The Origin of the European Mediaeval Drama

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Historical Background

The starting point of drama is religion. ¹ The root of the modern drama is based on the ritualistic resources of primitive religions. “Such is the case of the notion of ‘ritual drama’, the idea that serious drama is historically grounded in sacred ritual and may still draw on ritualistic resources for its substance.”² The ritualistic character of religion is found not only in Greek theatre but in the dramas of other countries as well. “Scholars had long known and accepted the Greek theatre (and analogous traditions in Mediaeval and Renaissance Europe, Japan, China, and India) had roots in religion and ritual. Aristotle and other commentators had canonized that fact. Indeed Aristotle’s classic statements from the Poetics – that tragedy originated from the leader of the sacred (presumably Dionysian) dithyramb ritual and comedy from the leader of the phallic processions – provided the starting point for every study of the origins of drama.”³

Thus, the origin of the modern theatre goes back as far as the Greek ritual plays centred on the altar of Dionysus, the wine-god and the god of fertility and procreation, around 1200 BC.⁴ The chant or the hymn that was sung in praise of god Dionysius is known as Dithyramb. It is a choric hymn which is considered as the root of Greek drama.⁵ It was Thespis who introduced an actor (Protagonist) in the Dithyramb around 594 BC.⁶ With Thespis thus began the classical Greek drama. The first playwright is Aeschylus (524 BC.),⁷ then Sophocles (496 BC.),⁸ Euripides (484 BC.),⁹ Aristophanes (448 BC.),¹⁰ and finally Menander (342 BC.)¹¹

Greek drama did not completely diminish with the end of the Greek Empire since drama in the Roman Empire was influenced by Greek drama. Like Greek Drama the origin of Roman drama is also centred on a ritualistic festival.¹² “For it is reliably reported that it was in 240 B. C. that the ediles commissioned for the first time in Rome’s history the translation from the Greek of a tragedy and of a comedy for the festival of Ludi Romani. The writer selected for this task was Livius Andronicus, a Greek, it is said, and who was taken a prisoner at the capture of Tarentum, and, brought to Rome, […].”¹³

The Roman dramatists, mainly Plautus (254-184 BC.),¹⁴ and Terence (185-159 BC.),¹⁵ were influenced by classical Greek drama. Another Roman dramatist named Seneca (4 BC. - 65 AD.), who was also influenced by Greek drama, had nine tragedies to his name which survived, known as the ‘Oratorical tragedies of Seneca.’¹⁶ The dramatic heritage of the other cultures was influenced by both the Greek and Roman drama. “Like the other arts drama possessed a distinguished past in Greek and Roman plays, theatres and works of criticism. The Greeks had carried this heritage east and south into Asia Minor, the Middle East, Alexandria and North Africa: the Romans had extended its influence northwards and westwards into Germany, France and Britain.”¹⁷
As a result, by the late tenth century we come across a Benedictine nun named Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim in Germany who was influenced by the dramas of Terence. “Hrotsvitha, […] had taken Terence as her model for half a dozen plays in Latin prose, designed to glorify chastity and to celebrate the constancy of the martyrs. The dramaturgy of Hrotsvitha appears to have been an isolated experiment and the merest literary exercise. Her plays abound in delicate situations, and are not likely to have been intended even for cloister representation.”

But in the Roman Empire both Greek and Roman classical dramas were not popular among the common people as they inclined more towards a crude form of dramatic entertainment called the “Oscum ludicrum or fabula Atellana,” the spectacula comic drama. While most of the Romans were not interested in classical Greek and Roman dramatic heritage they gathered around the purely entertainment dramas connected with Ludi Romani festivals. “It was not the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides or even the comedies of Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus and Terence which figured on the playbills known to them; for dramatic entertainment had by then degenerated into sequences of amusements that were both crude and rude. Mime, pantomimes, dancers, musicians and keepers of performing animals mingled with tumblers, wrestlers, charioteers and gladiators to provide that strange mixture of mimetic and athletic ludi […]”

The Romans used the dramatic talent of Livius Andronicus to promote the Ludi Romani festivals. The play of Livius also became very popular and it was performed during the festivals of Ludi Romani. “About 240 B.C. the Greek Livius Andronicus introduced tragedy and comedy. The play now became a regular element in the spectacular of the Roman festivals […] Permanent theatres were built in the closing years of the Republic by Pompey and others, and the number of days annually devoted to ludi scenici was constantly on the increase.”

The Reaction of the Church Fathers

The early Church Fathers were highly concerned about the impact of the Roman drama of spectacula on the moral degeneration of the converted Christians and its influence of the pagan cult on their faith. “Tertullian holds that the Christian has explicitly forsworn spectacula, when he renounced the devil and all his works and vanities at baptism. What are these but idolatry, and where is idolatry, if not in the spectacula, which not only minister to lust, but take place at the festivals and in holy places of Venus and Bacchus?”

