

MEDIAEVAL MYSTERY PLAYS, RITUAL AND DRAMA

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"Archaeology is the search for fact... not truth. If it's truth you're looking for, Dr. Tyree's philosophy class is right down the hall"



Overview

- Guilds in Mediaeval Society
- Emergence of Mediaeval Drama
- Mystery, Miracle and Morality Plays
- Guild Participation and York Cycle
- Ritual vs. Drama: Intersections & Differences
- Freemasonry Connections
- Legacy and Modern Relevance



Why the "mystery"?



*"I pray you all that be present
That you will here with good intent,
And lett your eares to be lent
Hertffull, I you pray"- The Banns*

During the Middle Ages in England, guilds or "guilds" were associations of skilled craftsmen who worked together to regulate their crafts and protect their social, professional, and financial interests. Guilds were an important feature of mediaeval society and played a vital part in influencing the economic and social structures of the Middle Ages. They were typically shaped by the craftsmen who shared a common trade or skill (or "mystery") such as goldsmiths, haberdashers, or ironmongers.



**The mediaeval
guilds. Our
brothers, or
distant cousins?**

Each guild was governed by a set of rules and regulations, known as the guild's constitution, which enforced the standards for workmanship, set prices for goods and services, and regulated the behaviour of members of the guild. Guilds also provided a structure and standards for the training of new apprentices and gave support and assistance to their members, especially those who had fallen on hard times. For example, guilds might provide financial assistance to members who suffered during a period of illness or economic hardship. Membership of the guilds was highly prized, and entry to the organisation was strictly regulated and often required an apprenticeship and a journeyman period before junior members could become full members. Guilds were also responsible for the strict enforcement of their regulations and standards, and fines or other penalties could be imposed on members who were in breach of the guild's rules.

Yn tyme of good kynge Adelstonus
day;
He made tho bothe halle and eke
bowre,
And hyc templus of gret honowre,
To sportyn hym yn bothe day and
ny|g|th.
An to worschepe hys God with alle
hys my|g|th.



Guilds also played an essential role in the mediaeval economy, as they facilitated the regulation of trade, and ensured that goods and services met the high standards of quality that were set. They also assisted in the promotion of economic development and modernisation by encouraging healthy competition and inspiring their members to develop innovative practices and technologies. Guilds played an important role as social institutions in mediaeval society, facilitating a sense of local pride, community and loyalty amongst their members. They were important participants in religious and civic events, and often highly influential in local politics.



Quem quaeritis?

- **Interrogatio:** *Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, o Christicolae?*
- **Responsio:** *Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o caelicolae.*
- **Angeli:** *Non est hic; surrexit, sicut praedixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro*

Mediaeval plays were a form of theatre that appeared in Europe during the Middle Ages between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. These plays were performed as part of religious festivals and were usually intended to teach the mainly illiterate local populations about religious principles and moral standards. Mediaeval plays were sometimes performed by itinerant actors and musicians, known as wandering minstrels, who would move from town to town and perform plays for the local inhabitants. The plays were usually performed in public spaces, such as town squares or greens, and were often accompanied by music, dance, scenery, props and colourful costumes. In addition, there were several specific categories of mediaeval plays, which included mystery plays, miracle plays, and morality plays.

**“I pray you all that be present
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Mystery plays were founded on Biblical stories and were typically based on events from the Old or New Testament. Miracle plays, on the other hand, were based on stories about saints and the miracles they performed, whilst morality plays were intended to teach moral lessons through allegorical characters and settings.



The great Mystery Play Cycles: York, Chester and Lincoln

One of the most well-known examples of mediaeval dramatic performances is the cycle of mystery plays known as the York Cycle, which was performed in England at York during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The cycle is comprised of forty-eight individual plays, each of which was intended to be performed by a different guild, such as the fishmongers, the carpenters, or the tanners. The plays were performed continuously over a period of several days and were intended to educate the audience about the important religious themes and stories that they contained. The card makers guild, which produced the third pageant in the York Cycle were a guild of craftsman who made cards for combing wool, at the time a major industry in the area. The fullers were also a guild associated with the wool trade and oversaw the fourth pageant, which introduced Adam into Paradise.

