
Medieval Drama

The Role of the Church

The medieval period in Europe (A.D. 476–1500) began with the collapse of Rome, a calamity of such magnitude that the years between then and the beginning of the Crusades in 1095 have been traditionally, if erroneously, called the Dark Ages. Historians used this term to refer to their lack of knowledge about a time in which no great central powers organized society or established patterns of behavior and standards in the arts.

Drama, or at least records of it, all but disappeared. The major institution to profit from the fall of the Roman empire was the Roman Catholic Church, which in the ninth and tenth centuries enjoyed considerable power and influence. Many bishops considered drama a godless activity, a distraction from the piety that the church demanded of its members. During the great age of cathedral building and the great ages of religious painting and religious music — from the seventh century to the thirteenth — drama was not officially approved. Therefore, it is a striking irony that the rebirth of drama in the Western world should have taken place in the heart of the monasteries, developing slowly and inconspicuously until it outgrew its beginnings.

The Church may well have intended nothing more than the simple dramatization of its message. Or it is possible that the people may have craved drama, and the Church's response could have been an attempt to answer their needs. In either event, the Church could never have foreseen the outcome of adding a few moments of drama to the liturgy, the church services. LITURGICAL DRAMA began in the ninth century with TROPES, or embellishments, which were sung during parts of the Mass (the public celebration of the Eucharist). The earliest known example of a trope, called the QUEM QUÆRITIS ("Whom seek ye?"), grew out of the Easter Mass and was sung in a monastic settlement in Switzerland called St. Gall:

ANGEL: Whom seek ye in the sepulchre, O ye Christians?

THREE MARYS: Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, O ye Angels.

ANGEL: He is not here; he is risen as he has foretold.

Go, announce that he is risen from the sepulchre.

Some scholars think that in its earliest form this trope was sung by four monks in a dialogue pattern, three monks representing the three Marys at Christ's

tomb and the other representing the angel. Tropes like the *Quem Quaeritis* evolved over the years to include a number of participants — monks, nuns, and choirboys in different communities — as the tropes spread from church to church throughout the Continent. These dramatic interpolations never became dramas separate from the Mass itself, although their success and popularity led to experiments with other dramatic sequences centering on moments in the Mass and in the life of Christ. The actors in these pieces did not think of themselves as specialists or professionals; they were simply monks or nuns who belonged to the church. The churchgoers obviously enjoyed the tropes, and more were created, despite the Church's official position on drama.

In the tenth century a nun called Hrotsvitha entertained herself and her fellow nuns with imitations of the Latin dramatist Terence. Although her own subject matter was holy in nature, she realized that Terence was an amusing comic writer with a polished style. She referred to herself as "the strong voice of Gandersheim," her community in Saxony, and said that she had "not hesitated to imitate in my writings a poet whose works are so widely read, my object being to glorify, within the limits of my poor talent, the laudable chastity of Christian virgins." Her plays are very short moral tales, often illustrating moments in the lives of Christian martyred women. As far as is known, these plays do not seem to have gone beyond the nuns' walls; therefore, they had little effect on the drama developing in the period.

Once dramatic scenes were added that took the action outside of the liturgy, it was not long before dramas were being staged outside the church. The Anglo-Norman drama *Adam*, dating from the twelfth century, has explicit stage directions establishing its setting outside the church. The play is to be staged on the west side of the church with a platform extending from the steps. The characters of Adam, Eve, God (called *Figura*), and the Devil and his assistants are given costumes and extensive dialogue. The dramatic detail in this play implies a considerable development of plot and action, which, despite its theological matter, is plainly too elaborate to be contained within the service of the Mass.

Miracle Plays

Once outside the church, the drama flourished and soon became independent, although its themes continued to be religious and its services were connected with religious festivals. In 1264 Pope Urban IV added to the religious calendar a new, important feast: Corpus Christi, celebrated beginning on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday, about two months after Easter. The purpose of the feast was to celebrate the doctrine declaring that the body of Christ was real and present in the Host (consecrated bread or wafer) taken by the faithful in the sacrament of Communion.

At first the feast of Corpus Christi was localized in Liège, Belgium. But in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it spread through papal decree and became one of the chief feasts of the church. Among other things, it featured a procession and pageant in which the Host was displayed publicly through the streets of a town. Because of the importance and excitement of this feast, entire communities took part in the celebration.

MIRACLE PLAYS on the subject of miracles performed by saints developed late in the twelfth century in both England and on the Continent. Typically, these plays focused on the Virgin Mary and St. Nicholas, both of whom had strong followings (sometimes described as cults) during the medieval period. Mary is

often portrayed as helping those in need and danger — often at the last minute. Some of those she saved may have seemed unsavory sinners to a pious audience, but the point was that the saint saved all who truly wished to be saved.

Although they quickly became public entertainments removed from the church building and were popular as Corpus Christi entertainments throughout the fifteenth century, few miracle plays survive in English because King Henry VIII banned them in the middle of the sixteenth century during his reformation of the Church. As a result, they were not performed or preserved.

The craft guilds, professional organizations of workers involved in the same trade — carpenters, wool merchants, and so on — soon began competing with each other in producing plays that could be performed during the feast of Corpus Christi. Most of their plays derived from Bible stories and the life of Christ. Religious guilds, such as the Confrérie of the Passion, produced plays in Paris and elsewhere on the Continent. Because the Bible is silent on many details of Christ's life, some plays invented new material and illuminated dark areas, thereby satisfying the intense curiosity medieval Christians had about events the Bible omitted.

Mystery Plays

The Church did not ignore drama after it left the church buildings. Since the plays had religious subject matter and could be used to teach the Bible and to model Christian behavior, they remained of considerable value to the Church.

First performed by the clergy, these religious plays dramatized the mystery of Christ's Passion. Later the plays were produced by members of craft guilds, and they became known as CRAFT OR MYSTERY PLAYS. Beginning in the medieval period, the word *mystery* was used to describe a skill or trade known only to a few who apprenticed and mastered its special techniques; it also referred to religious mysteries.