The Church Fathers also introduced disciplinary regulations to protect the converted Christians from the secular theatrical performances of the Roman drama. “An early formal condemnation of actors is included in the so-called Canons of Hippolytus, and the relations of converts to the stage were discussed during the fourth century by the councils of Elivira (306) and of Arles (314) and the third and fourth councils of Carthage (397-398).”

Until the conversion of Constantine the Church did not have the political power to bring strict legislations against the converted Christians who enjoyed this Roman spectacula. Even after the Edict of Milan (313 AD.) though the Church introduced several strict rules against spectacula it was unable to stop those converted Christianity being completely away from this unhallowed profession. “The love of even professing Christians for spectacula proved hard to combat. There are no documents which throw more light on the society of the Eastern Empire at the close of the fourth century than the works of St. Chrysostom; […] A sermon preached on Easter-day, 399, is good evidence of this. St. Chrysostom had been attacking the stage for a whole year, and his exhortations had just come to nought. Early in Holy Week there was a great storm, and the people joined rogatory processions. But it was a week of ludi. On Good Friday the circus, and on Holy Saturday the theatre, were thronged and the churches were empty.”
St. Augustine who had a passion for dramas before his conversion was one of the strongest opponents of the spectacula at the Council of Carthage. “Chrysostom’s great Latin contemporaries, Augustine and Jerome, are at one with him and with each other in their condemnation of the evils of the public stage as they knew it.” In spite of the opposition, St. Augustine who knew the value of the classical Greek and Roman dramatic heritage was more realistic in his attitude towards drama and theatre. He showed some sympathy for the revival movement of literary interest of the fifth century in which a devout bishop named Sidonius learnt both Menander and Terence with his son. While confessing his own experience on the drama which arouses passion, he drew a distinction between good and bad drama. “In a well-known passage of the Confessions he records the powerful influence exercised by tragedy, and particularly erotic tragedy, over his tempestuous youth. And in the City of God he draws a careful distinction between the higher and the lower forms of drama, and if he does not approve, at least he does not condemn, the use of tragedies and comedies in a humane education.”

But on the whole the attitude of the early Church Fathers towards theatre was negative. We can trace another attempt in introducing regulations against theatre from the Code of Theodosius which was drawn up in 435 for both empires. “The views of the Church were met upon two points. One series of rescripts forbade performances on Sundays or during the more sacred periods of the Christian calendar: another relaxed in favour of Christians the strict caste laws which sternly forbade actresses or their daughters to quit the unhappy profession in which they were born. Moreover, certain sumptuary regulations were passed, which must have proved a severe restriction on the popularity as well as the liberty of actors.”

Even with all these opposition and prohibitions, the Church Fathers were not able to completely stop the inner passion of people towards the Roman spectacula. One main reason for this was the recognition of theatre by the emperors and their positive reception of it with the state patronage. The emperors were also in a dilemma and embarrassing situation when the Church wanted them to stop the spectacula Roman theatre. “The emperors were, indeed, in a difficult position. They stood between bishops pleading for decency and humanity and populaces now traditionally entitled to their panem et spectacula.”

Finally the fall of Roman spectacula became a reality not because of the strict regulations or the willing suspension of spectacula by the Christians but only with the barbarian invasions. “In the Eastern Empire the Emperors’ embarrassment on this score was brought to an abrupt end by Saracen invasions in the seventh century. In the West the problem was solved by similar means although from a different quarter. The invading Goths, Ostogoths, Vandals, Lombards and other barbarians tribes that swept over the Alps into Italy and North Africa during the sixth century despised the showmen and their shows, mimetic and athletic, and eventually suppressed them, thus doing for the Church what its most distinguished leaders from St. Chrysostom to St. Augustine and St. Jerome had for so long argued should be done, but had so signally failed to achieve.”

Though with the invasion of barbarians the drama in the Roman Empire suffered it was not permanently dead. The agricultural based life style of the people and their intimate relationship with nature kept alive the root of drama in their day today life. “[...] the mimetic instinct renewed itself with each generation, like the annual return of spring after winter, and expressed itself throughout Europe in the festive games and dancers associated with sowing and harvesting of crops and with the progress of the seasons as remarked in the sun’s passage through the heavens, notably at the solstices (December / June) and the equinoxes (March / September).”

The Church in its conversion mission was well aware of this reality and tried to adapt her missionary methods by bringing Christian identity to pagan rituals. “For the peasant communities of Northern and Western
Europe, whom the hierarchy of the Roman Church sought to convert and control, these festivals of the agricultural year held an economic as well as a religious significance. The Church therefore could not ignore them, nor could it suppress them: it had come to terms with them and attempts to endow them with a Christian significance.”

E. K. Chambers who has researched extensively on mediaeval drama shows us with historical evidence regarding the adaptation of the missionary methods by the hierarchy of the Church in her missionary conversion in England. In this regard it is worth knowing about the two letters written by Pope Gregory the Great (590-640 A.D.) during the time of St. Augustine of Canterbury (604 A.D.), the apostle of England.

