

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 152



*Christianity  
and theater*

“The dogma is the drama”



**PULLING FACES** These tragic and comedic Greek masks were designed to represent character types on the ancient stage.



# Did you know?

## Christianity and Theater

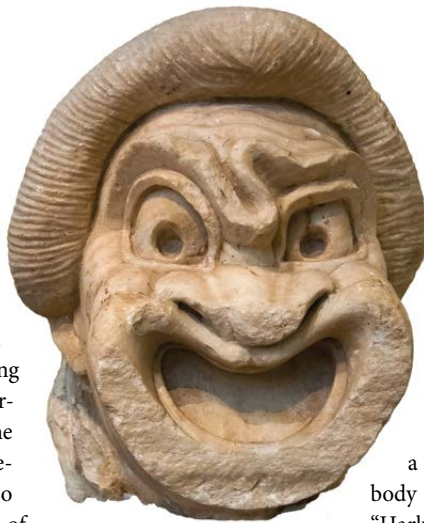
### A TASTE OF THE DRAMA OVER 2,000 YEARS

#### FROM MOCKING TO MARTYRDOM

Genesius of Rome (d. 303) is acting's patron saint; in legend he was an actor in the debauched Roman theater and came to faith as a participant in a performance in which the sacraments were being mocked. His sudden conversion led to his death at the hands of Emperor Diocletian (244–311). He is also considered to be the patron of clowns, comedians, musicians, and dancers, as well as lawyers, epileptics, printers, and victims of torture.

#### HAPPILY EVER AFTER

People have sometimes restaged Shakespeare's more tragic plays to give them happy endings. Restoration playwright Nahum Tate (1652–1715), best known to us today as a hymn writer, adapted *King Lear* into *The History of King Lear* (1681), the most performed version of the story until the early nineteenth century. It kept doomed heroine Cordelia alive and married her off to one of the few other heroic characters, Edgar; it also restored Lear to his throne. (Tate also adapted *Coriolanus* into *The Ingratitude of a Commonwealth* in 1682, though he did retain the death of the title character in that version.)



#### GOD'S DRAMATIST

As we've just explored in *CH* #151, revival preaching could be dramatic and theatrical (for more, see p. 25 in this issue). One of the most famous of the First Great Awakening's dramatic preachers was George Whitefield (1714–1770). Here's how Harry Stout described Whitefield's impact in his biography *The Divine Dramatist*:

To appreciate Whitefield's printed sermons fully, we have to read them less as lectures or treatises than as dramatic scripts, each with a series of verbal clues that released improvised body language and pathos. Words or phrases such as "Hark!" "Behold!" "Alas!" and "Oh!" invariably signaled the pathos Whitefield dramatically re-created with his whole body. The words were the scaffolding over which the body climbed, stomped, cavorted, and kneeled, all in an attempt—as much intuitive as contrived—to startle and completely overtake his listeners.

#### THAT TIME THE BIBLE WON A TONY AWARD

One of the most famous modern Christian-themed musicals is the controversial *Godspell*, based on the Gospel of Matthew and portraying Jesus's teaching, passion, and death. It started as Episcopal playwright John-Michael Tebelak's (1949–1985) master's thesis in drama at Carnegie Mellon in 1970 and was produced off Broadway in 1971. It ended up on Broadway in 1976, won the Tony Award in 1977, became a film (1973), was revived on Broadway

TRAGIC MASK, TERRACOTTA, 200–250 AD., SHARON MOLLERUS / (CC BY 2.0) WIKIMEDIA  
TERRACOTTA COMEDY MASK, C. 250 BC.—MUSEUM OF THE ANCIENT AGORA / (CC0) WIKIMEDIA  
GREEK TRAGEDY MASK, 4TH CENTURY BC, INV. NO. 4640, ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF PIRAEUS—GEORGE E. KORONAKOS / (CC BY-SA 4.0) WIKIMEDIA  
THEATRE MASK, PENTELIC MARBLE, 2ND CENTURY BC, NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF ATHENS, INV. NO. 3373—ZDE / (CC BY-SA 4.0) WIKIMEDIA



**BRITISH PAGEANT PLAY (above)** E. M. Forster collaborated with composer Ralph Vaughan Williams for *The Abinger Pageant*. Find out more on p. 31.

(2011), toured around the world, and has been performed by hundreds of local theater groups. Composer Stephen Schwartz (b. 1948) was adamant that the show not portray the Resurrection, noting in the script “it is the effect JESUS has on the OTHERS which is the story of the show, not whether or not he himself is resurrected.” In practice many Christian groups that produce the show find a way around this restriction.

### A MODERN SHEPHERDS’ JOURNEY

Pastorelas, plays telling the story of the shepherds’ journey to the baby Jesus, originated in medieval Spain and later were brought to North and South America by missionaries (pp. 37–39). One of the most famous modern ones, first produced with puppets in 1975, was filmed with live actors in 1991 by PBS’s Great Performances as *La Pastorela: The Shepherd’s Tale*. The cast included numerous Mexican American celebrities—pop singer Linda Ronstadt (Archangel Miguel); comedian Paul Rodriguez (Satanas); Robert Beltran, later of *Star Trek: Voyager* (Luzbel); and Cheech Marin of controversial comedic duo Cheech and Chong (El Cósmico).

### CAST LIST

Contributors to this issue have played a number of roles on stage themselves. Their Shakespearean roles include:

- *Merchant of Venice*: Portia, Bassanio
- *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: Hippolyta, Theseus
- *Much Ado About Nothing*: Benedick, Leonato
- *Romeo and Juliet*: Friar Lawrence, Capulet
- *Taming of the Shrew*: Petruchio, Hortensio
- *Twelfth Night*: Maria, Sir Toby Belch
- *Winter’s Tale*: Time, Bear

Mystery and morality play roles include:

- “Creation”: God
- “Fall of Angels”: Satan
- “Fall of Man”: Adam
- “Cain and Abel”: Cain
- “Noah’s Flood”: Noah
- “Herod Play”: Herod
- “Joseph’s Trouble”: Joseph

**HOWDY PARTNER** G. K. Chesterton (p. 36, below, second from right) played an American cowboy alongside George Bernard Shaw (far right) and other amateur actors in this British-produced Western, *How Men Love*.



- “The Temptation”: Christ
- “Harrowing of Hell”: Satan, Christ
- “Doomsday Play”: Tutivillus
- “Second Shepherd’s Play”: Coll, Gib, Daw, Mary, Mak
- *Everyman*: Everyman
- *Mankinde*: Mercy, Titivillus

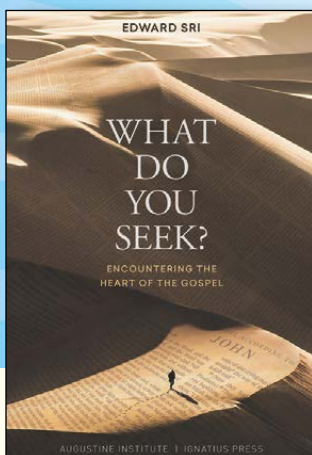
Other faith-related roles include:

- *And Then There Were None*: Wargrave
- *A Christmas Carol*: Jacob Marley, Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig, Mr. Dilber
- *Best Christmas Pageant Ever*: Rev. Hopkins
- *Charlotte’s Web*: Homer Zuckerman
- *End Days*: Jesus/Stephen Hawking
- *Freud’s Last Session*: Sigmund Freud
- *The Light Princess*: Queen, Prince, Snake
- *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: Mr. Beaver
- *Little Women*: Mr. March
- *Love Divine*: Charles Wesley
- *The Pilgrim’s Progress*: Narrator
- *Pride and Prejudice*: Mr. Bennet
- *Proof*: Robert
- *Twelve Angry Jurors*: Juror Eight **GH**

**COMEDY OF ERRORS** The demon Titivillus (imagined right), often blamed by scribes for copy errors, plays an antagonistic and comedic role in the medieval play *Mankinde*.



# HOW THE GOSPEL EVANGELIZED THE WORLD



## ◆ WHAT DO YOU SEEK? *Encountering the Heart of the Gospel*

The Good News of Jesus Christ is known as the *kerygma*, meaning “to proclaim”. It is the core message of Christ that the Apostles proclaimed to the world.

The Catholic Church emphasizes the importance of that “First Proclamation”: the core Gospel of God’s love and the person of Jesus Christ, which we surrender ourselves to so that a more in-depth presentation of the Faith can take deeper root in our soul. Scripture scholar **Edward Sri** helps us enter more deeply into the Gospel to ponder the mysteries of God’s love and his work of salvation.

WDSP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$16.95

“There is no better guidebook to keep us focused on what’s central to the Gospel—the *kerygma*. Especially useful when dealing with non-Christian friends and family members.”

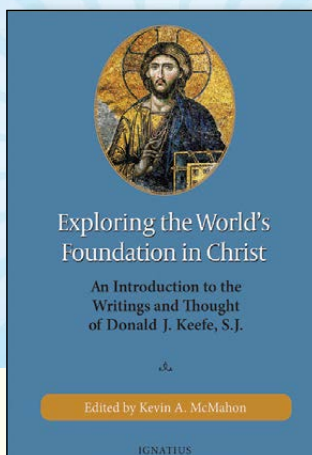
—**Scott Hahn**, Author, *Rome Sweet Home*

“Thanks to Ed Sri’s experience, we finally have a guide for those seeking to go deeper into the Christian message. It’s my new go-to book to give others on the good news of Jesus Christ!” —**Dr. Tim Gray**, President, Augustine Institute

“Dr. Sri is one of the very best at using his expert knowledge of the Scriptures to articulate it in a way that is accessible and inspiring to a broad range of readers.”

—**Fr. Mark-Mary Ames, C.F.R.**,

Author, *Habits for Holiness*



## ◆ EXPLORING THE WORLD’S FOUNDATION IN CHRIST

The first of its kind, this book provides an introduction to the writings and thought of **Donald Keefe, S.J.**, a theologian who many consider to be one of the finest of his generation, with a compendium of selections from his prolific works that touch upon every aspect of Catholic thought.

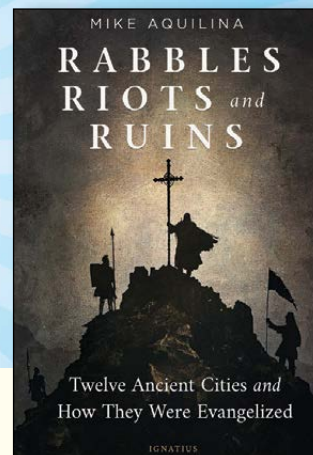
Edited by Kevin McMahon, this book shows how Keefe used a method that is deeply rooted in the prayer life and Sacred Scripture of the Church, and pursued a decades-long reflection on the significance of the central assertion of faith: that Jesus Christ is Lord, the author of a world that is centered on personal, hence free, life. Union with Christ, then, is the destiny of the world, and how the world is transformed through his own life that is both human and divine.

EWFP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$21.95

“Donald Keefe, S.J., was a soldier, a lawyer, a priest, and a theologian. His writings are treasures. Kudos to Kevin McMahon for providing us with a valuable introduction to Keefe’s work.” —**Robert P. George**, Philosophy Professor, Princeton University

“An introduction to the work of a man whose passionate love of Christ and the Eucharist is reflected in an immensely creative synthesis. Keefe influenced many of today’s most important American theologians. A lion of the Faith!”

— **Matthew Levering**, Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary



## ◆ RABBLES, RIOTS, AND RUINS *12 Ancient Cities and How They Were Evangelized*

Jerusalem, Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Carthage, Edessa . . . These were ancient cities that once raged against the Gospel and persecuted the Church, but later came to admirable faith. Each city had its own unique commerce, culture, and institutions — and each became more perfectly itself through the influence of Jesus Christ.

**Mike Aquilina**, acclaimed church historian, shows how those unique aspects of each ancient city shaped the practice of the Christianity we know today. This is your insightful entry into the world of the Church Fathers, the saints and sages who converted the world to Christ, and taught the modern Church about evangelization.

RRRP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$17.95

“An inspiring panoramic survey of the evangelization of 12 great cities that shows how this laid the foundations for the building of the Faith and subsequent spread of Christian civilization.” — **Joseph Pearce**, Author, *The Good, The Bad & The Beautiful: History in Three Dimensions*

“A richly-hued mosaic of sinners and saints, sages and heretics that tells much about the Faith as it was then, is now, and will remain.” — **Russell Shaw**, Author, *Eight Popes and the Crisis of Modernity*



ignatius press

P.O. Box 1339, Ft. Collins, CO 80522

[www.ignatius.com](http://www.ignatius.com)

(800) 651-1531

# Letters to the editor

## Readers respond to *Christian History*

### CONSIDER THIS

I have an idea for *Christian History* magazine to consider. Why not dedicate an issue about the structure of church buildings? Cathedrals should be included, as well as the Cane Ridge Meeting House structure, domes of the Russian Church and other structures. Just a thought.—*Sharon B. Fields, Paris, KY*

*It's long been on our list to devote an issue to the history of Christian architecture. Thanks for your suggestion—reader interest is an important factor we consider when deciding upon future issues.*

I enjoyed your issue #150. The history of your periodical was so interesting. You mentioned camp meetings. . . . Could you have an issue with camp meetings? Also, I enjoyed Dan Graves's article in the back of #150 on early church leaders. May we aspire to be like them—glorify our Lord.—*Philip Boutwell, Winston Salem, NC*

*Thanks Philip! If you're interested in the history of camp meetings, you can read more about them in issue #45: Camp Meetings and Circuit Riders. You can download the text of this issue for free on our website.*

### MISTAKES SPOTTED

Love your magazine! Question: page 15, issue #151, George Frideric Handel was an orphan? I do not think so. Thank you.—*Gary Court, Franklin, TN*

*You are right: Handel was taught among those at Halle, but was not an orphan himself. The wording of the phrase printed in our magazine was a little unclear, so we made corrections to the digital versions of this issue.*

Issue #151 is excellent. On page 23, the painting of William Tennent is actually of his son, William Tennent Jr. I wish we had a photo of William Tennent Sr. There are a number of paintings of his son but not of William Tennent. You can tell by his clothing that this can't be the elder.—*Wendy Wirsche, president of the William Penn House Association and church historian of the Neshaminy-Warwick Presbyterian Church*

*Thank you for this correction! We updated the online version of the issue to reflect the right Tennent.*

### BEING A BLESSING

I received my first issue of *Christian History* magazine. Thank you so much. I've been a child of God for years

and during these years, I've never learned (or been taught) history like this. I am forever grateful to say that this one magazine has opened my eyes and spiritual mind. I look forward to receiving the next one. Thank you.—*James Smith, Trenton, NJ*

I was thrilled when I read your letter [a response to a prayer request]. Your magazine is such a blessing to me—never failing to both inform me and challenge me to a deeper walk with our Lord. That said, your letter was so moving and encouraging. What a delight to hear that you have a heart to minister to believers like me here in this place. Thank you so very much.—*Gregory Nunn, Arcadia, FL*

*CH continues to serve many incarcerated individuals, thanks to the generous donations of our subscribers. To learn more about faith and incarceration, read CH #123 Captive Faith or visit [captivefaith.org](http://captivefaith.org).*

I have been receiving *Christian History* magazine for years. I just got the latest one on Awakenings and I just had to tell you all: you did such a fabulous job on this magazine. You do a fabulous job on all of them. It really enriches our faith and teaches so much in a synopsis form. We love your magazine, you all work so hard. If I had a million dollars I'd give it to you. You have the best free magazine.

I have one request: have you thought about taking all of the magazines and binding them into a book including all of the issues? It would be wonderful. Thank you to Bill Curtis and to Christian History Institute, and thank you for all the wonderful things that you do to share the history of our faith and the price that has been paid. Keep up the great work. I hope you all never quit! God bless you.—*Mark Fleming, Duncan OK*

*Thank you for the glowing praise, Mark, and thanks for the suggestion. We have not considered binding all the issues into a big book. It would have a 15-inch spine and weigh about 25 pounds! However, you can purchase slip-case covers on our website to house your favorite issues. Each case holds about 20 copies. We also sell a digital compilation of all previous issues in CD-ROM form. We hope these two options help our readers keep all their issues in one place! CH*



# Editor's note



*In my house* lives an aspiring actor.

I always knew she had a flair for the dramatic, but when she participated in her very first performance, *Finding Nemo Jr.* (and persevered through what we later found out was pink eye at the second show), I knew that she had not only a real gift, but also a real love for the stage.

If you're a parent, you know how satisfying it is when your kid finds their "thing." But if you're also a Christian, you might wonder how that "thing" will affect your child's faith. When I first started Googling theater programs in my area, I had to wonder: what does a Christian relationship with theater look like?

## HOW SHOULD WE THEN LIVE?

My relationship with the theater has been ambivalent. On one hand, as a Christian creative myself, I have seen the value of God-honoring performance done well—one example is when Piercing Word, a theatrical group that does live Scripture performances, came to our small mission church for Advent. The impact of carefully selected Old and New Testament passages coupled with the emotional force of those words spoken and performed brought me to tears. And I can recount numerous productions, overtly Christian and not, that turned my eyes upward.

On the other hand, I've had my fair share of concerns in the participation of other forms of theater, from half-baked "Christian" productions to productions with messages that are in tension with or outright antagonistic to Christianity. (As a former youth group leader, I attended many musicals that my teens participated in—and in some, I left wondering at the wisdom of allowing young people to perform adult dramas in front of their peers and parents.)

The question of how we should live when it comes to the performing arts is actually a pressing one in our daily lives. We live in a culture that revolves around the entertainment industry. Film, video games, live performances, and other spectacles fill much of our time and take much of our energy. How we interact with entertainment can say a lot about the place of faith in our lives. So how should we?

## NO NEW CRITIQUE UNDER THE SUN

Our conundrum, of course, is not unique to our time.

Find *Christian History* on Facebook as [ChristianHistoryMagazine](https://www.facebook.com/ChristianHistoryMagazine), or visit [www.christianhistorymagazine.org](http://www.christianhistorymagazine.org). Read daily stories at [www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/today](http://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/today). For X (formerly Twitter), use @christiaHistory, and for Instagram, @christianhistorymagazine.

Look for the final issue of our revival series with #153, which will focus on global revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For 2,000 years, Christians have approached the theater in numerous ways. Some, like Tertullian, Augustine, and many in the early church, rejected it, identifying the anti-Christian and idolatrous roots of the theater of their time that made participation a problem. These critiques persisted throughout the Reformation and later, as thinkers from Puritans to nineteenth-century theologians echoed their predecessors and pinpointed many of the same sin issues the early church faced.

But others embraced it, redeemed it, and created it. Even in the ancient church, where many critiques originated, drama came through liturgy and spoke of a participation in the holy through performance. Medieval religious dramas, performed during festivals involving the entire community, often drew from biblical stories. Exploration of Christian themes in society found in the works of playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe display that Christ permeated even the secular sphere of theater.

This incarnational aspect persisted into the next generations, as in this issue's stories about the lives of George and Louisa MacDonald and her adaptation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the revivalist oratory of the Great Awakenings, and the sacred subversions of godless modernity in the works of some of the Inklings and their contemporaries. You'll also read about how theater has brought audiences to the feet of Christ across cultures and societies, such as in Chicano and African American theater.