By the fifteenth century, mystery plays and the feast of Corpus Christi were popular almost everywhere in Europe, and in England certain towns produced exceptionally elaborate cycles with unusually complex and ambitious plays. The CYCLES were groups of plays numbering from twenty-four to forty-eight. Four cycles have been preserved: the Chester, York, Towneley (Wakefield), and N-Town cycles, named for their towns of origin. N-Town plays were a generic version of plays that any town could take and use as its own, although the plays were probably written near Lincoln.

The plays were performed again and again during annual holidays and feasts, and the texts were carefully preserved. Some of the plays, such as *The Fall of Lucifer*, are very short. Others are more elaborate in length and complexity and resemble modern plays: *Noah*, from the Wakefield Cycle, which has been produced regularly in recent history; *The Slaughter of Innocents*; and *The Second Shepherds' Pageant*, one of the most entertaining mystery plays.

The producers of the plays often had a sense of appropriateness in their choice of subjects. For example, the Water-Drawers guild sponsored *Noah's Flood*, the Butchers (because they sold "flesh") *Temptation*, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, and the Shipwrights *The Building of the Ark*.

Among the best-known mystery plays is the somewhat farcical *The Second Shepherds' Pageant*, which is both funny and serious. It tells of a crafty shepherd named Mak who steals a lamb from his fellow shepherds and takes it home. His wife, Gill, then places it in a cradle and pretends it is her baby. Eventually

the shepherds — who suspect Mak from the first — smoke out the fraud and give Mak a blanket-tossing for their trouble. But after they do so, they see a star in the heavens and turn their attention to the birth of baby Jesus, the Lamb of God. They join the Magi and come to pay homage to the Christ Child.

The easy way in which the profane elements of everyday life coexisted with the sacred in medieval times has long interested scholars. *The Second Shepherds' Pageant* virtually breaks into two parts, the first dedicated to the wickedness of Mak and Gill and the horseplay of the shepherds. But once Mak has had his due reward, the play alters in tone and the sense of devotion to Christian teachings becomes uppermost. The fact that the mystery plays moved away from liturgical Latin and to the vernacular (local) language made such a juxtaposition of sacred and profane much more possible.

The dominance of the guilds in producing mystery plays suggests that guilds enjoyed increasing political power and authority. The guilds grew stronger and more influential — probably at the expense of the Church. Some historians have seen this development as crucial to the growing secularization of the Middle Ages.

Morality Plays

MORALITY PLAYS were never part of any cycle but developed independently as moral tales in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century on the Continent and in England. They do not illustrate moments in the Bible, nor do they describe the life of Christ or the saints. Instead, they describe the lives of people facing the temptations of the world. The plays are careful to present a warning to the unwary that their souls are always in peril, that the devil is on constant watch, and that people must behave properly if they are to be saved.

One feature of morality plays is their reliance on ALLEGORY, a favorite medieval device. Allegory is the technique of giving abstract ideas or values a physical representation. In morality plays, abstractions such as goodness became characters in the drama. In modern times we sometimes use allegory in art, as when we represent justice as a blindfolded woman. Allegorically, justice should act impartially because she does not “see” any distinctions, such as those of rank or privilege, that characterize most people standing before a judge.

The use of allegory permitted medieval dramatists to personify abstract values such as sloth, greed, daintiness, vanity, strength, and hope by making them characters and placing them onstage in action. The dramatist specified symbols, clothing, and gestures appropriate to these abstract figures, thus helping the audience recognize the ideas the characters represented. The use of allegory was an extremely durable technique that was already established in medieval painting, printed books, and books of emblems, in which, for example, sloth would be shown as a man reclining lazily on a bed or greed would be represented as overwhelmingly fat and vanity as a figure completely absorbed in a mirror.

The central problem in the morality play was the salvation of human beings, represented by an individual's struggle to avoid sin and damnation and achieve salvation in the otherworld. As in *Everyman* (c. 1495), a late-medieval play that is the best known of the morality plays, the subjects were usually abstract battles between certain vices and specific virtues for the possession of the human soul, a theme repeated in the Elizabethan age in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

In many ways the morality play was a dramatized sermon designed to teach a moral lesson. Marked by high seriousness, it was nevertheless entertaining. Using allegory to represent abstract qualities allowed the didactic playwrights

to draw clear-cut lines of moral force: Satan was always bad; angels were always good. The allegories were clear, direct, and apparent to all who witnessed the plays.

We do not have much knowledge of the origins of morality plays. Many of them are lost, but some that remain are occasionally performed: *The Pride of Life*, the earliest extant morality play; *The Castle of Perseverance*; *Wisdom*; *Mankind*; and *Everyman* are the best known. They all enjoyed a remarkable popularity in the latter part of the medieval period, all the way up to the early Renaissance.

Although Chinese and Japanese drama neither influenced nor was influenced by Western drama in the medieval period, from roughly the late twelfth to the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, it, like Western drama, was connected to temples, shrines, and religious ceremony. During this period Japanese Nō drama developed as a highly refined, deliberate, and ritualized form involving ceremonial dance and music as well as a developed narrative. Centuries later, Nō drama had an influence on Western literature, particularly on writers such as Ezra Pound and playwrights such as W. B. Yeats and Samuel Beckett.

Nō drama developed from a popular form of drama called sarugaku Nō, invented by Kan'ami (1333–1384) in the fourteenth century. The rulers of Japan at that time, shoguns (generals) of the samurai warrior class, enjoyed theater and supported performances of highly sophisticated drama. They preferred sarugaku — “monkey music” — a form that included gymnastic action, music, dance, and a story line. Kan'ami refined sarugaku into sarugaku Nō, a more deliberate and controlled form that elevated the actor and demanded more skill — the word Nō means “skill” — from performers. The refinement Kan'ami brought to the drama was associated with Zen Buddhism, the form of religion favored by the shogun of the period.

