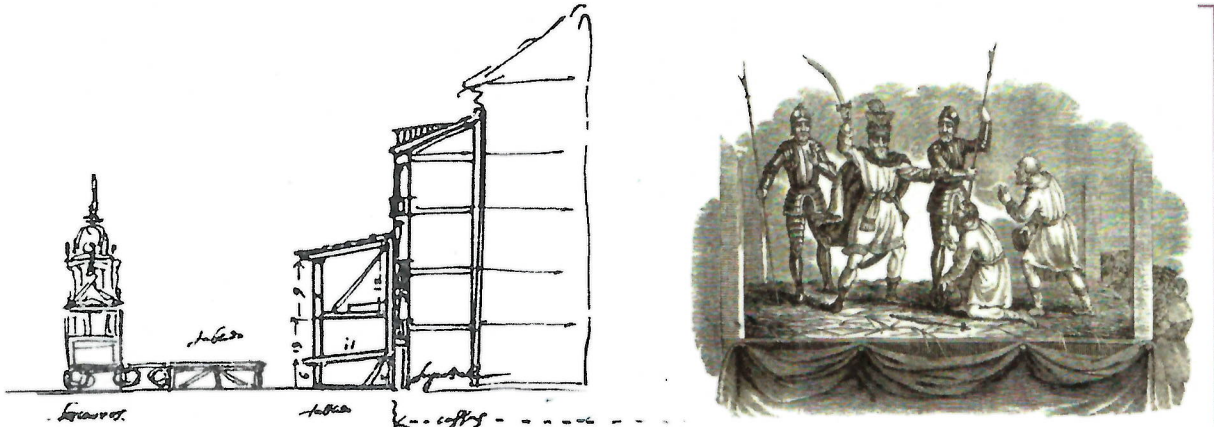
Guilds were frequently called on to produce a single play in a group, sometimes on the basis of particular skills or association with the play's subject: Noah plays, which required a real ship although perhaps half-size, went well with shipbuilding, for example. Because of both financial investment and tradition, plays tended to stay with the same guild for many years. As the plays and processions showed the wealth of the town, so the individual play and its properties showed the wealth of the guild.

Roles in the plays were open to all male members of the community (in France, women might perform occasionally) and were generally performed without compensation. As in any primarily amateur operation, the quality of the performances varied considerably, and it was probably in an attempt to upgrade the general level of acting that many cities after about

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MOVEABLE STAGING

In parts of England and Spain, mansions were set on wagons that traveled from place to place thus moving the plays to audiences gathered in prearranged places. On left, a seventeenth-century sketch of a Spanish pageant wagon in front of an audience area. The engraving, on right, of a pageant wagon dates from about 1560.

1450 hired professional “property players” to take the leading roles and to instruct the others. Although these few actors were paid, they were not looked down on as socially undesirable, as professional actors in secular plays would be in later times.

There are no textbooks of medieval acting. Scholars believe that it was, like the costumes, emblematic. It probably depended on reducing the character to large, symbolic strokes, without the actors’ “inner” work or the character’s “psychology” found in illusionistic productions in the modern era. How amateurs handled the problem of being heard and understood outdoors is unknown. Some pictures of the period show prompters or directors, book in hand, standing among the actors; this professional may have been literally cueing gestures and turns of voice.

Some plays and some roles suggest a tradition of satirical or comic playing, with caricature an established technique. The traveling actors of the countryside probably emphasized low comedy and passed on techniques and traditions that would flourish later with clowns in the theatre of Shakespeare’s time.

Fixed and Movable Staging

The staging of religious plays outside the church took two major forms, still within the conventions of emblem, environment, and simultaneity: either fixed staging or movable staging, the latter used most often in parts of Spain and England.

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Scaffolds In fixed staging, mansions or **scaffolds** were set up, usually outdoors, in whatever spaces were available—courtyards of noble houses, town squares, or the remains of Roman amphitheatres. Scaffolds differed in size, structure, and use. Some were elevated and resemble small stages but were not necessarily used as stages. Some were tiny houses, thrones, or just a tree. They were emblematic of a place but not full scenery. Depending on the space, the mansions were arranged in circles, straight lines, or rectangles, and the platea—the unlocalized playing area in front of the mansions—and the audience area were established accordingly. Although the individual arrangements varied, heaven and hell, ordinarily the most ornate mansions, were customarily set at opposite poles.

HOW WE KNOW

Oberammergau Passion Play through the Years

The passion play performed at Oberammergau in southern Germany is a tenuous link to the medieval tradition of ecclesiastical drama. The city made an oath in 1633 to perform a passion play every ten years if their town could survive the virulent plague then ravishing the area. The first performance was in 1634. Oberammergau joined a large number of German cities presenting religious drama at this time, encouraged by the Catholic Church.

The story presented as the passion play has changed in small and large ways throughout these four centuries. The history of the Oberammergau passion play is one characterized by stops, starts, and many textual revisions.

