

Medieval Drama

Medieval Drama (MD)

- MD has its origin in the mass or **liturgy**.
- Purpose: to communicate the teachings of religion in a simple and attractive way to all the faithful. Most of them were illiterate.
- The ritual of the Christian Church, with its two great festivals of Christmas and Easter and the celebration of Christ's life through its most significant moments, is inherently dramatic.
- Ritual of the Mass = interaction priest-believers, script with lines to recite.
- Liturgical drama spread in Europe in the **13th century**

Medieval Drama (MD)

- MD began in the form of dramatic elaborations of parts of the liturgy (= acting out a scene or **trope**).
- The question of the angel to the women: «**Quem quaeritis**» «**Whom seek ye?**» (*Easter Trope*) is generally given as the original nucleus from which the medieval theatre developed.
- The earliest evidence of religious theatre in English goes back to 14th century, the first texts in manuscript to 15th cent.
- In the next slides, *The Three Marys at the Tomb* by Peter von Cornelius and by Hubert van Eyck





The Easter Trope

- *Interrogatio. Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, Christicolae?*
- *Responsio. Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o caelicolae.*
- *Angeli. Non est hic; surrexit, sicut praedixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro*
- **Translation:**
- Question [by the Angels]: Whom do ye seek in the sepulchre, O followers of Christ?
- Answer [by the Marys]*: Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified, O heavenly ones.
- The Angels: He is not here; he is risen, just as he foretold. Go, announce that he is risen from the sepulchre.
- (John Gassner, editor, *Medieval and Tudor Drama*)
- *the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the sister of Lazarus.

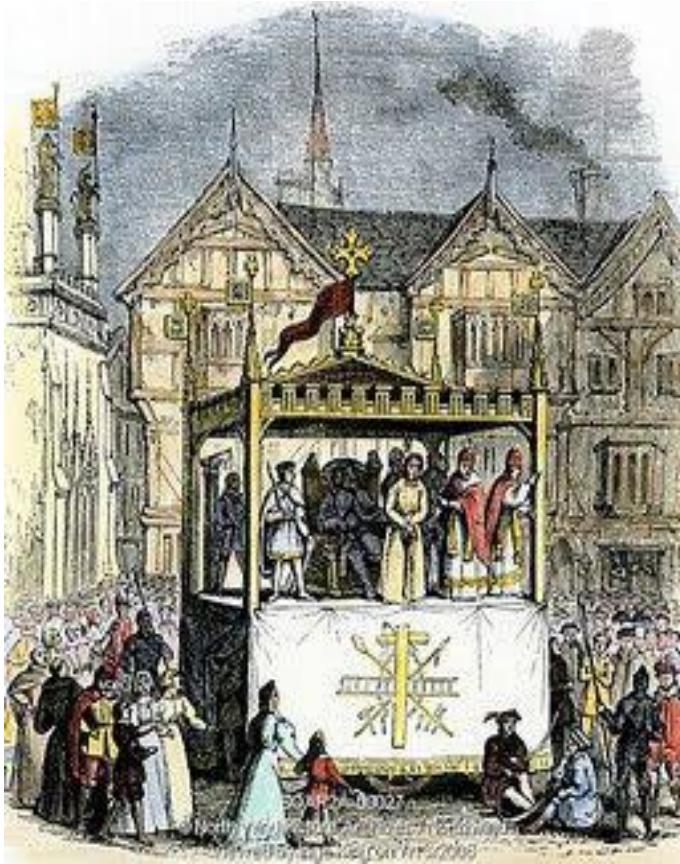
Miracle and Mystery Plays

- From the choir to the nave, from the nave to the churchyard (outside the church), then to the marketplace and the **pageants**.
- **Miracle Plays** or **Mystery Plays**: cover many different subjects from the Old Testament (the Creation, the Fall, Noah, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac) to the New Testament (the Annunciation, the Nativity, episodes in the life of Christ, the raising of Lazarus, the conspiracy of Judah, the Last Supper, the Resurrection) .

