5

Medieval Theatres in Europe

As we begin to examine the Middle Ages—or the *medieval* period, as this era is also called—it is important to remember that divisions of history are artificial and are used primarily so that historical developments will be easier to discuss. This is certainly the case with the medieval era.

Background: The Middle Ages

In Western culture, the period from 500 through 1400 C.E. is referred to as the *Middle Ages*, and the years between 1400 and 1650 are known as the *Renaissance*—the era when the classics of Greece and Rome were rediscovered. But these dates are arbitrary: in some cases the Middle Ages are extended to 1450 or 1500; and in some cases the Renaissance is said to have begun by 1350. This is often a matter of which country or which form of art is being studied; developments vary from one country and one branch of art to another. Thus the Renaissance came to Italy before it came to Spain, France, and England, and Renaissance painting had emerged while theatre was still in its medieval phase: some of the greatest medieval drama was

Touring Minstrels and Strolling Players One of the traditions influencing the secular theatre of the Middle Ages was the touring minstrel, who performed in makeshift spaces—on improvised platforms, on the street, or in a booth. This drawing, done at the close of the Middle Ages in 1598, depicts a form of entertainment—the strolling players—that was prevalent throughout the medieval period and continued well beyond.

Middle Ages

THEATRE

- Traveling performers (c. 500–925)
- Byzantine theatre (similar to Roman theatre) (fifth through seventh centuries)
- Trulian Synod attempts to end performances in Byzantium (692)
- *Quem quaeritis trope* (c. 925)
- Hrosvitha, a nun, writes Christian comedies based on Terence (c. 970)
- Vernacular religious drama flourishes: peak of medieval theatre (c. 1350–1550)
- *Second Shepherds' Play* (c. 1375)
- *Pride of Life* (c. 1400)
- *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1425)
- Actor playing Judas at Metz almost dies while being hanged (1437)
- *Pierre Patelin* (c. 1470)
- Hans Sachs born (1494)
- *Everyman* (c. 1500)
- Jean Bouchet, pageant master, directs cycle at Poitiers (1508)
- Cycle staged at Mons (1510)
- John Heywood's *Johan Johan* (1533)

C.E.

475 · 525 · 575 · 675 · 725 · 775 · 825 · 925 · 975 · 1025 · 1075 · 1125 · 1175 · 1225 · 1275 · 1325 · 1375 · 1425 · 1475 · 1525

CULTURE AND POLITICS

- "Dark Ages" (476–1000)
- Justinian becomes Byzantine emperor (527)
- Muhammad born (c. 570)
- Charles Martel defeats Muslims near Poitiers (732)
- Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor (800)
- Beginning of Romanesque architecture (c. 830)
- Earliest European reference to a collar in the harness of a horse that would allow the drawing of heavy loads and plow (920)
- *Beowulf* (1000)
- Norman conquest (1066)
- First Crusade (1095)
- Beginning of Gothic architecture (1140)
- English Magna Carta (1215)
- Oxford University flourishes (c. 1260)
- Roger Bacon's *De Computo naturali* (1264)
- Black death apparently originates in India (1332)
- Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353)
- Pope Urban VI in Rome; Clement VII at Avignon (1378)
- Peasant revolt in England (1381)
- Chaucer dies (1400)
- Gutenberg invents printing by movable type (c. 1450)
- Constantinople falls to the Turks (1453)
- Copernicus born (1473)
- Martin Luther born (1483)
- Columbus crosses the Atlantic (1492)

created between 1350 and 1550, a period when Renaissance painting and sculpture were already established. Medieval theatre, therefore, extends through 1550—well past the time when most cultural historians would say that the Renaissance had begun.

For that matter, some theatre historians do not refer to the later religious plays in England as medieval but, rather, as early English drama to reflect its impact on such Elizabethan playwrights as Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare. In addition, scholars point out that Spanish medieval religious theatre continued to flourish throughout the Spanish Renaissance, known as the golden age of Spanish theatre.

The overlap between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance points to the fact that developments in theatre sometimes seem to lag behind other cultural developments. This suggestion, of course, is not meant to demean theatre. Theatre is a reflection of society and is particularly concerned with people and their relationships to one another and to society. It takes time for shifts in these relationships to be absorbed, and therefore it is not surprising that theatre needs time to take in and mirror societal transformations. Another reason that theatre sometimes reflects cultural changes

Medieval Europe

more slowly than other art forms is that in order to survive it must usually have wide appeal: it must attract a broad cross-section of society. A single patron can commission a painting or a sculpture; but a theatre performance needs an audience.

Byzantium: Popular Arts and Theatrical Preservation

Before examining Western society and theatre during the Middle Ages, we should turn our attention briefly eastward. When Rome fell in 476 C.E., only the western Roman empire collapsed. The eastern empire, centralized in 330 C.E. by Constantine in Constantinople (today, Istanbul, Turkey), continued to function until 1453. Withstanding expansion by Islamic peoples, Byzantium, as the eastern empire was known, synthesized three important influences: ancient Greece, Rome, and Christianity. The Western world came into contact with Byzantium during the Crusades—the religious wars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that were undertaken to prevent the expansion of Islam. The western empire, however, had always looked on the eastern empire as a secondary civilization, and a sharp split between east and west occurred in 1054, when eastern Christianity broke from western Christianity, refusing to acknowledge the supremacy of the papacy.

The theatre of Byzantium was reminiscent of theatre during the Roman empire. The Hippodrome in Constantinople, a large arena that could accommodate 40,000 to 80,000 spectators, was the Byzantine equivalent of the Circus Maximus or the Colosseum, and popular entertainments like those of Rome flourished in the east. Thus one contribution of the Byzantine empire to the continuity of theatre consists of these popular presentations, including mime, pantomime, gladiatorial contests, and animal battles. Another important contribution lies in the fact that Byzantium was the preserver of the manuscripts of classical Greek drama: the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and the criticism of Aristotle were saved because eastern scholars recognized their importance and made certain that they were not destroyed. When the eastern empire fell in 1453, these manuscripts were transferred to the Western world and became part of the rediscovery of the past that influenced the Renaissance.

The Middle Ages in Western Europe

Most discussions of medieval society are concerned with Western developments from the early Middle Ages (500 to 1000 C.E.) through the High Middle Ages (about 1000 to 1400). The years from 500 to 1000 were erroneously called the

Dark Ages, because historians originally viewed this period as one in which few cultural or historical advances occurred. Most historians now argue that this era actually laid the groundwork for the advances of the High Middle Ages, and we will therefore refer to it as the early Middle Ages.

During the early Middle Ages, the vestiges of the Roman empire were overrun by barbarians, primarily from northern Europe, and institutions established by the Romans were toppled; Roman towns and roadways fell into disuse. The institution that stepped in to provide a semblance of order to the chaotic society was the Roman Catholic Church. As noted in Chapter 3, the Roman empire had been Christianized before its fall, and when the pagan barbarians invaded, many of them were converted to the new belief. The church was the center of artistic and educational activities. While Latin was the language of the church, vernacular languages—those of the local populations—became more dominant. The church's power was centralized in Rome under the pope; when Charlemagne became the most powerful secular ruler in Europe, during the early ninth century, he was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Under Charlemagne (768–814) there was a revival of arts, with a greater focus on classical learning. After his death, however, the centralization of power disappeared and European rule was fragmented. Secular rulers were always subject to the church's influence.

During these early years of the Middle Ages, there probably were troupes of traveling popular performers who presented comic, acrobatic, and circus-like entertainments. These performers were most common in areas closest to Rome and were frequently attacked by church officials. There were also traveling singers and storytellers, particularly in the north; and festivals that had been popular before the advent of Christianity were staged as well. These festivals contained performative elements, including dance, simulated battles, and mime.

By about 1000, medieval society had begun to establish its own patterns of organization, and between the years 1000 and 1400 major advances took place in most areas of human endeavor. During this period, the powerful church, though frequently questioned and threatened, was ever-present.

Medieval society was primarily agrarian; people everywhere were close to the land. For financial reasons and because of the way society was organized, most people rarely strayed far from the area where they were born and brought up. During the Middle Ages, the development of mechanical inventions—heavier plows, better harnesses, and windmills—made agricultural work more efficient. Production was increased, and soil depletion was prevented by the "three-field" system: agricultural landholdings were divided into three parts so that crops could be rotated; each plot remained unplanted once every three years.

Medieval society developed feudalism as a means of political organization. Under this system there were three major categories or classifications of people. At the top of the hierarchy were *lords* or *counts*, who controlled large areas of land and protected less wealthy landholders. In return for a lord's protection, his subjects—the second level, *vassals* or lesser lords, who controlled smaller areas of land—agreed to provide military service, consult with him, and pay him occasional fees. Under the vassals were the *peasants*, or *serfs*, who were attached to their

lord's land and required to work it. In return they received protection and a very small financial reward. Serfs, though bound to the land, had a higher status than the slaves of earlier societies. Unlike slaves, serfs had some recognized rights and at times could move to other areas. Medieval society became the first Western culture that did not practice slavery on a large scale.