Miracle Plays: The lives of Saints



Mediaeval plays were an integral component of contemporary social life, religion, and culture, as they provided occasions for people to congregate and celebrate important religious festivals and saints' days. As well as helping to educate the local population, they provided opportunities for actors and musicians to demonstrate their skills and abilities. In modern times, mediaeval plays are still performed in some areas and are considered a significant component of local history and cultural heritage.

Mediaeval mystery plays were performed in a variety of settings, including street performances, dramas, and religious festivals. The origins of mystery plays can be traced back to the Latin liturgy and religious services of the mediaeval church in several European countries including England, France, Germany and Spain. However, the origins of the plays themselves are still a matter of contention amongst historians. Some scholars argue that mystery plays emerged gradually from the tradition of religious processions that took place in mediaeval towns and cities, whilst others suggest that they were influenced by the performances of wandering minstrels and troubadours. There is at least an element of truth in both arguments.

One of the most significant aspects of mediaeval mystery plays was their accessibility to the masses. The plays were performed in the vernacular languages of the local people, making them approachable for all levels of society, including the illiterate who made up most of the population. The fact that the plays were usually performed in public places such as marketplaces, town squares, and churchyards, made them publicly visible and easy to attend. The plays were often accompanied by musicians and dancers, which added to their spectacle and appeal. As the themes of the plays were religious, they usually depicted biblical stories including the creation of the world, the birth of Christ, His crucifixion and resurrection, among others. The plays were often performed as cycles, with each play representing a different aspect of the Bible. For example, in the plays of the York Cycle referred to earlier, each told a different story from the Bible. The cycle was performed over several days and involved hundreds of actors and other performers. The plays were often accompanied by sermons that further explained the religious themes of the plays.

Another essential historical and cultural aspect of mediaeval mystery plays was their influence on the development of drama and theatre throughout subsequent eras. The plays were a significant precursor to modern theatre, and many of the elements of contemporary drama, including character development, plot, and stagecraft, can trace their origins to the mystery plays. Additionally, the plays were early examples of community theatre, with actors and performers sometimes drawn from the local populace.



Building of Solomon's Temple

Guilds and mystery plays are closely related in mediaeval history. Many of the plays were performed by guilds retelling stories from the Old and New Testaments. These guilds were responsible for writing, producing, and performing the plays. Each guild was accountable for performing a specific play, which was often related to their trade or craft. For example, the stonemasons' guild might perform a play about the building of King Solomon's Temple, while the bakers' guild might perform a play about the Last Supper. The rituals of modern Freemasonry have parallels with the traditions of the former.

Guilds and saints' days were also closely linked in mediaeval Europe. Each guild had a patron saint, who was believed to protect and watch over the members of the guild. The feast day of the patron saint was an important occasion for the guild members, and they would celebrate it with religious ceremonies, processions, and feasts. On the day of their patron saint's feast, the guilds would often close their shops and businesses, and participate in processions through the streets, carrying banners, candles, and other religious symbols. They would also attend Mass, offer prayers, and make other offerings at the altar of their patron saint. Mystery plays also had a role to play in these religious ceremonies and celebrations.

Miracle plays were related mediaeval dramas that were also popular in Europe during the Middle Ages. As these plays were religious dramas that depicted the lives of saints and miracles performed by them, they were therefore also closely related to the guilds. Like the mystery plays, they too were performed in open spaces, such as marketplaces, and were intended also to be educational and entertaining. Miracle plays often involved a protagonist who was faced with a difficult situation or dilemma, and through the intervention of a saint or miracle, this situation reached a positive resolution. Reverend Oliver wrote a nineteenth century history of the Holy Trinity Guild at Sleaford (Oliver, 1837), with an account of its miracle plays as

practiced in the fifteenth century. In this study he demonstrated the close relationship between theatre and ritual at the time. He describes the sequence of events of the plays as follows:

1. Proclamation of solemnity within the church
2. Celebration of Mass
3. Procession from the church to the town square with the Host and relics carried by monks and nuns
4. Procession of the trades' guilds
5. Procession of the pageant waggon with stage and set
6. Performance of the first act.

