

Religious and Civic Authority in European Drama

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The Renaissance and the Reformation were breeding times for new ideas in Europe. The authorities supervising the expression of ideas changed over these years, with the authority of the church over aesthetics diminishing. Changing authority also meant a changing focus in the ideas expressed, from Biblical and moral concepts to a full menu of humanist issues. Wilson Coates and Hayden White write that by the late Renaissance, “although artists and men of letters may have had didactic interests, the aesthetic element in their works became relatively much more prominent than the ethical element which predominated in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.” Renaissance and Reformation ideas were expressed in the arts as well as in writing. This paper will follow the shift in authority as it relates to drama, noting when physical distance may have played a role in the exercise of authority.

As a starting point, it is important to note that the use of drama was not approved in the Christian church for several centuries, partly due to attitudes formed early on in response to the Roman theater that celebrated Pagan gods. Reactions such as this one prevailed until the 10th century, and continue to inform Christian attitudes toward drama:

The laws of Christian discipline forbid among other pleasures the public shows. The show always leads to spiritual agitation, for where there is pleasure, there is keenness of feeling giving pleasure its zest; and where there is keenness of feeling, there is rivalry giving in turn

its zest for that. Then, too, where you have rivalry, you have rage, and bitterness, and wrath, and grief, and all bad things which flow from them — the whole entirety out of keeping with the religion of Christ. (Tertullian, 85–90)

Tertullian's comments near the end of the second century were repeated in sentiment by the church for several hundred years.

However, drama was introduced as part of the Easter Mass in the 10th century. The first drama was a conversation between the three Marys who approach Jesus' tomb in order to anoint his body, only to find an angel, who asks, "Whom do you seek in the tomb, oh worshippers of Christ?" The women respond, "We seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." The angel answers, "He is not here. He is risen. Come and see the place where they have laid him." The women praise God, ending the dialogue. After some additions to the short sequence, liturgical drama moved to the third lesson in the service of Matins which preceded the Easter morning Mass. (Hollman, iii)

By the 13th century, liturgical drama had spread from Switzerland and Flanders throughout Europe, and plays were performed "concerning the Nativity, the Saints and prophets, and certain parables." (ibid.) After that point, drama started to move from the church to the church yard.

When studying the movement of authority, it is useful to focus in one two areas: financial authority and aesthetic authority. In other words, who provided the resources needed in order for the drama to take place, and who decided on standards of beauty or artistic merit? In early liturgical drama, productions were mounted by the local cathedral or monastery for all of the worshippers at the mass. Clerics played the parts. Costumes were simple, with only a few props to symbolize the roles. Since the liturgical dramas did not employ elaborate costumes or sets, or professional actors, there weren't many expenses. (Hollman, vii) It seems that the local religious body took full financial responsibility.

As for artistic standards, tropes and dramas originated from anonymous clergy at various cathedrals and spread organically, not through any program of promotion of papal decree. The arbiters of taste were the clergy at each cathedral. (Rastall, 294)

As drama was beginning to emerge as an art under complete ecclesiastical authority in the Mass, the seeds of humanism and civil authority over drama were opening in the monasteries. For instance, Roswitha (also spelled Hroswitha), a tenth-century Benedictine nun in Gandersheim, wrote several

plays and poems that still survive. Roswitha's plays were performed in the nunnery at Gandersheim on great occasions, and perhaps at other monasteries as well. (St. John, "Translator's Note") Her goal for writing was stated in the preface to her collected plays:

There are many Christians, and we cannot entirely acquit ourselves of the charge, who, attracted by the polished elegance of the style of pagan writers, prefer their works to the holy scriptures. There are others who, although they are deeply attached to the sacred writings and have no liking for most pagan productions, make an exception in favor of the works of Terence, and, fascinated by the charm of the manner, risk being corrupted by the wickedness of the matter. Wherefore I, the strong voice of Gandersheim, have not hesitated to imitate in my writings a poet whose works are so widely read, my object being to glorify, within the limits of my poor talent, the laudable chastity of Christian virgins in that self-same form of composition which has been used to describe the shameless acts of licentious women. (Roswitha a)

Despite her obvious grasp of Greek and Roman works and her stated admiration of them, Roswitha chose to ignore certain conventions of Terence's writing, such as keeping the action of the drama within a single day and a single setting. (Gasquet, Introduction)

Returning to the question of financial responsibility, the Benedictine nunnery at Gandersheim drew its members from Saxon nobility. The nunnery had close ties to the German Holy Roman Emperor Otto I, who gave its abbess her own court, knights, and the right to coin money, and attend meetings of his Diet. (Gasquet, Introduction) The abbess in Roswitha's time was Gerberga, a niece of Otto I. Roswitha herself wrote a long epic poem about "Otto the Great." (Reese) One can assume that some imperial money supported the nuns and their intellectual pursuits.