In France, the chief figure among the important lords came to be the monarch. Some historians argue that the growth of national monarchies at the end of the Middle Ages developed directly out of feudalism.

During the High Middle Ages, there was a rebirth of towns as a result of expansion of commerce and trade. The towns were self-governing units, independent of the feudal system, and their growth led to a liberalizing of feudalism and possibly to the eradication of serfdom in the fifteenth century. Within the

Hrosvitha of Gandersheim Writing in the tenth century C.E., Hrosvitha, a nun in a Benedictine abbey in Saxony, is thought to be the earliest female playwright. Shown here seated on the right reading to her fellow nuns, Hrosvitha, writing in Latin, created six plays with religious themes in the manner of the Roman playwright Terence.

towns, merchants and craftsmen, such as butchers, weavers, and goldsmiths, organized themselves into guilds to protect their interests and privileges. (A rough parallel might be trade associations today.) Under the guilds, vocational training was organized: to become a master craftsman, for instance, one served first as an apprentice and then as a journeyman. The guilds controlled the number of people entering the various professions.

An important aspect of the medieval period was the spread of knowledge. By the year 1500—after the end of the High Middle Ages—there were over 100 universities in Europe. Earlier, in the twelfth century, the writings of Aristotle and other classic texts were rediscovered by scholarly monks in monasteries in western Europe. However, despite a new awareness of ancient philosophy and the arts in the High Middle Ages, the "queen of sciences" remained theology—the study of religion, which had been the main intellectual pursuit of the early Middle Ages. Monks copied influential manuscripts; and as a result, the monasteries were centers of learning. As early as the tenth century, a nun in a convent in Germany, Hrosvitha of Gandersheim, wrote plays patterned on those of the Roman dramatist Terence.

Hrosvitha

Hrosvitha (c. 935–1001), the earliest known female dramatist, flourished during the tenth century in northern Germany. During this phase of the Middle Ages, religious communities served as centers of scholarship and intellectual life. Hrosvitha was a nun who lived and worked in one of these—Gandersheim, a Benedictine abbey in Saxony led by women of noble families. Gandersheim was an influential center.

There are indications that Hrosvitha was of noble birth and had more access to the world than the other nuns at Gandersheim. One of the scholars who have written about Hrosvitha, Sister Mary Marguerite of Mercy College, finds evidence that she was a "canoness" and therefore not completely cloistered—that is, not completely confined to the abbey.

Hrosvitha read and wrote in Latin, the language of the Roman Catholic Church and of Western scholarship during the Middle Ages. Like other medieval scholars, she studied classical Roman texts for their form and style. During the Middle Ages, one Roman writer admired for his style was the playwright Terence; Hrosvitha particularly admired Terence's plays, but she feared that his subject matter was not suitable for Christian readers. To provide dramas that students could read without risk of corruption, Hrosvitha wrote six plays in the Terentian manner but using Christian stories. In the preface to her collected plays, she noted that her purpose was to glorify Christian virgins.

Martyrdom of devout Christians, hard-won conversions of nonbelievers, renunciations of past sins, and strict penance for the past are the recurring dramatic actions in Hrosvitha's plays. Her plays *Paphnutius* and *Abraham* both concern a woman's redemption from sexual sins. Another, *Dulcitius*, depicts the martyrdom of three Christian virgins: Agape, Chionia, and Irena. This play has a surprisingly comic scene, in which the captor Dulcitius visits the sisters in the middle of the night and mistakenly makes love to some dirty pots and pans. Other plays by Hrosvitha are *Gallicanus*, *Callimachus*, and *Sapienta*.

There is no evidence that Hrosvitha's plays were intended for performance or ever received performances in her own time. Without an active theatre tradition, it is unlikely that Hrosvitha had much knowledge of dramatic performance. However, it is possible that the plays were read aloud at Gandersheim.

In addition to her plays, Hrosvitha wrote poetry, biographies of saints, and history. Her work was not widely known until it was rediscovered and published in 1501. In retrospect, Hrosvitha's plays are of interest because of their connection to both the formal composition of classical drama and the themes and subject matter of medieval mystery and morality plays as well as their relationship to contemporary feminist theory.

Liturgical Drama

Development of Medieval Liturgical Drama

During the Middle Ages, the church was omnipresent; it is not surprising, therefore, that medieval drama was mostly religious. Moreover, much of the drama of this period was actually presented in the sanctuaries of churches and cathedrals. How could this be? How could the church, which had attacked theatre so vehemently during the late Roman empire and the early Middle Ages, become the instrument of its rebirth?

There are several possible explanations for the development of church, or liturgical, drama. We noted in Chapter 1 that religious rites have theatrical elements, and the rituals of Roman Catholicism are no exception. Roman Catholic rituals had many elements that contained the seeds of the rebirth of theatre. The Mass and the canonical hours, the vestments worn by the clergy, the church space, the musical accompaniment, and the annual symbolic events (such as the burial of the cross on Good Friday and its resurrection on Easter Sunday) are all inherently theatrical.

Liturgical drama, which was sung, seems to have developed along with changes in liturgical music. A popular form of early medieval music had two groups responding to each other in song, almost suggesting dramatic interaction. By the ninth century, extended musical passages, called **tropes**, had been added to services; later, lyrics were written for these passages. The Mass was the most rigid of the numerous daily services; for that reason, tropes were most often interpolated into other services, such as the canonical hours, which varied from day to day and also had special texts for occasions like Christmas and Easter. These tropes, which were sung or chanted in Latin to musical accompaniment, were in most cases performed in monasteries.

Medieval records indicate that in certain localities a trope called the ***Quem quaeritis*** was added to the introductory section of the Easter service around the year 925. The Latin words *Quem quaeritis*—meaning "Whom do you seek?"—are the first words spoken in this trope: they are the question asked by an angel when the three Marys visit the tomb of Christ. When the women reply that they are seeking Christ, the angel announces that Christ is not in the tomb but has risen. We do not know whether the trope of 925 was acted out by performers playing the three Marys and the angel, but between 965 and 975 it definitely became a tiny play. We know this because those are the dates of the *Regularis Concordia*, a book by Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester, England. *Regularis* was intended to establish clear goals and rules of conduct and procedure for monasteries. Among other things, it described how the *Quem quaeritis* trope was to be performed.

It is a reasonable assumption that around 965—possibly before, and certainly soon after—tropes on other parts of the Bible had also begun to be staged, and more than 400 plays dealing with the visit of the Marys to the tomb have been found in various places in Europe. By the year 1000, then, liturgical dramas—short plays on this story of the visit to the tomb as well as other biblical events—had been incorporated into the services of churches in England and throughout the European continent.

Debates in Theatre History

Why Was Hrosvitha Ignored for So Long?

Hrosvitha is considered the first female playwright in the history of theatre, and she is at least the first female playwright of whom there is any record. However, until the 1970s and 1980s she received very little attention from theatre historians. Why?

The feminist critic Sue-Ellen Case, in her essay "Re-Viewing Hrotsvit,"* tries to explain why Hrosvitha was ignored by scholars and why her plays were rarely produced. Case argues that Hrosvitha was too often depicted as a poor imitator of the Roman playwright Terence, whose plays she adapted. Furthermore, it was too often assumed that if she was cloistered, Hrosvitha must have created these dramas only as a monastic exercise. Case suggests that these ideas reflected a male-oriented view of dramatic technique and history. She has reinterpreted Hrosvitha's scripts. According to Case, Terence presents female characters who are manipulated by men, are controlled by the institution of marriage, and have little onstage presence; but Hrosvitha represents women as controlling the dramatic action and as responding to male aggression. In addition, Case argues that Hrosvitha used a variety of uniquely feminist dramatic techniques and for that reason has never been well received critically. Case also asserts that Hrosvitha created her plays for the community of women who lived with her in the convent.

Case's analysis of Hrosvitha's work forces us to consider that because of historians' gender, racial, ethnic, or sexual orientation biases, key figures and their works may be ignored—including two other medieval nuns, Hildegard von Bingen and Katherine of Sutton. Case's analysis also leads us to ask whether the traditional list of great dramatists and their works—known as the *canon*—needs revision and expansion. (As we shall see, this has been reflected in scholarship about Hrosvitha such as *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Contexts, Identities, Affinities, and Performances*.† In addition, Case's work leads us to reevaluate traditional ideas that have been accepted as historical reality and the ways in which those who hold power and are in the majority often present that version of reality.

**Theatre Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2 (December 1983): 533–542.

†Phyllis R. Brown, Linda A. McMillin, and Katharina M. Wilson, eds., University of Toronto Press, 2004.