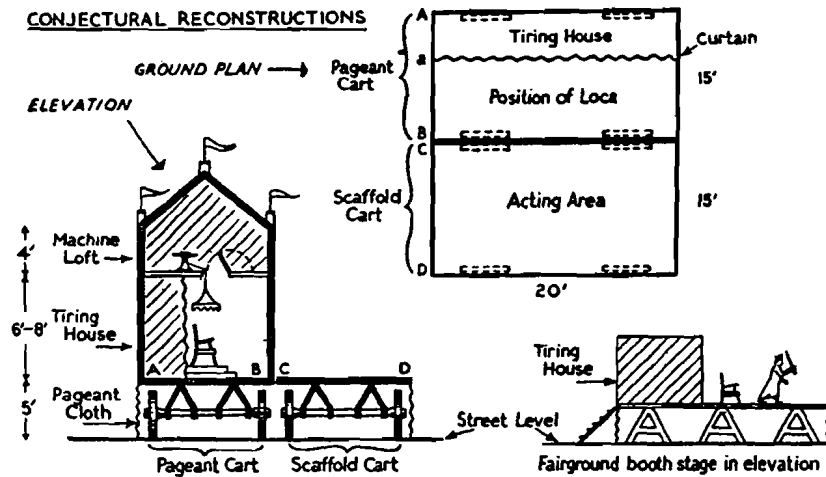
Nō drama, which relies on masks, ritual costume, dance, and music, is produced around the world even today. It emerged late in the fourteenth century out of Kan'ami's innovations, but it was his son, Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), who developed Nō into a serious form marked by the restraint and control associated with Zen Buddhism. The religious influences on Nō drama emphasized self-control, honorable behavior, and purity of action. Zeami produced a body of drama that can be seen today in the West as well as in the East. *Lady Han (Hanjo)* deals with a realistic situation in which a prostitute falls in love with a traveling captain. Before he leaves they exchange fans on which a painting of the moon will identify them. Such romances were not uncommon, and the emotions portrayed in Nō drama are derived from living experience.

The Medieval Stage

Relatively little commentary survives about the conventions of medieval staging, and some of it is contradictory. We know that in the earliest years — after the tropes developed into full-blown religious scenes acted inside the cathedrals — certain sections of the church were devoted to specific short plays. These areas of the church became known as MANSIONS; each mansion represented a building or physical place known to the audience. The audience moved from one mansion to another, seeing play after play, absorbing the dramatic representation of the events, characters, and locale associated with each mansion.

The tradition of moving from mansion to mansion inside the church carried over into the performances that took place later outside the church. Instead of

Figure 5. Pageant wagon



mansions, wagons with raised stages provided the playing areas. Usually, the wagons remained stationary and the audience moved from one to another. During the guild cycles the pageants would move; the performers would give their plays at several locales so that many people could see them.

According to medieval descriptions, drawings, and reconstructions, a PAGEANT CART could also be simply a flat surface drawn on wheels that had a wagon next to it; these structures touched on their long side. In some cases a figure could descend from an upper area as if from the clouds, or actors could descend from the pageants onto the audience's level to enact a descent into an underworld. The stage was, then, a raised platform visible to the audience below (Figure 5).

A curtain concealed a space, usually inside or below the wagon, for changing costumes. The actors used costumes and props, sometimes very elaborate and expensive, in an effort to make the drama more impressive. Indeed, between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries, a number of theatrical effects were developed to please a large audience. For instance, in the morality and mystery plays the devils were often portrayed as frightening, grotesque, and sometimes even comic figures. They became crowd pleasers. A sensational element was developed in some of the plays in the craft cycles, especially those about the lives of the saints and martyrs, in which there were plenty of chances to portray horrifying tortures.

The prop that seems to have pleased the most audiences was a complex machine known as the MOUTH OF HELL or "Hell mouth," usually a large fish-shaped orifice from which smoke and explosions, fueled by gunpowder, belched constantly. The devils took great delight in stuffing their victims into these maws. According to a contemporary account, one of the machines required seventeen men to operate.

The level of realism achieved by medieval plays was at times startling. In addition to visual realism, medieval plays involved a psychological level of participation on the part of both audience and actor. Sometimes they demanded that the actors suffer in accord with the characters they played. Some records attest to characters playing Christ on the cross having to be revived after their hearts stopped, and at least one Judas apparently was hanged just a little too long and had to be resuscitated.

The Actors

In the early days of liturgical drama, the actors in the tropes were monks and choirboys, and in the mystery plays they were drawn from the guilds. At first all the actors were male, but records show that eventually women took important roles.

The demands of more sophisticated plays encouraged the development of a kind of professionalism, although it seems unlikely that players in the cycles could have supported themselves exclusively on their earnings. Special skills became essential for the design and operation of complex stage machines and for the performance of acrobatics that were expected of certain characters, such as devils. As actors developed facility in delivering lines and as writers found ways to incorporate more challenging elements in their plays, a professionalism no doubt arose, even if actors and writers had few opportunities to earn a living on the stage.

By the second half of the sixteenth century, the early Renaissance, groups of wandering actors were producing highly demanding and sophisticated plays, and writers such as Shakespeare were able to join them and make a living. When these professionals secured their own theaters, they had no problems filling them with good drama, with actors, and with an audience.

Dramatic techniques developed in the medieval period were put to good use in the Renaissance theater. For example, the colorful and dramatic devil characters that stalked the mystery plays were transformed into sophisticated villains in Elizabethan drama. The devil Mephistopheles (Mephistophilis) behaves like a smooth Tudor lawyer in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*; Iago in *Othello* is suspected of having cloven hooves. Perhaps one important difference is that the Elizabethan devil-villains are truly frightening, since they are so recognizably human in their villainy.