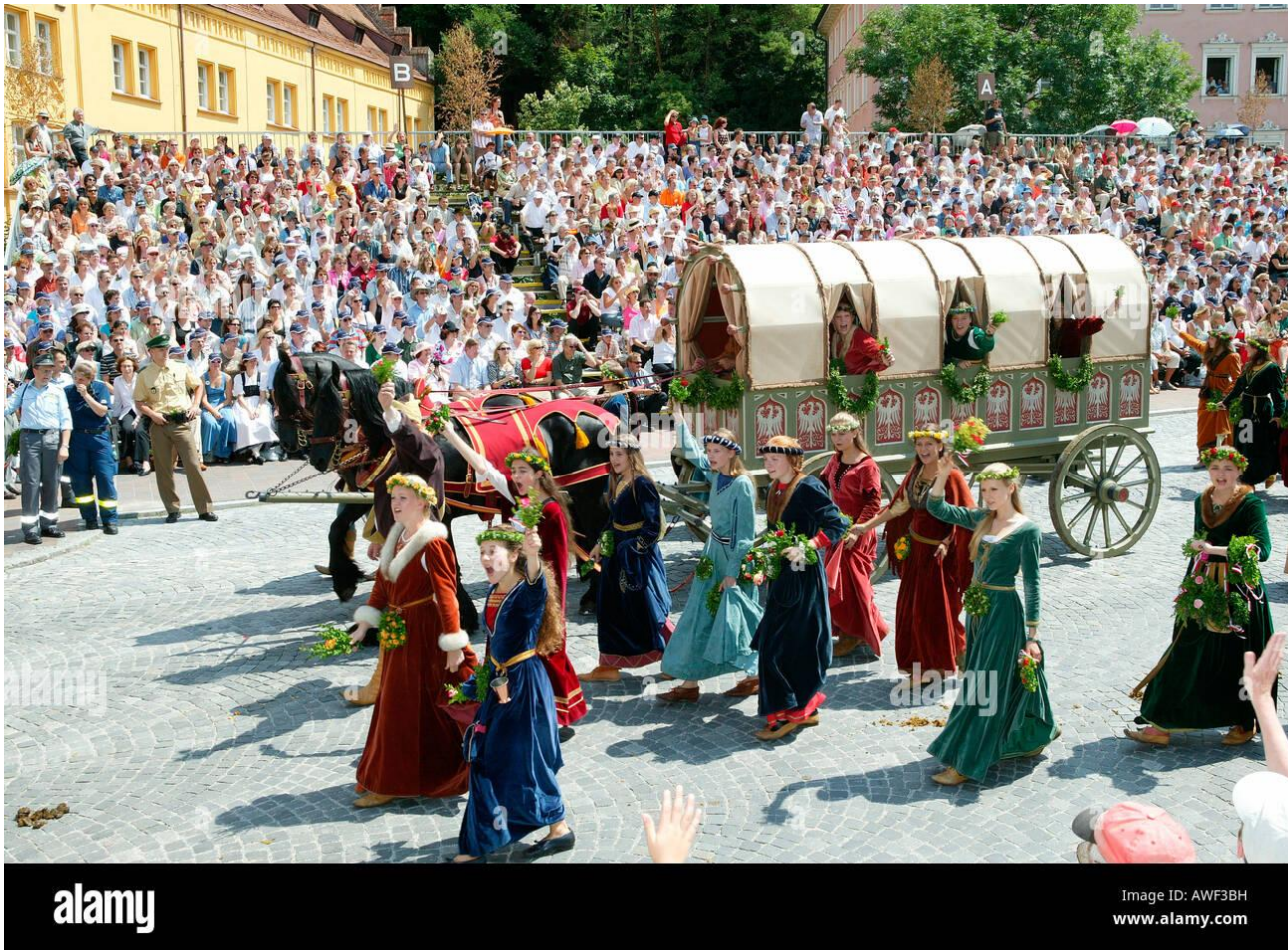
Pageants

- Medieval drama passed into **lay** hands.
- **Pageants** = Wagons or stages on wheels which went around the town from one station to another. Each pageant presented a scene of the play that was repeated at every station.
- Pageants were organized and financed by the guilds.
- **Medieval guilds** (corporazioni medievali di arti e mestieri) sponsored the plays that were probably written by local clerics. Each guild was responsible for a wagon with its scene (costumes and props).