During this early period of the Middle Ages, a German nun named Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) wrote short musical plays, which were probably performed in the convent that she oversaw. Hildegard wrote liturgical songs that were accompanied by texts. These dramatic musical pieces honored saints and the Virgin Mary and were written for performance on religious days. Hildegard also created a play in Latin, *Ordo Virtutum* (*Play of Virtues*), that seems to foreshadow the later vernacular morality plays. Another nun who also wrote short dramatic texts was Katherine of Sutton in fourteenth-century England.

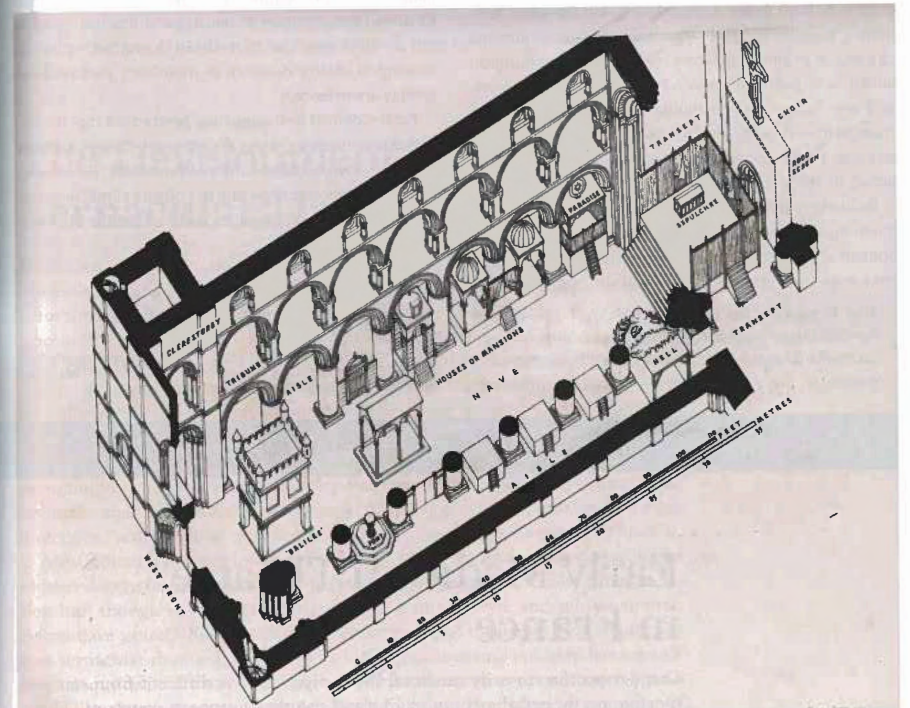
Producing Liturgical Drama

Liturgical dramas were written in Latin and presented by members of the clergy with the assistance of choirboys. At first, these dramas were staged in monasteries; the general population did not attend. Between 1000 and 1300, however, several significant changes took place. Urban centers developed where large groups of people congregated and where sizable churches began to be built. It was during this period that church architecture changed from Romanesque to Gothic; the Gothic style, with its pointed arches and buttressed walls, allowed for larger, more sweeping interior spaces. With the development of centers of population and the construction of Gothic churches and cathedrals, the liturgical plays were no longer confined to monasteries but came to be produced more widely, in churches as well as outdoors.

Two basic spatial elements were used for staging liturgical dramas within the church: the **mansion** and the **platea**. The platea was the central, open space, such as the nave. The mansion was a scenic structure depicting some locale needed for a biblical tale. Such a scenic unit could be specially—sometimes elaborately—constructed, or it could be an existing area within the church, such as a choir loft for heaven or the crypt for hell. Mansions were set up around the larger central playing area, the platea. Since a mansion was much too small to perform in, it served only to indicate a locale; once an action had been initiated at a mansion, it moved to the platea; the entire platea then became associated with the originating mansion for the duration of the scene.

The mansions in a church (or, later, in an outdoor space) were all on view at the same time. (This convention of multiple simultaneous settings is not one we are accustomed to seeing; if various locales are set up on a modern stage, lighting generally focuses our attention on a particular area.) In the medieval church, since the various mansions were visible simultaneously, the audience had to focus on one at a time and ignore the others. Interestingly, some contemporary avant-garde theatre companies have designed theatre spaces in which several playing areas are used simultaneously. In today's theatre, however, this technique has most often served to shatter the theatrical illusion of realistic drama and force audiences to become aware of the fact that they are watching a play. Medieval theatre, which was highly conventional, did not use, or need, its **simultaneous settings** for this purpose. In early English liturgical dramas, for example, males—usually the clergy, choir members, or students—performed all roles and church vestments served as costumes. Acceptance of **multiple settings** was in keeping with these conventions; it was also in keeping with the medieval worldview: the concept that all times and places were tied together in God's scheme of things.

As we have said, liturgical drama was written and performed in Latin, the language of scholarship and the church. When people attended a church service, there were many Latin words they understood—phrases from the Mass, for example, such as *In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti*, which means, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Still, Latin was not the language people spoke every day, and therefore the audience would not have understood most of the dialogue of liturgical plays. In the thirteenth century, however, dramas began to be written and presented in the languages spoken by ordinary people: Italian, French, Spanish, English, and so forth. Everyone could understand the language of these plays; thus the plays became more meaningful and immediate. The term for everyday speech is *vernacular*, and so this new form of drama—to which we turn below—is called religious **vernacular drama**. But first we should examine some unique developments in early medieval French theatre.



Staging Liturgical Drama This reconstruction shows how the interior of a medieval church was used for staging liturgical plays. In addition to the specially created mansions, existing areas within the church were used; note the open space called the platea, used for performing.

Debates in Theatre History

The Origins of Medieval Theatre and the Role of *Quem quaeritis*

Michal Kobialka, in *This Is My Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages*,* provides a postmodernist reading of medieval theatre history. In the introduction to his book, Kobialka asks the reader to confront contradictions in the best-known histories of early medieval theatrical practices.

Kobialka cogently argues that there is significant disagreement among historians regarding the origins of medieval theatre and drama. He notes: "Even this brief discussion of the origins of medieval drama and theatre indicates that there is no consensus among scholars concerned with the issue. The interpretations vary from non-ecclesiastical to ecclesiastical origins, from ritual to literary origins, or from forensic discourse to Marxist labor relations."† Kobialka suggests that the varied interpretations of possible origins range from mime to religious liturgical additions to public recitations to legal rhetorical delivery, and even connections to the development of towns and changes in work practices. Each theory embodies a historian's bias and unique point of view regarding the interpretation of surviving texts and documents.

In addition, Kobialka points out that there is no agreement regarding the place of *Quem quaeritis* in the development of medieval theatrical and dramatic practices. He cites many leading medieval theatre historians:

> Thus to establish the identity of the *Quem quaeritis*, the scholars utilize seven different theatrical forms: (1) liturgical drama (Chambers), (2) play (Young, Sticca, Anderson, Axton), (3) play of ritual drama (Hardison), (4) dramatic office (Craig), (5) liturgical music drama (Smoldon), (6) dramatic resurrection ceremony (Bjork), and (7) performance ceremony (Norton).‡

Clearly, each of these theories reflects an individual historian's interpretation and contextualization of *Quem quaeritis*, how that historian interprets documents pertaining to it (or excludes other sources), and how that scholar draws parallels to known theatrical practices. Among the diversity of opinions, there is no one prevailing theory.

In addition, other scholars have called for a reexamination of whether the first references to *Quem quaeritis* are truly an indication of the beginning of drama in the Middle Ages. Carol Symes, for example, argues that Bishop Ethelwold's description of the trope in about 975 C.E. is not an initial reference to medieval drama but, rather, an attempt to enforce decorum on more lively performances already in existence.§

Postmodernist historians have pointed out that the historical narratives we study are laden with biases and contradictory methodologies and interpretations. The attempt to evaluate theories regarding the origins of medieval theatrical and dramatic practices underscores the postmodernists' arguments.

*University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1999.
†Ibid., pp. 17–18.
‡Ibid., p. 24.
§"The Medieval Archive and the History of Theatre: Assessing the Written and Unwritten Evidence for Premodern Performance," *Theatre Survey*, vol. 52, no. 1 (May 2011).

Early Medieval Theatre in France

Our perspective on early medieval theatre in France is different from our perspective on theatrical activity in England or other European countries. This is because we have more records and manuscripts from France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries than we have from other areas. In addition, these documents indicate that there may have been more diversity in theatrical activity in France than elsewhere.

From the twelfth century in France, for example, we have two versions of the biblical story of Daniel, as well as a manuscript known as the *Play of Adam* or the *Mystery of Adam*, which features stories of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel. From the thirteenth century, there are six surviving plays. Two of these offer religious messages, sometimes presented in comic terms. Several dramas from this period mix serious Christian subject matter with comic, secular material.