As for artistic authority, Roswitha speaks of the ancient scholars as an ideal in her "Preface to the Plays." In addition, she addresses a letter to "learned patrons," who seem to be men outside the convent. (Roswitha b) She also gives credit to the abbess Gerberga. (Gasquet) So it would seem that there was quite a community of classical scholars paying attention to Roswitha's work, yet she did not adhere slavishly to Greek or Roman dramatic form. In her synthesis of Classical form with themes that fit her location, Roswitha anticipates humanist playwrights.

As time passed, drama expanded from inside the church to the town square outside. After the 12th century, drama was mostly played in the church yard or beyond. Two kinds of drama appeared in the 14th century: mystery plays and morality plays.

Mystery plays were nominally stories from the Bible. Guilds were responsible for their production, each guild in charge of a different play. It is the guilds that give their names to the mystery plays because each guild guarded its techniques from outsiders, and therefore its traditions were a mystery. (Jacobus, 139)

A student of the Radical Reformation will note that the guilds, therefore, played an important role in both the development of the drama and in movements of religious dissent. George Hunston Williams points out several instances of the relationship of guilds to the Radical Reformation. For instance, the Christian Brethren “had a strong following among the guilds in the 1530’s in Maastricht.” (Williams, 601)

Guilds were supervised by civic authority. The cities each had a corporation, which controlled the operation of trades, the quality of goods manufactured in the city, as well as the cycle or mystery plays mounted by the guilds. It is through the financial records of the city corporations, especially in York, that scholars get much of their evidence regarding drama of this period. Not every city had a Mystery cycle, but many had some kind of drama around the Corpus Christi festival. (Purvis, 18)

The corporation assigned plays to the guilds. The Shipwrights Guild, for instance, performed a play about the building of Noah’s Ark. The guild paid the city corporation for the privilege. The guild also paid for all of the staging, costumes, props, and sometimes for actors. Funds came from dues and fines paid by the members. (Purvis, 44) Very rarely, the city would make grants to guilds in financial hardship. Guilds would petition to corporation in order to enforce the collection of dues and fines in support of the pageant, reassign responsibility of specific plays, and sort out which craftspeople ought to support the pageant of which guilds. (Purvis, 46–47, 61) So, in answer to the financial question, the guilds negotiated with civic authority.

Aesthetic authority is not so well documented. Canon J.S. Purvis, an expert on the Mystery plays of York, England, writes that the original cycle of plays may have been the work of a single author, a man who was in a religious fraternity, or else that the chaplains of all of the religious fraternities contributed to writing the cycle plays. (Purvis, 22–23) Although the origins of the artistic work were ecclesiastical, the mature cycle plays were not supervised or controlled by the church. (Purvis, 18) Richard Rastall writes that both the liturgical and the guild plays “evolved and were modified over the decades. Borrowing a play from elsewhere, revising or rewriting it, adding a scene, providing an alternative version of a scene or of only a few lines to take account of the presence of singers or of the absence of a character – these are all situations to be seen in the surviving play texts.” (Rastall, 2) In other words, the specific needs of a place and time contributed to the aesthetic measure of a play.

Financial records are not available in reference to the morality plays, but the answers to some questions about what artistic authorities influenced them are. Morality plays were allegorical, mostly having to do with the individual soul's quest for salvation. Characters representing humanity such as Everyman interacted with the personifications of vices and virtues. Allegorical struggles were well known in medieval literature through the study of the Christian author Prudentius, who wrote in about the year 400. The innovation of the morality play in the late fourteenth century was to express the allegory in dramatic form. Wyclif refers to such a morality play in his *De Officio Pastoralis*. (Cambridge History of English and American Literature, "The Early Religious Drama.") Both the Catholic church and the dissenting traditions used allegorical plays, suggesting that the test for a morality play's artistic merit lay with its effectiveness as a tool. (Bryant, 45)

Related to the question of artistic merit is the issue of whether the plays should be performed at all. One example of the continuing influence of Tertullian in this period is Robert Mannyng of Brunne, who wrote against the plays in 1303:

Against God thou breakest covenant, and servest thy sire, Termagant. Saint Isadore said in his writing, "All those that delight to see such a thing, or horse or harness lend thereto, yet have they guilt of their peril."

