Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages

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EPILOGUE

A Note on the Continuity of Ritual Form in European Drama

I

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW of the literary critic, perhaps the most important fact about the early history of medieval drama is that the ritual structure characteristic of the Mass and the Church year carries over unchanged into representational plays. This structure is comic, not tragic. The mythic event celebrated is rebirth, not death, although it is a rebirth that requires death as its prelude. The experience of the participants is transition from guilt to innocence, from separation to communion.

In addition to a persistent formal pattern, we find a technique developing for representational performance. Some elements of this technique can be observed in liturgical plays, especially those not a part of the Resurrection group, but the major steps, which allow for the artificial construction of plots, their formulation into episodes, and their expression in nonceremonial dialogue (i.e., dialogue that is neither Biblical, lyric, nor derived from liturgy), appear to have been taken first by vernacular playwrights.

The story of the development of religious drama from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century is reasonably clear in outline, although complex and often obscure in detail. Isolated segments of the story of man's salvation were combined into immense vernacular cycles of two major types, the Continental Passion play, which includes Old Testament episodes and episodes of Christ's ministry and Resurrection, and the English Corpus Christi cycle, which adds to these a group of episodes of the Nativity.

Craig and Jenney are doubtless correct in their conclusion that the form of the Old Testament phase of the cycle was determined by the responsories of Lent. The nonexistence of Latin dramas for most of the standard Old Testament episodes indicates further that they were the work of vernacular rather than liturgical dramatists. The principle may be extended to episodes of Christ's ministry and to the Nativity and Resurrection episodes that have no close Latin cognates.
However, the vernacular cycles are not independent of liturgical tradition in the manner of the Mystère d’Adam and La Seinte Resureccion. To the degree that they return to the liturgy of Lent for their structure, they return to the ritual “plot” of the Church year. They must therefore be considered a fusion of the techniques of representation derived from vernacular tradition with the ritual form characteristic of Latin religious drama. The combination accounts for both their episodic quality and their larger unity.

The meaning of the phrase “ritual form” as used here is essentially that which has been standard since Gilbert Murray’s “Excursus” on ritual forms preserved in Greek drama, first printed in Jane Harrison’s Themis (1912). Murray lists six elements: an agon (a struggle or contest); a pathos involving suffering (including a spargamos—a “tearing apart”) and death; a messenger who announces the death; a threnos (lament); an anagnorisis and peripety (recognition and reversal); and a theophany (a period of joy occasioned by rebirth). The Aristotelian orientation of this pattern is obvious from its terms. One qualification is necessary. Because it was formulated to deal with Greek drama, it is both too specific and too limiting for medieval drama. Medieval writers habitually speak of the Mass and the Lenten sequence in terms of a transition from tristia to gaudium. The tristia phase is objectified in a variety of ways that include Murray’s agon, pathos, and threnos, as well as elements not found in Greek drama—penance, alienation, Old Testament typology, and the like. The tristia may be presented in extenso, as in the liturgy of Lent, or it may be extremely brief. The same is true of the theophany, which may include any or all of such elements as purification, rebirth, union in Christian love, marriage, and lyric rejoicing. In its most general form the Christian pattern consists of three parts. These may be labeled pathos, peripety, and theophany, with the understanding that the more extended the pathos and theophany phases, the more numerous the devices used to objectify them. In the Quem quaeritis the pattern is presented in its entirety but in the briefest possible manner. The Marys show sorrow for Christ’s death (pathos), they are informed of the Resurrection (peripety), and they rejoice (theophany). Partly to satisfy the desire to tell the story and partly to make the peripety more significant by the enlargement of pathos and theophany, the drama is extended backward and forward from its center. In Latin drama the extension is limited by inadequacies of technique and conditions of performance. A hint of more ambitious development is provided by manuscripts in which groups of plays appear together rather than being attached to widely separated church services,
but there is little or no evidence of the performance of several plays together prior to the thirteenth century.

The Mystère d'Adam and La Seinte Resureccion use techniques that permit a radical extension of the scope of religious drama. Combining these techniques with the concept of history as a providential drama centering on the Resurrection, dramatists extended the time line of the Resurrection play back to the beginning of time and forward to the Last Judgment. Did this extension occur in one step or as a result of gradual aggregation? There are allusions to performances of cycles at Riga and Cividale in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, but there are no references to continuous performances of unrelated plays. The play that is usually considered an example of a transitional work, halfway between liturgical drama and the cycles, is the Mystère d'Adam. Upon inspection, however, the Adam and Cain episodes prove to be associated arbitrarily, because of the responsory that was their source, rather than because they are the first episodes of an incomplete drama of redemption. A transition cycle is, after all, a contradiction in terms. Either the author thinks of his work as having unity or he thinks of it as a series of separate plays. The concept of unity (though not its achievement) is absolute. As the concept of a unified cycle spread through Europe, authors reworked older plays in cyclic form or composed new ones, incorporating traditional material where suitable. Early allusions indicate that initially there were wide variations among the cycles of different regions in choice of episodes and manner of treatment. Later, when a few cycles became "authoritative," the variations diminished, and the pattern of a few dominant "types" emerged, with specific cycles showing local variation and cross-influence. Thus the evidence favors the idea that the movement from isolated play to cycle was brought about by a new way of regarding the subject matter rather than by a gradual, unconscious process of aggregation.

As we have noticed, the cycles represent a movement back to liturgy. Their liturgical quality can only have been intensified by the common practice of presenting them on Corpus Christi day. Numerous documents dating from the sixth to the fifteenth century show that the body of Christ had two equally important meanings for the medieval Church. First, of course, the corpus Christi is the Host. This meaning is the dominant one in the liturgy composed for the feast by Thomas Aquinas. But the corpus Christi is also the mystical body of Christ, which is the whole body of the faithful from the beginning to the end of time. Both meanings are present in St. Cyprian's comparison of Christians united in Christ to the grains of flour united in the oblation loaf. The first—the corpus Christi as Host—is the basis of the Corpus Christi procession, during which the sacrament
is carried through the community and displayed at various stations. The second—the corpus Christi as the mystical body—finds its expression in cycle plays that present the whole history of the faithful from creation to judgment.

Considered from the medieval point of view, the stories composing the typical cycle are episodes in a single drama. The practice of calling them plays is, in fact, a modern one. Medieval and sixteenth-century writers normally refer to the cycles in the singular. We hear of “the play of Corpus Christi,” not “the plays of Corpus Christi,” and the Ludus Coventriae, not the Ludi Coventriae. When approached in this way, the typical cycle, no matter what its size, is an enlargement of the Resurrection play. The beginning or pathos phase extends from creation (or the fall of Lucifer) to the ministry of Christ. The reversal is the Resurrection—often a recognizable adaptation of the Quem quaeritis. The end, or theophany, extends from the appearances of Christ to the disciples to the Last Judgment. The effort to express ritual form in representational terms is thus completed in an historical drama that emerges from eternity in the first episode and disappears into it once again in the last. It may be added that regardless of digressions and irrelevancies the cycle play is also aesthetically complete. The action is one, whole, and entire, and the “universal form” has a beginning, middle, and end, as it did in the briefest plays of the tenth century.

II

To extend these notes beyond the cycles is to confront the problem of the transition between medieval and Renaissance drama. There can be no thought here of offering a solution to this problem, but a few suggestions seem relevant. At present the traditional view of the Renaissance as a rebirth of secular interests antithetical to the medieval period persists: it is evident even in the work of some historians who consciously admit its inadequacies. At the same time, other historians insist that the Renaissance is an artificial concept and that medieval attitudes remained dominant throughout Europe at least until the seventeenth century. It is natural that these conflicting views should affect approaches to the drama.

On the level of practical criticism, for which Shakespeare criticism may be considered the touchstone, the spectrum of positions extends from those that stress Christian elements inherited from the Middle Ages (E. M. W. Tillyard, Willard Farnham) through qualified secularism (Theodore Spencer, E. W. Talbert) to pure historicism on the one hand and myth-
ritual criticism on the other. There is an equally marked lack of agreement among studies concentrating on medieval influences. Tillyard, C. S. Lewis, and a host of American critics stress the influence of a Christian world view presumed to persist from the Middle Ages through the sixteenth century. Willard Farnham and L. B. Campbell stress the importance of a specific nondramatic influence, the "fall of princes" motif. Spivack, Rihner, and others stress the influence of the morality play. And although it has ceased to be a major factor, the idea that the comic and digressive elements of the Corpus Christi cycle influenced or prepared the way for the secular theater can also still be found in handbooks and short histories of the drama.

I suggest that recognition of the persistence of ritual form inherited from the Mass and the liturgy may provide a way of coming to terms with the variety of views now current. This form is, after all, the dominant form for medieval drama. As such, it both fulfilled the expectations of audiences conditioned by their experience of Christian worship and educated them in what to expect from representational drama.

In attempting to bridge the gap between medieval and Renaissance drama, at least four complicating factors must be considered.

