



Medieval Theatre

The period from about 500 to 1500 AD is known as the Medieval Period in theatre history. Following the decline in popularity of the theatre in Rome and the demise of respect for actors, the period to follow was a difficult one for the theatre. Traces of performances such as mimes, acrobatics, and singing can be found, but anything structured like a play remained difficult to find until later. Like the Greeks who used plays to worship Dionysis, Christians would introduce theatrical performance to the church and its mostly-illiterate congregation as a means of worship and teaching the gospel.

Initially, priests used liturgical chants during the mass to teach those who could not read about the events in the Bible. Eventually these chants grew into more elaborate productions that, because of the limited space within the church, had to be moved outdoors. Because of the content and probably due to the texts being in Latin, the players were priests, nuns, and choir-boys. However, at some point the plays were translated from Latin, which opened the doors for the common man to participate.

Some groups not associated with the church began performing *Miracle and Mystery plays*, but they drew criticism from those with church ties, and it was not long before their performances were repressed. However, these pioneers do represent the first acting companies and were later recognized and patronized by the nobles.

Medieval drama has a language all its own. The following are some terms from the period:

Miracle and Mystery plays — plays based on the saints' lives and Bible stories.

Passion play — a play based on the last week in the life of Christ.

Mansion — a series of acting stations in a line, including Heaven, Pilate's House, Jerusalem, and Hell's Mouth.

Guilds — groups of tradesmen (bakers, goldsmiths, etc.) whose common trade was jointly responsible for part of a story from the Bible which, when combined, made a cycle.

Each guild competed with the others to see who could produce the most elaborate story.

Cycle — the combined stories produced by the guilds.

Morality play — similar in theme to *Miracle and Mystery plays*, yet more concerned with the *principles* taught by Christianity rather than stories from the Bible.

Masque — a spectacular play glorifying the nobility.

Pageant cart — a two-storied cart that doubled as a stage (with the underside being a dressing room). During a cycle the carts would move from place to place, each producing the same story over and over again. The audience would remain stationary and enjoy each performance as it moved through.



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Despite the seriousness of the message and the religious content, the performances continued to appeal to the audience's sense of horseplay. Any opportunity for silliness and buffoonery was seized. Noah's wife became a nag, and the Tower of Babel lent itself to unlimited comic dialog. However, the audience's favorite figure to take comic pokes and humorous stabs at was Satan. The gleeful attitude with which he and his assistants handled Hell's business gave the viewers a frighteningly enjoyable incentive to be good. Even after the scenes in which Satan was a part of the story, his assistants adorned in horrific masks continued to pop into the story for no apparent reason other than to keep the audience amused with feats of acrobatics and farcical miming. Perhaps this is why even today one of the most prolific symbols of the Medieval period continues to be the jester.

Other aspects of the Medieval stage that helped to draw in large audiences were the complicated technical devices and special effects. For example, trap doors were hidden in the raised stages so that characters could appear from nowhere or disappear. Some troupes had cranes to fly angels in. However,

one of the most fascinating devices had to be the contraption known as Hell's Mouth. With a moving jaw, real flames, and smoke bellowing from its bowels, the device would consume those characters who were too evil for Heaven. It took seventeen men to operate one such device.

Medieval Plays

- *The Second Shepherd's Play* — a secular play about a clever scoundrel named Mak who steals a sheep, hides it in a crib, and passes it off as his son.
- *Everyman* — an *allegorical* (a play with strong symbolism) Morality play in which Everyman is summoned to meet Death, appear before God, and seek salvation. Other characters include Five Wits, Fellowship, Kindred, Discretion, Beauty, Strength, Knowledge, and Good Deeds.

Medieval Review

1. Medieval plays were based mainly on stories from the _____ and the lives of saints. They were called _____ and _____ plays.
2. Plays based on the last week of Christ's life were called _____ plays and are still performed.
3. Similar to the above were _____ plays, only these taught the difference between right and wrong rather than Christianity itself.
4. A _____ was a glorious spectacle performed for the benefit of the nobility.
5. Despite the seriousness of the message, Medieval plays still had a lot of _____.
6. Name two Medieval plays: