
PERFORMANCE OF MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS MYSTERY PLAY AS THEATRICAL ART GENRE AND PRECURSOR OF ‘POLITICAL THEATRE’

**Zhambyl Amangeldiyevich Tlepov¹, Assel Malikkyzy Malikova^{2*},
Aigul Omirbekkyzy Tursynbayeva¹, Aidos Tolebekyly Makulbekov¹
and Natalia Mikhailovna Dugalich³**

¹ *L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, 2 Satpayev st., Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan*

² *Kazakh National University of Arts, 50 Tauelsizdik Avenue, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan*

³ *Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Miklukho-Maklaya str.6, Moscow, Russia*

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Abstract

The article deals with the notion and essence of performance as a cultural and social category, the origins of mystery plays and the characteristics of performing medieval mystery plays as appeals to the sacred and the ‘political theatre’ of the Middle Ages. It is shown that in the 14th-16th centuries, the mystery play becomes a widespread genre of theatrical art under the aegis of the Catholic Church. However, the increasing role of secularism and the need to consolidate monarchical power give performative practices of the mystery play a social and political meaning, in which religious and sacred stories are replaced with military-political and social-historical.

Keywords: medieval theatre, performance, performative practices, Catholic Church, liturgical drama

1. Introduction

Although the art of theatre originated in antiquity as a ritual practice with an archaic tradition of continuity of ceremonial and ritual actions based on the worship of gods, the evolution of theatre was determined not only by the religious cult and the course of history but also by the development of human self-awareness in the context of the cultural and historical process.

Revealing the basis of the performative practices of the medieval mystery plays as readiness for mass performance realistically explicates the general values and worldviews of the culture of the time, confirming its mental characterization, and enables one to comprehend theatrical activity in the framework of changes in cultural consciousness inherent in different eras [1, 2].

*Corresponding author, e-mail: mmassel22@gmail.com

The relevance of this study consists in a more detailed study of the phenomenon of ‘political theatre’ which is mainly associated with the theatre of the 20th century, the time of social shifts, revolutionary upheavals and the actualization of questions about the role of art in the life of society [3]. However, latent manifestations of political theatre accompany all stages of theatre development starting with the ancient Greek tragedy. The purpose of the article is to analyse the performative practices of religious mystery plays in the medieval theatre, which can be a vivid example of the presence of a political context even in performances of sacred content. This approach enables a more substantiated consideration of the evolution of political theatre manifestations at different stages of the theatrical art formation and determines its important role in public and political life.

2. The notion and essence of performance

The theatre is considered, first of all, a means of communication, and the performed communication function of performative practices contains the prerequisite for the development of theatrical art. In academic literature, the term ‘performance’ is often used in a variety of contexts which are sometimes very far apart (Table 1).

Table 1. The definition of performance.

No.	Source	Definition
1	I. Chilvers [4]	a form of contemporary art in which a work is constituted by the actions of an artist or group at a specific place and time
2	B. Kershaw & H. Nicholson [5]	a form of contemporary art that essentially involves an experiment
3	A. Dempsey [6]	various transformations that may exist outside the theatrical space, but theatrical performance is a transformation solely for the sake of acting and the audience
4	R. Goldberg [7]	a type of conceptual art that specializes in depicting feelings, states of consciousness, socio-psychological phenomena that arise in the process of human communication... the body, appearance, gestures, the behaviour of the artist taking on the role of an actor are the creative means and material in performance
5	E.V. Zakharova [8]	a moment of pure self-expression in various situations and for the sake of another subject – the viewer – or for a purpose
6	Campbell [9]	One can distinguish the political-ideological and social types of performance, however, as a rule, these terms denote an action, most often a dramatic one, which has an audacious, eccentric nature. The goal is to amaze the viewer with originality, unusual sensations and ideas

Therefore, we can conclude that performance is something in which one can directly participate; a planned event that makes a certain period a part of art and even involves one in this action.

When believing that from ancient times to the present, performative practices are, first of all, the “spectator’s area” [10], one should identify the addressee of the performance - the real addressee and the one that the performer has in mind. Thus, the theatre of antiquity is an appeal to the gods and later – ‘to the plebs’. The theatre of the Middle Ages again turns to the sacred because the latter affects the religious and mystical side of the consciousness of the medieval man. The theatre of the Renaissance appeals not only to the public of different statuses but also to the power, seeking support or criticizing. The Age of Enlightenment discovers a patriotic performance addressed to society, to every citizen. Modern performance is distinguished by the subject’s appeal to themselves and deep immersion in themselves, and in the postmodern era, performance for the sake of performance is a polylogue of the contemporary times.

Performance contains not only an appeal to the present subject but also to an ephemeral spectator-observer who is not necessarily real. Depending on the features of the cultural-historical development, the addressee of the performative practices - divine forces/power/society, etc., is identified from the position of the ‘non-present spectator’.

3. Origins of performance of medieval mystery plays

The development of the ancient theatre laid the foundations of theatrical art for the entire following period of human existence. However, the rapid transformations of the geographical and political map of Europe due to the collapse of the Roman Empire, changes in the mentality and national composition of the population as a result of the Migration Period, as well as the establishment of a single religion in the role of the official system and arbitrator (in relations between the power and the people) in the European space significantly changed not only the cultural views of the inhabitants of New Europe but also led to the emergence of a new worldview and philosophical and artistic paradigms [11].

With the emergence of Christianity, new conditions for the whole society were determined, the perception of religion and its role in human life changed [12, 13]. Once the Roman Empire made Christianity the state religion, converting to it became a political matter. For many centuries to come, religion became the bearer of political power and controlled all spheres of human activity including culture, art and Science. Rome acquired the status not only of the spiritual centre of Western culture but also of the centre of the feudal worldview based on the authority of the Church. The Pope received the supreme secular power which gave him the authority to determine the social laws of society, support the political aspirations and reforms of influential feudal lords, have the

right to crown monarchs and emperors and be the personification of the rule of law and justice, which must be addressed as the last resort [14].

Approximately in the 10th-11th centuries, Catholic Church service in Western Europe began to become theatrical during worship which led to the emergence of liturgical dramas. In the services of the Easter cycle, there were scenes with evangelical motives; believers were shown fragments of the life of biblical characters whose actions were supposed to be a clear example of a Christian's correct or incorrect behaviour. The content of the liturgical dramas of the 11th century reveals their strong connection with the Gospels and proves that there is no independent creativity here: the dramas were just an addition to church services; their authors were priests, deacons, canons and choristers [15]. Over time, liturgical dramas began to improve not only in terms of the complication of the plot and text and an increase in the number of characters but also acquired an ideological and propaganda context designed to celebrate Christianity and disparage other religions.

In the 13th century, the liturgical drama gradually began to turn into a semi-liturgical drama, performed not in the church building but the squares in front of the church buildings. Semi-liturgical dramas represented a special transitional stage in the history of medieval drama - from the church space, time, language and spirit to the social space of the square, the desacralized time of the holiday, lively folk speech and everyday and secular themes. Biblical and religious meanings remain the textual basis of semi-liturgical dramas but the context has noticeably acquired a secular and social connotation.

4. The performance of medieval mystery plays as an appeal to the sacred and 'political theatre'

The semi-liturgical drama became an intermediate between the schematic acts of the liturgical drama and the real theatrical spectacle known as mystery plays. The mystery play was formed as a separate genre in the 14th century and increasingly often turned to secular subjects while maintaining a religious colouring. Therefore, two main types of mystery play were identified - profane and religious. This type of medieval theatre operated with an uncivil, vernacular language, was performed on squares on major holiday days and reflected the biased and superstitious consciousness of the medieval spectator. M.L. Andreev characterizes the medieval mystery play as a work in which "history is shown from the perspective of the guiding idea - the guiding ideal of civilized life inherent in this era" [15, p. 60]. Such a theatrical model of the medieval man's worldview was intended to strengthen the authority of Church and, at the same time, nullify any attempts of numerous heretical beliefs to radically change the nature of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. "Mystery drama presented a universal model of the world, arranged according to the will of God, and man only as his instrument." [16, p. 105]

The mystery play had a clear collective nature both during the organization of the preparation for the event and at the time of the event itself. Mystery play, however, significantly differed from other genres of the religious theatre of the Middle Ages in that the main action of this monumental spectacle took place outside the Church and covered not only the event of the holiday but also other religious and political subjects, including comic scenes and the like [17].