First, the emergence of noncyclic religious plays must be examined closely. The cyclic concept permits the writing of one, and only one, play. When taken out of context, the episodes of the cycles lose their meaning, in the same way that the play of the murder of Gonzago from Hamlet would lose its meaning if presented alone. To restate the point in different terms, logically, the line of time is continuous from beginning to end. Every event has a past extending back and a future extending forward to eternity, and any interruption of the sequence is arbitrary. Yet the writing of a noncyclical play requires just such an interruption. One segment of the time line must be treated as complete in itself. The first scene must somehow be made independent of what comes before, and the last must have the quality of finality: e.g., "they were married and lived happily ever after."

One late medieval form, the saint's play, was traditionally presented in isolation from other plays, and it is probable that many of the problems involved in composing noncyclical dramas were first solved here. The Digby Conversion of St. Paul is a case in point. At the same time certain cyclical episodes, of which the Brome Sacrifice of Isaac is an outstanding example, show a degree of unity that would justify individual production. It appears significant that both the Conversion of St. Paul and the Sacrifice of Isaac draw on the pathos-peripety-theophany structure of ritual. Paul passes from intolerance and brutal persecution through a miraculous
conversion to zealous piety, and, again, from adversity through angelic consolation to hope of salvation. In like manner Abraham passes from agonized sorrow through angelic deliverance to joyful praise of the Lord. The Brome play is far more successful than the *Conversion of St. Paul* because its parts are organically unified around a single peripety. Because the sacrifice of Isaac was always considered a type of the sacrifice of Christ, the use of ritual form to dramatize it may have been quite intentional.

Second, it must be recognized that the morality play is qualitatively different from the cycle play and that Renaissance drama was heavily indebted to its techniques. The morality play is not history but fiction. It is not based on fidelity to an historical source but on fidelity to doctrine, and its episodes are invented and arranged to illustrate this doctrine. Since the doctrine is moral and depends on the sacraments (grace, in Protestant cognates), the morality play is of necessity psychological drama. The characters do not act in such and such a way because history says they did but because a sacramental psychology requires them to do so. Since the characters in a morality play are personified motives, the form is also psychological in a literal sense: it takes place within the mind of the central character, who appears in the action as a personification of the soul, or what would now be called the ego.

The morality play introduces two new elements: a method of constructing plays on the basis of doctrine (akin to Aristotelian *dianoia*) and a psychological concept of character portrayal. For both theoretical and practical reasons, however, the “universal form” of the morality play is the same as that of the liturgical play. The liturgy of baptism and Communion makes it abundantly clear that the individual Christian (Mankind or Everyman) recapitulates in his own life the ritual pattern of alienation, suffering, death, and resurrection. Thus the “full scope” morality begins with a period of innocence terminating in a fall, reaches its climax at a reversal whereby the central character is saved or reborn, and ends with reconciliation and hope. *Everyman* is unique only in that it concentrates on the “Summons of Death” phase of the action and symbolizes the pathos phase by a series of episodes in which various characters desert Everyman prior to the change in his fortunes. With this reservation, the pathos-peripety-theophany sequence in *Everyman* is both clear and effective.

Third, the influence of classical drama during the sixteenth century had a profound effect on traditional forms. The dramatists imitated—Seneca, Plautus, Terence—had inherited a ritual tradition somewhat different from that of Christian Europe and, in addition, had all but buried this tradition beneath an overlay of philosophy, psychology, rhetoric, intrigue,
and the conventions of five-act structure. In Italy and France the alien classical influence was strong enough to replace medieval forms. In Spain its effect was relatively slight. In England it permitted an enlargement of the scope of traditional drama but—except for isolated experiments in neoclassic comedy and tragedy—was absorbed into the traditional frame.

Fourth, there is the matter of the shift of orientation brought about by the complementary forces of nationalism and the Reformation. As Father Gardiner has shown, the medieval cycles did not die out spontaneously but were suppressed by Protestant reformers. As they disappeared, dramatists turned from solely religious subjects to secular ones. Classical history and the history of the national state replaced sacred history as prime sources for dramatic plots. Ethical, political, and protopsychological doctrine vied with, and for some authors replaced, the older sacramental psychology. Rhetoric, wit, intrigue, complex stage effects, and brilliant display added an element of gorgeousness entirely lacking in medieval plays.

