

e) what effect did audience response have on actors, plays, playwrights, sponsors?

- Mystery Plays: became too popular for their own good-- people flocked to the churches to be entertained, since there was so little else in their lives, especially when the play was in their own language, leading to unruly audiences, pickpockets, people selling drink, the mixture of people of various social classes, men and women seeing each other, and other non-church sanctioned activities; once the plays were outside on church porches they became uncontrollable and this contributed to their transfer to the secular guilds

- the Feast of Fools was the earliest form of comedy, c. 1250 and it began as a parody of a religious celebration, performed during the Christmas season in the Great Halls, with a 'bishop fool' and cheerful music, pagan bits of fun like the Yule log, ridiculous costumes, singing out of tune, masks, drinking, and eventually a good deal of revelry, slapstick, and occasional bawdy words, songs and actions--this contributed to the disillusionment of the Church, as such comic drama was too secular for the Church to accept-- but impossible for them to stamp out.

- Miracle Plays: the popularity of these plays led directly to the formation of traveling troupes during the early 1500's and the establishment of more completely secular plays, based on stories like *Robin Hood & Maid Marian* and *Ralph Roister Doister*--along with farces, mummings, and minstrels; for perhaps a hundred years the Miracle Plays, the later Morality Plays and secular comedy co-existed quite comfortably. Touring companies did whatever the folks at the castle wanted to see and usually had quite a few plays in their repertory, along with the bare essentials of costumes and props which would transform an innyard or a raised level in the castle Great Hall into a performance space. The Miracle Plays only really ended -- and the Christmas related ones never went out of style --with the coming of the Protestant Reformation since most of them were clearly based on Catholic theology, and they were zealously repressed as the reformers didn't want people staying loyal to those ideas or to the monasteries & the clergy.

The Morality Plays....

These developed later than the earlier Mystery and Miracle Plays and were a different kind of drama which were very popular across Europe from the early 1500's on. The basic premise was to provide an answer to the question "What must I do to be saved?" The two most popular and most frequently performed in England were *Everyman*, which first appeared near the end of the 15th century and of which four copies are extant, dated from 1510-1535, and *The Castle of Perseverence*, which is later and more vigorous in the conflict between good and evil as the castle at the centre of the playing area is stormed physically. Plays very similar to *Everyman* were produced at about the same time in Germany and Holland, where, known as *Elckerlijc* or *Jedermann*, they are still presented in elaborate pageant style each year before Easter. There is no way to know where they originated first-- just that there are recorded performances of them from about 1490 on in England and in Europe.

Morality Plays shared some of the production style and techniques of Miracle Plays, and some of the actors were probably people who had caught the acting bug by being involved in these while others were in bands of professional traveling actors. The plays, often presented during Lent, usually featured a central character who is told by a messenger from God that his death is approaching or his salvation is threatened because of his lifestyle. In *Everyman* he is given 24 hours to find witnesses to appear before God and testify to his worthiness to enter Heaven; the characters, rather than people, are allegories which represent his good and bad qualities: kindred, cousin, knowledge, discretion, confession, beauty vs a reliance on strength, five wits (senses), and earthly goods. In the end only his Good Deeds will accompany Everyman to the grave--the moral lesson is very clear.

These plays had a life span which was longer than Miracle Plays as they were consistent with the teachings of the various Reformed churches in Europe and England--with a more solemn, less bawdy style and language which reflected the effects of the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War and, in England, the Wars of the Roses, on the mood and fears of the population -- who no longer believed that faith alone, in the absence of good deeds and a moral life, would save them from damnation.

b) how were they chosen/trained; what skills required?

- Mystery Plays: they were easily available/under control of whomever was doing the plays; skills weren't an issue, as anyone in the Church had very good memory skills and was used to chanting and singing

- Miracle Plays: 2 to 5 rehearsals were considered sufficient for the individual plays in most of the English cycles, but many of the actors had probably played those same parts before, or seen them many times as children; voice --tone, flexibility, volume--and a good memory seem to have been the key skills required, as the plays were in rhymed verse to large audiences outside, with other noises around; most of the characters are stereotypical and not very subtle, although comic roles allowed for more improvisation and needed more physical skills, as did animals and devils.

- By the end of the Middle Ages the professional actor was beginning to emerge and to gravitate to touring companies, rather than to be dependent on festivals which might only be held a few times a year; some became coaches or directors, and others were actually paid to perform.

6. Who were the audiences?

a) what genders/ages/social classes came, and why?