As a means of attracting the rural population and visitors from other towns to the city, mystery plays over time were transferred to a more convenient time - the summer months, and the spectacle itself turned into a powerful instrument of propaganda. This explains the fact that most mystery plays were organized at the expense of the city municipalities which readily covered the cost of organizing events. Sometimes the costs of organizing the event were covered not only by the city authorities but also by the clergy and monasteries (the latter borrowed money from the municipality). In France and the Netherlands, the city government allocated a fund for prizes for the winners of the theatre and literary competitions, whose performances were timed to coincide with the performance of the mystery plays. Usually, the cost of the show exceeded the profit but since the mystery play lasted for eight days and attracted a lot of visitors from other cities, the revival of trade more than compensated the costs of organizing the theatrical show [18].

The multi-day performance of the mystery plays provided not only economic preferences but also created the image of a rich, developed city. Mystery plays were typically performed in large, economically successful cities that had the status of religious or market centres in Europe at that time.

The ideological orientation of the mystery plays was the subject of close attention of the Church censorship which tried to prevent any anticlerical intentions of a false or dubious nature. Before staging the mystery play, its initiators applied for permission from the city authorities. Having passed the preliminary selection, the texts of the mystery plays were considered by the bishops or city magistrates, after which the organizers received permission to hold the mystery play and advertise the place and time of its display. When permission was granted, the so-called permission to play - *licentia ludendi* was put in the manuscript of the mystery play, which determined the conditions and the place where the mystery play was shown. If the performance was staged without permission from the authorities, offenders were incarcerated or fined [18, p. 127].

The popularity of the mystery play made it an integral attribute of urban culture and the method of disseminating and promoting mystery play spectacles was revolutionary for its time. For the first time in a medieval theatre, targeted advertising campaigns were organized to popularize the mystery play among the city's community. Thus, in the book of expenses of the organizers of the 'The Mystery of the Passion' in Mons (1501), there was an entry that testified to an advertising campaign that was carried out during all days of the mystery play run [18, p. 150].

The organization of mystery plays reached a significant level since not only representatives of the city authorities and Church nobility but also artisans and whole guild associations were associated with them. For the first time, organizational documents began to define the responsibilities of the parties and the rules for conducting the mystery plays [19].

The detailed approach to the organization of the mystery plays on the part of the Church and secular authorities was determined by the socio-political significance of the spectacle in the life of society. Considering the duration of the mystery play and the involvement of various strata in particularly large numbers, this genre acquired not only an emotional and sacred colouring but also received a load of political direction for the approval of dominant and well-established ideas in society. Thus, in the 'Mysteries of the Old Testament', which included the history of the world from its creation by God to the birth of Christ, each of the eight episodes contained connotations on the semantic and allegorical levels aimed at evoking associations on the problems of the medieval community. One of the first scenes of the mystery play contains an allusion to the biblical legend of Lucifer's disobedience and his expulsion from Heaven by God. This dramatic episode of the mystery play had a clear political meaning and its biblical theme contained the ideas of the time about the subordination of the feudal lords to a single ruler - the king. The topical content of the scene is quite obvious: the mystery play was shown during the years of the fierce struggle of Charles VII and Louis XI with the last unconquered princes [20].

The example above is not an isolated proof of the political bias of the mystery plays even with a pronounced religious and sacred meaning. Thus, in the 13th-14th centuries, on the territories of England and France and later in Germany, the local royal authorities authorized the eviction of Jews and imposed sequestration on their property. Anti-Semitic sentiments became the norm in everyday life, and these political instructions were actively promoted by the church. 'The Mystery play of the Passions', which was shown in 1437 in Metz, was based not only on the Holy Scriptures but also on the historical chronicles of Flavius, which described the story of the punishment that was sent to the Jews for the suffering of the Saviour [20, p. 51]. The mystery plays dedicated to the death of Jesus Christ had a special ideological connotation, which was expressed in the mockery of the Jews over Christ, faith and sacred values for every Christian [20, p. 55]. A political appeal of an anti-Semitic character was inherent in many mystery play cycles of medieval Europe. For example, in the Alsfeld mystery play of the early 16th century, there were allegorical characters who performed a political function (for example, the Church and the Synagogue - the latter was on the stage during the performance and the leader of the Jews incited them to shameful acts. It was this character that demanded that the Jews condemn Christ) [20, p. 63].