As believers of the twenty-first century continue to use drama to share the gospel in creative and powerful ways, it's helpful to explore the depth and complexity of Christian's historical involvement in theater. Though the voices represented offer different answers, the outworking of their caution or creativity was ultimately the same—pointing to the true Spectacle, the greatest Story ever told, in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And with that in mind, perhaps the best I can do for my fledgling performer is to encourage her to that end. **CH**



Kaylena Radcliff  
Managing Editor

We thank Joe Ricke and Sarah R. A. Waters for their counsel and contributions to this issue.

We also thank the many readers who support this ministry, making it possible for us to provide *Christian History* in print. Please visit [www.ChristianHistoryMagazine.org](http://www.ChristianHistoryMagazine.org) to donate or to begin a subscription to *Christian History*.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY



## Christianity and theater

### 6 The spectacle and the spiritual

*David L. Eastman*

### 11 “Not consistent with true religion”

*Tertullian*

### 12 Mystery cycles and miracle plays

*Joe Ricke*

### 17 Reforming drama

*Sarah R. A. Waters*

### 21 Reading Christ between the lines

*Marlowe and Shakespeare*

### 22 Fuel on a demonic fire

*Jennifer Woodruff Tait*

### 25 Heel kicking and holy jumping

*Abram J. Book*

### 28 “Merry Christmas, Mr. Scrooge”

*Edwin Woodruff Tait*

### 29 From drama to life

*Rachel E. Johnson*

### 31 The pageant

*Parker T. Gordon*

### 32 Wizards’ duels and modern mayhem

*Sorina Higgins*

### 36 Demons, tricks, and belief

*G. K. Chesterton*

### 37 From Aztlán with love

*Daniel F. Flores*

### 40 “Don’t you want to be free?”

*Editors*

### 41 “Lord, lean out and listen”

*James Weldon Johnson*

### 42 Custom breakers

*Elizabeth Schafer*

### 46 “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

*Cyril Gary Jenkins*

### 47 The most important story

*Max McLean*

### 48 Faith’s “Workout” on stage

*Mark Lewis*

### Also: • Did you know?, inside front cover

- Letters, p. 3
- Editor’s note, p. 4
- Hebrew Bible and drama, p. 10
- Timeline, p. 26
- Discussion questions, p. 49
- Recommended resources, p. 51

**Founder**  
A. K. Curtis

**Senior Editors**  
Chris Armstrong  
Jennifer Woodruff Tait

**Managing Editor**  
Kaylena Radcliff

**Advisory Editor, CH 152**  
Jennifer Woodruff Tait

**Executive Editor**  
Bill Curtis

**Contributing Editor**  
Edwin Woodruff Tait

**Design Editor**  
Doug Johnson

**Proofreader**  
Meg Moss

**Layout**  
Dan Graves

**Image Researcher**  
Max Pointner

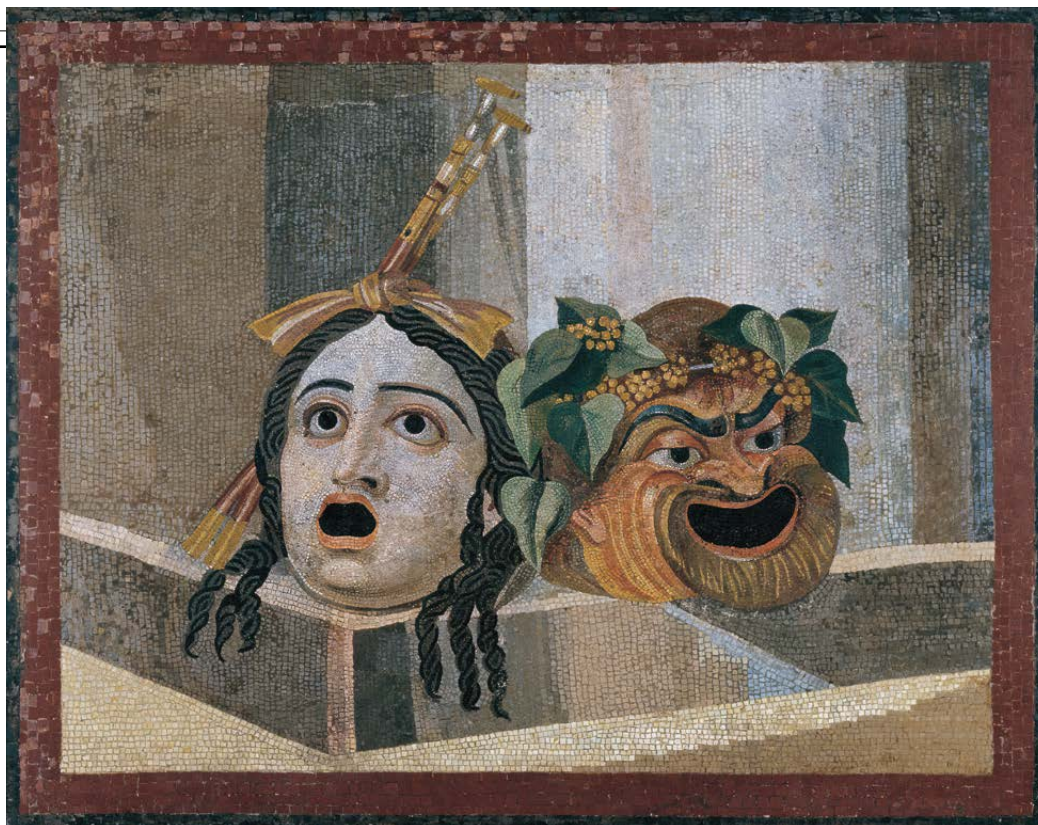
**Editorial Assistants**  
Grace Bert  
Melody Schwartz

**Circulation**  
Sara Campbell  
Karen Kopp

**Print Coordinator**  
Deb Landis

©2024 Christian History Institute. Cover: Stanley Ridges Vandamm at foot of Crucifix with Earle Larrimore in *Days Without End*, 1934. 1695699—© NYPL The quotation on our cover, “The dogma is the drama”, is by Dorothy L. Sayers from her 1938 essay of the same name. *Christian History* is published by Christian History Institute, P. O. Box 540, Worcester, PA, 19490 and is indexed in *Christian Periodical Index*, ISSN 0891-9666. Subscriptions are available on a donation basis. Letters to the editor may be sent to [editor@ChristianHistoryInstitute.org](mailto:editor@ChristianHistoryInstitute.org) and permissions requests to [info@ChristianHistoryInstitute.org](mailto:info@ChristianHistoryInstitute.org). Credits: We make every effort to obtain proper permission to reproduce images. If you have information about an image source that is not credited, please let us know.

[www.ChristianHistoryMagazine.org](http://www.ChristianHistoryMagazine.org) • 1-800-468-0458



# The spectacle and the spiritual

HOW THE EARLY CHURCH INTERACTED WITH ROMAN AND GREEK THEATER

David L. Eastman

*How despicable it is to go from the church of God to the church of the devil . . . to raise your hands to God, and then to wear them out clapping for an actor.—Tertullian*

**The religious origins** of theatrical performances in the Greek and Roman worlds fueled early Christian tensions with the theater. Public theatrical performances emerged in the early fifth century BC. Greek author Aeschylus (c. 525–c. 455 BC), the first dramatist known to us, held performances of his work at the spring religious festival of the god Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis hill in Athens. The festival featured religious processions and sacrifices to the god within the theater, and mythological stories about the gods provided the basis for nearly all the Greek tragic plays. Thus, an undeniable link existed between classical Greek tragedy and pagan religion.

Old Comedy, the earliest form of Greek comedy, often made fun of these same stories. In addition, crude sexual humor was a primary feature of these plays, and the performers often wore costumes that exaggerated the sexual organs. Early Greek theater, therefore, both had its roots in a pagan religious context and emphasized bawdy humor.

Roman culture admired and emulated the earlier Greeks in many ways, so it is not surprising that Roman theater was also closely tied to religious festivals. In the

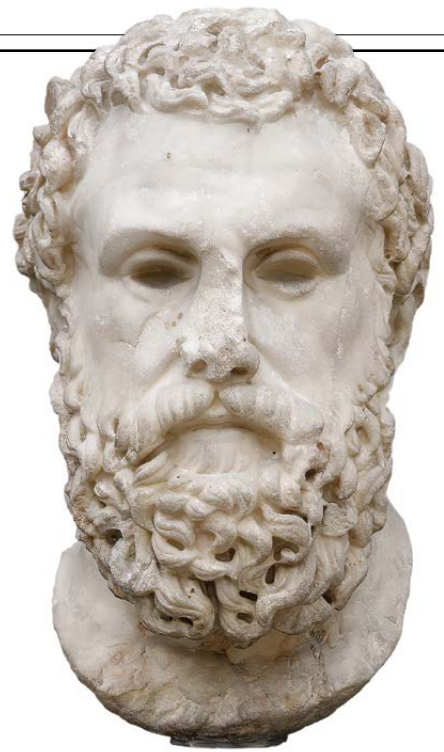
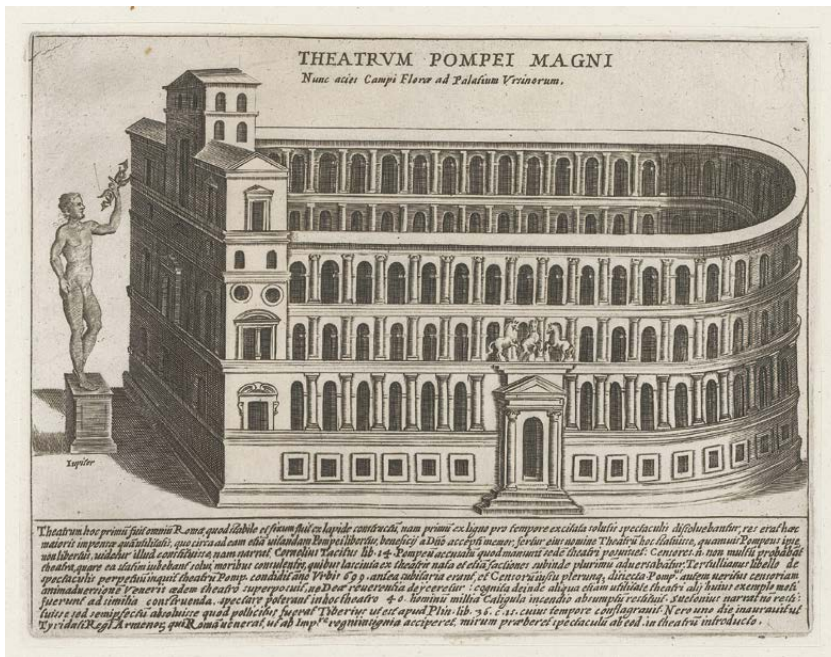
**ICONS OF THEATER** Tragedy and comedy masks have long been associated with theater; we see many modern versions today. This mosaic is from 2nd-c. Rome.