- Mystery Plays: all the churchgoing inhabitants of that town or region, led by the feudal lord and lady and their court and municipal and guild leaders

- Miracle Plays: everyone who could get to the town where the cycle was being done--it was a great tourist attraction, and it was free if you just wanted to stand all day--also a great place to take your dancing bear, or your fire swallowing act, or love tokens to sell, or goodies to eat, or a rebellion you wanted to start, or a place to get lost in, run away from to, pick a few pockets, beg a meal or a drink, meet a love at or get drunk in!

b) was admission free/paid? circumstances?

- Mystery Plays: free, but a donation was expected from the wealthy, who might also pay for all costs of the Mass, or dedicate a new altar, or build a new church if they had done something they needed forgiveness for recently!

- Miracle Plays: usually free, but as crowds grew, wealthier people coming from a distance were happy to pay to sit in scaffolds erected by businessmen to make money, since these kept wives and children away from the mobs of lesser folk, buskers and pickpockets.

c) what background did they bring to the theatre/plays seen?

- Mystery Plays: at the beginning, not much, since they spoke no Latin, and the Mass was in Latin; after a while, the events became familiar, which was the whole point of doing them!

- Miracle Plays: once the plays were in English or the language of whatever country, it was easier and audiences came to know the stories and expect key actions/events; by the 1400's after the invention of the printing press, at least some people could read the Bible for themselves; otherwise, kids heard the stories--so most people knew what they would be seeing

d) what kinds of reactions to the plays presented was typical?

- Mystery Plays: they tended to make people more religious and more knowledgeable about the holy days and major characters of the Christian stories--and they had hugely positive effects on the attendance at church services when they were being done-- pretty much the only game in town...

- Miracle Plays: seem to have increased secular spirit via comedy, making fun of familiar things which had once been sacred or for the church only--incredibly popular, which explains why so many towns developed cycles, as they were the only thing, apart from war or big market days, which got people out of own villages/rural areas into towns to buy and trade stuff, suss out possible marital partners-- and foment a rebellion, maybe!

which took place long after their own time, for example--but this didn't matter to audiences; they followed, more or less, the key events of the Bible in order

- the cycle plays combine stiled rhymed-verse dialogue with vivid action and minimal characterizations; but especially as the years passed, comic episodes showing human failings--like Noah's wife as a nag--were introduced, and devils and villains had the best lines; the authors of these are largely anonymous, although from the records it would seem that many guild actors played the same role for several years, and the Church still had the power to approve or censor the scripts and the way in which they were presented.

c) to what degree did plays utilise music, choral work, dance?

- Mystery Plays: music and choral work/chanting, but no dance--the Church saw dance as related to pagan festivals and disapproved of it, although it was never able to stamp it out in the world outside the church-- as in folk dances around Maypoles, and courtly dances.

- Miracle Plays: music was used prominently, often played by actors as prologue or transitional soundscapes; a chorus of angels often sang hymns or played fanfares on trumpets, and breaks between scenes or wagons were covered with vocal and instrumental music, both religious and secular; dance is mentioned in some of the prompt books, but there is no indication of what kind were done

4. Who were the key playwrights of this period?

a) what social class did they come from; what education, skills or training did they have?

- Mystery Plays: there are no names recorded of playwrights; they seem to have emerged collectively from within specific monasteries, with very predictable subject matter /dialogue based on the words of the Mass and then of the Bible

- Miracle Plays: seem to have been written collectively by guild members or perhaps later by more educated citizens, with probably help from clergy for details until Bibles were available in English and in print form

b) who were the major playwrights/what were major works?

- Mystery Plays: the only one with a name is Hrosvitha, a canoness at a monastery in Germany c. 950, who wrote 6 plays based on comedies by Terence but using religious subjects; she apparently feared the attraction of pagan works, so set out to re-write them into suitable Christian fare. They don't seem to have been produced in her own time, and were not published until 1500, at which time they had considerable influence on secular playwrights of that period who were interested in Latin drama. Hrosvitha, is special because she is the first known female dramatist AND the first identifiable Western post-classical dramatist.

- Miracle Plays: other nuns who wrote included Hildegard, a Benedictine abbess, who created *Ordo Virtutum* in 1155, and Katherine de Sutton, abbess of Barking in England in the 1300's; these were more traditional religious plays written by the only women of the time who were literate and had any materials to use or time to write!

5. Who were the actors/dancers/musicians?

a) what gender/age/social class; income/prizes?