This mixture is characteristic of early medieval theatre in France. For instance, it is assumed that in many places Latin liturgical drama preceded drama in the vernacular—that is, everyday language. In France, however, vernacular religious drama seems to have appeared at roughly the same time as Latin drama, and in a few instances may have even preceded it. Thus in the theatre of France at this time, Latin and vernacular drama, and low comedy and serious works, existed alongside one another. In fact, there may also have been more of this blending in other parts of Europe than is generally recognized.

Still, by the end of the fourteenth century a fairly clear division had been drawn between liturgical drama and secular drama, and it is to the origin and development of vernacular theatre that we will turn next.

The Development of Religious Vernacular Drama

Historians continue to debate how medieval vernacular drama originated. The earliest historians of medieval theatre suggested that church dramas performed in Latin simply metamorphosed—were transformed—into the vernacular. Scholars who held this developmental theory also believed that in addition to changing from Latin to the vernacular, religious plays moved from inside church buildings to stages erected outside. Among the reasons suggested for this move are the following: (1) The productions were becoming increasingly elaborate and were therefore difficult to stage in churches. (2) The cost of staging these dramas was becoming burdensome to the church. (3) Church officials were opposed to using holy spaces for theatre. One play that supports the notion of a move from inside the church building to outside is *The Mystery of Adam* (c. 1150), whose stage directions clearly indicate that it was performed outdoors, alongside the church.

Most contemporary scholars believe that later vernacular drama developed independently from the liturgical plays—that there was no evolutionary relationship, though there were similarities in dramatic style and subject matter. As we have noted, the evidence from early medieval theatre in France suggests that vernacular drama did not come after liturgical drama but may have developed alongside it. Whatever its origin, however, between 1350 and 1550 religious vernacular drama presented outside church buildings flourished in a number of European countries, including England, France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

In describing religious vernacular drama, it is important to remember that attempts to categorize various types have been made only long after these plays were actually performed. But to help us understand what kinds of plays were produced, scholars have separated religious vernacular dramas into two general categories: **mystery** or **cycle plays** and **morality plays**, which are difficult to categorize as religious or secular.

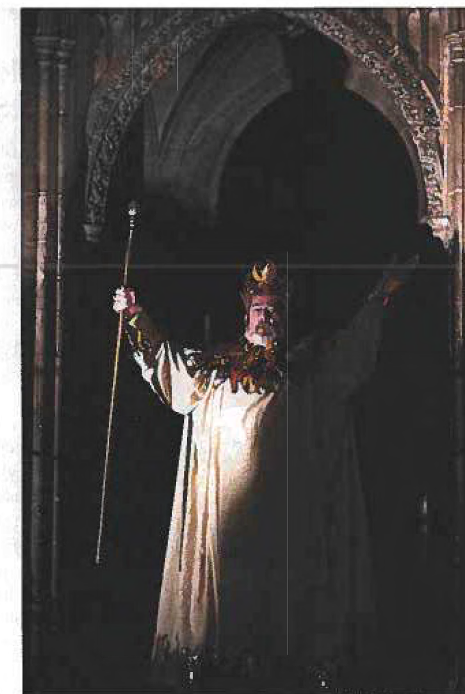
Mystery or Cycle Plays

The term *mystery* comes from *ministerium*, meaning a religious service or office; this suggests the religious origin of mystery dramas. The mystery plays dramatized a series of biblical events, from the creation to the last judgment. The cycle plays sometimes dramatized other stories connected to biblical figures, the lives and miracles of saints, and contemporary church doctrines. They were distinct from the brief liturgical plays: first, they were not presented as part of a religious ceremony but were staged independently as drama; second, they were not small, individual scenes, but short dramas sometimes presented as part of a sequence. When a number of plays were presented in sequence, they constituted a "cycle"—which is how the term *cycle plays* originated.

Spring and summer were the most popular times for the presentation of vernacular drama, primarily because of the weather. A favorite occasion for cycle plays was the feast of Corpus Christi. This festival, which was recognized officially by the church in 1311, was observed in the week after Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday occurs eight weeks after Easter Sunday; thus Corpus Christi took place sometime between the last week in May and the last week in June. It was intended to remind laypeople of the doctrine that the bread and wine of the Mass become the body and blood of Christ; but it went further than that—it incorporated the mystery that, in Roman Catholicism, gives meaning to existence: the union of human and divine in the person of Christ and the promise of redemption made possible by his sacrifice. It was because of this breadth of meaning, and because the festival took place in late spring, that Corpus Christi became a favorite occasion for cycle plays. But cycle plays were also presented at other times and in conjunction with other festivals. Though no exact parallel can be drawn, it is interesting to note that Greek and Roman drama was also presented in conjunction with religious observances or festivals. These appear to be natural times—times when people gather together and are in a celebratory mood—for dramatic presentations.

Since cycle plays were written in the vernacular and staged outdoors, they were meant to appeal to large audiences and to popular tastes. The mysteries are often set in biblical or earlier times, but the characters are medieval types; Abraham and Isaac, for example, are dramatized not as Old Testament Jews but as medieval Christian serfs. Old Testament characters in the cycle plays speak of saints who have not yet been born. Such a displacement in time is called an *anachronism*, and mystery plays are filled with anachronisms. Presenting characters and events outside their proper historical sequence made the biblical characters more identifiable to audiences and also drew parallels between past eras and medieval times. Abraham and Isaac, Noah, Joseph, and the Virgin Mary were depicted as ordinary men and women just like the friends and neighbors of medieval audiences. The charm and directness of these characterizations are still evident when we read the plays today.

To popularize these religious dramas, medieval dramatists also highlighted the spectacular. (Even today, audiences can be mesmerized by biblical spectacle, as is evidenced by the popularity of biblical epic films.) A good example of special effects was a production of a play about Noah in 1501 in the town of Mons, in present-day Belgium. In this play, Noah is commanded by God to build an ark to save his family and all the animals because it will soon rain for forty days and forty nights and a great flood will come. When the moment of the deluge arrived, the Mons production provided a spectacular effect. On the roofs of houses behind the "Noah" stage area in the town square, water had been stored in wine barrels and men were standing by, waiting for a signal to open the barrels. When the signal was given, the deluge began and torrents of water fell onto the stage. Enough water had been stored to provide a steady rain for five minutes. In the presentation, water rose all around, but Noah, his family, and his animals were safe in the ark. Since many of the religious dramas had a violent scene, such as a hanging or crucifixion, there are accounts of actors being placed in perilous situations because of the desire for realistic special effects. Lifelike dummies were also used for particularly violent moments in the cycles.



Mystery Plays The mystery plays depicted scenes from the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament. These plays were frequently presented in a cycle, a series of short dramas each of which dramatized an episode from the Bible. They were strung together over several hours or several days. The scene here shows Edward Woodward as God in a contemporary production of a mystery play at Canterbury Cathedral in England.

Comedy was also introduced to make the cycle plays more appealing. A good example occurs in the play about Noah and his wife. As Noah begins building his ark, his neighbors make fun of him and his carping wife argues with him. The wife is caricatured as a shrew, always nagging her husband. She does not want to board the ark, and the byplay between her and Noah is highly humorous. In other words, though the story is serious, both the character and the actions of Noah's wife are comic.

At the close of this discussion, we should emphasize that there is much controversy surrounding the cycle plays of the Middle Ages. Current scholarship suggests that the cycles were probably not as extensive as previously thought and that few actual cycles may have been staged. Dating the plays is also difficult, since they were often revised. Dramatic styles also varied from country to country. In addition, while Corpus Christi became most associated with the cycle plays, historians now point out that these plays were staged at many other times as well. We will see later in this chapter that there is also considerable disagreement about the staging of the cycles.

English Cycle Dramas and *The Second Shepherds' Play*

The surviving English vernacular plays are organized in a series of cycles and come from specific towns in which they were staged. The oldest is the N-Town cycle, which comprises forty-one plays that were found in a manuscript dated earlier than 1468. (N-Town has only an initial because scholars do not know which of the 123 towns in England where cycle plays were performed it designates.)

The York cycle, comprising forty-eight plays, survives in a manuscript from about 1477, though the plays had probably been staged for a century prior to that. The Towneley cycle (named after the family that long owned the medieval manuscript) comprises thirty-two plays and is also called the Wakefield cycle since it most likely came from that town; it has five plays that are identical to those in the York cycle. The Chester cycle has twenty-one plays and was performed as late as 1575.

In order to understand the themes and dramatic structure of vernacular plays, we can look at a specific example: *The Second Shepherds' Play* (c. 1375) from the Wakefield (Towneley) cycle.

