

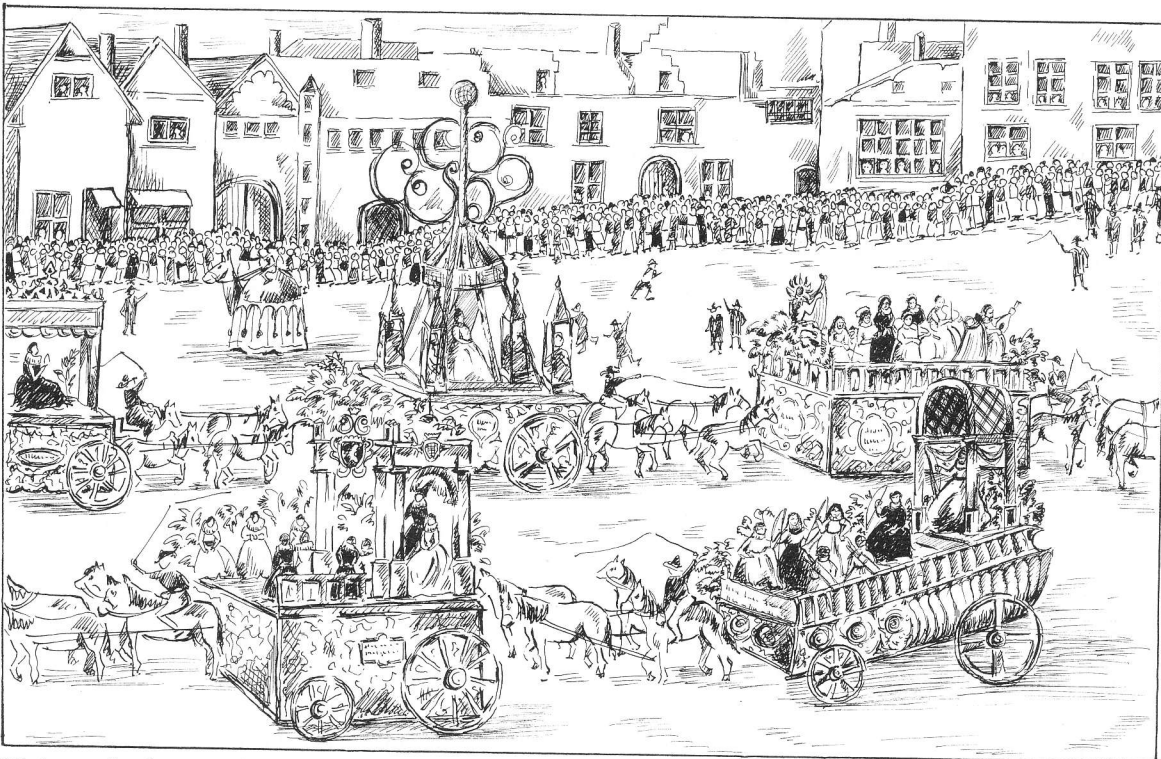
MYSTERY AND MORALITY PLAYS

INTRODUCTION

From the early centuries up until the sixteenth century, people in Christian Europe were taught about their religion by their parents or relatives at home, or by relatives and other Christians in their local church. Only a very small number of people actually studied religion – some clerics. In fact, very

few medieval people were educated – even some kings and noblemen could not read and write.

Books were extremely expensive because they had to be written by hand. They were considered so valuable that they were often chained to library shelves. Usually they were written in Latin, (or Greek) the language of the educated minority. This



Elaborately decorated carts used to transport the actors of the various morality plays around the towns and villages.

minority was made up of scholars and monks, and in the centuries to the early Middle Ages, by nuns in cloistered communities. (Cloistered means, 'shut away from the world'.)

Very few people could afford to be educated. In any case, most people did not see much reason for being educated. If they were in the lower classes, it was believed they had no right to be educated anyway.

Christians were taught about their religion through sermons, and through preparation to receive the Sacraments. They were reminded of the basic stories and beliefs of their religion through Church paintings and ceremonies, hymns and, in later centuries, stained glass windows, mystery or miracle plays and morality plays.

THE MYSTERY OR MIRACLE PLAYS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Mystery and miracle plays probably originated at St Weyburgh's Abbey in England. Initially, they were performed in Latin, but later on, English was used. The most well-known and intact versions of these plays are those which were performed in the city of Chester in England.

These plays were about the main stories in the Old and New Testaments, from Adam and Eve to the Crucifixion. They were performed during Whitsun (Pentecost week) – nine on Monday, nine on Tuesday and the remaining seven on Wednesday.

These days were days of special celebration. The town or city was decorated and had a carnival atmosphere about it. Everybody looked forward to it, especially the workers and peasants, who could have a break from their hard life of manual labour.