Medieval Drama Timeline

| DATE | THEATER | POLITICAL | SOCIAL/CULTURAL |
|----------|---|---|--|
| 400–500 | | <p>476: The fall of Rome and beginning of the Dark Ages</p> <p>483–565: Byzantine Emperor Justinian, author of the Code of Civil Laws</p> | <p>480–524: Boëthius, Roman scholar, philosopher, and theologian, is executed for treason.</p> |
| 500–600 | <p>500–1000: Traveling performers proliferate in Europe.</p> | | <p>570–632: Muhammed, founder of Islam</p> <p>590–594: Devastating plague spreads through Europe and kills half the population.</p> |
| 600–700 | | <p>Persians take Damascus and Jerusalem.</p> | <p>636: Anglo-Saxons are introduced to Christianity.</p> <p>695: Jews are persecuted in Spain.</p> |
| 700–800 | | <p>768–814: Charlemagne reigns in France and is crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 by Pope Leo III in Rome on Christmas Day.</p> <p>792: Beginning of the Viking era in Britain</p> | <p>c. 710: Buddhist monasteries in Japan become centers of civilization.</p> <p>787: The Council of Nicaea officially rejects iconoclasm.</p> |
| 800–900 | <p>9th c.: Beginnings of liturgical drama</p> | <p>843: Treaty of Verdun divides the Holy Roman Empire into German, French, and Italian kingdoms.</p> <p>850: Rurik, a Northman, becomes ruler of Kiev, an important Russian trading post. Trade begins with Constantinople, which remains a commercial and cultural center throughout the Dark Ages.</p> | <p>c. 800–1000: <i>Beowulf</i>, one of the first long poems written in English</p> <p>855: Earliest known attempts at polyphonic music</p> <p>863: Cyril and Methodius invent a Slavic alphabet called Cyrillic.</p> |
| 900–1000 | <p>c. 900: Farces make their first appearance since classical times.</p> <p>925: Earliest extant Easter trope</p> <p>965–975: Compilation of the <i>Regularis Concordia</i> (Monastic Agreement) by Ethelwood, bishop of Winchester, England. The <i>Regularis Concordia</i> contains the text of the earliest extant playlet in Europe, with directions for its performance.</p> | | <p>c. 900: The beginnings of the famous Arabian tales called <i>A Thousand and One Nights</i></p> |

Medieval Drama Timeline (continued)

| DATE | THEATER | POLITICAL | SOCIAL/CULTURAL |
|-------------------------|---|---|--|
| 900-1000 (continued) | 970: Plays of Hrosvitha, a German nun and the first known female playwright. The six plays are modeled on the comedies of Terence but deal with serious religious matters. | 1000: Leif Ericson, possibly the first European to venture to North America | 975: Arabic arithmetical notation is brought to Europe by the Arabs. 980-1037: Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Arab physician and philosopher 990: Development of systemic musical notation. |
| 1000-1100 | | 1066: The Normans conquer Britain. 1086: Compilation of the <i>Domesday Book</i> , a survey of the British economy, population, and land ownership at that time 1096-1099: First Crusade. Crusaders take Jerusalem from the Arabs. | 1054: The Great Schism separates Eastern and Western Churches in Europe. 1079-1142: Peter Abelard, French theologian and philosopher |
| 1100-1200 | 12th c.: Religious plays are first performed outside churches. | 1109-1113: Anglo-French War 1147-1149: Second Crusade. Crusaders lose Jerusalem to the Arabs. 1167-1227: Genghis Khan, founder of Mongol empire 1189-1193: Third Crusade. Crusaders fail to recapture Jerusalem. | c. 1125: Beginnings of French troubadour and trouvère music 1133-1855: St. Bartholomew's Fair, London, England 1167: Oxford University is founded. |
| 1200-1300 | 13th c.: Beginnings of Yuan zaju drama in China 1250: <i>Easter Play of Muri</i> , beginnings of German drama 1276-1277: French poet Adam de la Halle writes <i>The Play of the Greenwood</i> , the oldest extant medieval secular drama. | 1202-1204: Fourth Crusade. Crusaders seize Constantinople. 1212: Children's Crusade. Thousands of children are sent as crusaders to Jerusalem; most die or are sold as slaves. 1215: King John of England signs the Magna Carta, guaranteeing habeas corpus, trial by jury, and restrictions on the power of the king. 1224-1227: Anglo-French War 1228: Sixth Crusade 1248: Seventh Crusade | c. 1202: Court jesters appear at European courts. 1225: Guillaume de Lorris writes <i>Roman de la Rose</i> , a story of courtly wooing. 1225-1274: Thomas Aquinas, important Scholastic philosopher 1254-1324: Marco Polo, Venetian traveler whose accounts of life in China became famous in the West 1264: First celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi c. 1282: Florence emerges as the leading European city of commerce and finance. |

Medieval Drama Timeline (continued)