Guilds and these dramas were closely intertwined, with the plays providing an opportunity for guilds to showcase their skills and talents to the wider community. They also helped to reinforce the guilds' social status and their importance in mediaeval society. As these plays often also included themes related to the guilds' trades or crafts, they helped to educate the public about the skills and knowledge required for each profession. Sometimes guilds would collaborate on an individual play. Some of the plays were divided into several scenes or acts, with each scene focusing on a particular aspect of the story. Every guild would be responsible for producing and performing one or more scenes, which were then combined with the scenes from other guilds to create a complete performance. This organization helped to reinforce the importance of each guild's role in the production and ensured that the play was a collaborative effort.

The development of mystery plays also shows the importance of ritual in the human psyche and provides a glimpse of how Masonic traditions may have been influenced by these mediaeval dramas. As Edwards states:

“...ritual of one sort and another forms the basis of all popular theatrical entertainment and the root from which the dramatic art itself has grown” (Edwards, 1976, 9)

A connection may be seen between ritual and the mediaeval plays, particularly the mystery plays. The Masonic ritual itself is a set of symbolic ceremonies and practices that are designed to teach moral lessons and impart wisdom to members of Freemasonry, a fraternal organization whose influences may be traced back to the mediaeval guilds. In several ways like the mediaeval mystery plays, elements of Masonic ceremonial use symbolic characters, stories, and rituals to convey moral and spiritual teachings to its members. These rituals are steeped in

symbolism and draw on a wide range of historical and cultural sources, including ancient mythology, biblical stories, and mediaeval legends.

Morality Plays: a link with Freemasonry?



One of the common features of both Masonic ritual and the mystery plays is their use of dramatic performances to convey moral and spiritual teachings. In the mystery plays, actors performed stories from the Bible and other religious texts, using costumes, music, and other dramatic devices to bring the stories to life. Similarly, Masonic ritual used and still uses symbolic performance to convey its teachings. Masonic ceremonies are often performed in elaborate settings, with members dressed in traditional regalia and performing complex rituals that are rich in symbolism. It is noteworthy that a Jewish play (circa 200 BCE) includes acts or signs of Moses that were dramatised in the same manner as those of the Scottish Masonic Royal Arch Veils ritual, using similar regalia.

Another shared similarity between Masonic ritual and the mediaeval plays is their emphasis on community and fellowship. Both the mystery plays, and Masonic rituals are performed within a community of like-minded individuals who share a common interest in moral and spiritual development. We can see the connection between Masonic ritual and mediaeval plays and how they highlight the enduring power of symbolic performance and the importance of belonging and fellowship in the pursuit of moral and spiritual improvement.

The connection between ritual and the mediaeval mystery plays is a subject of much debate amongst scholars and historians. A similar link may be seen between Freemasonry and the mystery plays, where Masonic tradition has its roots in the mediaeval stonemasons' guilds whose members built the great cathedrals and castles of Europe. The mediaeval stonemasons' guilds certainly participated in the mystery plays, especially those that depicted biblical stories relating to the building of King Solomon's temple. The *Ordinalia* are examples of these and are three mystery plays dating to the late fourteenth century, written principally in Middle

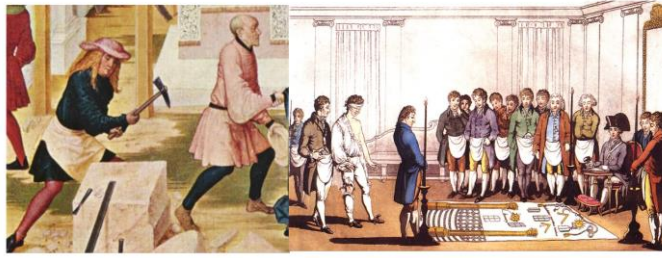
Cornish so that the local illiterate peasant population could understand them, although stage directions are Latin.

The stonemasons, Freemasons, drama, ritual, and morality.