The earliest script still extant is from 1662. Scholars now know that this first script was assembled from pieces of preexisting scripts from other communities. In 1680, the community moved the performance year to the first year of each decade. A new script was crafted in 1730, which introduced the allegorical figures of Envy, Avarice, Death, and Sin as Jesus's adversaries. By 1750, church fathers became concerned that the holiest stories of Christendom should not be performed on stage. The script was rewritten again. The church and the government banned passion plays in 1770, and the play was not performed in that decade.

In 1780, a completely revised script was allowed to be staged. The villagers performed the play three times that decade and five times the next and they charged admission grossing much more than the production's cost. The ban on passion plays was

revived again in 1791—with a special exception for Oberammergau.

Again in 1811, a new script was devised. All the allegorical characters were excised. Only the bible story would be put on stage. Now the play was more firmly based on the Gospel of Matthew, in which the Jews ask for the crucifixion of Jesus and, when Pilate washes his hands of the affair, the Jews exclaim, "His blood is on us and on our children!" The Jews thus became the villains. (There were no Jews as *performers* and few Jews lived in the Oberammergau vicinity. You had to be a Catholic and a lifetime resident to appear in the play.) In 1830, the first permanent theatre was built for the play; it seated five thousand. It was in this period that Oberammergau became an international destination in play years for Catholics and Protestants.

Adolf Hitler, Germany's *fürher*, saw the 1934 performance, saying afterward, "It is vital that the Passion play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed..." In the aftermath of World War II and the disclosure of the systematic murder of some six million Jews by the German government under Hitler, the town fathers sought and obtained a *missio canonica*, an official declaration of the Catholic Church that the play conformed with church doctrine, and the passion play continued with only slight script revisions.

Beginning in 1970, Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Council and some Christian organizations as well began to protest the play's depiction of the

(continues)

The following excerpt is for use in preparing for quizzes, discussion board posts, and response papers for this semester only.

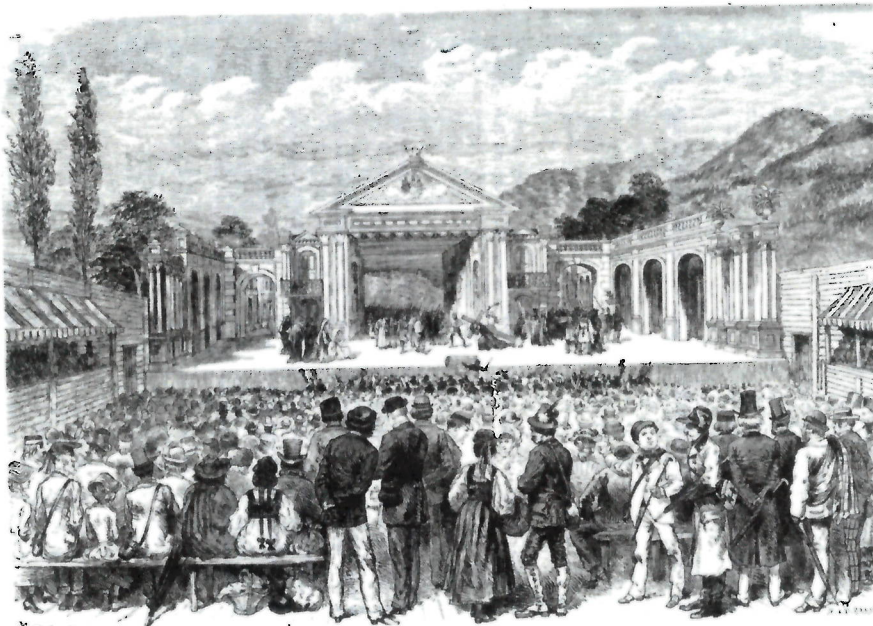
HOW WE KNOW Oberammergau Passion Play through the Years *(continued)*

Jewish people. The church connection to the play was dissolved: the play became solely a municipal activity. In 2000, the script was again rewritten in an attempt to minimize the anti-Semitism perceived by many, but few critics were satisfied. Despite revisions, discussions, and debates, the effect of Oberammergau's passion play on religious intolerance is still in question.

The conflict has not stopped the performances. About one-half of the citizens of the town are involved in the production. Performances run from

2:30 to 10:30 P.M., with a three-hour dinner break. In 2010, the town presented the show 102 times. Over a half-million visitors saw it, bringing significant money to the city. The Oberammergau passion play continues, part piety, part commerce, connected in a broken and jagged way to medieval times but also in many ways very modern.

In the United States, passion plays, sometimes called Easter plays, are performed each year in about twenty states.



This engraving shows the temporary uncovered seating and stage area in 1789. A permanent theatre was built for the play in 1830 to seat about five thousand spectators.

Pageants In movable staging, **pageants (pageant wagons)** may have allowed the audience to scatter along a processional route while the plays were brought to them and performed in sequence, much like a parade with floats. Each play, then, was performed several times. A likely pattern was for the first play (e.g., creation) to be presented at dawn at the first station; when it moved to the second station to perform, the second play (e.g., the fall of man) was then presented at the first station. For most of the day, several plays were performing at once. The word *pageant* is important in a discussion of movable staging because it was used to describe the play itself, the spectacle of the plays in performance, and also the vehicle on which the presentation was staged.