

Medieval Mystery Plays

Mystery, or miracle, plays during the Middle Ages were dramatic representations of stories from the Old Testament, New Testament, and lives of the saints. Often grouped in cycles that did not necessarily flow from one story to the next, mystery plays communicated the Christian story and message through the dramatization of core components of the Christian faith through images that would become standard and the vernacular language. From depictions of Adam and original sin to the Resurrection and miraculous events in saints' lives, mystery plays took on regional characteristics, pulling in large crowds from the towns where they were staged and the surrounding countryside. With background scenes, re-enactments, song, and verse composed especially for the dramatizations, mystery plays depicted heaven, hell, and earth, always keeping an eye on the central message: eternal salvation through the Christian faith.

Mystery plays grew out of earlier gestures to dramatize parts of the liturgy, especially on major feast days in the Christian faith. In these early liturgical plays, which first accompanied the celebration of the Easter liturgy, the priest who administered the mass would dramatize key points of the ceremony, such as removing the cross from above and placing it beneath the altar to symbolize the death of Jesus on Good Friday and replacing it on Easter to symbolize the resurrection of Jesus. Chanting of scriptural dialogue in response to these actions, called tropes, often accompanied the actions. Gradually, these liturgical scenes were extended to include extra-liturgical text to enhance dramatization. In the tenth century, starting in England, liturgical representations were grouped together and the prose composed for them began to stray from the liturgy. The vernacular began accompanying the Latin, and the text itself shifted from prose to verse. The longer groupings resulted in plays moving outside the walls of the church to church courtyards and then eventually to even larger spaces beyond church grounds. The longer plays also required more participants, drawing on the lay population. Now detached from the liturgy and walls of the church, the plays nevertheless depicted the core of Christian faith, attracting townspeople and country folk in large numbers. In essence, mystery plays became civic events.

While ecclesiastics mostly composed play cycles, laymen also composed verse for these cycles, gradually incorporating aspects and scenes of contemporary lay life. For example, Roman soldiers often appeared in the garb of the feudal knight. Beginning the twelfth century, lay associations such as guilds produced and financed plays. At times, the subject of a play would be representative of the guild in some way, such as a baker guild putting on a play about the Last Supper. In the fourteenth century, the Virgin Mary and her miraculous intercessory powers was the subject of the vast majority of religious drama. The fifteenth century was the height of plays depicting the lives of saints and passion plays, which depicted the liturgical Passion of Jesus as well as the other aspects of his life. Plays ranged in performance time, from lasting a portion of a day to several days. The Corpus Christi cycle was the most complex, at times covering Creation to the Last Judgment. The Fourth Lateran church council in 1215 formalized

the doctrine of transubstantiation, which affirmed the transformation of the Eucharist from bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus. Later in the thirteenth century, the papacy declared the need for a new feast day in the liturgical calendar to celebrate this doctrine. In 1311, Pope Clement V formalized the Feast of Corpus Christi, or the body of Christ, which fell seven weeks after Easter. The Corpus Christi cycle of the early fifteenth century in the English town of York contained forty-eight episodes staged at various sites and lasted approximately thirteen hours. Those who participated directly in mystery plays such as a Corpus Christi cycle considered it a great honor. It was an expression of religiosity and civic standing. This was a full civic celebration with music, song, and costumes, bringing expression to the lay piety so pervasive in the high and late Middle Ages.