

# DRAMA



# PREVIEW

by Dr. Ann L. Greer

On March 20 and 21, at 8:15 in the Commons Theater, with the reading of the Banns by the standard bearers (vexillators), the Ottawa University Players will present their interpretations of four English Corpus Christi guild cycle plays for the campus community and associated colleges. In order that they be the better understood, some history of medieval religious drama is offered.

Following the decline of Roman drama into spectacle, gladiatorial games, and slaughter in the arena, drama almost ceased in Europe, except as unrecorded folk plays and games, and as crude presentations by vagabond entertainers. When drama again appeared, it was within the church. An interesting parallel becomes apparent: formal drama had originated as an extension of the ritualistic celebration of a religious ceremony honoring the Greek god Dionysus; when reborn in the Christian era, drama began as a trope (an interpolation in the liturgy, in the ritual of the church service on Easter Sunday, honoring Christ, the Redeemer).

It is impossible to say with certainty where this first occurred, and no names are connected with liturgical drama, as the purpose was all-important, the persons concerned contributing a service to Christian understanding. We know that these tropes were used widely and similarly throughout Christian Europe, beginning in the Ninth Century. At that time, class rather than national divisions indicated the major lines and boundaries of association and communication. A similar feudal system, and an identical Church organization, prevailing throughout the continent meant that the same customs were likely to be practiced in comparable positions, carried from place to place by traveling noblemen and their entourages, by wandering minstrels and tradesmen, and by churchmen visiting monasteries in Christendom.

In Ninth Century Europe, the Church was truly the center of public life, and the Church services were essentially the same everywhere. Much of a dramatic nature characterizes Catholic ritual, in religious processions (little used in this country), and in special observances of great feast days. The Mass itself is a symbolic reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ. At the Passion season, an intensifying of dramatic effect occurs.

From an early time the Church had attempted to adapt

some aspects of classical drama to vivify Christian story and doctrine. Priests introduced dramatic appeal to fortify the faith of those who could not follow the words of the Mass, by making a kind of "living picture book" for those to whom the Latin liturgy was unintelligible, especially in commemorating the principal feast days of the Church calendar. However, when specific dramatization entered the Church, it came as a phenomenon indigenous to the culture that produced it, apparently not influenced by earlier drama. France took the lead, in time, in quantity, and in quality. An enormous number of French liturgical plays are extant.

The earliest such trope of which we know is a vocalizing of the final *a* in *alleluia* in an Easter Mass, much prolonging the chanted word, and called a "wordless sequence." Next in order is a brief dialogue set to the "wordless sequence," probably with pantomime accompanying. The trope is much more recognizably an interpolation now, and acting with dialogue, by priests taking part in the service, is specifically rather than symbolically dramatic. This is called the *Quem Queritis Trope*.

Authors, actors, managers — all were clerics, monks and priests, no professionals. Many of the plays of which there is evidence seem never to have been committed to writing, but to have been passed along orally. More and more emphasis on the dramatic element crept in even though the performances remained a part of the Church service. Sometimes undue attention was drawn to

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these tropes, as when Balaam's ass spoke in the person of a boy strapped under a donkey, hidden by a long saddle blanket. Herod's ravings became increasingly violent until they were proverbial. Secular interests and vernacular language gradually crept in. The dramas became so elaborate and time-consuming that eventually they were removed from the Church services by papal decree. Before this — and certainly afterward — the Churchyard was the scene for some of the acting of religious dramas, which persisted, though no longer as tropes.

This is a period during which our tracing of the medieval dramatic performances is vague, even theoretical. Whether they died out completely (not likely), or were reworked and their number increased to form the late medieval **mystery plays** (a French term, from *mystere*, meaning guild, also known as **miracles** or **ludus**, we are not sure. There is marked similarity in some later plays to earlier tropes, and some roles remain the same, as in the case of Herod. When the later dramas are known to us, they are a part of the Corpus Christi festivals, or, in some instances, of Whitsuntide festivals.

(Next week Corpus Christi Guild Cycle Plays)

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