**Medieval drama and the mystery plays**

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| **Published:** | 31 Jan 2018 |
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The mystery plays and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries were very different from modern drama. They were performed in public spaces by ordinary people and organized and funded by guilds of craftsmen and merchants. These plays portrayed scenes from the Bible, conveyed religious doctrine and encouraged their audiences to lead Christian lives.

While modern theatre undoubtedly finds many of its origins in medieval drama, the mystery plays, pageants and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries are actually a very different animal, with quite a different set of associations. Imagine not a fixed stage and a darkened room, but mobile theatre out on the streets. Some people are watching carefully, but others are chatting with their friends, or buying food and merchandise from nearby vendors – keeping only one eye on the stage. You may well recognize several the actors from your own daily life. And instead of a focus on the individual and human relationships, you are treated to scenes from the Bible, about Christianity and the history of salvation. Medieval drama took many forms, but the most spectacular of all was the religious drama of towns such as York, Chester, Coventry, and Wakefield, known as the ‘mystery plays.’

**The mystery plays**

The mystery plays are sequences of performances, sometimes referred to as ‘cycle plays’ because they make up a cycle of 48 surviving short playlets. Throughout the 15th and into the 16th century, around 300 years before the building of the London playhouses, these cycles were the most popular and enduring form of theatre in Britain, performed annually in the biggest towns and cities of the country. They are most known as the ‘mystery plays’ for two reasons. Firstly, they took the mysteries of God as their primary theme. They aimed to show, in a day, the whole history of the universe from the creation of Heaven and Earth to the Last Judgement – the end of the world, when everyone on earth will be judged by God and divided between Heaven and Hell, salvation and damnation. Secondly, these plays were organized, funded, and produced by guilds, which were also called ‘mysteries’ in the Middle Ages. Guilds were associations of craftsmen or merchants, who oversaw regulating and teaching their trade; they were often wealthy and wielded considerable power.

The mystery plays gave guilds the opportunity to advertise and show off their wares. A play about Noah’s Ark and the Flood would be sponsored by the Shipbuilders, who provided the ark itself, and the Goldsmiths would oversee the play of the Magi, donating lavish gifts as props. According to a surviving public proclamation from York, the guilds were also in charge of sourcing ‘good players, well arranged, and openly speaking’. Significantly, these players were not usually professionals. They were ordinary people with a taste for drama – so you might well see your friend, neighbor, or local butcher in the cast, as Herod, Noah or even Jesus.

Another detail which sets these plays apart from modern drama is their mobility. The plays were usually performed on separate pageant wagons, with wheels, so that they could be moved. The wagons would proceed, one after another, and the players would perform on them at various fixed stations around the town or city. The audience could pay a bit more to have a seat at these various stations, or they could stand – and this gave them more autonomy over their experience. They could either stay at one station and watch every play, or dip in and out, wandering between the different stations. The players performed their historical stories in up-to-date settings, making references to local landmarks, disputes, and characters to root the action not only in the contemporary moment, but in their particular location. In this way, the players drew their audience into the play world, making the mysteries of God and the history of Christianity feel more present and accessible.

**Irreverence and criticism**

Students of medieval mystery plays are often surprised, even shocked, by their humor. Noah is portrayed as a bit of a drunken fool, and his wife as a shrewish nag. The York plays of the Crucifixion, which concerns Jesus being nailed to the Cross, sees the soldiers arguing and making the audience laugh with their incompetence. This might seem sacrilegious to a modern audience, but it was part and parcel of medieval life and the attitude of medieval Christians to their religion. The comic nature of Noah’s character in these plays did not detract from the overall importance and significance of their Christian message: it just amused and entertained the audience on the journey to salvation. The black humor of the York play of the Crucifixion did not risk dampening the awe and glory of Christ rising from the dead, fighting back devils, or allocating the saved to Heaven – rather, it amplified his triumph. The mystery plays seem to have been tacitly approved and sanctioned by the Church, even if religious authorities were not directly involved in the plays themselves. It was not until the Reformation that these plays suffered serious revision, increased regulation and ultimately a phasing out.

A surviving manuscript, housed in the British Library, shows that there were some critics of these plays, even if the majority welcomed and enjoyed them. The *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (c. 1380–1425, Add MS 24202), the first work of theatre criticism in English, condemns the mystery plays for their blurring of the divine and the human. How could a human being play the role of Jesus? Did not performing the sacred mysteries and sacraments of God with ordinary objects detract from them? These accusations are precursors to the kinds of criticism levelled at the mystery plays during the Reformation, which would eventually lead to their demise. However, it is safe to say that for a couple of hundred years they were a sanctioned and celebrated way of telling the story of Christianity.

**Morality plays**

Mystery plays may have been the most popular form of theatre in the Middle Ages, but they were not the only one. Mumming, revels, interludes, and pageants were all part of medieval theatrical life, and several critics have even drawn attention to the performative nature of church rituals, such as the Liturgy and the Eucharist. Another popular genre was the morality play, which endured into the Tudor period. Morality plays are allegorical (i.e. the characters and events have symbolic meaning) and provide their audience with Christian moral guidance. In this kind of religious drama, we follow a primary character (representing mankind) as they encounter a cast of personified vices and virtues, before ultimately turning to righteousness and salvation. Such serious themes are counterpointed by moments of farcical comedy, primarily provided by the vice characters. The plays were usually quite short and were performed by semi-professionals who relied on public support.

One such play is *Everyman*, which was printed in 1510. In this play, the titular character discovers that he is about to die. He must provide God with a book of accounts, detailing the good deeds he has done, to save his soul and gain access to Heaven. In despair, Everyman realizes that he has misspent his life and his account book is almost empty. The play follows him on a spiritual journey, where allegorical characters such as Friendship and Beauty desert him but others, for example Good Deeds and Confession, instruct and advise him, helping him to turn his life around before his death. The play not only teaches the audience some complex Christian doctrine, but more importantly it encourages them to look to their own lives and souls before it is too late. Little is known about the circumstances in which *Everyman*was performed – and, in fact, there is no record of any performance at all until 1901. On the title page of the printed edition, *Everyman*is referred to as a ‘treatise’ as well as a ‘play’, which has led some critics to suggest that it might have been designed for reading rather than performance. However, it is certainly presented as a play, with characters and assigned dialogue, and it was successfully updated for a modern audience at the National in London in 2015. Carol Ann Duffy translated the older text into modern verse and Chiwetel Ejiofor took the lead role, as a rich banker who is visited by Death during his over-extravagant, drug-fueled birthday party.