| DATE | THEATER | POLITICAL | SOCIAL/CULTURAL |
|-----------|--|---|--|
| 1300–1400 | <p>14th c.: Beginnings of Nō drama in Japan</p> <p>c. 1385–1450: <i>The Second Shepherds' Pageant</i>, part of the English Wakefield Cycle</p> <p>1398–1548: Confrérie de la Passion at Paris performs religious plays.</p> | <p>1337: Hundred Years War begins.</p> | <p>c. 1302: Dante's <i>Divine Comedy</i></p> <p>1304–1374: Petrarch, Italian poet</p> <p>1347–1351: The Black Death kills approximately 75 million people throughout Europe.</p> <p>1360–1400: <i>Piers Plowman</i> and <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>: achievements of Middle English literature</p> <p>1387: Chaucer's <i>Canterbury Tales</i></p> |
| 1400–1500 | <p>c. 1425: <i>The Castle of Perseverance</i>, English morality play</p> <p>1429: Plautus's plays are rediscovered in Italy.</p> <p>c. 1470: <i>Pierre Patheline</i>, most renowned of medieval French farces</p> <p>1490: <i>Corpus Christi</i> play of Eger, Bohemia</p> <p>c. 1495: <i>Everyman</i>, best-known English morality play</p> | <p>1429: Joan of Arc's troops resist the British siege of Orleans, an important turning point in the Hundred Years War.</p> <p>1431: Joan of Arc is captured and burned as a heretic.</p> <p>1453: France wins the Hundred Years War and becomes an important continental power. England abandons the Continent to develop its naval forces.</p> <p>1481: Spanish Inquisition</p> <p>1482–1485: Reign of Richard III. Richard maintains a company of actors at court, which tours surrounding towns when not needed by His Majesty.</p> <p>1485–1509: Reign of Henry VII, first of the Tudor rulers. Like Richard III, Henry maintains a company of actors.</p> | <p>1400–1455: Fra Angelico, Italian painter</p> <p>c. 1406–1469: Fra Lippo Lippi, Italian painter best known for his frescoes</p> <p>c. 1430: Modern English develops from Middle English.</p> <p>c. 1450: Gutenberg invents movable type.</p> <p>1485: Sir Thomas Malory publishes <i>Le Morte Darthur</i>, one of the first books printed in England.</p> <p>1492: Columbus sets sail across the Atlantic.</p> |
| 1500–1600 | <p>1527: Henry VIII builds a House of Revels in which to stage court entertainments.</p> <p>1548: Production of plays is forbidden in Paris.</p> <p>1558: Elizabeth I forbids performance of all religious plays.</p> | <p>1509–1547: Reign of Henry VIII</p> <p>1534: Henry VIII breaks with the Roman Catholic Church. Drama is used as a political instrument to attack or defend opposing viewpoints.</p> <p>1558–1603: Reign of Elizabeth I</p> | <p>1509: Pope Clement V resides at Avignon, beginning the Babylonian Captivity, during which Rome is not the papal seat.</p> <p>1545–1563: The Council of Trent is convened by the Catholic Church to solidify its control over expressions of Church doctrine. Medieval religious plays are deemed provocative and controversial.</p> |

Hrosvitha

The German nun Hrosvitha (c. 935–1000) (also Hroswitha, Roswitha, Hrotsvit, and Hrotsuit) belonged to the Benedictine convent in Gandersheim, founded in 852. Her name translates to “strong voice,” a term she uses to describe herself in her writing. Her voice is that of a learned woman, and today it can be heard as a feminist voice in a time and society that were unquestioningly patriarchal.

Hrosvitha is considered not only the earliest German woman poet but the first woman dramatist in Europe. A Saxon noblewoman, she entered the convent in approximately 959, living with nuns who were themselves of noble birth. The abbey was under the protection of Otto I (912–973), who united a powerful Germany and produced a long-lasting period of peace and development. Otto became the Holy Roman Emperor on February 13, 962. His rule, dubbed the Ottonian Renaissance, favored religion, learning, the arts, and music.

During this period, the abbey at Gandersheim was obligated not to the Church but to the king himself, and Otto eventually released it from his direct governance, permitting it to maintain a law court and to coin money. While such political issues may not have affected Hrosvitha, the fact that the period was one of learning and scholarship was of great importance. Hrosvitha was educated in the liberal arts, beginning with the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy) and continuing with the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic). Her studies were conducted in Latin, the language she used to write her plays. Her education was comparable to that of liberally educated men and of the nuns who lived with her.

Hrosvitha’s work is deeply rooted in her religious beliefs. Her religious order meditated on the drama of the lives of Christian saints and especially on their often spectacular martyrdoms. The abbey gave its inhabitants a life of contemplation, removed from the world. But it is also clear that the nuns had the talent, education, and opportunities to write religious tracts and, in the case of Hrosvitha, religious drama. The question of whether Hrosvitha’s plays were actually produced is not settled.

Hrosvitha wrote six plays and several other prose and poetic works. The plays reject the temptations of the world in the name of Christ. In *Gallicanus* the title character is promised the hand of Constantia if he wins a specific battle, but Constantia, daughter of the Christian emperor Constantine, has taken a vow of chastity. Eventually, with the aid of saints, Gallicanus converts to Christianity and becomes a martyr. The conversion of an important Roman is the theme of *Callimachus*, and the conversion theme dominates *Paphnutius* and *Abraham*. *Sapientia* also emphasizes martyrdom. *Sapientia*’s three daughters, whose names translate as Faith, Hope, and Charity, offer a threat to the stability of Emperor Hadrian’s rule. They are tortured brutally but survive without pain until Hadrian beheads them. Eventually *Sapientia* joins her daughters in heavenly bliss, inspiring the local women who have witnessed the events.

DULCITIUS

Dulcitus is probably the second of Hrosvitha's plays. It was rediscovered in 1494 in an eleventh-century manuscript along with her other dramatic works. Its first printing was in 1501 in an edition with woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer, indicating its importance at the time. The play is plainly didactic and was designed to teach a lesson rather than merely to entertain. The lesson, as in all her plays, is a moral one, urging listeners or readers to live a life of purity and virtue in order to celebrate the greatness of God. In this sense, Hrosvitha wrote in the medieval literary tradition of Europe. Her plays are fascinating to the modern reader, however, because she purposely emulated the techniques of the Roman playwright Terence.

She chose Terence as her model because his texts were used in education and therefore widely known in Europe. Moreover, they were amusing comedies written with such great style that they were models of elocution. Hrosvitha admits to imitating Terence, but her motives were subversive. She wished to use the eloquent style of Terence not to entertain her audience with secular amusement and charming courtesans but to honor the virtue of chaste virgins who praised God and Christian virtues.

Dulcitus, a jail governor, lusts after the three virgins Agape, Chionia, and Hirenia (Love, Purity, and Peace). Hrosvitha emphasizes his power, but all his worldly power comes to nothing in the face of the virgins' beliefs. In this sense, Hrosvitha celebrates how the apparent weakness of females in her own society can confound the apparent strength of males. Despite his position and power, Dulcitus's lust cannot be satisfied.