Late Republic (second century BC), Rome witnessed a relatively brief period of tragedy and comedy in the Greek style. But by the imperial period (around the time of Jesus), two genres dominated the Roman theater: mime and pantomime. Mimes were comic plays with often ridiculous plots, full of sexual innuendo and vulgar language. Pantomimes were dance performances with musical accompaniment that reenacted stories from mythology.

## A DRAMATIC DEBATE

Although mime and pantomime proved to be popular with the public, many Greek and Roman moralists and philosophers condemned theatrical performances because their content promoted moral corruption. This condemnation extended to the performers themselves. Moralists labeled dancers and actors as a disreputable class of society because their disgraceful public displays threatened standards of public morality. The Greek orator Aelius Aristides (117–181) famously wrote a letter to the leaders of the city of Sparta denouncing dancers as threats to the moral health of the city.





Thus Christianity emerged within the context of a lively debate concerning the role of theater in society. On the one hand, these wildly popular shows contributed to a growing Roman imperial culture around mass entertainment (“bread and circuses”). Civic leaders frequently funded performances as part of annual religious festivals and temple dedications. On the other hand, moralists and intellectuals saw these performances as threats to the moral fabric of society because they promoted depraved and foolish behavior.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), a highly educated Egyptian philosopher who converted to Christianity, was the first Christian author to comment specifically on theatrical performances. One of his most famous works, the “Exhortation to the Greeks” (a term used for pagans in general), displayed the folly of many practices of nonbelievers.

He opened with an assault on the mythological roots of theatrical performances. Most dramas, he said, draw their inspiration from the cesspool of old myths about the gods, retold by drunken poets. The plays, he wrote, promote pagan ideas and pull the authors and the crowds that adore them into “the company of demons.” Clement then called upon “Truth, with Wisdom in all its brightness” to shine its light into all these dark places “on those that are involved in darkness.”

### WARNINGS AGAINST “SPECTACLES”

Clement’s contemporary in North Africa, Tertullian (c. 155–c. 220), produced the most extensive early Christian diatribe against theatrical performances in “On the Spectacles” (see p. 11). Tertullian believed that theater should be condemned alongside the other primary public spectacles: horse races in the circus, gladiatorial combats, and rituals for the dead (including executions) in the arena. Tertullian understood that Scripture does not specifically prohibit these forms of public entertainment, but he said that the psalmist praises the

**LOOPHOLE** Roman lawmakers actually forbade building permanent theater structures, so this one (above left) was built as a temple to Venus to get around the rule.

**FATHER OF TRAGEDY** Aeschylus (above right) was an ancient Greek playwright credited with innovating the genre of tragedy.

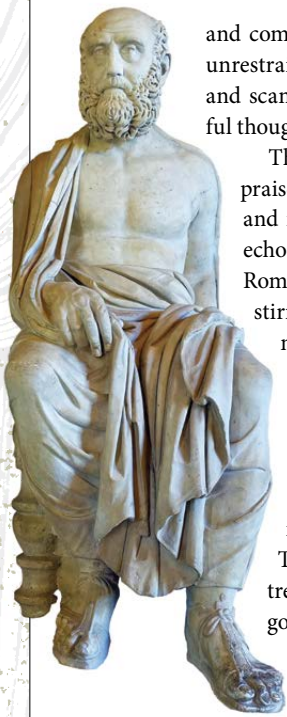
person “who has not gone into the assembly of the impious . . . nor sat in the seat of scoffers” (Ps. 1:1). From this Tertullian proposed three reasons that Christians should (literally) not sit in seats for shows that “are inconsistent with true religion and true obedience to the true God.”

First, Tertullian exposed how the spectacles originated in idolatrous Greek and Roman traditions. He placed a challenge before any opponents: “If you can show that any of these spectacles has had no connection with an idolatrous god, then I will at once declare it free from the stain of idolatry.” The famous Roman general Pompey (106–48 BC) constructed the first Roman theater on top of a temple of the goddess Venus, quite literally building upon an idolatrous foundation. Because no one could separate spectacles from idolatry, the blemish remained. Christians, Tertullian believed, must renounce these shows because, at the time of baptism,

We make our profession of the Christian faith in the words of its rule. We testify publicly that we have renounced the devil, his ceremony, and his angels.

According to Tertullian, idolatrous entertainment is the work of the devil, so Christians must abstain from it.

Second, public spectacles could spark unholy passions and desires. Tertullian argued that the theater is polluted by “immodest actions and dress that are so strongly and specifically tied to the stage.” He maintained that theatrical shows featuring crude humor and provocative costumes spark physical lust, which Scripture condemns. In fact, “tragedies



and comedies are full of bloody scenes and unrestrained behavior; they are the impious and scandalous creators of crimes and lustful thoughts.”

Thus, Tertullian concluded, theater praises whatever is shameful in society and ridicules whatever is honorable. He echoed the concerns of earlier Greek and Roman philosophers, who warned that stirring up the passions would undermine public morality. If arousal might come from these spectacles, Christians ought to refuse them.

The third reason resulted from the previous two. The pagan festivals created a kind of antichurch in which the forces of evil ran wild, Tertullian explained. He began his treatise saying, “How despicable it is to go from the church of God to the church of the devil

... to raise your hands to God, and then to wear them out clapping for an actor.” Tertullian told two peculiar stories about the fates of those who ventured into this demonic realm. One was an otherwise unattested story involving Jesus himself.

A woman went to the theater and came home possessed by a demon. When Jesus cast out the evil spirit and chastised it for attacking a believer, the demon replied, “I had every right to do this, for I found her in my domain [the theater].” The second story involved a woman who attended a tragedy performed in the theater and had a dream that night in which she saw a linen cloth (probably a burial shroud) and heard the actor’s name said out loud, and five days later

**CORRUPTING INFLUENCE** Surprisingly, key figures in Roman culture rejected the theater, such as philosopher Aelius Aristides (*above left*). They agreed with Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria (*above right*) about its negative effects on society.



*His Country. The Progress of his Studies. His Instruction in the Christian Doctrine. His several Masters. His impartial inquiry after truth. The divine Self, what. Its excellent genius. Clemens of this Self. His*

she was dead. Tertullian claimed that many such stories exist of those who “spent time with the devil at the shows and fell away from the Lord,” for no one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24), and light has no fellowship with darkness (2 Cor. 6:14).

Tertullian also mentioned arena spectacles—which involved wild beasts, executions, and bloodshed—and urged Christians to refuse these because they are sometimes the victims. This ominous reality would become far more common and widespread later in the third century.

Tertullian concluded that instead of being inflamed by these shameful spectacles, Christians should be spurred toward the miraculous aspects of the Christian life: treading the devil underfoot, exorcising demons, and receiving divine revelation. If people want blood, he suggested, they should focus on the blood of Christ. And the greatest spectacle of all is the future return of the Lord.

**“SHAMEFUL INSANITY”**

The writings of Tertullian profoundly influenced the thought of a later fellow North African, Augustine of Hippo (354–430). In his *Confessions* (c. 400), Augustine reflected on time wasted as a student attending theatrical performances that roused his emotions. As a result of what he called his “shameful insanity,” he took pleasure from experiencing the range of emotions stirred up by these plays, even the negative emotions. Looking back Augustine concluded that these fanciful stories and the passions they provoked comprised yet another distraction that drew his attention away from God, the true object of worship.



AEILIUS ARISTIDES, C. 200 AD, GALLERIA DEGLI ARAZZI, VATICAN MUSEUMS—DADEROT / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA  
 WILLIAM CAVE, APOSTOLICAL LONDON, 1682, P. 193, LONDON—PUBLIC DOMAIN, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARIES  
 PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE ROMAN THEATRE IN PALMYRA—© GUILLAUME PIOLLE (CC BY 3.0) WIKIMEDIA

While Tertullian is the most famous Latin Christian author to condemn the theater, in the Greek world that distinction belongs to John Chrysostom (c. 347–407). While priest of Antioch in Syria in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, he had many things to say about the evils of the theater.

Chrysostom claimed that some Christians had abandoned the church and neglected their Christian duties because they attended public shows, including the theater. Even clergy and monks had fallen victim. Some Christians had stopped meeting on “the very day on which the sacraments of the salvation of humanity were celebrated.”

Even on Good Friday, “when your Lord was being crucified on behalf of the world, and his sacrifice was being offered, and paradise was being opened,” Christians were attending the spectacles instead of church. If a visitor came to Antioch and asked how this “city of the apostles” had fallen into such spiritual laziness, Chrysostom sadly admitted that he would have no answer.

The shows’ content also concerned Chrysostom, for Christians see things there that could only provoke sexual lust. For instance, as viewers sit in their seats, they would watch “a woman, a prostitute no less, coming onto the stage with her head shaved and no sense of shame. She is finely dressed and flirts seductively with the audience by singing the songs of harlots and using disgraceful language.” Chrysostom wondered if viewers could honestly claim not to be aroused by this. “Is your body made of stone? Or iron? . . . If someone lights a fire in his lap, will he not burn his clothing?” As Jesus had warned in the Sermon on the Mount, anyone who lusts after these women has already committed adultery with them in his heart. And the danger does not end at the

**THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH** The majestic theater of Palmyra (*below*) was never finished, but probably held many captive audiences. Bishop John Chrysostom (*above*) urged Christians to be captivated instead by the greatest drama: the story of God’s redemption.

theater, for “each man takes home with him much of what he has seen there, so it sticks to him like the infection of a plague.”

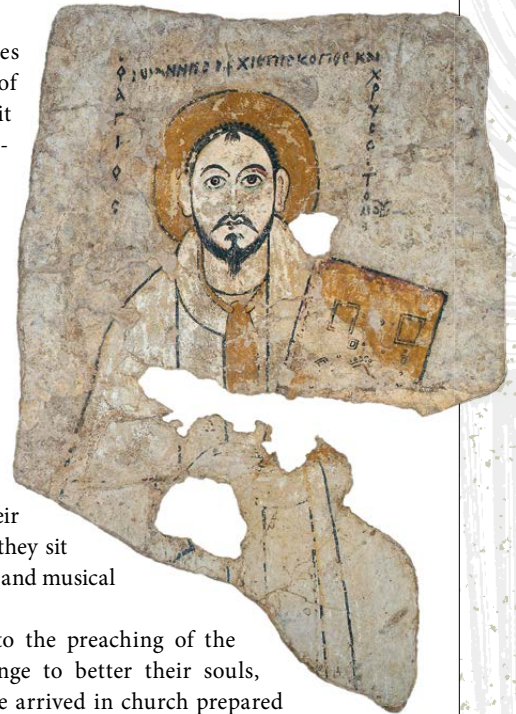
#### SITTING LIKE CRITICS

Moreover, said Chrysostom, attending spectacles creates the expectation of constant entertainment in the minds of many people, and they bring that expectation with them to church: “For the crowds are accustomed to listen [to sermons] not for their benefit but for pleasure, so they sit there like critics at tragedies and musical entertainments.”

Rather than listening to the preaching of the Word of God as a challenge to better their souls, Chrysostom decried, people arrived in church prepared to judge the preacher on his ability to entertain them. Even though congregations reportedly gave great ovations to many of Chrysostom’s sermons, he despised this and saw it as further proof that a destructive mentality had infected the church.

Finally, as Tertullian had, Chrysostom believed that the true theater is the spiritual theater of the church, not the physical theater of the spectacles. The greatest drama is not foolish tales of tragedy and comedy, but the story of God’s redemption playing out in the hearts and minds of believers past and present. He referred to this as “the celestial theater, where the spectators are the angels.”

Early Christian authors feared the negative spiritual impact of the theater on believers. All these authors agreed, however, that it also created a powerful and moving experience in the minds and hearts of those in attendance—in fact, this impact was much of the problem! While drama’s





influence drew criticism in the early church, by the Middle Ages, the church began to use those powerful emotional forces in the service of spiritual formation. **CH**

*David L. Eastman is the Joseph Glenn Sherrill Chair of Bible at the McCallie School, research fellow at the University of Regensburg and the University of South Africa, and faculty fellow at the Center for Early African Christianity.*



**SEEING VS. HEARING** Roman drama, religion, and entertainment (left) was very visual, but Hebrew life centered around *hearing* God’s Word. The Leningrad Codex (above) is the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew biblical text.

## The Hebrew Bible and drama

Christianity and theater’s uneasy relationship might be said to have emerged from the synthesis of ancient Hebraic roots and classical perspectives within which the New Testament faith was born. Despite the significance of ritual actions in biblical worship—wave offerings, individual and community cleansings, processions, temple worship etiquette, and so on—there is no Old Testament “drama” to equal similar dramatic enactments and performances in other cultures.

The most obvious contrast is between the Hebrew tradition and classical Greek dramatic festivals. Other cultures too were “theatrical.” Creation myths, redemption narratives, fertility cults—these are the common stock of performances and rituals (if not always full-fledged drama) of most cultural and religious traditions. To some degree they were part of the pagan practices resisted by the Book and people of Moses.

Why this “dramatic” neglect of drama and theater in the Hebrew tradition? The most logical answer is the biblical commandment against images (Exod. 20:4). Representation of birds, animals, humans, and, especially, the

gods and Y\*W\*H, the most High God, was expressly forbidden.

This affected the entire literary nature of the Old Testament and the Jewish religious tradition that produced it (and that, at the same time, it produced). With its emphasis on hearing (rather than seeing), and on memorization and reflective meditation (rather than icons and contemplative meditation), this tradition worked against the development of a highly visual theatrical representation.

God’s words, given in Torah, in the prophets, in the history of his people Israel, were, in their own way, mighty works not to be re-created but to be recited, chewed on, pondered, explained, and, most of all, loved. Psalm 19, which C. S. Lewis calls the greatest romantic poem before Wordsworth, begins with a celebration of the majestic “speaking heavens,” or the revelation of God in nature, but it moves decisively into the central importance of reading, meditating, pondering, obeying, and, most of all, loving the words of God:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world...

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.

The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether...

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

(Ps. 19:1-4; 7-9; 14)

—Joe Ricke

# “Not consistent with true religion”

*Tertullian penned one of Christianity’s oldest and most famous critiques of theatrical pursuits, On the Spectacles, around 200 AD.*

**Y**ou Servants of God, about to draw near to God, that you may make solemn consecration of yourselves to Him, seek well to understand the condition of faith, the reasons of the Truth, the laws of Christian Discipline, which forbid among other sins of the world, the pleasures of the public shows. . . .  
—from Chapter 1

**T**he faith of some, either too simple or too scrupulous, demands direct authority from Scripture for giving up the shows, and holds out that the matter is a doubtful one, because such abstinence is not clearly and in words imposed upon God’s servants. Well, we never find it expressed with the same precision: You shall not enter circus or theater, you shall not look on combat or show; as it is plainly laid down, you shall not kill; you shall not worship an idol; you shall not commit adultery or fraud. But we find that that first word of David bears on this very sort of thing: Blessed, he says, is the man who has not gone into the assembly of the impious, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of scorers.—from Chapter 3

**Y**ou have festivals bearing the name of the great Mother and Apollo of Ceres too, and Neptune, and Jupiter Latiaris, and Flora, all celebrated for a common end; the others have their religious origin in the birthdays and solemnities of kings, in public successes in municipal holidays. There are also testamentary exhibitions, in which funeral honors are rendered to the memories of private persons; and this according to an institution of ancient times. . . .

But in the matter of idolatry, it makes no difference with us under what name or title it is practiced, while it has to do with the wicked spirits whom we abjure. If it is lawful to offer homage to the dead, it will be just as lawful to offer it to their gods: you have the same origin in both cases; there is the same idolatry; there is on our part the same solemn renunciation of all idolatry.—from Chapter 6

**NOT FABULOUS, BUT TRUE** Tertullian (*above*) wrote against the spectacle of the theater due to its sinful associations, pointing his readers instead to the greatest spectacle of all: the gospel.



**W**hat nobler than to tread under foot the gods of the nations—to exorcise evil spirits—to perform cures—to seek divine revealings—to live to God? These are the pleasures, these the spectacles that befit Christian men—holy, everlasting, free. Count of these as your circus games, fix your eyes on the courses of the world, the gliding seasons, reckon up the periods of time, long for the goal of the final consummation, defend the societies of the churches, be startled at God’s signal, be roused up at the angel’s trump, glory in the palms of martyrdom.

If the literature of the stage delight you, we have literature in abundance of our own—plenty of verses, sentences, songs, proverbs; and these not fabulous, but true; not tricks of art, but plain realities. Would you have also fightings and wrestlings? Well, of these there is no lacking, and they are not of slight account. Behold unchastity overcome by chastity, perfidy slain by faithfulness, cruelty stricken by compassion, impudence thrown into the shade by modesty: these are the contests we have among us, and in these we win our crowns. Would you have something of blood too? You have Christ’s.—from Chapter 29

**N**ever and nowhere is that free from blame which God ever condemns; never and nowhere is it right to do what you may not do at all times and in all places. It is the freedom of the truth from change of opinion and varying judgments which constitutes its perfection, and gives it its claims to full mastery, unchanging reverence, and faithful obedience. That which is really good or really evil cannot be ought else. But in all things the truth of God is immutable.—from Chapter 20



# Mystery cycles and miracle plays

RELIGIOUS DRAMA SATURATED THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Joe Ricke

*One need not search far* or look hard for religious drama in the Middle Ages. There were Bible plays, saints' plays, miracle plays, and so-called "morality" plays all over Catholic Europe. Of course, the Mass itself was a sort of production, with props, script, costumes, and ritual movements. Eventually, some dramatic elements, especially the *Quem quaeritis?* (*Whom Do You Seek?*) story of the women and the angels at the tomb, were included in the Easter services. We have definite evidence that in some religious houses, nuns (such as Hrotsvitha, see pp. 42–45) wrote and performed religious drama, usually about saints, sometimes based on pagan Roman plays. And a lively, improvisational, native dramatic tradition involving fantastic stories, stock comic figures (think Punch and Judy shows and characters costumed as hobby horses), and song and dance developed alongside and, in some cases, was absorbed into, the stories that mattered—primarily biblical stories and saints' lives.

"Mystery cycles" (or Corpus Christi plays) and morality plays (or moral interludes) became very popular before the Reformation in England from the late fourteenth century until the middle of the sixteenth century. Many continued

**A TOWNWIDE AFFAIR** This 15th-c. Corpus Christi procession (*above left*) and this painting of 17th-c. Brussels (*above*) capture what scholars believe medieval pageant wagons and cycle plays would have looked like.

for a time afterward, usually with revisions that downplayed the roles of the Virgin Mary and the saints and, at least to some degree, fit better with new beliefs and practices. After the Reformation in England, representations of religious stories, characters, and themes were discouraged if not completely abolished (see pp. 17–20), though religion was not completely absent from the drama. Still, if a member of the court of King James (reigned 1603–1625) could have been transported to 1450, he would have seen biblical plays, saints' plays, and other miracle plays regularly in local churchyards and town centers.