- Mystery Plays: clergy and choir boys, and perhaps by the late 1200s wandering scholars or schoolboys

- Miracle Plays: most of the actors were guild members at the start, later they opened the casting to anyone in the local population since so many actors were needed for a whole cycle, but no one could appear in more than two plays--one at each end of the cycle, probably; the majority were merchants/working class, but some were nobility; most were men and boys, but occasionally women and girls appeared!! Doubling was a common practice, but sometimes several actors were needed to play the same character who aged; realistic effigies were substituted for live actors when beheadings, burnings at the stake and other violent acts were called for. The actors were paid in food and drink at rehearsals and performances.

- Mystery Play costumes were usually church vestments with realistic or symbolic accessories--like enveloping robes and hoods for female characters, or wings for angels, or non-clerical robes for the Three Kings

- Miracle Plays: these would vary of course with the size of the town, the importance of the Cycle and the wealth of the sponsoring guilds, but the best of them had very elaborate Heavens, where Angels could be raised or lowered, and a Hell's Mouth, with a huge monster's head--often a dragon or a lion, with opening mouth, smoke pouring out, noisemaking demons with tails, and cries of the damned coming from within--very effective persuasion to keep on believing! Lots of trap doors for sudden appearances and disappearances, effigies for violence, special tricks for miracles with concealed mechanisms; use of water, for Noah's flood, stored in barrels on roofs of adjoining houses to allow for continuing rain for 5 minutes; fancy costumes, very full of colour symbolism--blue for Virgin Mary, white for God and angels, red for devils, black for evil people, purple for kings--especially neat devil's costumes, with bones attached as tails, horns, painted faces, extra hair, and pitchforks! These colour choices are also seen in most religious paintings of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

- Miracle Plays: many animals also used, some real, some effigies, some played by actors--tigers spring up from earth, pursue apostles, turn into sheep--plus mega large dragons, snakes, wolves, and fanciful creatures; scenes featuring transformations were very popular--staff to snake, wife to pillar of salt, water to wine; light, especially haloes, used by reflecting rays of concealed torches off gilded surfaces; painted cloths with sun and moon interchanged to show night; fire used to create hell which sometimes caused serious accidents/death.

- as a cycle's length, schedule and budget became more complex, with c. 300 actors and c. 40 different staging places, a person would be hired as *pageant master*, under contract on a salary--the first professional artistic directors/production managers--to oversee the building and decorating of the wagons, and the scaffolding along the streets for audiences, create the schedule, supervise all spending and keep it on budget, cast and rehearse the actors, fine those who infringed the rules or didn't learn their lines, collect contributions from the audience, and open the cycle. Quite a job!

- as special effects became more fancy, many of these required special skill and employed *directors of secrets*--they were second only to the pageant master-- the equivalent of a stage manager --and they often had crews of 10-15 technical people during performances.

- there is a director's scroll from c. 1350 in Germany which is 15 ft. long and gives all the actors' cues and complete directions; other quite detailed prompt books are also extant from the 1500's, as are many guild records detailing the cost of costumes and other expenses paid out for their plays.

3. What were the plays about?

a) what were the plot sources?

- Mystery Plays: the life of Christ, from birth to the day of, but seldom including, the Crucifixion itself--usually they just skipped to the resurrection as it probably felt too irreligious to actually show a crucifixion on stage--not to mention the technical difficulties!

- Miracle Plays: the story of the Bible, from Creation to Last Judgment, and additions later of various saints' lives/miracles, legends about biblical figures, and writings of church fathers were also used as sources.

b) what structural/stylistic elements were used?

- Mystery Plays: very limited information, since most of what is extant is detailed prescriptions for how to stage these plays from the church manuals of the period--and most of these are about stage directions

- Miracle Plays: often were done in cycles based on the events of the Bible; the earliest date from c. 1375, and they were performed until the early 1500's; in England, more than 127 different towns had a cycle of plays at some time during the late Middle Ages, but only a few texts survive, from 4 cycles: York (48 plays), Chester (24) Wakefield/Towneley (32) and the N---town Plays, place unknown (42); other cycles existed in France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Germany

- the cycle plays were re-written, new episodes added and others omitted; there are very loose connections between the episodes which make up a cycle, and real chronology is non-existent--Biblical characters frequently mention events

special effects, props, and building of the pageant wagon or raised stage on which their play would take place. Guilds usually staged plays which were related to their area, like contemporary commercials-- for example the shipwrights would do Noah, the goldsmiths the Three Kings, the bakers the Last Supper, the weavers the Second Sheppard's Play; two or more poorer guilds might band together to do plays with no obvious connection to anyone's craft. Sometimes the actor who would play Satan was a traveling performer as no guild really wanted to be associated with the devil; often apprentices who were being punished for some transgression against their master would make up the group of devil's assistants.