Some popes were forced to defend the Jewish communities of Italy as these communities handled banking operations of the papal court. For example, Paul II (1534-1549) prohibited the holding of the mystery plays representing the

Passion of the Lord in the Colosseum, since after these performances the audience usually engaged in violence towards the Jews [21].

Some of the mystery plays acquired the characteristics of exclusively secular theatre with plots devoted to recent political and social events: for example, there was a two-day performance in this genre by Father Georgius Agricola in 1574 in Munich. There were about a thousand performers and the action showed the brilliant victory of the national hero - Constantine the Great [21, p. 107].

In 'The Mystery of the Siege of Orleans' (1435, 1439), instead of the traditional conflict between God and the Devil, the main conflict manifested itself in the clash of two real historical forces - the English conquerors and the French patriots. The mystery play ends not with the burning of Joan of Arc but with the victory of the French. More than a hundred characters acted in the mystery play and the main characters included the citizens of Orleans, the peasant woman Jeanne, King Charles VII and the French generals led by the Count of Dunois. From the English side, there were military leaders - the Earl of Salisbury, the Duke of Somerset, Lord Talbot, etc. The Orleans Mystery was not only the personification of the patriotic pathos of the liberation struggle against the English but mainly promoted the greatness of the King of France, who during the war itself did not show particular courage or power. 'The Mystery of the Siege of Orleans' testifies to the presence in the medieval theatre of the possibility of creating a broad folk drama, contemporary in theme, ideologically patriotic and heroic. However, the realistic portrayal of the heroic struggle of the people in this mystery play was subordinated to the general religious concept, according to which neither the people nor their human will are the primary cause of victory but rather God's plan [20, p. 102].

The secular theme in the mystery plays was becoming increasingly popular, and already in the 16th century this genre was gradually banned in large cities, and participants in some of the mystery plays were harassed and persecuted. First, this was due to the weakening of control over the mystery plays on the part of the Church authorities and the strengthening of the positions of artisans and the urban bourgeoisie who were increasingly the main financial sources for organizing shows. The mystery plays began to show signs of other genres of medieval theatre, especially farce, in which the clergy and secular authorities were ridiculed and presented in a negative light. One of the oldest theatrical associations in France, the Confraternity of the Passion, which in 1402 received from Charles VI the monopoly to perform mystery plays, miracle and other religious plays in the capital, aroused a noticeable discontent among the clergy with the anticlerical content of their shows. Despite complaints from the clergy, the privilege was cancelled only in 1677 [20, p. 94]. The Confraternity of the Passion was a vivid example of specialized organizations ('confraternities'), which united the most successful participants in mystery performances.

Since the mystery plays lost their religious component from the point of view of the official Church ideology, the clergy began to actively fight the mystery plays, trying to ban them at the highest level. This was also facilitated

by the tense situation in Europe, especially the processes of the Reformation which provoked secularization sentiments.

5. Conclusions

The medieval era is the time of the domination of archetypal, essentially, allegorical images, often distressing, perhaps even not completely comprehensible in their sacredness, unknown mysticism, embodying external forces in relation to a person, not associated with the person's feelings. Medieval theatre with its integral parts - liturgical and semi-liturgical dramas, mystery and miracle plays, morality plays and farces - makes it possible to touch the mystical and sacred because medieval theatre can magically materialize thought; both inscribed in the sacred books and born in the head of a Christian, it gradually draws the spectator into the play. Liturgical and semi-liturgical dramas as ritual-performative, religious-performative practices mean an appeal to the 'invisible' observer – God. However, already in the medieval semi-liturgical drama, it becomes possible for parishioners to participate, who thus 'touch the sacred', participate in the sacred rite, experiencing an interaction with the sacred.

Analysing the significance of the medieval mystery plays, one can determine the goals and means of the Church to spread the Catholic ideology. However, the influence of secular, everyday life was of great importance in the formation of early theatrical forms, which the Church tried to take under its wing, creating a symbiosis of entertainment and sacred ritual based on the models of the ancient theatre, which it officially fought during the 'Dark Ages' and sought to limit its influence in the Renaissance. Mystery plays became a platform for the development of further forms of theatre, in which the socio-political meaning was expressed at a qualitatively new level.

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