For all these changes, the persistence of ritual form is obvious both from the plays themselves and from the mass of scholarship and criticism that has accumulated in the last thirty years on such matters as Shakespeare’s religious imagery, his use of morality-play techniques, and archetypal and ritual patterns in his plays. In the cycle of plays from Richard II to Richard III it is evident that we have a secular equivalent to the sacred cycle of the Middle Ages. The protagonist of the cycle is respublica rather than Holy Church, and its rationale is the religio-political synthesis of the Tudor apologists rather than Catholic theology. Insofar as the plays participate in a larger unity, they are episodes in a drama extending from England’s “fall from grace” by the murder of Richard II to her “rebirth” under the Tudors. After all qualifications based on order of composition, departures from the larger pattern, and ambiguities of Tudor political theory have been accepted, the plays remain something more than a haphazard collection, and their unity is that of the cycles.

The parallel between the Corpus Christi cycle and Shakespeare’s histories is evidence of the persistence of medieval tradition in the Renaissance but is of minor significance in itself. The appearance of ritual pattern in individual plays is more important and more useful to criticism. Without entering into extended comment, I suggest that Henry V is a clear example of the use of ritual form for a secular subject. The play begins with challenge and conflict, turns on what Henry insists is the “miracle” of Agincourt, and ends with a political and social marriage—the union of France and England and the wooing of Katharine. The implications of
the form are brilliantly realized in the imagery of death and peril, providential salvation, and finally, in Burgundy's speech, natural rebirth. The same pattern is so marked in *The Winter's Tale* that at least one critic has interpreted it as conscious Biblical allegory. While the allegory may, I think, be discounted, the ritual pattern is most emphatically there. Because it has close analogues in sacred history, it encourages allegorical reading in the same way that the Mass pattern encouraged the Amalarian interpretation. The error of the allegorical reading is that it equates structure with subject matter (an error less serious in the case of the Mass, where ritual and sacred history are intimately related) and ends by diverting attention from the play as written to ingenious and strained parallels between its episodes and events in the New Testament. On the other hand, an approach based on the concept of the representation of secular materials in ritual form preserves the valuable insights of the allegorical reading while avoiding its liabilities. The themes of fertility and rebirth, for example, can be treated as analogues, rather than disguised equivalents, of the Christian archetype.

It is in the case of tragedy that recognition of the continuity of ritual form is perhaps most needed. The form of Shakespearean tragedy is usually understood—consciously or unconsciously—in terms of the Freytag pyramid, according to which its typical shape is that of rising action, climax-catastrophe, and falling action. The reading based on the "fall of princes" tradition, while historically more sophisticated, repeats and reinforces this view. Yet scholars have been forced to abandon the Freytag pyramid when dealing with individual plays. In what sense do Othello, Hamlet, and Lear rise before they fall? More important, it is generally recognized today that Shakespearean tragedy tends to end with a sense of uplift. At times this uplift is equated with Aristotelian catharsis, although it seems unrelated to the meanings normally read into "pur- gation of pity and fear." At other times it is explained in terms of Renaissance political philosophy: the state is healed (or order restored) at the expense of individual suffering. Herbert Weisinger has gone beyond these explanations to equate the uplift with the paradox of the Fortunate Fall.

We can, I think, extend Weisinger's insights by admitting that the archetypal form of Christian drama is not tragic, in the sense defined by Freytag's pyramid, but comic. The uplift is neither accidental nor cathartic, in the usual sense of that term, but the first hint of rebirth—of a movement toward theophany. Properly speaking, many Shakespearean plays that we call tragic—the list includes *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*—are comic in structure and tragic in tonality; that is, the episodes, the rhetoric, and the imagery stress darkness, sorrow, alienation, suffering,
and death. The theophany is limited to the last scene or even to the last few lines and is suggested (not stressed) by imagery of creative sacrifice (Romeo), restoration of social health (Hamlet), or lovers reunited in death (Othello)—this in contrast to the emphatic theophanies symbolized by lyric rejoicing, marriage, reconciliation of opposed factions, and the like, in the romances and pure comedies. If it seems strange to speak of comic structure and tragic tonality in Romeo, Hamlet, and Othello, a parallel can be found in the shifting tonalities of the Mass itself, which is joyful on Christmas and deeply somber on Passion Sunday, although the same comic structure is used on both occasions.

The preceding notes (and they are no more than that) are intended to suggest that the forms and techniques used in the earliest drama of the Middle Ages are important not only to later medieval drama but to Renaissance drama as well. The task of relating them to the data of history and criticism remains for the future. Even as notes, however, they offer the promise of a measure of unity among conflicting positions—a unity in which opposing views can be understood in terms of "both/and" rather than "either/or."