2. Where and how were performances produced?

a) indoors/outdoors/what kinds of spaces/stages?

- the earliest dramas were done on a single raised acting area before the altar, or near the small chapels around the nave in a larger church or cathedral

- later Mystery Plays were expanded to fill the nave of the church on small often raised scenic structures called *mansions* which were arranged so that performers could go around from one to another, and in the *platea*, the neutral floor space in the center of the nave; the choir loft was sometimes used to represent Heaven and the crypt (burial space) beneath the main floor was Hell

- as towns became larger and the dramatic church services became too popular/crowded, Mystery Plays were done on the *church porch*, a large, flat area, often raised with steps up to it, so it was visible for some distance--the town or village square was normally in front of the church--this led in too many cases to unruly audiences, people drinking, eating, flirting, coming and going, and behaving in un-churchlike ways, which contributed to the church relinquishing responsibilities for producing and staging mystery plays and their transference to the guilds

- Miracle Plays: at first the guilds created the same kind of mansions which had been used in the churches, around the town square or outside it in an open area; later some towns and some cycles of plays used pageant wagons which could be built in someone's enclosed space in secret and dragged to the staging area. Other cycles may have used pageant wagons as if they were in a parade, where each one of 10-20 moved to designated sites along a route through the town so that the audience near them could watch it, for as many hours as it took to show the cycle to everyone gathered for it. Evidence for this is scanty, mostly in guild and town records about something else, but there are several extant design drawings and expenses for building pageant wagons-- whether they stayed in one place or moved. The York Cycle of plays apparently began at 4:30 am and finished at dark and the wagons were pulled by teams of men who also did crowd control.

b) what did the design of the stage/audience areas look like?

- Mystery Plays: in churches people sat in pews or stood, depending on the sophistication of the building. When they moved outside there were no audience areas for seating, as audiences moved/shifted to watch each mansion in the church/ on the town square in turn

- Miracle Plays: there doesn't seem to have been only one design for these; some were two story wagons, c. 15-20 feet long, with six wheels, with lots of curtains/sets, but that would have made them also c. 15 feet high, very heavy for people to pull and tough to fit into narrow medieval streets with bow windows which almost met across streets at the second floor level. Others utilized a scaffold cart which was in place at each of c. 12-20 staging positions so that the pageant cart drew up behind it and was the backstage area/carried the actors, who then moved on to the scaffold cart to act; basically, we'll probably never know exactly what they looked like or how they worked-- or even if there was any consistency in their design. The audiences stood on the streets, leaned from the windows, or if they were rich or important, sat in scaffolding erected for that purpose in open areas, sometimes at a cost.

c) what technical effects were used?

- Mystery Plays: some mansions had curtains; flying machinery was occasionally used in cathedrals with elaborate mystery plays, eg., in one reported instance in Italy, Christ could rise by means of pulleys and be engulfed in simulated clouds and then re united with God and the Angels in Heaven on a platform some 50 feet above the church floor and above the main altar

whose army was largest and which side the current pope favoured and how far away from a centralized authority people lived; castles and courts might use traveling minstrels and storytellers but none would have risked the disapproval of the religious authorities by granting any other kind of entertainers any rights, nor were most feudal knights interested in anything but their own estates and relationship to their own feudal lord and to the monarchy.

e) for what purposes was theatre performed?

* by the 10th century AD (900's) **liturgical drama** was being created to enrich parts of the service on special holidays such as Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday when the ritual of the Church itself was quite dramatic; so the procession of Christ through the Stations of the Cross might be mimed by priests in elaborate costumes, with dialogue between an individual and the group of priests done as song, and then eventually in the language of the people of that country.

• The earliest of these plays came to be known as **Mystery Plays**, because they dealt with the mysteries of the Christian religion and the mass; they began with sung and spoken brief dialogues which were called *tropes* -- the very earliest recorded one which is extant, inserted into an Easter Mass in 925 in a monastery in Switzerland, went like this:

Angels:	Whom seek ye in the tomb O Christians?
The 3 Marys:	Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified, O Heavenly Beings.
Angels:	He is not here, he is risen as he foretold. Go and announce that he is risen from the tomb.