The Second Shepherds' Play dramatizes the biblical story of the shepherds who are told by an angel of the birth of Christ and are instructed to visit the manger where he has been born. Its first section comically depicts the stealing of a sheep from three shepherds by a rogue, Mak. When the three shepherds search for the missing sheep in Mak's home, Gil, his wife, puts it in a crib and pretends that it is her newborn child. When the shepherds return a second time to offer gifts to Mak's "child," they discover that the infant is the stolen sheep. Though thievery was a capital offense in medieval law, the lenient shepherds merely toss Mak in the air in a blanket.

The humble and just shepherds are then called by the angel to visit the newborn Christ child, to whom they bring gifts in the second section of the play. The farcical "birth" of the first section, therefore, sets the stage for the holy nativity. Parallels are drawn between these two plots: the "child" in the first section is a sheep, just as Christ is the lamb of God; and in both sections there are scenes of adoration and gift-giving.

The Second Shepherds' Play uses most of the standard dramatic techniques of medieval cycle plays. It is written in the vernacular and in verse and is filled with anachronisms. The shepherds are characters out of the Middle Ages, not the Bible: they complain about their lords and feudal conditions, and even though Christ is not born until the close of the play, they pray to him and to various saints throughout the first section. Though the play dramatizes the birth of the Christian savior, this event is preceded by an extended comic section that reflects the influence of secular farce. The mixture of comic and serious elements itself indicates the two strains of medieval theatre—religious and secular.

The Emergence of Episodic Form

In Chapter 2, we examined the first important dramatic form that emerged in Western theatre, the climactic drama developed in Greece and Rome. The second major dramatic form to develop in the Western tradition is **episodic structure**. Early traces of episodic structure can be found in medieval religious drama.

The Second Shepherd's Play In England during the medieval period, cycle plays were developed: a group of plays that told the story, for example, of the life of Jesus. A well-known example is *The Second Shepherd's Play* from the cycle in Wakefield, England. This play dramatizes the visit of shepherds to the manger where Christ was born. In this scene from a production by The Players of St. Peter in London, a shepherd asks to lift the cloth from the face of the person he presumes is the baby Jesus, only to discover it is a sheep that has been substituted for Christ.

Episodic drama stands in marked contrast to climactic drama. The "crisis" structure of Greek drama is formal and tightly constructed. In a typical Greek play, the plot begins near the climax of the story, there are very few major characters, the locale of the action is limited (often to one place), and comedy and tragedy are not mixed in the same play. In the religious drama that emerged during the Middle Ages, the dynamics are quite different.

In *The Second Shepherds' Play*, as we have seen, the action shifts abruptly from a field to Mak's hut and then to Christ's manger some distance away; and comic and serious elements are freely intermingled. Obviously, a play about the birth of Christ should be serious; but the taste for earthy farce was irrepressible in English drama of this period, and so comedy also became a part of the drama.

Moreover, *The Second Shepherds' Play*—unlike climactic drama—does not have a single plot; it has two separate, though related, stories: Mak and the theft of the sheep, and the visit to the Christ child. The fact that two stories unfold simultaneously suggests how these plays achieved unity and advanced a theme. The method is to juxtapose two stories, two plot threads, and two sets of characters so that they reverberate with and thus reinforce one another. A theme is explored from two or more points of view so that the whole becomes greater than its parts. In *The Second Shepherds' Play*, Mak steals a lamb, and we recall that Christ is often called the *lamb of God*. As we move from the story of Mak to the story of Christ's

birth, we are aware of two babies and two lambs; and the echoes and resonances of these two ideas bring the parts of the drama together to create a forceful image.

Frequent changes in time and place occur in *The Second Shepherds' Play*; but this did not bother medieval audiences, who were not concerned with a realistic or literal rendition of a story. In a series of cycle plays, the story unfolded from beginning to end and often involved a great many characters.

In the cycle plays, then, instead of the economy and compression of Greek drama, we find expansiveness and a juxtaposition of elements. We switch from one element to another: from one group of characters to a different group; from one historical period to another; from one story line to another; from comedy to serious drama. Tension and excitement, as well as meaning, often arise from this shifting back and forth.

Episodic structure was logical for the cycle plays, given the medieval worldview—the concept of all time as part of God's continuum. The past was considered part of the medieval present; therefore, anachronisms and sudden changes in time and place were not considered incongruous. A parallel can be drawn with medieval triptych paintings: many of these paintings were designed as church altarpieces and show three separate religious scenes side by side.

Episodic drama was in its infancy during the medieval period, but in later years it became the foundation for highly complex plays, such as those of English playwrights like Shakespeare and Spanish dramatists like Lope de Vega. The episodic approach entered the mainstream of Western drama; it and the Greek climactic form became the two predominant dramatic structures from the sixteenth to the early twenty-first century.

Producing the Cycle Plays

Liturgical drama, as we noted earlier, was produced within the church building. For the mystery plays, production techniques varied throughout Europe.

On the Continent, mystery plays were produced by religious guilds or clubs called *confraternities*. In northern England, they were produced by trade guilds, and plays were often assigned to the trade guild that seemed "appropriate." The Last Supper, for example, might have been presented by the bakers' guild because of the bread served by Christ; the Noah play by the shipbuilders' guild; and the visit of the magi (in which the three wise men bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ child) by the goldsmiths' guild. Because of the guilds' participation, the presentations were often civic and commercial events; the cycle plays provided an opportunity for trades and craftsmen to display their abilities. Frequently, town councils or other local organizations assisted in financing and scheduling, although the church continued to oversee outdoor religious theatrical events.

Cycle plays were usually produced once every two to ten years, and some were extremely elaborate. A passion play presented at Valenciennes in France in 1547 lasted twenty five days; and *The Acts of the Apostles*, given in 1536 at Bourges (also in France), lasted for forty days and had a cast of 300 performers. Probably, these were exceptions and most productions took place over a shorter period; nevertheless, productions were often complex to mount. The Noah play was part of a cycle at Mons that involved 150 actors playing approximately 350 roles. A total

Past and Present

Passion Plays

Passion plays that depict the life of Christ continue to be staged for large audiences in many parts of the world. Two long-running examples are the Oberammergau Passion Play and the American Passion Play.

The Oberammergau play was first staged in Bavaria (now a part of Germany) in 1634 after the community members of Oberammergau promised that they would stage a play about the life of Christ regularly if they were spared from the bubonic plague.

The German passion play is presented now only on years ending in "0"; thus the next performance is scheduled for 2020. In 2010, over a hundred performances were given, employing 2,000 performers, musicians, and stage technicians from the local community. The current version of the drama, staged in an open-air theatre, comprises scripts that were written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and juxtaposes scenes from the Old Testament with the passion of Christ.

Debate rages over whether the play's portrayal of Jewish characters and Jewish biblical tales is anti-Semitic. In medieval cycle plays dealing with the life of Christ, Jews were often presented negatively. In addition, Jewish Old Testament stories were Christianized. The same is true of the Oberammergau Passion Play.

In the United States, the American Passion Play, staged indoors in Bloomington, Illinois, celebrated its ninety-fourth consecutive season in 2017 and is one of the longest-running passion plays in the country. (However, its producers have announced that financial difficulties threaten its future.) The play, set in 30 C.E., traces Christ's life from his Sermon on the Mount to his resurrection and ascension. All the performers are nonprofessionals, much like their medieval counterparts in the cycle plays.

of forty eight rehearsals were held, and the productions lasted for four days. Performances of the cycle plays often began early in the day and, after a break for lunch, continued until late afternoon. Depending on the locale, this went on for two, three, or many more days.

Most people knew about forthcoming performances because so many members of a community were involved, but those who were not aware were informed by announcements and processions a few days beforehand. Practices on charging spectators varied. Most productions were free; however, on occasion, for certain productions in England and on the Continent, a fee was charged but the funds were returned to the local community.

Performers

Both on the Continent and in England, the actors in cycle plays were amateurs. As the productions became more complex, however, professionals may have supplemented the amateur casts. Customs regarding women performers varied: women performed in France, for instance, but were excluded in England. Because of the extensive scope of the cycle plays, doubling—having a performer play two or more different parts—was not unusual. Rehearsal time was minimal; typically, there were fewer than five rehearsals for an individual cycle. Amateur actors agreed under oath to perform and were fined for missing or disrupting a rehearsal. Since nonprofessionals were used, they were usually typecast and were requested to repeat their roles when a cycle was restaged. *Typecasting* means choosing people who have certain qualities in real life to play characters with similar qualities. A tough-looking man with a strong voice, for instance, would be cast as Cain, who kills his brother Abel; an innocent-looking young woman would play the Virgin Mary. Vocal abilities were highly regarded.

The financial burden on the individual performer could be great, but the task was undertaken as a religious duty. If, for example, an actor was unable to attend work because of his obligations in the production, he would have to hire a replacement at his job.

Costumes

Actors in the cycle plays provided their own costumes. They were assisted, however, if they needed unusual costumes: God, for example, was costumed as a pope (the pope being God's earthly representative), and angels wore church vestments with wings attached.