## A DAY OF DRAMA

Specifically, if this same courtier had visited York on June 4, the feast of Corpus Christi, he might have seen the entire spectacle of the biblical story, filtered through a mix of



**HELLMOUTH (right)** A key display in medieval drama, the entrance to hell was imagined as a monster's mouth.

Roman Catholic doctrine, popular culture, and a strong dose of civic pride—all in one long day of performances, starting before sunrise at 4:30 a.m. with the arrival of the first pageant wagon.

The pageant wagon, an elaborate movable stage on wheels, would begin its trip from Pageant Green onto Mickelgate, stopping first at the gates of Holy Trinity Priory. There a civic official sat, checking the performance against the official script, or “register,” in this case of the first play of the day, “The Fall of Angels.” An actor performing the role of God (*Deus* in Latin), probably costumed in a golden mask, facial hair, and a wig and standing on some kind of upper level on the wagon stage, called the world and the Corpus Christi play into being:

*Ego sum Alpha et O: vita, via, veritas, primus et novissimus.*

I am gracious and great God without beginning.

I am maker unmade; all might is in me.

I am life and way, unto weal winning.

I am foremost and first; as I bid, shall it be.

Shortly, *Deus* created “nine orders of angels, full clear, / For love, in my worship, to sing,” along with the first “special effect” of the cycle, the sudden appearance of angels at different heights representing the different orders, in full angel gear. That gear included leather costumes coated with feathers. Immediately after their appearance, the angels broke into the *Te Deum* and a few minutes later sang the *Sanctus*.

*Deus*, too, sang praises, within the limits of Christian orthodoxy. He singled out one angel, costumed with something extravagant and gaudy:

Of these mights [powers] I have made, the most, next to me,

I make you, as master, to mirror my might;

I bid you obedient in bliss here to be.

I name you now “Lucifer, Bearer of Light.”

Of course, Lucifer’s special position as top angel and mirror of God wasn’t enough for him. Since “my power surpasses each peer,” he pridefully reasoned that “I shall be like the One who is highest on height.” But before you could say “special effect #2,” Lucifer and the rebellious angels fell to a lower level, where some kind of hellmouth, belching fire and smoke, received them. At the same time, the angel actors performed an amazing costume change into black masks and devil costumes:

Ah, ah! Help me! Helpless! So hot is it here!

This is a dungeon of dole in which I myself find!

What is my body, once comely and fair?

I am ugliest, loathsome, who once was sublime!

My brightness is black as a coal now;

My misery, endlessly kindling.

It makes me go growling and grinning!

Ah! Fury! I boil in woe now!

And that was just the first out of 48 plays!

**PARADE OF PLAYS**

Craft guilds sponsored each of the plays and their wagons, and many of them were amazingly appropriate. For example,





the Shipwrights sponsored *The Building of the Ark*; the Fishers and Mariners, *The Flood*; the Vintners, *The Marriage at Cana*; the Bakers, *The Last Supper*; and the Pinners (pin makers), *The Crucifixion*. Each wagon was individually imagined and designed for its particular play, although there is good evidence that some of the action occurred on the street in front of the wagon as well. The wagons were hand drawn in and out of some 12 stations throughout the city, including the gate in front of York Minster and the final station, the Pavement (the commercial center of the city—site of markets, fairs, proclamations, and executions).

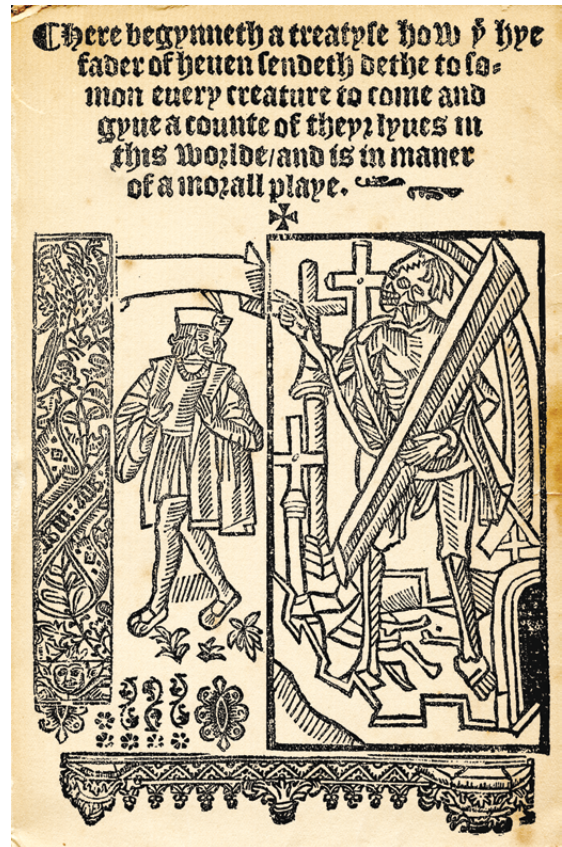
The final performance of the final play (*The Last Judgment*) would, almost certainly, have been after midnight. That would mean that, in years that the entire cycle was performed, 476 individual performances occurred in York on the feast of Corpus Christi. Before we ever again use “medieval” as an adjective meaning “primitive,” we should consider the commitment of the citizens of York (and other cities) in staging perhaps the most spectacular theatrical events in world history—Christian or otherwise—from the late fourteenth until the middle of the sixteenth century.

### DRAMATIZING REDEMPTION’S STORY

Pageant content very much focused on biblical stories: the Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Last Judgment. As a specifically Christian version of biblical history, the pageants heavily emphasized the person and work of Jesus Christ. Old Testament characters and stories were included primarily if they were traditionally connected typologically with the New Testament, such as the stories of Noah, Abraham and Isaac, and Moses against Pharaoh.

Eight plays roughly corresponded to the infancy and childhood of Christ—from the Annunciation to the Slaughter of the Innocents. Similarly, plays related to the Passion, Death, and Resurrection—from the Entry into Jerusalem to the Ascension—numbered 19. The cycle ended, as one might expect for late medieval popular religion, with four plays about the Virgin Mary, followed by the Last Judgment.

Much is made of the “incarnational” aspect of theater as an art form, but nowhere is this more evident than in the medieval biblical plays. Some might assume (and some might require) that “biblical plays” featured one-dimensional figures rather than “flesh-filled, blood-brimmed” humanity, as Gerard Manley Hopkins would later put it.



**ON THEM** A 19th-c. artist imagines a Vintners’ (winemakers) pageant wagon featuring Noah, commonly believed to be the first vintner (*above left*).

**THE MORAL OF THE STORY** Morality plays like *Everyman* (*above*) often presented vices and virtues in allegorical ways to lead viewers to consider spiritual things.

But the pageants gave us troubled Cain who resented his brother to the point of death; quarrelling spouses—Adam and Eve, and especially Noah and his wife, who yet saved the world of creatures; tormented Joseph, doubting yet loving his pregnant virgin wife; the anguished but resistant mothers of Bethlehem in the “Slaughter” play; wicked, ranting rulers like Herod, Pilate, and Pharaoh; the rollicking but ultimately sentimental shepherds of the Townley *Second Shepherds Play*; the tender scene with Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, followed immediately in the same play by his encounter with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus; the disabled townspeople crying out to Jesus for help on his entry into Jerusalem at the York plays; and the sadistic soldiers, cracking jokes and mocking Jesus for over 250 lines as they nail him to the cross, only to find that they need some wedges because “the mortice-hole is over-wide; / that makes it wave instead of set.”

Among all this noise and tragicomedy, the figure of Christ, played over the day by 24 different actors, reigned from the cross. Here the Incarnation and the redemptive suffering of Christ spoke through the body of the mocked man

GUSTAV SPRENGLER AND CHRISTIAN GÖTTLEB STEINLEN, PAGEANT WAGON OF NOAH’S ARK IN THE PROCESSION OF THE VINTNERS IN VEVEY, LITHOGRAPH, C. 1833—GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, LOS ANGELES (87.810043)  
JOHN SKLÖT, FRONTSPIECE FROM *EVERYMAN*, C. 1500 TO 1530—PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA





**STAGE DIRECTIONS** This 15th-c. morality play manuscript includes notes in the margins and a sketch of stage demons surrounding an actor.

on the cross in a powerful medieval popular lyric repurposed for the play, as one of many moments of direct address to the audience characteristic of medieval drama.

After the soldiers roughly swung the cross up into its position and their rude laughter died out, the play too settled into its groove. Likely some knelt, others wept, parents hushed their children, as they were drawn back into what all the noise and spectacle was about in the first place. Jesus, who had spoken only 10 of the 250 lines in the Crucifixion play heretofore, spoke from the cross:

All men that walk by path or street,  
 My sufferings take heed unto.  
 Behold my head, my hands, my feet,  
 And fully feel, before you go,  
 If any mourning may be fit,  
 Or torment, equal this unto.  
 My father that all pain may quit,  
 Forgive these men who these things do.  
 What they do, know they not.  
 Therefore, father, I crave  
 Their sins be punished naught.  
 But see their souls to save.

The audience wasn't given much time to linger in this emotional identification with Jesus. The play and the soldiers, like life, must go on. They had people to execute, garments to gamble over, another performance a few hundred yards down the street.