Moreover, the three virgins are problematic not only to Dulcitus but to Emperor Diocletian as well. When Agape tells Diocletian that it is dangerous to offend almighty God, Diocletian asks: "Dangerous to whom?" She responds, "To you and to the state you rule." Hrosvitha therefore not only establishes the power of the virgins but of the Christian religion. Astonishingly, this "new-fangled religion" threatens Rome itself, which is why Diocletian persecuted Christians so brutally during his reign.

The play's short lines, quick realistic dialogue, and carefully focused interaction are recognizably like Terence's. The present translation uses virgules (/) to indicate the end of lines as they were printed in the original Latin. The broad farcical humor of the "miraculous" scene in which Dulcitus embraces pots and pans in the kitchen thinking they are the three virgins — a scene performed while the virgins watch through the crack in the door — is also in the tradition of Roman comedy.

Despite the three virgins' ultimate martyrdom, the play is a comedy. The soldiers and Dulcitus will end up in "Tartarus," while the virgins "will enter the heavenly bridal chamber of the Eternal King." For the devout canonness Hrosvitha, no ending could be happier.

Dulcitus in Performance

In the opinion of most scholars, the plays of Hrosvitha were not produced but instead read as **CLOSET DRAMA**. On the other hand, comic scenes such as the one in which Dulcitus blackens his face against the pots and pans have led some theater historians to speculate that the plays were performed by the nuns themselves in the abbey. In any event, *Dulcitus* would not have had a public audience and may not have influenced other medieval drama. It is, however, a remarkable moment in the history of drama. As Hrosvitha tells us: "I, the strong voice of Gandersheim, have not hesitated to imitate in my writings a poet whose works are so widely read, my object being to glorify, within the limits of my poor talent, the laudable chastity of Christian virgins in that self-same form of composition which has been used to describe the shameless acts of licentious women."

Hrosvitha (c. 935-1000)

DULCITIUS

c. 965

THE MARTYRDOM OF THE HOLY VIRGINS AGAPE, CHIONIA, AND HIRENA

TRANSLATED BY K. M. WILSON

[Characters

| | |
|------------|---------------------|
| DIOCLETIAN | |
| AGAPE | WIFE (OF DULCITIUS) |
| CHIONIA | SISSINUS |
| HIRENA | SOLDIERS |
| DULCITIUS | GUARDS] |

The martyrdom of the holy virgins^o Agape, Chionia, and Hirena, whom, in the silence of the night, Governor Dulcitus secretly visited, desiring to delight in their embrace. But as soon as he entered, / he became demented / and kissed and hugged the pots and pans, mistaking them for the girls until his face and his clothes were soiled with disgusting black dirt. Afterward Count Sissinus, acting on orders, / was given the girls so he might put them to tortures. / He, too, was deluded miraculously / but finally ordered that Agape and Chionia be burnt and Hirena be slain by an arrow.

DIOCLETIAN: The renown of your free and noble descent / and the brightness of your beauty demand / that you be married to one of the foremost men of my court. This will be done according to our command if you deny Christ^o and comply by bringing offerings to our gods.^o

⁵ The martyrdom of the holy virgins: The martyrdom of the three virgins occurred in 290 during Diocletian's persecution of the Christians in Thessalonica. 5. deny Christ: Deny the vow of virginity they made in the name of Christ. 6. our gods: Gods acknowledged by the Roman empire.

AGAPE: Be free of care, / don't trouble yourself to prepare our wedding / because we cannot be compelled under any duress / to betray Christ's holy name, which we must confess, / nor to stain our virginity. 10
 DIOCLETIAN: What madness possesses you? What rage drives you three? /
 AGAPE: What signs of our madness do you see? /
 DIOCLETIAN: An obvious and great display. /
 AGAPE: In what way? / 15
 DIOCLETIAN: Chiefly in that renouncing the practices of ancient religion / you follow the useless, new-fangled ways of the Christian superstition. /
 AGAPE: Heedlessly you offend the majesty of the omnipotent God. That is dangerous . . . 20
 DIOCLETIAN: Dangerous to whom?
 AGAPE: To you and to the state you rule. /
 DIOCLETIAN: She is mad; remove the fool! /
 CHIONIA: My sister is not mad; she rightly reprehended your folly. 25
 DIOCLETIAN: She rages even more madly; remove her from our sight and arraign the third girl. /
 HIRENA: You will find the third, too, a rebel / and resisting you forever. /
 DIOCLETIAN: Hirena, although you are younger in birth, / be greater in worth! / 30
 HIRENA: Show me, I pray, how?
 DIOCLETIAN: Bow your neck to the gods, set an example for your sisters, and be the cause for their freedom!
 HIRENA: Let those worship idols, Sire, / who wish to incur God's ire. / But I won't defile my head, anointed 35