The assumption has usually been that the common characters in medieval mystery plays wore contemporary clothing: such costuming would have been in keeping with the anachronistic nature of these plays and with the desire to let audience members identify with biblical characters. In some instances, supernatural characters may have worn masks.

Recent scholarship, however, questions this traditionally accepted view. Some costume historians point out that in medieval art there is considerable interest in representing clothing from earlier periods, although most of these representations are historically inaccurate. In addition, lists of props and costumes that survive from certain pageants, as well as stage directions in some of the plays, suggest that costuming was not contemporary. For example, one N-Town cycle play requires one character to be costumed as a Jewish high priest.

Most likely, the approach to costuming in medieval theatre was not uniform—just as there was no single approach to staging. This uncertainty about costumes again reminds us that to try to establish a single, uniform concept of "medieval theatre" is to diminish a vital, robust art form, which flourished in many parts of Europe in a number of individual configurations.

Pageant Masters

Because of the complexity of cycle plays, there developed, both on the Continent and in England, a practice of having one person organize and oversee a production. In England, there are records of someone referred to as a **pageant master**, who supervised the mounting of plays on wagons. This might include advance preparations—both for the wagons and for the rehearsals of plays to be presented on them—and the logistics of seeing that the plays unfolded on schedule.

In the 1500s on the Continent—in France, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, and Austria—men were hired to oversee the elaborate production of cycle plays, and some of these men's names are known. One of them, a Frenchman named Jean Bouchet, outlined the duties of the manager or director. These responsibilities, Bouchet said, included finding people to construct scenery as well as seating for the audience; supervising the building of the stage (or stages); positioning machines and scenery; selecting and rehearsing performers; disciplining performers and fining those who violated the rules; assigning people to collect money at the entrances; and serving as a narrator between plays—describing what had happened before and arousing interest in what was to come.

Medieval Theatre "Director" This illustration, *Meneur du Jeu*, is from a miniature of the *Mystère de la Passion*. It is one of the earliest depictions of a "director" at work during a rehearsal of a medieval passion play. Note that he is holding a script in one hand and a baton in the other.

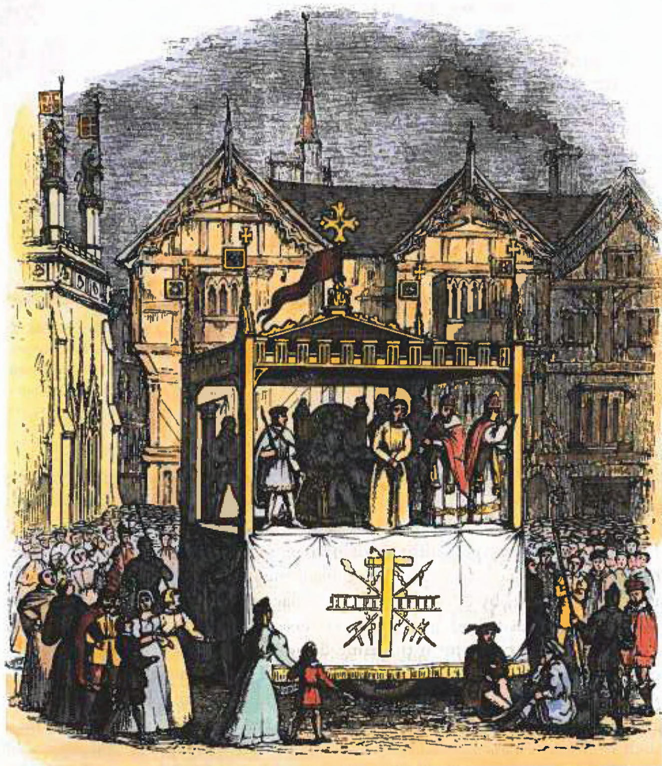
The duties and responsibilities of managers or pageant masters varied a great deal from place to place. As we have mentioned, the plays were organized in some areas by guilds and in other places by committees. But in many instances there was a single person who oversaw and managed the production. Such people did not perform the same duties as modern directors—they did not, for instance, develop an interpretation of the text or an overall concept to guide the production. But in terms of organization and management, the pageant masters anticipated the role of the director, who was to come very much to the forefront several centuries later. Also, the pageant masters could be said to anticipate modern-day producers, since some were responsible for financial details.

Stages

Processional and Stationary Staging Two traditions developed for staging the cycle plays: processional and stationary. The English, Spanish, and Dutch seem to have used processional staging for some of their mystery plays; the rest of

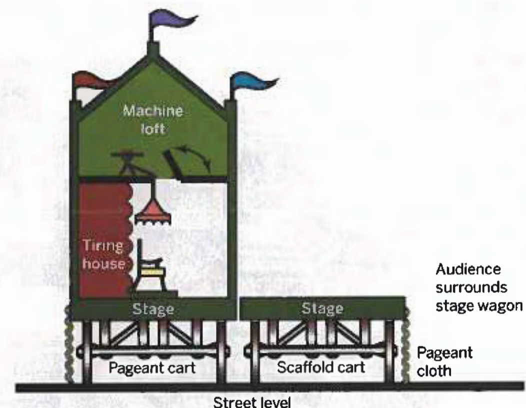
Europe used mainly stationary staging. Recent research suggests, however, that both forms of staging were probably used in most countries.

In **processional staging**, audiences assembled in various places and the cycle play was set up on a wagon that moved from locale to locale, so that the play could be presented separately for each audience area along its route. Numerous questions remain unanswered regarding processional staging in England. For example, what did a pageant wagon look like? One theory is that



Pageant Wagons One form of staging for medieval religious plays was the pageant wagon, which could be rolled into a town or a nearby field. The wagon—or wagons—served as a stage, contained scenery, and had a backstage area for costume changes. Scholars do not know exactly how a pageant wagon worked, but shown here are two speculations. Above is a hand-colored woodcut of a performance of a mystery play on a pageant wagon in Coventry, England, at the height of medieval theatre. The wagon has a platform with a cloth covering its lower part (from which characters could emerge). The drawing on the following page shows a cutaway view of two wagons: one serves as a stage platform, while the other, behind it, provides a place for storing scenery, changing costumes, and hiding special effects.

the wagon was a two-story structure on four to six wheels, with the bottom level serving as a curtained dressing area and the second level containing scenery and acting space.



Side view of possible arrangement of a medieval pageant wagon behind a second wagon.

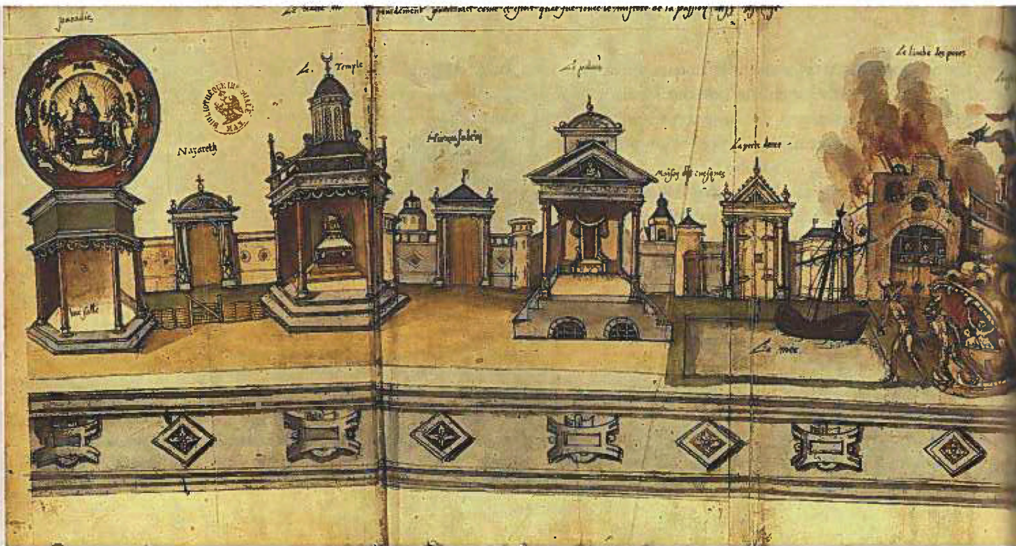
This theory has been challenged, though, because such wagons might have been too large and unwieldy to move through the narrow streets of medieval English towns and would not have provided a large enough area for acting. A second theory is that one-story wagons carrying scenery were used in conjunction with either bare scaffold carts or the street used for acting; costume changes took place in a curtained-off back area of the scenery cart. This theory is based on the Spanish practice of pulling scenery wagons up to a platform for performances; however, the Spaniards used two, three, or four scenery carts for each play.