Two letters of Gregory the Great, written at the time of the mission of St. Augustine, are a key to the methods adopted by the apostles of the West. In June 601, writing to Ethelbert of Kent by the hands of abbot Mellitus, Gregory bade the new convert show zeal in suppressing the worship of idols, and throwing down their fanes. Having written thus, the pope changed his mind. Before Mellitus could reach England, he received a letter instructing him to expound to Augustine a new policy. ‘Do not, after all,’ wrote Gregory, ‘pull down the fanes. Destroy the idols; purify the buildings with holy water; set relics there; and let them become temples of the true God. So the people will have no need to change their places of concourse, and where of old they were wont to sacrifice cattle to demons, thither let them continue to resort on the day of the saint to whom the church is dedicated, and slay their beasts no longer as a sacrifice, but for a social meal in honour of Him whom they now worship.

This author in his extensive research examines the existence of folk drama performed at village festivals as festival plays which were directly related to pagan cultic rituals long before the conversion of Constantine in 312 AD. This opinion is accepted by other authors too. “The Roman state itself frequently gave official recognition to foreign cults. This policy of religious tolerance began at an early period in Roman history, and by the middle of the third century before Christ, Roman religion consisted of a medley of Greek and Latin beliefs, with Greek elements dominant and crowding the indigenous cults off the fields.”

The Church, learning from the existing reality of the Roman pagan cult and the agricultural based ritualistic religious life of the people adapted her missionary method by paving way for the birth of the Christian liturgical drama. The drama once forbidden by the Church because of its vulgar form of popular entertainment revived as one of her new missionary methods. “Drama has had two births in Europe, once from the rites of pagan Greece, the second time from those of Christian Rome.” On both these occasions the religious rituals became the basis of drama. These religious rituals were predominantly seen in religious festivals. With the introduction of the Christian identity or significance to the agricultural based religious ritualistic cult, the pagan festive calendar was baptised as the Christian festive calendar. “With that achieved through the equation of the major Commemorative Feasts in the Christian Calendar (Christmas, Shrovetide, Easter, Pentecost, All Saints, etc.) with those of the agricultural year, an accommodation with the ludi of social recreation in these holiday seasons could be reached.”

The most important ‘ritual’ in Christian liturgy is the Eucharist. “In the Christian Church the term ‘liturgy’ was originally limited to the commemoration of the Last Supper in the celebration of the Eucharist; but in the course of time the term was extended in its meaning to describe any or all of the Offices or services devised for public worship. Thus the term ‘The Mass’ as used in the Roman Catholic Church today still resembles the term ‘liturgy’ as used in its original restricted sense among the earliest Christian communities: […].” Hence, it is
important to trace how the Mass as a religious ritual and the heart of Christian liturgy gave birth to Christian liturgical drama.\textsuperscript{50}

**The Mass as Drama**

The origin of mediaeval drama may be traced back to the liturgy of the Church. The celebration of the Eucharist or the Mass as the heart of the Christian liturgy is the root of Liturgical plays which is the cradle of the mediaeval drama. “Early in the 9\textsuperscript{th} century,\textsuperscript{51} Amalarius, Bishop of Metz, […] wrote several interpretations of the Mass. One of these, Liber officialis, had a far-reaching influence, traceable in devotional manuals as late as the 12\textsuperscript{th} century.”\textsuperscript{52} Amalarius introduced a new feature to the Mass which is the dramatic character. “Whether or not he was the first person to perceive the essentially dramatic structure of the Latin Mass is an open question; but, as O. B. Hardison demonstrated in his book *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*, Amalarius thought it is necessary to stress the fact that the celebration of Mass had an immediate and recurring significance for all who partook of it as well as an historical significance in commemorating past events.”\textsuperscript{53} With the introduction of the dramatic structure, the symbolic significance of the Mass became less important. The dramatic aspect gained more significance as an actual representation of the supreme sacrifice of Jesus.\textsuperscript{54}

Karl Young, another erudite author of the mediaeval drama had researched extensively on the dramatic structure of the Mass.\textsuperscript{55} He mentions the opinions of three persons who describe the Mass as a liturgical drama. “The Mass itself, when sung with its due accompaniment of solemn ritual, writes canon Westlake, was at once the most elementary as well as the highest drama, declares Dom Lefebvre. Lintilhac holds, that the central act of the sacred ceremony is truly mimetic, and that the Mass, grafted upon the primitive liturgy of the Last Supper, was already a true drama.”\textsuperscript{56} He too mentions the contrary opinions of those who do not accept the Mass as a drama and maintains its sacred liturgical character of worship.\textsuperscript{57} “The celebrant remains merely the celebrant, and does not undertake to play the part of his Lord. He is only the instrument through which Christ acts. The Mass, then, has never been a drama nor did it ever directly give rise to drama.”\textsuperscript{58} Karl Young, while accepting the dramatic features of the Mass considers it as merely worship. Although the Mass has some dramatic elements such as the movements of the celebrant and especially the Elevation of the Host and also the dialogue of antiphon and response it lacks one important aspect to be called a drama. “Only impersonation is lacking. If only the priest were impersonating Christ when he pronounces the words of consecration: “This is indeed my body.” But he isn’t. The canon of the mass makes it clear that he is quoting, not impersonating.”\textsuperscript{59} Hence, the Mass has to be considered as a drama with these limitations. Another important aspect of the mediaeval drama is the Passion Play. The root of the Passion Play as such is found in the ‘Easter Play’ which was enacted within the Mass.