The stonemasons' guilds used the mystery plays as a means of educating their members about the connection between their craft and Christian morality. Whether or not mediaeval mystery plays were direct, linear precursors to the rituals and symbolism of Freemasonry remains to be seen. Certainly, the plays involved allegorical characters and symbolic imagery that may have influenced the development of Freemasonry's later rituals and symbols. Parallels may likewise be seen between the hierarchical structure of both guilds and Freemasonry. Like Freemasonry, the stonemasons' guilds also had secret signs and passwords, which were used to identify members and regulate their activities. Some historians maintain that the relationship between Freemasonry and the mediaeval mystery plays is more likely to be symbolic rather than historical. However, it is entirely possible that the plays and the stonemasons' guilds may have served as one source of inspiration and allegory for the early Freemasons, who were seeking to formulate a new system of spiritual education that used allegory and symbols to inculcate moral lessons. Freemasonry may have adopted or appropriated many of the symbols, paraphernalia and rituals of the stonemasons' guilds and integrated them into a new system of initiation and personal advancement, even if the link is not a direct one.

The builder is slain...



The possible connections between Freemasonry and the mediaeval mystery plays may be indirect but they are certainly possible. Whilst there is significant evidence to suggest that the mediaeval plays and the stonemasons' guilds strongly influenced the development of Freemasonry's symbols and rituals, the exact nature of this connection remains obscure. Nonetheless, mediaeval mystery plays continue to be an important part of our cultural and religious heritage, and their possible influence on the development of later theatre, drama, and ritual cannot be ignored.

The Middle Ages were times of great religious fervour, and ritual played an important role in the lives of people throughout Europe. English mediaeval drama was fundamentally Christian and despite the bans and constraints of the early Church, it was the Christian Church which became the basis of English mediaeval theatre (Fernando, 2016). The celebration of the Eucharist or the Mass, and particularly the Mass on Easter Sunday introduced the dramatic aspect through the 'Acted Part' by being the catalyst of the Easter Play, *Quem quaeritis*. Nygaard (2003) observes that:

“... even though rituals are ideally invariant and formal they are also culturally specific, meaning that the invariance and formality has to be located in the cultural tradition and, more significantly when dealing with religious ritual, the type of religion in question.” (Nygaard, 2003, 6).

In the Christianity of the Middle Ages, rituals were used to mark important moments in the life cycle, such as birth, marriage, and death, as well as to celebrate religious festivals, and to conduct Mass. They also played an important role in socialisation.

As Davis-Floyd and Laughlin observe:

“...since participation in ritual requires coordination of individual processes with group patterns, ritual serves biologically as a mechanism for socialization.” (Davis-Floyd and Laughlin, 2022, 5)

These mediaeval rituals included complex symbolism, which to be meaningful to the congregation, had to be plausible. This is analogous to the way in which secular theatre operates (Richardson, 2023). If an actor is addressing, or performing in front of an audience, then it is the whole awareness of that actor which concentrates the interest of the audience. These performative rituals provide valuable understandings into culturally embedded views of the mediaeval universe and belief that articulated people's interpretation of their place in the world during the Middle Ages (Thomas et al., 2017). And, as Bloomfield states:

“...the dramatic elements of the late mediaeval Mass were an integral part of the ritual, inseparable from the renewal of sacrifice.” (Bloomfield, 2018, 46.)

Of course, rituals were adaptable to transforming environments. In the late Middle Ages this was apparent in the interpretation and appropriation of Jewish and Arabic hermetic texts (Page, 2019). In the early Middle Ages, ritual and drama were closely intertwined. As Bulandrová (2018) reflects, congregations have tended to interpret the Mass as a living, dramatic form since at least the ninth century. As has also been noted, the first plays to be performed in Europe were liturgical dramas, which were based on biblical stories and performed as part of the church service. These plays were often very simple, with only a few actors and a limited stage setting. However, they were an important way for people to learn about the Bible and to participate in the religious life of the community. Over time, liturgical dramas became more elaborate. They began to be performed outside of the church, and they often included more complex plots and characters. These plays were still religious in nature, but they also began to incorporate elements of secular drama. However, along with this development, the liturgy remained an integral part of Church ritual. Aurell (2022) emphasises the continued ability of liturgy to incorporate three seemingly separate but connected ideas in the mediaeval religious setting: church service, ritual, and theatre.