The most radical theory is that true processional staging was too complicated: a town that had set aside only one day for a religious theatrical event could not have staged a complete cycle at a series of locales; also, since the plays were not uniform in length, it would have been difficult to coordinate a processional production. Therefore, some scholars believe that the pageant wagons, carrying scenery and possibly actors in a mute tableau, were paraded through a town (much like floats in a modern parade) and then pulled up to a stationary stage for the actual performance.

Though there is debate about precisely what form processional staging took, there is no question that it was an accepted type of theatrical presentation during the Middle Ages, particularly in England, Spain, and the Netherlands.

The second major form of production for cycle plays was **stationary staging**. In this form—which predominated throughout Europe—a series of small scenic mansions stood side by side, like those for liturgical drama. Usually a huge platform stage was erected in an open courtyard of a town, residence, or monastery, or in a town square. On occasion, the *pulpitum*—or stage area—of an abandoned Roman amphitheater was used. The platforms were usually outdoors, but smaller indoor stages were sometimes used. In certain places, existing sites provided a setting for performances. In Rome, Italy, and Bourges, France, there were amphitheaters remaining from Roman days; and in Cornwall, England, there was a circular structure, known as the *Cornish round*, with earthen embankments approximately 10 feet in diameter surrounding various stage areas.

Scenic units—the mansions—were placed side by side on the stage or, in some instances, directly on the ground. At times, a cycle was divided into sections by intermissions, some of them as long as twenty-four hours, during which the mansions were changed or rearranged.



Outdoor Stages at Valenciennes A popular form of medieval staging, especially on the European continent, was a series of stage areas set alongside one another. In the one at Valenciennes, France, shown here in a color rendering made in 1547 of the original stage set by Cailleau, the action moved from one area to the next. At the far left is heaven or paradise; at the right is hell, with a mouth out of which devils emerged. In between are other mansions representing various locales.

The most popular and most spectacular mansions, representing heaven and hell, were placed at opposite ends of the playing area or platform. Heaven, placed on the east, was elevated and frequently contained flying machinery—that is, equipment to lift performers aloft. The entrance to hell was most often depicted as the head of a monster, which spewed forth fire and smoke. Between heaven and hell were less intricate mansions representing various earthly locales.

The relationship between the audience and the stage varied; occasionally, spectators viewed the action from all sides, in what was almost theatre-in-the-round, but sometimes they were on three sides or only one side. Seating was temporary: people closest to the stage stood, and farther back scaffolding and **box** seats were erected. Rooms in nearby houses and on adjoining roofs held additional spectators; in some instances, no doubt, these choice locations were sold to people who wanted the best possible view.

The Neutral Platform Stage One aspect of medieval staging that was to have important ramifications for the theatres of England and Spain in the years to come was the concept of a **neutral**, nonlocalized **platform stage**. A pageant wagon might have a specific scenic background, and stationary settings might have mansions for individual scenes, but in both cases the most important playing area was a stage platform in front of these settings. (Recall that dramas presented inside churches also used a generalized area where most of the performance took place—the central platea.)

We know from the texts of many cycle plays that action often moved instantaneously from one locale to another. In *The Second Shepherds' Play*, for instance, at one moment the shepherds are in a field, at the next moment they are in Mak's house, and a few minutes later they are at Christ's manger. In *Abraham and Isaac*, at one point the characters are preparing to go on a journey to a mountaintop; after a few steps across the stage, they have arrived there. To accept such abrupt, sudden transitions, the audience had to regard the platform itself as a neutral area, not a specific locale. In the audience's imagination, the stage could be transformed instantaneously into whatever the play indicated it was: a field, a room in a house, a mountaintop.

As with dramatic structure, this concept of stage space differs from Greek and Roman practice. Instead of a specific locale, such as the palace of Oedipus or Agamemnon, the medieval stage was like a slate from which writing can be erased. A place could be designated, and then the slate could be "wiped clean" so that another locale could be assigned to it. Shifts of locale could be created in the spectators' imagination rather than by changes of scenery—an arrangement that we sometimes find in today's theatre.

Secrets: Early Experiments with Technology

As noted earlier, special stage effects, called **secrets**, were enormously popular and ingeniously worked out. They were so important that a secrets master was hired to oversee them. The flood for the play about Noah is an example of an elaborate stage effect. On stationary stages, actors impersonating heavenly beings could be "flown in" on lines or ropes from the roofs of adjoining buildings. On movable stages, characters could be flown in from the tops of the wagons; trapdoors also allowed actors to be raised and lowered. Shiny surfaces were used to reflect light and create "halo" effects; the halo was quite common in medieval religious painting and was also popular in religious theatre. Between 1350 and 1550, religious drama devised many innovations for special effects.

Music

Music also played a significant role in the staging of the cycle plays. Some dramas included choruses, and in others there were songs performed by an individual or a group of actors—another reason why vocal ability was so admired in the amateur players. Professional musicians provided accompaniment and entertained before and after the presentations as well as during breaks.

Special Effects in Medieval Theatre Theatres in the Middle Ages used a number of visual and sound effects. For example, musicians often accompanied or supplemented a performance. Shown here, from "The Cantigas de Santa Maria," a thirteenth-century manuscript, are a Moor and a Christian playing lutes.

Past and Present

Street Theatre

The tradition of performing theatrical works on the streets of medieval Europe continued long after the final performances of religious drama. During the Renaissance, for example, we shall see that traveling comic troupes presented their works in the streets of many European countries, including Italy, France, and Germany.

Our contemporary theatre includes a wide variety of street performers, ranging from individuals who perform hoping for gratuities (called *buskers* in the United Kingdom) to organized companies that frequently present political works. Some street performances are improvised, some use an outline of a script that changes according to audience reactions, and some are fully scripted. **Street theatre** companies hope to "democratize" theatregoing by making their art available to people of all backgrounds.

Among the most famous U.S. theatre companies of the late twentieth century that presented many sociopolitical works on the streets of major cities (some of which continue to perform today) are the Living Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and the Bread and Puppet Theater. (We will discuss these companies later in the book.) The United States is not the only country that continues to embrace street theatre; other companies produce similar presentations throughout the world. For example, in 2015 in Dubai, the Global Village Festival showcased a variety of international street theatre performers.

As in the Middle Ages, contemporary street theatre makes performances highly accessible to audience members from all backgrounds and walks of life. And like the medieval drama staged on the streets of Europe, which made use of comic and other popular conventions to teach the audience specific religious lessons, most contemporary street theatre companies attempt to entertain and instruct their audiences about political and social inequities.

Morality Plays

Thus far in this chapter we have focused on religious drama, and particularly on the cycle plays. We now turn to another important form of medieval drama, the **morality play**. A morality play attempts to teach a moral lesson through the use of allegorical characters. In **allegory**, people represent ideas: one character stands for charity, another for integrity, another for greed, and so forth. In morality plays, characters often undertake a journey through which they learn the moral lesson. Some scholars describe morality plays as **station dramas** because during the journey the protagonist confronts a series of crises that can be seen as analogous to Christ's journey through the "stations of the cross."

Scholars debate whether to categorize morality plays as religious or secular. It is true that the main characters in morality plays are ordinary men and women, rather than the saints or biblical figures of the miracle and cycle plays. However, the morality plays dealt with moral issues and were deeply rooted in Christianity—and this is the important thing to remember about them.

One key aspect of the morality play reappears in plays of the Renaissance, particularly in England. Frequently the basis of these dramas is a struggle between two forces, one good and the other evil, for the soul of the main character. This struggle could be between God and Satan, or between a good angel and a bad angel; the crucial element is a battle between two sides for a person's soul. In the English Renaissance, we will see this idea refined by the playwright Christopher Marlowe and developed still further by Shakespeare in several of his plays.

While this form was most highly developed in England between 1400 and 1550, morality plays were also written in other European countries. Among the best known are *Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1400–1425) and *Everyman*, which was probably a translation of a late-fifteenth-century Dutch play.

Everyman

Everyman remains the most popular example of a morality play. In this drama, the character of Everyman—who represents humanity—is suddenly and unexpectedly told by Death, a messenger of God, that his earthly life is over. Unprepared for death and afraid to journey to the next world alone, Everyman seeks a companion to accompany him. He speaks to a number of characters, each representing

Everyman The best-known medieval morality play—shown here in a German adaptation by Hugo von Hofmannstalh staged annually outside the cathedral in Salzburg, Austria—is the story of Everyman, who is summoned to die. In the play, whose main object is to teach a lesson, abstract ideas become characters: Death, Good Deeds, and so on. Everyman tries to forestall dying and then tries to get others to come with him, but all refuse except Good Deeds. In this scene, we see Peter Lohmeyer as Death, in a production of *Jedermann* (*Everyman*) at the Salzburg Festival, 2014.

an abstract idea—Worldly Goods, Kin, Beauty, and others—but none of them except Good Deeds will accompany him to the afterlife. The lesson that Everyman, along with the audience, learns is that only Good Deeds can be of any assistance when one is summoned by Death.