- with royal unguent by debasing myself at the idols' feet.
- 40 DIOCLETIAN: The worship of gods brings no dishonor / but great honor. /
- HIRENA: And what dishonor is more disgraceful, / what disgrace is any more shameful / than when a slave is venerated as a master?
- 45 DIOCLETIAN: I don't ask you to worship slaves / but the mighty gods of princes and greats. /
- HIRENA: Is he not anyone's slave / who, for a price, is up for sale? /
- DIOCLETIAN: For her speech so brazen, / to the tortures she must be taken. /
- 50 HIRENA: This is just what we hope for, this is what we desire, / that for the love of Christ through tortures we may expire. /
- DIOCLETIAN: Let these insolent girls / who defy our decrees and words / be put in chains and kept in the squalor of prison until Governor Dulcitus can examine them.
- DULCITIUS: Bring forth, soldiers, the girls whom you hold sequestered. /
- SOLDIERS: Here they are whom you requested. /
- 60 DULCITIUS: Wonderful, indeed, how beautiful, how graceful, how admirable these little girls are!
- SOLDIERS: Yes, they are perfectly lovely.
- DULCITIUS: I am captivated by their beauty.
- SOLDIERS: That is understandable.
- 65 DULCITIUS: To draw them to my heart, I am eager. /
- SOLDIERS: Your success will be meager. /
- DULCITIUS: Why?
- SOLDIERS: Because they are firm in faith.
- DULCITIUS: What if I sway them by flattery? /
- 70 SOLDIERS: They will despise it utterly. /
- DULCITIUS: What if with tortures I frighten them? /
- SOLDIERS: Little will it matter to them. /
- DULCITIUS: Then what should be done, I wonder? /
- SOLDIERS: Carefully you should ponder. /
- 75 DULCITIUS: Place them under guard in the inner room of the pantry, where they keep the servants' pots. /
- SOLDIERS: Why in that particular spot? /
- DULCITIUS: So that I may visit them often at my leisure. /
- SOLDIERS: At your pleasure. /
- 80 DULCITIUS: What do the captives do at this time of night? /
- SOLDIERS: Hymns they recite. /
- DULCITIUS: Let us go near. /
- SOLDIERS: From afar we hear their tinkling little voices clear. /
- 85 DULCITIUS: Stand guard before the door with your lantern / but I will enter / and satisfy myself in their longed-for embrace. /
- SOLDIERS: Enter. We will guard this place. /
- 90 AGAPE: What is that noise outside the door? /
- HIRENA: That wretched Dulcitus coming to the fore. /
- CHIONIA: May God protect us!
- AGAPE: Amen.
- CHIONIA: What is the meaning of this clash of the pots and the pans? 95
- HIRENA: I will check. / Come here, please, and look through the crack! /
- AGAPE: What is going on?
- HIRENA: Look, the fool, the madman base, / he thinks he is enjoying our embrace. / 100
- AGAPE: What is he doing?
- HIRENA: Into his lap he pulls the utensils, / he embraces the pots and the pans, giving them tender kisses. /
- CHIONIA: Ridiculous!
- HIRENA: His face, his hands, his clothes, are so soiled, so filthy, that with all the soot that clings to him, he looks like an Ethiopian. 105
- AGAPE: It is only right that he should appear in body the way he is in his mind: possessed by the Devil.
- HIRENA: Wait! He prepares to leave. Let us watch how he is greeted, / and how he is treated / by the soldiers who wait for him. 110
- SOLDIERS: Who is coming out? / A demon without doubt. / Or rather, the Devil himself is he; / let us flee! /
- DULCITIUS: Soldiers, where are you taking yourselves in flight? / Stay! Wait! Escort me home with your light! / 115
- SOLDIERS: The voice is our master's tone / but the look the Devil's own. / Let us not stay! / Let us run away; the apparition will slay us! / 120
- DULCITIUS: I will go to the palace and complain, / and reveal to the whole court the insults I had to sustain. /
- DULCITIUS: Guards, let me into the palace; / I must have a private audience. /
- GUARDS: Who is this vile and detestable monster covered in torn and despicable rags? Let us beat him, / from the steps let us sweep him; / he must not be allowed to enter. 125
- DULCITIUS: Alas, alas, what has happened? Am I not dressed in splendid garments? Don't I look neat and clean? / Yet anyone who looks at my mien / loathes me as a foul monster. To my wife I shall return, / and from her learn / what has happened. But there is my spouse, / with disheveled hair she leaves the house, / and the whole household follows her in tears. 130
- WIFE: Alas, alas, my Lord Dulcitus, what has happened to you? / You are not sane; the Christians have made a laughing stock out of you. / 135
- DULCITIUS: Now I know at last. I owe this mockery to their witchcraft. 140
- WIFE: What upsets me so, what makes me more sad, is that you were ignorant of all that happened to you.
- DULCITIUS: I command that those insolent girls be led forth, / and that they be publicly stripped of all their clothes, / so that they experience similar mockery in retaliation for ours. 145
- SOLDIERS: We labor in vain; / we sweat without gain. / Behold, their garments stick to their virginal bodies like skin, / and he who urged us to strip them snores in his seat, / and he cannot be awakened from his 150

sleep. / Let us go to the Emperor and report what has happened.

DIOCLETIAN: It grieves me very much / to hear that Governor Dulcitiuſ has been so greatly deluded, / so greatly insulted, / so utterly humiliated. / But these vile young women shall not boast with impunity of having made a mockery of our gods and those who worship them. I shall direct Count Sissinus to take due vengeance.

SISSINUS: Soldiers, where are those insolent girls who are to be tortured?

SOLDIERS: They are kept in prison.

SISSINUS: Leave Hirena there, / bring the others here. /

SOLDIERS: Why do you except the one?

SISSINUS: Sparing her youth. Perchance, she may be converted easier, if she is not intimidated by her sisters' presence. /

SOLDIERS: That makes sense. /

SOLDIERS: Here are the girls whose presence you requested.

SISSINUS: Agape and Chionia, give heed, / and to my council accede! /

AGAPE: We will not give heed. /

SISSINUS: Bring offerings to the gods.

AGAPE: We bring offerings of praise forever / to the true Father eternal, / and to His Son co-eternal, / and also to the Holy Spirit.

SISSINUS: This is not what I bid, / but on pain of penalty prohibit. /

AGAPE: You cannot prohibit it; neither shall we ever sacrifice to demons.

SISSINUS: Cease this hardness of heart, and make your offerings. But if you persist, / then I shall insist / that you be killed according to the Emperor's orders.

CHIONIA: It is only proper that you should obey the orders of your Emperor, whose decrees we disdain, as you know. For if you wait and try to spare us, then you could be rightfully killed.

SISSINUS: Soldiers, do not delay, / take these blaspheming girls away, / and throw them alive into the flames.

SOLDIERS: We shall instantly build the pyre you asked for, and we will cast these girls into the raging fire, and thus we'll put an end to these insults at last. /

AGAPE: O Lord, nothing is impossible for Thee; / even the fire forgets its nature and obeys Thee; / but we are weary of delay; / therefore, dissolve the earthly bonds that hold our souls, we pray, / so that as our earthly bodies die, / our souls may sing your praise in Heaven.