**The Easter Play**

When we consider the true sense of the word ‘drama’ the dramatic forms in the Mass are not really dramatic but mimetic. The Mass has two mimetic forms at first. They are the ‘Read Part’ and the ‘Sung Part.’ The ‘Sung Part’ which is called ‘trope’ is directly linked with liturgical music.\textsuperscript{60} “The tropes attached themselves in varying degrees to most of the choral portions of the Mass. […] They received the specific names, in Germany of *Sequentiae*, and in France of *Prosae*, and they include, in their later metrical stages, some of the most remarkable mediaeval hymns.”\textsuperscript{61} These tropes were not acted but with one exception.\textsuperscript{62} That is the inclusion of ‘The Acted Part’ which is called the Easter Trope.\textsuperscript{63}
According to the scholars of the mediaeval drama this Easter trope is considered as the starting point of the mediaeval liturgical plays. The most commonly accepted opinion among the scholars on the origin of the mediaeval liturgical drama is the short dramatic form, known as the Easter Trope on the ‘Visitation of the three Marys to the sepulchre’ which was enacted by the monks during the Mass on Easter Sunday. This is the earliest and the simplest form of *Quem quaeritis*.

**Interrogatio:**

*Quem quaeritis in sepulchro. [o] Christicolae?*

**Responsio:**

*Iesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o caelicola.*

*Non est hic, surrexit sicut praedixerat;\*  
*ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro. Resurrexi.*

Though the source of this Easter Trope is generally connected to a manuscript found from the monastery of St. Gall in the 10th century there had been other early sources too.

Another Easter Trope known as the *Concordia Regularis* or Harmony of the Rule was compiled in England. “The precise position which the *Quem quaeritis* was intended to take in the Easter services is not evident from these tropes by themselves. Fortunately another document comes to our assistance. This is the *Concordia Regularis*, an appendix to the *Rule* of St. Benedict intended for the use of the Benedictine monasteries in England reformed by Dunstan during the tenth century. The *Concordia Regularis* was drawn up by Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester, as a result of a council of Winchester held at some uncertain date during the reign of Edgar (959-79) […]”

While the intention of *Concordia Regularis* was to protect the faith of the monastic ceremonies from the uneducated it is also considered as a different dramatic form. “This is clearly a ‘play’ distinct from the original trope, which became detached from its position in the procession of the Mass and was inserted in the services preceding the Mass.”

**The Passion Play Cycle**

This short dramatic form of *Quem quaeritis* dialogue based on the resurrection of Jesus later developed into a long series of dramatic forms with the inclusion of biblical as well as secular narrations. “The Easter cycle, also, received memorable accretions during this period. The *Quem quaeritis* of the Tours manuscript, […] included a series of scenes beginning with the Setting of the Watch before Sepulchre, and ending with the Incredulity of Thomas.”

The dramatic action of the *Quem quaeritis* at the Sepulchre had been enhanced with the inclusion of the liturgical readings (*lectiones*) and one such *lectio* was the sixth century pseudo-Augustinian Christmas sermon known as *Contra Judaeos, Paganos, et Arianos de Symbolo*, which is considered as the source of the Prophet Play that will be examined in relation to the plays of the Old Testament in the next chapter.

Also with the introduction of the vernacular into liturgical plays, mainly German, French and English, the short play of *Quem quaeritis* became longer. Mostly the German liturgical plays used both Latin and vernacular. “Another way in which the vernacular invades liturgical drama is illustrated in Klosterneuberg Easter Office. After Pilate sets the guard at the tomb, the soldiers patrol, singing a song to the congregation with the refrain
Schowa propter insidias, “a guard against plots,” one word of German and two of Latin. Such ‘macaronic’ verse was popular in the Middle ages.”