Producing the Morality Plays

Though the subject of medieval morality plays was religious, by the early sixteenth century they were probably staged by professional performers—unlike mystery or miracle plays. The introduction of professional actors was in keeping with a transition from religious to secular theatre, which is reflected in the morality plays of the late Middle Ages. The text of *Everyman*, however, suggests that staging techniques for moralities were similar to those for the cycle plays and were based on the same concept of a neutral platform stage.

Secular Theatre in the Middle Ages: Popular Forms

A battle between secular and religious studies unfolded slowly during the High Middle Ages, leading to an increased focus on the secular during the Renaissance. One reflection of this struggle is evident in medieval theatre: during the centuries in which liturgical drama and, later, mystery and morality plays were developing, nonreligious or *secular* drama was also emerging. Secular theatre, which could be classified as popular entertainment, was often comic and sometimes irreverent.

Throughout the early Middle Ages and into the High Middle Ages, the tradition of professional theatre was kept alive by wandering minstrels, mimes, jugglers, and rope dancers. These performers, who were attacked by the church as pagan and sacrilegious, continued a tradition of touring players that can be traced back to ancient Greece. Other secular entertainments inspired by festivals, such as May Day games, were enjoyed by the conquering barbarians. Many of these festivals, which featured phallic maypoles and the like, celebrated fertility and sensual freedom. The church was unable to coerce the pagans into renouncing these activities even after they were converted to Christianity.

These forms—indicative of a desire to keep the theatrical impulse alive—came to fruition in the High Middle Ages. Out of the festival celebrations came two types of secular drama: folk plays, dramatizing the heroic exploits of folk heroes; and **farce**, which comically depicts universal human weaknesses. Secular farce seems also to have been influenced by such church-related events as the Feast of Fools and the festival of the Boy Bishop. During the Feast of Fools, which flourished between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, young clergymen selected a mock "bishop" or "pope of fools," who was allowed to misuse his religious power; they also sang and danced indecently, burlesqued sermons and services, and staged plays satirizing the church. The festival of the Boy Bishop was similar, though tamer.

Such popular festivities, which were criticized by the church's hierarchy, contained the seeds of farce. There was something earthy and basic about these comic pieces; as a result, they had an appeal that continued for many years, and eventually they found their way into the plays of Shakespeare and other writers of his time.

Nonreligious comic pieces of the Middle Ages contrast sharply with religious drama. Religious drama, obviously, focuses on the significance of religion—the importance of the Bible, the rewards of virtue, the punishment of vice. Comic drama emphasizes the imperfections and scandals of everyday human behavior; adultery, hypocrisy, and other forms of misbehavior constitute its subject matter. Also, this subject matter is presented in a strongly satirical or comic light.

We have records of secular drama and farces dating from the thirteenth century. One extant drama, *The Play of Greenwood* by Adam de la Halle of Arras in France, dates from about 1276. This play combines folk material about fairies and supernatural events with satirical material about people living in Arras. There is even more native material in *The Play of Robin and Marion*, written about 1283 by the same author. The popularity of brief secular comedies and farces grew steadily during the fourteenth century.

Among plays surviving from the fifteenth century is a French farce called *Pierre Pathelin*, which dates from around 1470 and was so popular that it went through thirty editions in the next 130 years. Its story concerns a lawyer—Pathelin—who cheats a merchant out of a roll of cloth and then, proud of his success, tells a peasant how to get out of paying his debts, whereupon the peasant turns the tables on the lawyer and cheats him out of the fee the peasant owes him.

A German writer of farce who emerged in the sixteenth century was Hans Sachs (1494–1576). A shoemaker and also a singer, Sachs learned a great deal about drama in his wide travels. A prolific author, he wrote nearly 200 plays. A good example of his work is *The Wandering Scholar from Paradise*. The play is about a woman who, because her second husband is a brute, dreams fondly of her deceased first husband. When a traveling student tells her that he is from Paris, she thinks he has said *paradise*. She assumes that he can contact her dead husband, so she asks him to take clothes and money to her first husband when he returns to "paradise." The student readily agrees and goes on his way with his spoils. When the second husband returns and hears the story, he chases after the student to recover the money; but when he overtakes the student, he too is fooled and the student escapes not only with the woman's money but with the second husband's horse.

In England, farce also developed in the sixteenth century. John Heywood (c. 1497–c. 1580) wrote a play called *Johan Johan* in which a henpecked husband's wife is having a love affair with a priest. When the husband is ridiculed by his wife and her lover, he sends them both away from home but then realizes that he has made a mistake—he has actually thrown them into each other's arms.

In France, a first cousin to native farce was the ***sottie***. In French, *sot* means "stupid," "foolish," or "absurd," and *sottise* means "foolishness" or "nonsense." These short sketches, which frequently had the figure of a fool as a central character, were often critical of the church or religious figures. A sense of native fun as well as satire predominated in the *sottie*.

At the same time that farce was developing, vagabond players began organizing into troupes and finding wealthy patrons among monarchs, lords, and merchants. They found that this was the best way to develop some continuity and stability in their transient, unreliable profession. The type of entertainment they often presented to their patrons was the **interlude**, a theatrical piece staged between the courses of a banquet. For their performances, which could include farcical, religious, or musical forms, a large banquet hall was used rather than a theatre space. European professional players, who toured a great deal, were accustomed to performing in such improvised spaces.

With the rise of the monarchy in parts of Europe, nonreligious court entertainments became more popular. An intriguing medieval dramatic form staged for royalty was the street pageant. By the fifteenth century, allegorical, biblical, and mythological dramatizations, honoring visiting monarchs, were staged along town routes. These were pantomimed tableaux with occasional narration.

It is important to remember that nonreligious drama was being performed at the same time as the mystery plays. These satiric pieces, farces, and folk plays in which ordinary people were the heroes no doubt had some influence on religious drama, and vice versa: the way in which religious plays were written and performed must have affected secular drama, and the down-to-earth comic quality of nonreligious plays affected the cycle plays. Much of what is popular in the medieval mysteries is reminiscent of folk plays and farces. The fact that so many of the cycle plays contain farcical characters and scenes is an indication of the interaction between religious and secular drama.

The Decline of Religious Theatre

The weakening of the church in the sixteenth century, culminating in the widespread Protestant Reformation, was one reason for the demise of religious theatre. Roman Catholicism withdrew its support from religious theatre, which it accused of having weakened the church; for example, it outlawed religious drama in Paris in 1548. Protestantism considered religious drama a tool of Catholicism; thus Elizabeth I, as head of the Anglican Church, banned religious drama in England in 1559.

Another reason for the decline of religious drama was that its secular qualities finally overwhelmed the religious material. The farce within *The Second Shepherds' Play* and the focus on the human struggle in *Everyman* were steps in the development of the great secular drama of the English Renaissance.

Still, as we noted at the opening of this chapter, religious drama continued to be staged in many European countries well into the Renaissance period. In Spain, religious drama was presented well into the 1700s. In Bavaria, parts of Switzerland, and Austria, medieval Easter, Christmas, and Corpus Christi plays were performed until about 1700. Even in England, the Chester cycle received its final production in 1575.

Medieval religious theatre—in the form of drama it developed and in its staging practices—was to be a major influence on later theatre and drama, particularly in Elizabethan England and the Spanish golden age. Although religious theatrical works remain important spiritual experiences for some audiences, after the Middle Ages religion was no longer the central concern of most theatre.

In Part Two, we will begin to see how Western theatre developed after the Middle Ages, as we take up the theatres of the Renaissance.

Summary

During the early Middle Ages, touring minstrels kept the theatrical tradition alive. Later in the Middle Ages, theatre was reborn in the Roman Catholic Church. Musical and dramatic interpolations added to religious services grew into liturgical dramas; these plays, written in Latin and dramatizing biblical events, were staged in churches by the clergy.

In the fourteenth century, plays in the language of the people—religious vernacular drama—developed. Mystery or cycle plays, which depicted a series of biblical tales, were staged and acted outdoors by guilds in northern England and by confraternities on the Continent. In England, Spain, and the Netherlands, mystery plays were usually presented on pageant wagons, which probably traveled through towns. In other parts of the Continent, a large open playing space with a series of scenic mansions set side by side was common. A medieval dramatic form difficult to categorize is the morality play, which presented allegorical characters and moral lessons and was staged by professional performers.

Medieval plays used simple, direct dramatic techniques that called on the imagination of the spectators. They frequently used symbols and exercised great freedom in shifts in time and space.

Secular theatre also flourished in the Middle Ages. During the High Middle Ages, folk drama and farce developed, and professional performers were employed at the courts of the emerging monarchs. The influence of secular theatre is evident in the farcical and folk elements of the cycle plays.