Schechner (1994) sees the mediaeval Mass as metaphorical and stylized rather than naturalistic. It encouraged and sometimes coerced the audience to participate. It treated time in a singular way, and integrated drama and music. In this way:

“... it extended the spatial field of the performance from the church to the roadways to the homes of the congregants.” (Schechner, 1994, 625)

However, by the fourteenth century, a new type of drama had emerged in Europe: the mystery play. As has already been seen, mystery plays had evolved into large-scale productions that told the story of the Christian faith from the Creation to the Last Judgment. They were

performed by guilds and other civic organizations, and they were often staged in the streets or in public squares. Mystery plays grew to be popular throughout Europe, and they played an important role in the cultural life of the Middle Ages. They were a way for people to learn about their religion, to celebrate their shared history, and to come together as a community. In addition to mystery plays, we have seen other types of drama that flourished in the Middle Ages. These included miracle plays, which focused on the lives of saints, and morality plays, which explored moral themes. With the eventual abolition of most of the religious festivals from the English mediaeval calendar at the Reformation, civil aspects assumed more obvious positions in the annual ritual cycle. An example from Chester illustrates this. In 1606, the mayor compiled a list on which days the civic elite had to wear their gowns, and out of sixteen days, seven were secular feasts (Bos, 2010).

Ritual and drama were both important aspects of mediaeval culture. They helped to shape the way people thought about the world, and they provided a way for people to express their religious beliefs and to participate in the life of the community. The relationship between ritual and drama in the Middle Ages was a complex one, and the two were usually closely intertwined. Liturgical dramas, for example, were essentially religious rituals that incorporated elements of drama. Although the concept of ‘ritual’ may seem to be elusive, as Asad observes:

“Every ethnographer will probably recognise a ritual when he or she sees one because ritual is, of course, symbolic activity as opposed to the instrumental behaviour of everyday life” (Asad, 2010, 73).



Miracle Plays and Freemasonry

There were, however, also important differences between ritual and drama. Rituals were typically performed in a sacred space, such as a church or a temple, while dramas were often performed in a secular space, such as a marketplace or a street. Rituals were also typically performed by religious professionals, such as priests or monks, while dramas were often

performed by laypeople. Despite these differences, there were also some important performative similarities between ritual and drama. Both forms incorporated the use of symbols and costumes, and both involved the reenactment of events from the past. Ritual and drama alike also served an important social function, providing a way for people to come together and to participate in a shared experience.

Memento Mori



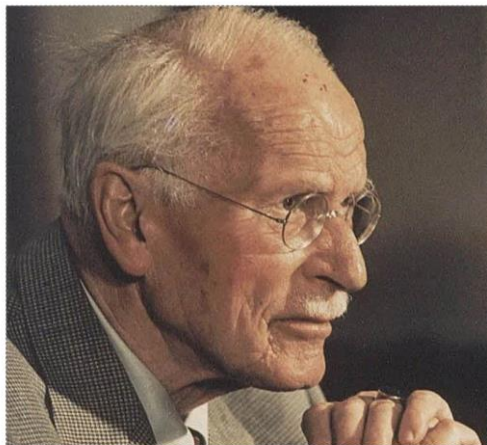
Mediaeval life was saturated in many types of ritual. The rituals of public execution of traitors and other criminals often involved an almost sacrificial and systematic mutilation of the corpse. The drawing, hanging, disembowelling, beheading, quartering and displaying of the human remains were part of an elaborate and brutal drama and ritual. Some of these may still be seen in the traditional, symbolic penalties of Freemasonry. Rituals send a powerful message to those observing them. McVitty (2011) sees the traitor's execution as having a parallel to Christ's Passion. Thornhill (1971) sees the rebirth of drama during the Middle Ages closely resembling the birth of drama in Greece, in both cases the drama evolving out of the death of a divinity. Hardison (1965) observes that arguably the most important fact that emerges from the early history of mediaeval drama is that the ritual structure representative of the Mass and the Church year is carried over untouched into later representational plays. He sees the structure as being comic, rather than tragic. The sacred event being celebrated is rebirth, not death, although it is a rebirth that needs death as its prologue. He sees that "...the experience of the participants is transition from guilt to innocence, from separation to communion." (Hardison, 1965, 284).