SOLDIERS: Oh, marvel, oh stupendous miracle! Behold their souls are no longer bound to their bodies, / yet no traces of injury can be found; neither their hair, nor their clothes are burnt by the fire, / and their bodies are not at all harmed by the pyre. /

SISSINUS: Bring forth Hirena.

SOLDIERS: Here she is.

SISSINUS: Hirena, tremble at the deaths of your sisters and fear to perish according to their example.

HIRENA: I hope to follow their example and expire, / so with them in Heaven eternal joy I may acquire. /

SISSINUS: Give in, give in to my persuasion. /

HIRENA: I will never yield to evil persuasion. /

SISSINUS: If you don't yield, I shall not give you a quick and easy death, but multiply your sufferings.

HIRENA: The more cruelly I'll be tortured, / the more gloriously I'll be exalted. /

SISSINUS: You fear no tortures, no pain? / What you abhor, I shall ordain. /

HIRENA: Whatever punishment you design, / I will escape with help Divine. /

SISSINUS: To a brothel you will be consigned, / where your body will be shamefully defiled. /

HIRENA: It is better that the body be dirtied with any stain than that the soul be polluted with idolatry.

SISSINUS: If you are so polluted in the company of harlots, you can no longer be counted among the virginal choir.

HIRENA: Lust deserves punishment, but forced compliance the crown. With neither is one considered guilty, / unless the soul consents freely. /

SISSINUS: In vain have I spared her, in vain have I pitied her youth.

SOLDIERS: We knew this before; / for on no possible score / can she be moved to adore our gods, nor can she be broken by terror.

SISSINUS: I shall spare her no longer. /

SOLDIERS: Rightly you ponder. /

SISSINUS: Seize her without mercy, / drag her with cruelty, / and take her in dishonor to the brothel. /

HIRENA: They will not do it. /

SISSINUS: Who can prohibit it? /

HIRENA: He whose foresight rules the world. /

SISSINUS: I shall see . . . /

HIRENA: Sooner than you wish, it will be. /

SISSINUS: Soldiers, be not afraid / of what this blaspheming girl has said. /

SOLDIERS: We are not afraid, / but eagerly follow what you bade. /

SISSINUS: Who are those approaching? How similar they are to the men / to whom we gave Hirena just then. / They are the same. Why are you returning so fast? / Why so out of breath, I ask? /

SOLDIERS: You are the one for whom we look. /

SISSINUS: Where is she whom you just took? /

SOLDIERS: On the peak of the mountain.

SISSINUS: Which one?

SOLDIERS: The one close by.

SISSINUS: Oh you idiots, dull and blind. / You have completely lost your mind! /

SOLDIERS: Why do you accuse us, / why do you abuse us, / why do you threaten us with menacing voice and face?

SISSINUS: May the gods destroy you!

SOLDIERS: What have we committed? What harm have we done? How have we transgressed against your orders?

SISSINUS: Have I not given the orders that you should take that rebel against the gods to a brothel?

- SOLDIERS: Yes, so you did command, / and we were
eager to fulfill your demand, / but two strangers
intercepted us / saying that you sent them to us / to
lead Hirena to the mountain's peak.
- 270 SISSINUS: That's new to me. /
SOLDIERS: We can see. /
SISSINUS: What were they like? /
SOLDIERS: Splendidly dressed and an awe-inspiring
sight. /
- 275 SISSINUS: Did you follow? /
SOLDIERS: We did so. /
SISSINUS: What did they do? /
SOLDIERS: They placed themselves on Hirena's left and
right, / and told us to be forthright / and not to hide
from you what happened.
- 280 SISSINUS: I see a sole recourse, / that I should mount my
horse / and seek out those who so freely made sport
with us.
- 285 SISSINUS: Hmm, I don't know what to do. I am bewil-
dered by the witchcraft of these Christians. I keep
going around the mountain and keep finding this
track / but I neither know how to proceed nor how
to find my way back. /
- SOLDIERS: We are all deluded by some intrigue; / we are
afflicted with a great fatigue; / if you allow this
insane person to stay alive, / then neither you nor we
shall survive. /
- 290 SISSINUS: Anyone among you, / I don't care which,
string a bow, and shoot an arrow, and kill that
witch! /
- 295 SOLDIERS: Rightly so. /
HIRENA: Wretched Sissinus, blush for shame, and pro-
claim your miserable defeat because without the help
of weapons, you cannot overcome a tender little vir-
gin as your foe. /
- 300 SISSINUS: Whatever the shame that may be mine, I will
bear it more easily now because I know for certain
that you will die.
- 305 HIRENA: This is the greatest joy I can conceive, / but for
you this is a cause to grieve, / because you shall
be damned in Tartarus° for your cruelty, / while I
shall receive the martyr's palm and the crown of vir-
ginity; / thus I will enter the heavenly bridal chamber
of the Eternal King, to whom are all honor and glory
in all eternity. /
- 310
306. Tartarus: Hell.

COMMENTARIES

Marla Carlson

READING HROTSVIT'S TORMENTED BODIES

1998

In this excerpt from an article that appeared in Theatre Journal, Marla Carlson reminds us in this brief treatment of Dulcitus that the question of physical beauty can be interpreted in several different ways. In the world of Hrotsvitha, the pagan emphasis on the physical body must always be seen in relation to the Christian emphasis on the soul. Carlson sees a gender connection between the two.

In *The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgins Agape, Chionia, and Hirena*, beauty is a transparent sign of virtue. The play (also known as *Dulcitus*) begins with an ironic contrast: the pagan Emperor Diocletian manifests the rage and madness he attributes to the virgins, while they remain impassive. The girls' bodies function as foci of desire but are themselves free from desire. By contrast, the non-Christian men are represented as desiring subjects, which also means they are *subject* to their bodies. Diocletian wants to direct the disposal of the girls in marriage. Governor Dulcitus wants to use and possess them himself, and his desire produces his downfall. After he is blackened in the kitchen by making love to the pots and pans he mistakes for the virgins, Agape observes that now Dulcitus's body corresponds to his