Chronicles describe that every vantage point in the town was taken by people wanting to get a good look at the performances.

Each play was arranged by a guild (a group of skilled workers in a particular trade). They were responsible for decorating the carts on which the plays were performed. These were pulled by horses from one part of the city to the other so that performances could be seen by all the townsfolk. The guilds competed fiercely to outdo each other in the

decoration of their carts. People who came to see the plays were also interested in the way the carts were decked out and would offer criticisms and show appreciation of any new and elaborate staging.

Usually guilds were in charge of performing a play that had some connection with their trade, no matter how slight. So we find that the play 'Noah's Flood' was performed by the River Dee Boatmen. Sometimes guilds shared a cart, e.g. on the Monday of the play cycle, the Vintners (wine and spirit makers) and the Dyers performed 'King Herod' and on Tuesday, the Goldsmiths and Masons performed 'The Murder of the Innocents'.

THE MORALITY PLAYS

The morality plays were used as a way of teaching people how to lead a good Christian life. Scholars believe that these plays had been developed from medieval sermons. By the sixteenth century, the themes of the plays had become more secular (i.e. more to do with ordinary life than with religion) but even so, they were meant to present a strong moral lesson to spectators.

Basically, the morality plays were like a warning: "If you make wrong choices in life, punishment or a loss of heaven awaits you."

The characters in the plays were usually the personification of virtues or vices. (Personification means that an issue or quality is being talked about as if it were a human person.) The characters might be Chastity, Hatred, Lust, Forgiveness, Free Will, Pity, etc. The action of some of the plays was based on what Church teachers understood to be the moral development of people during different periods of their life – (in most cases it referred to men, as society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did not see women as playing an important role in life).

In a play called 'The Castle of Perseverance', the whole course of a man's moral life was shown. In his youth, the man is attracted by the pleasures of the world and is led to be sinful. As he grows to middle age and becomes more mature, he is more inclined to be good and virtuous. As old age approaches, he tends to fall back into sinful ways. Finally, as death

nears, he seeks forgiveness for his sins and he hopes for salvation.

THE NATURE OF THE MORALITY PLAYS

Comedy was used in these plays to make vices and evil doers appear grotesque, vain and useless. As one historian commented: "From a Christian point of view, vice is truly comic because it prevents a person from going to heaven and therefore a sinful life is a useless life and thus ultimately comic".

HOW MORALITY PLAYS WERE PERFORMED

Morality plays were performed alongside churches, in market squares, on street corners or in large fields.

Sometimes a play would be performed on a platform on wheels which was drawn from place to place, sometimes in an open area with a platform and small structures built around it to represent buildings.

Audience involvement was an essential part of the plays and it was not unusual to see in the scripts a reference like the following: "aback, fellows, and give me room". Audiences could stand in the acting area and make suggestions and comments. In fact, the audiences were drawn into the action of the plays by the actors. They were urged to do good by the virtues and were tempted by the vices. Sometimes the actors would ask one of the audience to hold a prop and at times others were singled out as examples of "people who obviously looked like they had led a very good life", or "people who had led a bad life".

In this way, the plays reached into the lives of everyone, showing that all people were often in the same situation of having to decide whether to be good or to allow themselves to be tempted to sin. Everyone lived with the hope of getting to heaven and all were aware of the danger of going to hell if they did not lead a good life on earth. The morality plays showed that before God all people would be judged the same way, regardless of whether they were kings or peasants.

CONCLUSION

Scholars believe that the morality plays in England were part of a popular education movement started by the Catholic Church in the early thirteenth century.

What the Church was trying to do was to give people some basic knowledge of their faith. One of the things the scholars have noted is that although the plays were concerned about the difficulties to be faced in being a good Christian, they did not stress the need to withdraw to a monastery to do this. Rather, they encouraged people to develop their whole personality and to adopt a balanced attitude to life. For most people, this was the best way of living as a good Christian.

Review Questions

1. List the ways Christians today learn about their faith.
2. Describe the way some morality plays showed how people's moral life developed.
3. What do you think are some of the influences which help people make decisions, or hinder their decision-making? How do the following influence decision-making: Parents? Friends? Teachers? Media? Church?
4. Write a short morality play on a theme of your own choice showing clearly the pros and cons that have to be considered when making a decision about a problem. Here are some examples:
 - (a) One of your friends has decided to cheat in a Science test and has written information on her forearms. Advise her.
 - (b) You have been invited to a party and you know that your best friend's boy friend/girl friend is going with someone else. Do you tell him/her?

(c) Your Mathematics marks or grades are poor and you have to pass the next test well or you will be in big trouble. While emptying out the class bin, you find a copy of the next Mathematics test. What do you do?

You may wish to construct short morality plays on appropriate themes of your own choosing.