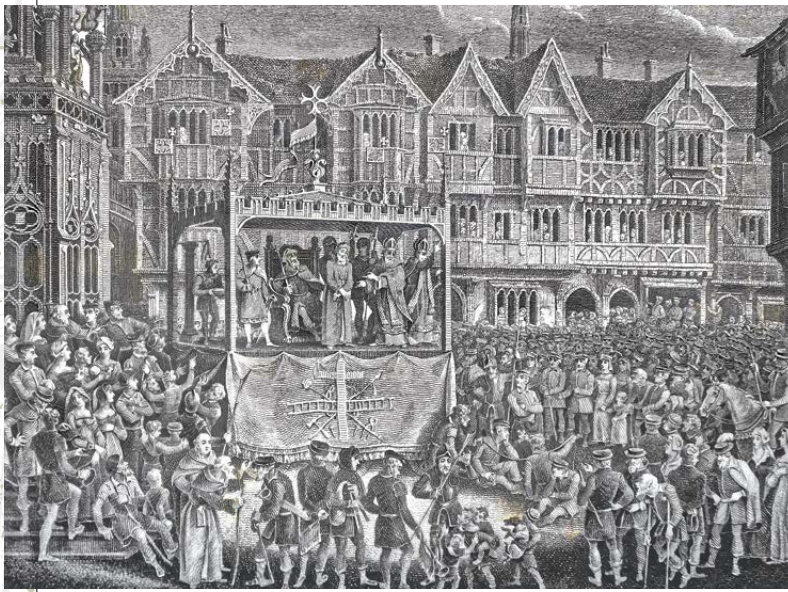
- 1 SOLDIER: Well, hark! He chatters like a jay.
- 2 SOLDIER: I think he patters like a pie.
- 3 SOLDIER: Well, he's been doing this all day,  
 Discussing mercy; who knows why?  
 We assume that many in the audience knew and felt why.

**MORALITY PLAYS**

When Western Christians think of allegory, they probably think first of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Of course, allegory had worked since long before Bunyan, and even long before Christianity, as a way of discussing or teaching philosophical, esoteric, or moral content. Prudentius (348–c. 413) in the late fourth century wrote *Psychomachia*, a highly influential poetic account of the battle for the soul of man in which seven sins (idolatry, lust, etc.) are opposed by seven virtues (faith, chastity, etc.).

Dante (c. 1265–1321) and many medieval Christians claimed that scriptural texts and even pagan texts could be read on four different levels, the literal and three different "allegorical" levels. Two of these we might classify as "religious" in that they dealt with salvation and questions of the afterlife (heaven, hell, purgatory). The other level is the moral level. The more or less allegorical plays from the medieval period typically dealt with that level and thus are called "morality plays."

The major surviving English morality plays date from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century, and all deal with humanity and the struggle against sin in an allegorical manner. The five major ones are *The Pride of Life*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mankinde*, *Wisdom*, and *Everyman*. The best-known of the morality plays,



**A DAY TO REMEMBER** Artist David Lee imagines the scope and scale of medieval drama in this drawing of a 19th-c. mystery play in Coventry (*left*). The event continues to fascinate, as seen in this mystery cycle reenactment held in 1966 in front of York Minster (*below*).



*Everyman*, is both a moral play and a salvation play. In it, the title character is summoned by death not just to die but to give an account or a “reckoning” of his life before facing the afterlife.

### VICE AND VIRTUE

As such the play is very much about the virtues Everyman has neglected and the vices he has practiced. It is necessary for his salvation to rely upon his good deeds, but Good Deeds (the character) says something like “you should have thought of that earlier!” Just when it looks like it’s too late, Knowledge appears, who introduces Everyman to Confession, who gives him the whip of Penance, which he uses to scourge himself (as Good Deeds and Knowledge cheer him on). Scourged Everyman gets up with stripes on his back but a skip in his step, until Knowledge insists he wear the garment of Contrition for the rest of his life.

Although the play mentions incarnation and atonement, they seem tangential to the central action. This is an allegorical medieval play equally about morality and salvation, raising the significant medieval religious concern of how to die well.

Other morality plays are not nearly as clear cut as *Everyman*, the best example being *Mankind* (c. 1470). Whereas *Everyman* is solemn to a fault, *Mankind*, especially in its early critical history, was thought of as scandalous and profane to a most grievous fault. The lovable title character, a simple rural laborer carrying a spade, is taken under the guidance of Mercy, a clerical figure prone to long, boring Latinate moral sermons. Opposed to them both are a handful of lively “vice” characters (none of which clearly represents a traditional deadly sin): Mischief, New Gyse (New Fashion), Nought, Nowadays, and their pet devil, Titivillus, whom they bring in midplay, demanding that the audience pay for the thrill. Titivillus enters the stage with a blasphemous take on the entrance of Deus in the cycle plays: “*Ego sum dominantium dominus* [I am the Lord of Lords], and my name is Titivillus.”

Throughout the play the entertaining and sarcastic vices tempt Mankind, first to sin and finally to hang himself, since they have convinced him to despair. Finally, Mercy, who is neither entertaining nor lively, chases the comic vices from the stage, rescues Mankind, forgives him (again), and assures him that:

All the virtue in the world if we might  
comprehend  
Your merits were not enough to buy the bliss  
above,  
Not to the lest joy of heaven, of your proper

effort to ascend.

With mercy you may [gain heaven]; I tell you no  
fable, Scripture doth prove.

The ending is characteristic of the strange mix of solemn and vulgar discourses in the play, both giving voice to the clerical speeches of “Mercy” and undercutting him. After he rescues Mankind by offering him God’s mercy, he then continues with 34 more lines of a tedious sermon on sin. He is interrupted, briefly, by Mankind’s simple, lovely exit lines:

Since I shall depart, bless me father, ere I go  
God send us all plenty of his mercy.

Readers and audience members are not exactly sure where they stand in *Mankind*’s uproarious and exhilarating dialogical imagination, and it continues to generate scholarly debate. But its quick switches between pompous sermons on sin and edgy vice characters reflect the uneasy but fascinating incarnational fusion of religious ideas and popular theatricality on display in much medieval religious drama, designed as much for the marketplace as for the church. **GI**

*Joe Ricke is a scholar, teacher, and writer with a lifelong emphasis on medieval and early modern drama.*



# Reforming drama

DURING RELIGIOUS CHANGE, ENGLISH PLAYWRIGHTS FACED SHIFTING ATTITUDES ABOUT THEATER

Sarah R. A. Waters

**Popular perceptions** of the reason for the English Reformation might be summed up by Anne Boleyn’s words in the song “Don’t Lose ur Head” by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss in their musical, *Six* (2017):

Tried to elope  
But the Pope said, “Nope!”  
Our only hope was Henry—  
He got a promotion  
Caused a commotion

Set in motion the C of E [Church of England]

Henry VIII’s (1491–1547) desire for a divorce was, of course, only one reason for the English Reformation. However, one product of the messy and ongoing break with the Catholic Church might come as a surprise. In an effort to separate himself from Catholic influence, Henry sought to suppress iconographic practices, including religious theater. As England’s religious allegiances shifted from monarch to monarch and between Protestantism and Catholicism, English theater reflected the tumult.

## POLEMICAL PLAYWRIGHTS

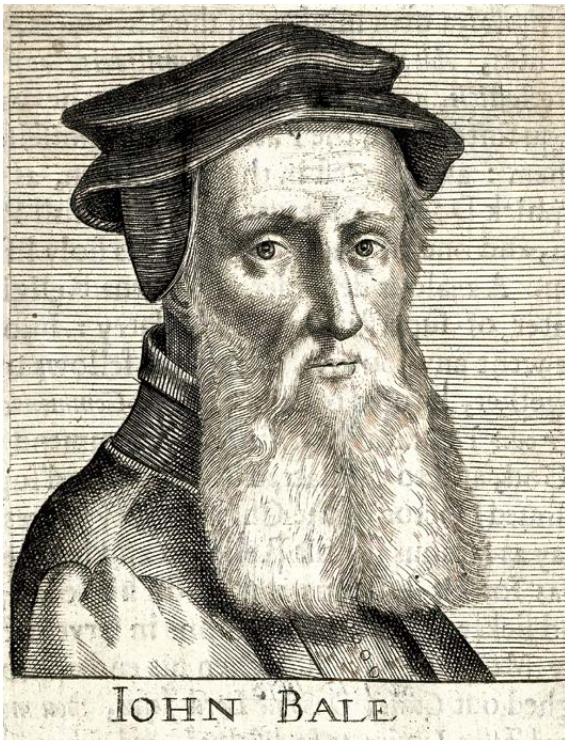
Though they held opposite religious convictions, two men bridged the theaters of the medieval and early modern worlds through their unique lenses on the

**PATRON OF THE ARTS** In this painting, Queen Elizabeth I watches a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. She actively promoted theater, but other rulers prohibited it.

Reformation. Anti-Catholic preacher and playwright John Bale (1495–1563) worked for Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540), while Thomas Heywood (c. 1570–1641), a devout Catholic playwright, actor, and author, worked for Henry (and later Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth).

Heywood’s best-known work is *The Play of the Wether* (1533). It was a “moral interlude” that served primarily as entertainment rather than as a morality play. Nevertheless like its medieval predecessors, it featured stock characters, an allegorical “Vice” (Merry Report) and a deliberately classical god (Jupiter) rather than the pope or the Christian God. Jupiter dialogues with different characters who each beg him to make conditions more favorable for them.