If priest or clerk lend vestment, that hallowed is through sacrament, more than other they are to blame; of sacrilege they have the fame: Fame, for they fall in plight, they should be chastised, therefore, with right. (Mannyng, 102)

It seems from Mannyng's accusations that priests at least cooperated with the early plays, which indicates some church involvement with the aesthetics, if not the economics, of drama outside the church walls.

As the political situation in Europe changed, so did the topics addressed in drama. Since the Reformation was expressed differently in each country, it is necessary to limit the scope of the study of drama after 1500. This remainder of paper will focus more closely on the study of English drama.

Religion-related drama was part of the English Reformation from the beginning. John Ritwise and the boys of St. Paul's School performed an anti-Lutheran play before Henry VIII in 1527. (Cambridge History of English and American Literature, "Early English Comedy") Edward VI kept up Henry's policies toward drama, but the five-year reign of Mary Tudor brought vigorous suppression of both drama and Protestantism. (Bryant, 31)

Elizabeth I ascended in 1558, bringing back the Church of England. Elizabeth's church required that homilies in support of the English Reformation and against papal usurpation of royal authority be preached a certain number of times per year. (Byant, 42) Elizabeth did issue proclamations banning plays that touched on religious themes. Nevertheless, playwrights continued to support the religious ideas of the English Reformation by referring to them in "history" plays. The crown employed rigorous censorship to make sure that the religious ideas supported civil authority, and yet drama continued to flourish. (Bryant, 84)

Some of the polemical dramas written under Henry and Edward reappeared immediately. John Bale, a former priest and supporter of the Reformation, may have presented his play "King John" to the Queen in 1561, having written it around 1538. The dramatic structure of the play borrows heavily from the allegorical tradition of the morality plays. The main idea of "King John" is an argument from scripture that kings rule by the will of God, not at the behest of popes (Bryant, 45–82). John Bale is just an early example of how the political and religious issues of the country were being addressed by playwrights under the supervision of the civil government, not the church.

Companies of actors had no permanent home at this point. Theaters weren't built in England until 1576. Up until that time, companies of wandering actors with no other occupation could be arrested for vagrancy in England. A few companies of actors enjoyed the legitimacy of being named for a civic authority figure, such as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. (Jacobus, 161)

One place where drama was performed before theaters were built was at college. The Inns of Court, a college for law students in London, is one example. (Jacobus, 161) Inn yards typically had a balcony above and a square yard on which actors performed. The audience looked out their windows or stood in the yard.

Christ's College in Cambridge also had its performances. It was there that William Stevenson wrote "Gammer Gurton's Needle," about a Catholic (not Anglican) priest who provides low comedy by drinking, disguising himself in order to sneak into a parishioner's house to spy on her, and generally getting himself in trouble. (Bryant, 88) And so, drama continues in the service of religious propaganda.

Who is paying for it? Account books have listings for "comedy" and "tragedy," indicating that the productions were supported by the colleges. These productions attracted royal visits to Oxford and Cambridge, keeping those two centers of learning solvent and connected with the throne. (Cambridge History of English And American Literature)

What are the aesthetic authorities? As academic centers, the colleges were interested in imitating the classics, and in incorporating the New Learning. The University Wits had a strict code of standards, influenced by the rigid course of study at the colleges. The curriculum at Oxford and Cambridge was medieval in form during the period from 1570 to 1580, and yet scholars returning from abroad or visiting attracted the admiration and attention of the students. (Cambridge History of English and American Literature, "The University Wits") Like Hroswitha, playwrights synthesized the format of Terence with ideas from their own context. Also like Hroswitha, royal patronage added a little extra pressure of personal taste.

Individualism, one concern of the Protestant Reformation, is demonstrated at this point in theater history. Whereas the liturgical dramas were composed by anonymous clergy, Renaissance dramas had celebrated authors. The characters of the medieval dramas were either Biblical characters or allegorical representations. Renaissance drama had characters with names and depth. The authority of the individual believer was reflected in drama.

This paper has attempted to trace the lines of authority through financial responsibility, aesthetic standards, and physical distance. Liturgical drama in the tenth century was the artistic and financial responsibility of the church and took place within the church. University dramas in the sixteenth century were performed neither in nor near the church, were the financial responsibility of the colleges, and catered to the tastes of civic authority, even when touching on religious themes. Throughout these five hundred years, drama was used to teach a certain message, usually a moral one. The Renaissance love of knowledge prevailed in both Catholic and Protestant circles as religious and secular leaders learned to put new ideas and spectacular dramatic forms to work for them.

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