Thus the expanded Easter play fully developed into a long Passion Play with the addition of the other themes on Jesus’ passion and death mainly enacted on Good Friday. “The Good Friday scene is an elaborate planctus. It is opened by Joseph of Arimathea, and the three Maries. Then comes Nicodemus, and the body of Christ is taken from the cross. The Virgin Mary enters with St. John, and the planctus resume.” Then with the addition of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday and other selected incidents of Jesus’ earthly ministry such as miracles and parables, also his entrance to the Temple of Jerusalem amid the exultations of the crowds and the cleansing of the Temple, expanded the story of the Passion play as to a fully developed drama to enact throughout the Holy week beginning from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. “The earliest text of a Passion is contained in the Benedictbeuern manuscript. It opens with calling of Andrew and Peter, the healing of the Blind, Zacchaeus and the entry into Jerusalem. Then follows a long episode of Mary Magdalen. […] Then […] the Raising of Lazarus, the Betrayal by Judas, the Last Supper, the Mount of Olives, the Passion itself, from the Taking in Gethsemane to the Crucifixion.” This development is known as the Passion Play cycle enacted from Palm Sunday to Good Friday.

The historical development of the Passion plays has to be considered in relation to the other two forms of mediaeval dramas known as Miracle and Mystery plays, which according to the Catholic Encyclopaedia are the two main forms of European Mediaeval Christian drama. But there is a difference in the time of their origin. “It should be noted that the word “mystery” has often been applied to all Christian dramas prior to the sixteenth century, whereas it should be confined to those of the fifteenth century, which represent the great dramatic effort anterior to the Renaissance. Before this period dramatic pieces were called “plays” or “miracles.” The embryonic representations, at first given in the interior of the churches, have been designated as liturgical dramas.”

As a result of secularization the plays that were first enacted during Easter and Christmas liturgical celebrations began to be organized out of the church and started evolving as productions of the Cycle Plays of four guilds replacing the language from Latin to the vernacular. “From ecclesiastical the drama had become popular. Out of the hands of the clergy in their naves and choirs, it had passed to those of the laity in their market-places and guild-halls.” It is with this development that we come across mainly the two forms of mediaeval dramas known as Miracle and Mystery plays and the other form called Morality plays that has fewer characteristics in relation to Passion plays.

Miracle Plays

Miracle plays are also known as the ‘Plays of the Saints’ based on the life, miracles, or martyrdom of saints. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica “Almost all surviving miracle plays concern either the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas, the 4th century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor.” But E. K. Chamber’s research on the manuscripts of Miracle plays performed by different guilds shows us ‘The Cycle’ of Miracle plays beginning from ‘The Creation of the World’ to ‘The Last Judgement.’ Here the author gives a list of manuscripts on Miracle plays performed by the guilds such as York Plays, Towneley Plays, Coventry Plays, and some other manuscripts called Ludus Coventriae, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Norwich and Cornwall. The plays titled ‘Conversion of St. Paul,’ ‘St. Mary Magdalen,’ and ‘Massacre of the Innocents’ are also included in the list of Miracle plays.
Mystery Plays

Mystery plays also have a similar dramatic cycle beginning from the scene on ‘The Creation of the World’ and ending with ‘The Last Judgement.’ Hence, Mystery plays can be categorized under three cycles, namely the plays based on the Old Testament, the New Testament and the plays of the saints. Most of the Mystery plays have a direct link to Passion plays. “The most celebrated of these were the Passion plays, by which must be understood not only the plays devoted to the Passion properly so called, but also those which set forth the complete history of the Saviour.”

According to E. K. Chambers the origin of the word ‘Mystery’ shows its relation to Passion Plays. “Mystère, or ‘mystery,’ on the other hand, is not English at all, in a dramatic sense, and in France first appears as misterie in the charter given by Charles VI in 1402 to the Parisian confrérie de la Passion.” Describing the Passion Play of Oberammergau within the cycle of Mystery plays another writer mentions the same view of Chambers on the origin of the word ‘mystery’ in relation to Passion Plays. “[…] while in France a special community, the “Confrérie de la Passion,” was founded for the purpose of producing and enacting Passion-Plays.”

J. W. Robinson who has researched the dramatic narrative of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of the Mystery plays in relation to Christian paintings shows us how both the drama and the paintings were oriented towards one purpose, i.e., the ‘Image of Pity’ and these paintings were influenced by the monologues that Jesus delivered to the audience in the Mystery plays of the Passion, Resurrection and the Last Judgement. “Both the monologues and the images, which are primarily associated with the Passion and Resurrection, are also found transferred to the Last Judgement. In the plays of the Last Judgement the awesome judge becomes also the reproachful and bleeding Christ, and in paintings of the Last Judgement the majestic figure of God is either replaced by the image of the bleeding Saviour, or […]” According to the author both the dramatic monologues and the imagery paintings became a common feature in the fifteenth century. These dramatic monologues of Jesus acted as separate parts within the plays while interrupting them. These Mystery plays were performed by the guilds such as Chester, Towneley, York, Wakefield, and Ludus Coventriae.