Indeed, the mediaeval mind did not shy away from the use of horror in ritual and drama. Mystery plays sometimes featured props in the form of the mouth of hell, which introduced turmoil, conflict, hostilities, and violence into the mediaeval religious theatre. Rossmeisl (2012) describes how the all-consuming demonic mouth of hell devoured the figures of evil, such as Herod and Judas, to demonstrate the supremacy of God. As well as religious instruction, this provided great entertainment, especially when accompanied by coarse humour. However,

these ritualized performances also served to mirror the fears and hopes of mediaeval existence, treating the audience as a religious congregation, and steering them between profanity and holiness to better understand the complexities and contradictions of life in the Middle Ages, even if the audience was not fully aware of this. As Eisenberg (2009) states:

“Ritual practices are subject to selection because of embodied and established attitudes and concepts. These ways of knowing the world are so deeply ingrained that we do not normally even recognize the ways in which they shape our experience.” (Eisenberg, 2009, 10).

The legacy of ritual and drama in the Middle Ages is still felt today. Many of the conventions of modern drama, such as the use of scenery, costumes, and props, can be traced back to mediaeval drama and beyond. For example, the Feast of the Ascension was a dramatic occasion involving a procession up the hill in Lincoln from the guildhall at the base to the cathedral and castle at the top, which used mechanical elements for the Ascension of Mary at the conclusion of the procession. Andrews (2012) argues that the historical development of this ritual was one of an increasing focus on materiality (in parallel with the increasing popularity of the Feast of Corpus Christi), and that the staging of the procession became more reliant on mechanical and dramatic elements.



"For thousands of years, rites of initiation have been teaching spiritual rebirth"
-Carl Gustav Jung

The use of religious symbolism in drama and its sense of community has many of its antecedents in mediaeval liturgical dramas. In addition, the social function of ritual and drama in the Middle Ages continues to be relevant today. Drama can still be used to bring people together and to explore important social issues. It can also be used to promote increased understanding and tolerance between different cultures. In attempting to better understand the role and importance of mediaeval drama in its historical context, we cannot help but be influenced by our modern sensibilities. But as Symes says:

“Looking through the lens of performance places the historical object in a new light, calling attention to the processes which led to its production and calling upon the historian to imagine the conditions in which it was enacted.” (Symes, 2009, 9)

**Ritual, drama
and
archetypes...**



The Middle Ages were times of great creativity and innovation in the field of drama. The plays that were produced during this period helped to shape the development of modern drama, and they continue to be performed and studied today, partly because of the power of and fascination with the enduring archetypes contained within them.

Although the theory of archetypes dates to ancient times, it was in the innovative research of the Swiss analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the concept of archetypes and archetypal image projection in literary traditions were first analysed and documented (Fleer, 2009). Although later literary specialists and cultural anthropologists have further developed Jung's theory of archetypes, the work of these researchers remains securely founded upon the hypotheses first explored by Jung. Mediaeval ritual also reaches tantalisingly back to a pre-Christian era, where pagan festivities were still practiced, in the Middle Ages often under cover of a Christian festival. Anderson (2011) describes how:

“...from the late Middle Ages to the middle of the nineteenth century, a peculiar fraternal ritual took place. Each year on the evening of the twenty-third of June, the Brotherhood of the Green Wolf chose its new chief. Arrayed in a brimless green hat in the shape of a cone, the elected master led the men to a priest and choir.” (Anderson, 2011, 1).

Theatre, spectacle and ritual



The history of ritual, drama and its importance in religious and secular life through the ages will no doubt provide food for thought for many years. Modern Freemasons may see themselves as part of ancient traditions that surely predate the formation of the premier Grand Lodge.

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