• In the later Middle Ages (c.1300-1500) **Miracle Plays** developed and became enormously secular and popular as both religious education and entertainment-- they were great tourist draws in the larger towns which had cycles of plays. These plays reflected the key economic/political changes which were happening:

- the formation of guilds and the growth of towns, which led to a decline in feudalism and to shifts in population as people left the land for the towns, or didn't return to their feudal lords after fighting in a war
- the Crusades made the many thousands who went to and returned alive from the Holy Land more sophisticated and less gullible and brought the influences of the Byzantine Empire and Islamic cultures back to Europe at this time
- the Black Death made many people skeptical about the degree to which the Church could successfully intercede with God for them
- the rise of universities stimulated interest in secular learning; the Church's dominant role in society was being challenged as it had to share its formerly total authority with guilds, towns, and universities.

d) when were performances given?

• Mystery Plays: on all the major holidays of the Christian church--Easter, Christmas, Epiphany-- and various key saints days--in France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, England; however, these were not done by every church, in fact most churches might only do a single play a year, and many never did them at all, especially outside the larger towns

• Miracle Plays: outside in the spring and summer to get the good weather, and especially during the Corpus Christi Festival in June to which all Biblical events could easily be related. Plays were also done at Easter or Whitsuntide, or on a city's patron saint's feast day, or out of gratitude for deliverance from a plague, drought, or war.

e) who paid for and sponsored performances, and why?

• Mystery Plays were done as part of religious services, or occasionally as parts of processions to the church on Easter Sunday, and paid for by the monastery /church/abbey itself

• Miracle Plays were organized by secular authorities-- the town and later the Guilds were the obvious organizations to do this, as they had a great deal of money and the desire to attract large audiences to their towns. Guilds began as protective organizations against local feudal lords and to protect merchants and trade in the 12th century. By the 13th century they operated much like later labour unions: regulated working conditions, wages, product quality, and apprenticeships via a council of masters who controlled journeymen (wage earners) and apprentices (whose parents paid for them to be trained for 7 years). As towns became more self governing, the guilds held most of the power because they could organize themselves and elect the mayor and the council from amongst themselves--leaving less power to dukes, earls, knights in whose region they were located. The guilds provided the actors, put up most of the money for sets, costumes,

Notes on Medieval Theatre in Europe

by Sue Daniel

These are organized according to the Six W's and probably provide more information than you need or want in relation to follow up activities for The Babysitter, but feel free to pick and choose and to use none, some or much of these now or at any time in the future when they may be helpful!

- 1) *what roles did theatre play in this time and place?*
- 2) *where and how were performances produced?*
- 3) *what were the plays about?*
- 4) *who were the key playwrights of this period?*
- 5) *who were the actors/dancers/musicians?*
- 6) *who were the audiences?*

I. What roles did theatre play in this time and place?

a) what influenced the development of theatre at this period?

- the basic theatrical elements which survived during the Dark Ages (c. 500-900) and which influenced the re-emergence of drama were:
 - remnants of Roman amphitheatre entertainers; they became storytellers, jesters, tumblers, jugglers, rope dancers, and exhibitors of trained animals, largely in the Mediterranean areas where larger towns and cities survived; the Christian Church denounced them regularly
 - the traveling minstrels in most of France (jongleurs) and in Teutonic Europe (scops)--singers and tellers of tales about the deeds of Teutonic heroes; after the 8th century AD by which time much of Northern Europe was Christian, they were also banned
 - popular festivals and pagan rites (like the winter solstice celebrations featuring fire and evergreen ceremonies in the Druids/Norse cultures which were later wrapped into the Christian celebration of Christmas, and the spring fertility festivals which were adapted into Easter rituals) which were part of the Mother Goddess based pre-Christian religions
 - Christian ceremonies within churches, which utilized choral speech and song, and became more elaborate over time
- the slow development of walled towns and then cities from the wilderness and small, isolated settlements and villages of the Dark Ages (no longer a fashionable term, but a familiar one!) created a need for larger monasteries, bigger churches, inns, merchants, housing and services for more people
- the fact that the population was almost completely illiterate and the services of the Church were in Latin made it essential for the Church to find visual and symbolic ways to communicate the content of the Bible and the basic tenets of Christianity
- the lives of ordinary people were full of drudgery, poverty, plague, and death, and they began to sleep during Mass, or miss it altogether, which was seen as dangerous by both the Church and whatever Duke/King was in charge-- which led to the re-discovery/ use of drama as a religious and educational tool.

b) what was the legal position of theatre and social status of participants?

- the earliest performances were done only by male priests/monks, most often in Benedictine monasteries and slowly in town churches and larger cathedrals on special occasions; since the Church held most of the political power in this fragmented social time period, and all of the moral power, whatever they did was not to be criticised.
- secular power-- that of squires, knights, lords, dukes, earls, kings-- was fragmentary and shifting depending on