Corpus Christi Plays

Both Miracle and Mystery plays became very popular when they were enacted during the feast of Corpus Christi. This feast paved the way for many Passion Plays of the Corpus Christi cycle. “Even the great Chambers saw the procession as giving birth to the plays. The procession, according to this hypothesis, included pageants of various spiritual episodes, which then developed through dumbshow into real plays of the kind we have in the cycles.” The Corpus Christi play cycle resulted in the evolution of the Passion Play mainly due to the production skill of the various guilds. “Each of the craft guilds had its patron saint and was in character semi-religious, dedicated to uphold the Corpus Christi Feast and its function as a symbol of the Redeemer, so that it was an inevitable step, as plays grew more involved, for the guilds to take them over.” Some of these plays that were enacted at the Corpus Christi feast were long Passion Plays such as ‘The Passion Play of Arnoul Greban,’ ‘The Passion de Semur,’ ‘The Passion de Valenciennes,’ and ‘The Heidelberger Passionsspiel,’ and the other plays which were mainly typological more than historical in their arrangement.

One of the earliest English Mystery plays which was enacted at the Corpus Christi feast was the ‘Harrowing of Hell.’ “It belongs to the earlier part of the fourteenth century, and consists of a prologue, epilogue, and intermediate dialogue. The principal dramatist personae are Dominus and Sathan, Adam and
Eve.”

E. K. Chambers mentions the Harrowing of Hell as an Easter play related to the Resurrection. “This was based upon the accounts of the Descensus Christi ad Inferos, the victory over Satan, and the freeing from limbo of Adam and the other Old Testament Fathers, which forms part of the apocryphal Gospel of Nichodemus.” He does not accept that the Harrowing of Hell was intended for dramatic representation. “The prologues found in two or three manuscripts leave it clear that it was for recitation.” He however, mentions that it was found in the Easter cycle at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

According to scholars it is the vernacular Anglo-Norman play called Mystère d’Adam written in the mid-twelfth century that can be considered to be the first secular or semi liturgical drama, first acted by clergy and then laity representing the biblical characters mainly from the book of Genesis. George R. Coffman explains the importance of Mystère d’Adam considering its relation to the root of the Latin drama. “We record its beginnings in a little Easter Resurrection play of four sentences; and though Latin drama persisted for many hundreds of years after this, the Anglo-Norman Mystère d’Adam (ca. 1170) marks the triumph of the new medium. In content, this Latin drama is religious, varying from the closest possible connection with the liturgy, in the play of the three Maries, to the thinly veiled political Tendenzschrift in the Tegernsee Antichrist. It includes within its scope almost exclusively plays that group themselves about the ecclesiastical seasons of Easter and Christmas and certain saints’ days. Its subject-matter is, with notable exceptions, from the Old and the New Testament, the Apocrypha, and saints’ legends.”

Morality Plays

Though Morality plays are not directly related to Passion Plays it is important to examine them briefly as they are related to Miracle plays and developed at the time of the Corpus Christi cycles. “Moralities are a development or an offshoot of the Miracle plays and together with these form the greater part of medieval drama.” There are however, some differences between Miracle and Morality plays. According to A. M. Kinghorn Miracle plays teach moral truths based on the Biblical stories. Therefore they have a dramatic cycle on historical events and characters such as Adam, Eve, Herod and Pilate. In moralities characters are stereotyped like the Seven Deadly Sins. (They are also known as Capital Vices or Cardinal Sins – wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony). The plot of the Morality plays dramatizes the tension between Vice and Virtue and mainly deals with Man’s sinful nature by making use of the characters allegorically to teach moral lessons. E. K. Chambers describes these plays under the title ‘Popular Moralities’ in dealing with the manuscripts of Morality plays such as ‘The Pride of Life’, ‘The Castle of Perseverance’, and ‘The Summoning of Everyman’. The Morality play ‘The Pride of Life’ though not directly linked to Passion Plays had included the characters of Pharaoh, Herod and Pilate in order to dramatize the vice of power and possessions.

Conclusion

In examining the historical background on the origin of the European mediaeval drama; this paper attempted to trace the relationship between drama and religion. The root of the Modern Greek, Roman and Western drama is based on the ritualistic resources of primitive religions.

In Europe the drama had two births, firstly from the religious rites of pagan Greece and secondly from the Christian Church. Our main concern is the origin of the European mediaeval drama. The European mediaeval drama is essentially Christian. In spite of all prohibitions and restrictions of the early Church Fathers it is the Christian Church which became the cradle of European mediaeval drama. The Eucharistic
celebration or the Mass and especially the Mass on Easter Sunday introduced the dramatic aspect through the ‘Acted Part’ by giving birth to the first Easter Play called *Quem quaeritis*. This short Easter Liturgical Play enacted the Resurrection of Christ. It also evolved in creating various forms of European mediaeval drama namely ‘Passion Plays’, ‘Corpus Christi Plays’ ‘Miracle Plays’, ‘Mystery Plays’, and ‘Morality Plays’. “The medieval drama took its beginning in a symbolic re-enactment of the Resurrection – the axial historical event in Christianity. An elaboration of this dramatic idea, working backward in history to the creation and forward to Doomsday, […] cycles of scriptural plays, […] in which all human history could be comprehended.”