Medieval Pageants



A Medieval Pageant



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Cycle = a series of mystery/miracle plays written in a certain town

- Four Cycles survive: the **Cycle of York, Chester, Wakefield and an unknown town (N. Town)**
- They are anonymous
- The Wakefield cycle is the most interesting. It includes some texts whose author shows great mastery of language (from educated language to local vernacular).
- The ***Second Shepherds' Play (Secunda Pastorum)*** is its masterpiece (the character of Mak, the sheep-stealer, creates a comic pseudo-nativity by trying to hide a sheep he has stolen in a cradle). The episode concludes with the real Nativity.

Morality Plays

- They stage an allegorical conflict between figures of **good** and **evil (psychomachia)**, as they struggle to capture the soul of the character symbolizing **humanity as a whole**.
- The characters are personified abstractions of **virtues** and **vices**, who struggle for man's soul.
- The title of the most famous morality play *Everyman* (ca. 1500) already indicates that the protagonist is every man, that is, all of humanity.
- *Everyman* describes the journey of man toward death. None of his friends wants to accompany him (**Fellowship**, **Goods** i.e. riches, **Five wits**). Only **Good Deeds** and **Knowledge** comfort him and accompany him.

The 7 deadly sins (vizi capitali)

The seven deadly sins are mentioned in *Everyman*, because humankind praises them, lives with them instead of condemning them:

- 1) pride (self-glorification, orgoglio),
- 2) wrath (rage, ira); 3) lust (lechery, lussuria)
- 4) gluttony (craving for food, gola)
- 5) covetise (greed, covetousness, avidità)
- 6) sloth (laziness, accidia)
- 7) envy (being green-eyed, invidia).

What is a Reckoning?

Christians have to show God a reckoning of their life, i.e., a settlement of accounts, a computation, a calculation of all their good and bad deeds.

(Rendiconto, estratto conto).

Some other words to remember:

For = Because; For and = because if

Clean = at all, completely;

Weet = know no wise = no ways

Thous = you art = are

liveth, appaireth, dreadeth – lives, appairs, fears

Who accompanies Everyman and who doesn't?

- Everyman = humankind
- Good deeds (before God) and knowledge (as far as the tomb)
- Those who do not accompany him:
- Strength and Beauty,
- Discretion (discernimento),
- Five-Wits
- Riches and Fellowship

From Religious to Secular

- Little by little there was a secularization of characters. They are humanised, especially minor characters like the shepherds. The plays include **moments of robust realism** and lively comedy together with religious doctrine.

Interludes

- A type of morality play that introduces more realistic and comic elements (end of 15th cent.)
- A playlet offered between the courses of a banquet.
- It marks the transition between religious and secular drama. It includes scenes far removed from the original theme and atmosphere of the morality play and is entertaining.

Interludes

- An interlude could be a moral play like John Skelton's *Magnyficence* (ca. 1576): the protagonist (a prince) is tempted by the Vices and learns from Adversity and Despair to follow the advice of Perseverance. **The education of a prince** is typically a Renaissance interest.
- Its lesson (**moderation** or measure) is a Humanist rather than a Christian value.
- An implicit **critique of Cardinal Wolsey** (guilty of sinful pomp = magnificence)

Interludes

- *The Play Called the Four PP* (ca 1544) by John Heywood is a comic interlude: a Palmer (pilgrim), a Pardoner (venditore d'indulgenze), a 'Pothecary (pharmacist) and a Pedlar (ambulante) compete to tell the biggest lie. The Palmer is the judge of the competition.
- 'Pothecary: a tale of a marvellous cure.
- Pardoner: a tale of a visit to Hell where he finds a neighbour, a terrible shrew. Lucifer does not want women in Hell any longer.
- The Pedlar wins by declaring that he has never seen a woman with a bad temper or losing her patience.