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1 See William H. Quillian, “‘Composition of Plays’: Joyce’s Notes on the English Drama,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1975): 5.


3 Ibid., 182.


13 O. Szemerényi, “The Origins of Roman Drama and Greek Tragedy,” *Hermes* 103, no. 3 (1975): 300. The author mentions that Livius was a slave of the noble family of the Livii and when freed he got the name of his former master.
See W. Beare, *The Roman Stage: A Short History of Latin Drama in the Time of the Republic* (London: Methuen, 1968), 56-69. The author mentions five plays of Plautus. He also mentions that Plautus was not an original writer as he had adapted Greek drama to Roman taste. See also Walton, *Living Greek Theatre*, 232.


See Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 21. See also Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, vol. II, (London: Oxford University Press, 1903), 207. See also Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 5. See also Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 23. See also A. M. Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective* (London: Evans Brothers, 1968), 58-59. This author shows how the plays of Hrosvitha were oriented mainly to extol virginity through one of her plays on ‘Abraham,’ an old hermit of the desert who saves his niece from a brothel. He further mentions that her plays did not have any impact on the European secular theatre as they were lost until about 1500. See also George R. Coffman, “A New Approach to Medieval Latin Drama,” *Modern Philology* 22, no. 3 (1925): 244, 256-271. This author examines the influence of the dialogues of Hrotsvitha on the St. Nicholas plays and reveals many historical facts on her education in gaining the literary skill in Latin.

Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, vol. I, 2. See also Walton, *Living Greek Theatre*, 231. Walton describes fibula as “Middle and New Comedy from the death of Aristophanes onward were to provide the backbone to the only Roman drama of note. Amongst a number of indigenous comic forms that flourished in the second century B.C., the plays of Plautus and Terence alone have come down to us. All are representative of a genre known as the *fabula palliata*, “a story wearing the *pallium*,” the *pallium*, being a Greek cloak. These were adaptations of Greek originals, usually of more than one play.”


According to Chambers the Church had to compromise with regard to regulations on drama because of its popularity. “It was hardly possible for practical legislators to take the extreme step of forbidding Christian laymen to enter the theatre at all. No doubt that would be the counsel of perfection, but in dealing with a deep-seated popular instinct something of a compromise was necessary. An absolute prohibition was only established for the clergy: so far as the laity were concerned, it was limited to Sundays and ecclesiastical festivals, and on those days it was enforced by a threat of excommunication.”
See ibid., 12.

ibid., 15.

See Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 4. Williams mentions that “St. Augustine, who died in 430, was judging by many allusions to plays and actors, an ardent theatregoer.”


See ibid., 17.

Ibid., 17-18.

See ibid., 13.

Ibid., 14.

See ibid., 13, 16.

Ibid., 13. See also Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 22.

See Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, vol. 1, 18-19. It is also important to mention that these Barbarians were Arian Christians. See also Dragoș Mîrșanu, “The Aesthetic “Shadow” of Gothic Arianism: Archaeology, Architecture and Art in the Age of Heresies,” in *Memory, Humanity and Meaning: Selected Essays in honour of Andrei Pleșu’s Sixtieth Anniversary*, eds. Mihail Neamțu and Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2009), 412: “Nevertheless, by a curious change of fate, Arianism continued to be practiced for more than two hundred years in the West of the Mediterranean world, as it was “carried” along by the migratory populations known as the “Germanic Barbarians.” Shockingly victorious at Adrianople against Valens (AD 378) the Goths became too strong a force to ever be expelled again beyond the northern borders of the empire: [...].”


Ibid., 22. See also Payne, “Modernizing the Ancients,” 184.


See ibid., 11. According to this author “E. K. Chambers devoted an entire volume of *The Medieval Stage* to discussion of the religious and dramatic antecedents of Christian Drama in Europe.”

Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, vol. I, 95-96. See ibid., 96-115. The author, in a long explanation on the subject of ‘The Religion of the Folk and Folk Drama’ shows with historical evidence how the Church used both methods, by using force to destroy the pagan cult as well as her new missionary method in bringing religious significance. See also Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 125-126.


See Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, vol. II, 3-7. The author explains the historical development of the Mass as an essentially dramatic commemoration of one of the critical moments in the life of Jesus which started from the fourth century. The author also explains how the dramatic aspect of the Mass developed during the Holy week beginning from Palm Sunday with the reading of the gospel narrative of the Passion until Good Friday and the joyful singing of the *Alleluia* on Easter Sunday.


Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. I, 81. See also Sticca, “The Montecassino Passion Play and the Origin of the Latin Passion Play,” 211. This author also mentions the opinion of Honorius d’Autun on the Mass as an authentic drama written around the year 1100.

See ibid., 85.

Ibid., 85.


Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 8. See also Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective*, 26. This author explains how the earliest tropes were sung at the introductory portion of the Mass as utterances of joy.

Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective*, 26-27. According to the author this exception is the *Quem quaeritis* or the Easter Trope of the Easter Mass.

Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. I, 201-205. The author describes the *Quem quaeritis*, the tenth century manuscript of St. Gall monastery as the first dramatic tropes of the Easter Mass.


See David A. Bjork, “On the Dissemination of *Quem quaeritis* and the *Visitatio sepulchri* and the Chronology of Their Early Sources” in *The Drama of the Middle Ages: Comparative and Critical Essays*, eds. Clifford Davidson, C. J. Gianakaris, and John H. Stroupe (New York: AMS, 1982), 7. The author of this essay gives a list on the early sources for *Quem quaeritis* and mentions that one source in southern France is earlier than the source of St. Gall.

See Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 10-20. The author explains the story of the three Marys at the sepulchre, its music and how Shakespeare was influenced by this dramatic form.
According to the author, the *Regularis Concordia* is the earliest surviving text of the dramatic form of the *Visitatio*;


Ibid., 29.

See Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. I, 239-410. The author describes the manner in which the short dramatic form of *Quem quaeritis* or visit to the sepulchre evolved in three stages. See also ibid., 239. The author has extensively researched on how the original *Quem quaeritis* dialogue developed into a long dramatic form with the inclusion of the biblical as well as secular characters and incidents. Thus the author explains this development: “In surveying the numerous texts of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* it is convenient to recognize three marked stages in the growth of the play: one in which the dialogue is conducted by the Maries and the angel, a second in which are added the apostles, Peter and John, and the third which provides a role for the risen Christ.”

Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 73. See also Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 10-20. The author has shown how the Easter trope which contained in the *Regularis Concordia* evolved as resurrection play.

See Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective*, 30. According to this author “The sepulchre might have been fashioned at first from prayer-books, or a recessed tomb could have been used, but later a more realistic and even a permanent sepulchre, such as may still be seen in mediaeval churches, was constructed to aid the regular performance of these plays.”

See Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 52-53. The author mentions that *Prophetae lectio* differs from *Quem quaeritis*. Though this was used as a Christmas homily its content (the homilist invites the Jews and the Gentiles to behold the coming of the Christ) is related to the liturgical readings of the Passion from Palm Sunday to Good Friday. See also Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective*, 30.

Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 39. See also ibid., 40-41. The author also gives one sample of English liturgical plays which is in both Latin and vernacular, a manuscript discovered from the library of Shrewsbury School in 1890. This incomplete text has liturgical plays on Shepherds and a Sepulchre. See also Hardin Craig, “The Origin of the Old Testament Plays,” *Modern Philology* 10, no. 4 (1913): 473-474.

Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 432. *Planctus* means lamentations of Mary. By the late thirteenth century, affective description of Mary’s sorrows were familiar to all Catholics through a wide variety of sources - Passion tracts, Passion Plays, sermons, hymns and theological treatises. See also Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. I, 493.


See Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. I, 492-539.


See Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 68-123. In the theme on ‘The Secularization of the Plays’ the author has extensively explained the evolution of both the Easter and Christmas plays. See also Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective*, 36-37.
See Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 106-148. See also Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 91-115. Both authors have given a broad description on the cycle plays produced mainly by four guilds named Towneley, Chester, York, and Coventry.

Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 69. See also Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective*, 53. According to this author the English Passion Plays were written by the laity.


Ibid.,


See ibid., 424-425.

See ibid., 425-426.

See ibid., 433-434.

See ibid., 429.

See ibid., 430.

See ibid., 430-431.

See Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 163-170. The author has described the two plays, ‘The Conversion of St. Paul’ and ‘Mary Magdalen’ under the title ‘Romantic Drama: Saints’ Plays and Miracles.’

See *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, “Miracle Plays and Mysteries,”

Ibid.,


Ibid., 418. See also Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 67, 75.


See ibid., 511.

See ibid., 508-509.

See Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. II, 138-148. The author mentions many Corpus Christi plays performed by the guilds such as York, Coventry, Chester and others most of which include the passion of Christ.


See Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, 66. According to the author the beginning of this Passion Play is based on the book of Genesis as the scenes are on Creation, Fall of Man and the story of Cain and Abel.

See ibid., 67. This Passion Play presents the history of the Redemption from the Fall of Man to Resurrection.

See ibid., 70.

See ibid., 71-76.


Ibid., 74.

Ibid., 74.

Ibid., 74.

See ibid., 74.


See Kinghorn, *Mediaeval Drama: Literature in Perspective*, 116. See also Potter, *The English morality play*, 7. According to this author the traditional division of mystery plays based on scripture, miracle plays on the lives of the saints and morality plays on the struggle between vices and virtues causes serious misunderstanding on the nature of morality play.


See Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England*, 143.