The conflict Jupiter faces clearly parallels contemporary Catholic and Protestant competitors for Henry’s religious favor. As the play closes, Jupiter reasserts his power and godly “right” to “serve as many or as few as we think best” since “the direction of that doubtless shall stand / perpetually in the power of our hand.” Heywood, in his “moral,” urged Henry to assert his authority and



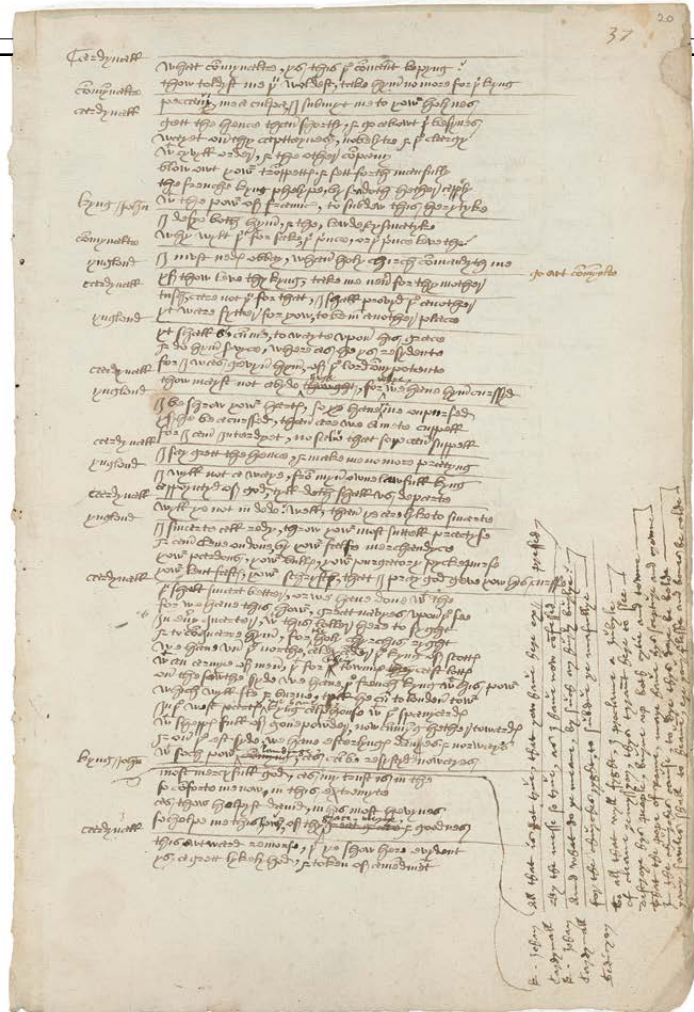
JOHN BALE

not be swayed by any of these voices and the demands they were making. Heywood toed the line (sometimes) but never hid his Catholic faith, and, although he wrote plays flattering his monarch (and employer), he also wasn't afraid of writing "morals" that might protect his own interests.

Bale wrote more directly polemical plays. Through his central figure, Baleus Prolocutor, he showed how Catholicism had no place in England and asserted the merits of English Protestantism. In plays like *King Johan* (c. 1536–1538), about a historical figure (King John) who also had conflicts with Rome, Bale employed allegorical figures.

They had more of a patriotic than papal flavor: Sedition (who works for Antichrist), Clergy, Nobility, Civil Order, Usurped Power, and Private Wealth join the stage with the poor widow who personifies England. The villains are Nobility, who "took an oath to defend the church evermore" and sides with Sedition, and the Clergy, who likewise follows the pope, while Civil Order and King John are on the side of "good" as they set out to remove the influence of Rome.

This use of historical figures to comment on conflicts in contemporary society at a safe historical distance fed into the historical plays that form much of William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) early theatrical output. The same religious conflict surfaced again and again across the plays of many early modern dramatists, Shakespeare included, as ideas about order and disorder, legitimacy and illegitimacy, and the divine right of kings took on heightened associations, especially when a king with a Catholic background (James I of England and VI of Scotland) had to be



**"BILIOUS BALE"** John Bale (above left) earned this nickname due to his contentious nature. He was, however, an accomplished historian, minister, and writer; his *King Johan* (above) was a seminal work of English verse drama.

imported to England from Scotland (1603). Unsurprisingly, disruptions to order and ideas about fate, prophecy, and predestination, as well as guilt and the fall of man, surface again in *Macbeth*—a play first performed in 1606 in the wake of James's ascension to the throne.

### FIERY INTERLUDES

In some early modern plays, medieval traditions bleed directly into early modern practices. For instance *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) by Thomas Kyd (1558–1594) features a personified revenge alongside the Ghost of Andrea, whose death and subsequent whodunnit narrative is dramatized in the play. Although a retrospective story, it raises questions about the determinism or predestination of events, particularly when Revenge asserts that he has the power to change "peace to war" and "friendship into fell despite." Later Revenge claims to be the "hand" that "shall hale them down to deepest hell / where none but furies, bugs and tortures dwell." More blatantly, the ghost demands that he "be judge" and calls for one character to be "dragged through



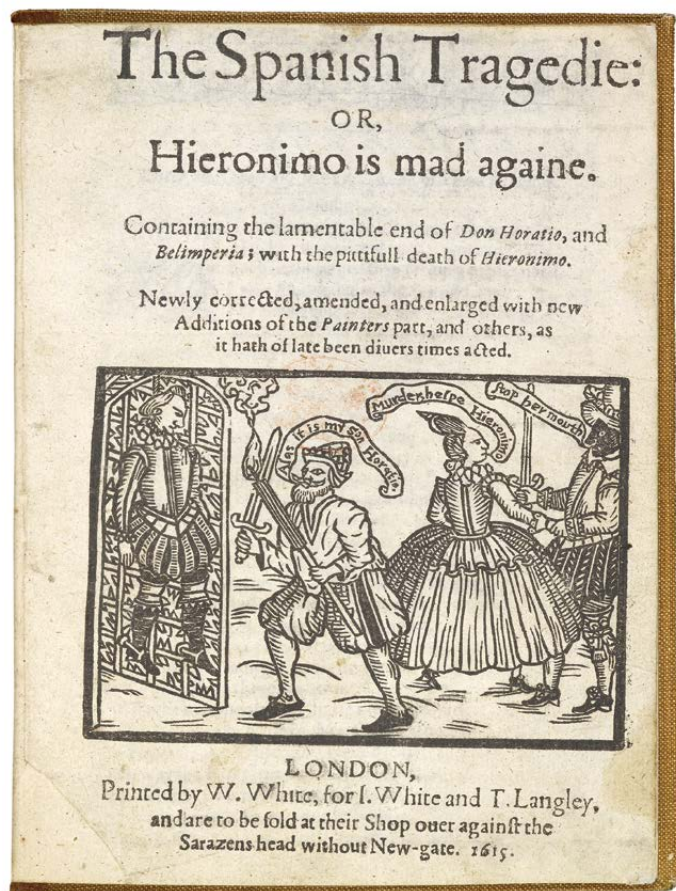
boiling Acheron / And there live, dying still in endless flames.” The play concludes with a moralistic vision of their “endless tragedy.”

As the title indicates, Kyd’s play was set in a Catholic location, and the characters’ hellish violence and inhumane behavior suggest an indictment of Catholicism. Kyd played with other Catholic spaces too: a ghost in a liminal space suggestive of purgatory and ideas of weighed judgment and of souls balanced with retributive or potentially purging revenge. The links with later plays are obvious, like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, first performed around 1600, but so too are links with the soul journeys of earlier medieval plays like *Everyman* (c. 1510).

Even more directly Christopher Marlowe’s (1564–1593) potentially blasphemous *Doctor Faustus* (1604) featured an overreaching academic who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for 18 years of unholy fun, earning him the title of (perhaps) a ghost “newly crept out of / Purgatory.” Marlowe also included the devil, Faustus’s own personal devil (Mephistopheles), good and evil angels, the seven deadly sins, and visions of heaven (lost) and hell with “Furies tossing damned souls / On burning forks.” At the end Faustus cries for mercy and has visions of “Christ’s blood [which] streams in the firmament” as he urges us to “see, see.” The play’s final speech is full of tortuous debates about whether he “must be damned” or whether he might indeed “leap to my God!”

### SPIRITUAL SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare, a contemporary of Marlowe and Kyd, wrote in the wake of, and sometimes competing with, such plays. He lived in a world where religion permeated everything. In early modern England, sermons entertained as much as the theater did. Shakespeare had an interest in religion and its dramatic potential and entertainment value. Keen

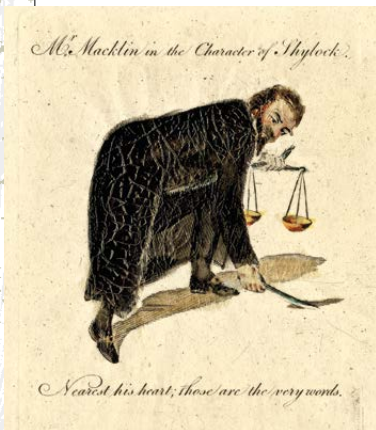


**TRAGIC PLAYWRIGHTS** Christopher Marlowe (*above left*) who wrote *Doctor Faustus*, and Thomas Kyd, who wrote *The Spanish Tragedy* (*above*), were tragic themselves. Both died young; Marlowe at 29 and Kyd at 35.

to avoid the censors and to retain his legally necessary patronage, Shakespeare masked political commentary behind foreign (Catholic or otherwise contraband) locations and the shadow of the past.

Although as scholar John Cox noted, *Measure for Measure*, first performed 1604, was “the only play Shakespeare wrote with a biblical title” (see Matt. 7:2), this was not his only play drawing on religious inspiration. Shakespeare often wove biblical stories, characters, and moments into his plays. Spiritually loaded terms pop up like jack-in-the-boxes. Alongside both Protestant and Catholic Christianity jostle, as Cox notes, “Judaism, Islam, and the state religion of ancient Rome,” as well as occult beliefs, such as curses, witches, and magic. These paired with other kinds of “othering” of the characters, especially racially in the cases of Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*) and Othello (*Othello*).

Moreover as the title of *Measure for Measure* indicates, Shakespeare was interested in matters of justice, mercy, legalistic interpretations of Scripture, and the fractures of a society where religion and its spouters were inherently hypocritical and used their version of Christianity as a



disguise to control the lives of others (the Duke of Vienna disguises himself as a friar for most of the play). In the same play, chastity and the sanctity of a nun's virginity are challenged, and ideas about "purity," "truth," and even what it means to be a Christian are scrutinized. Clearly Shakespeare sought to critique more than just Catholicism.

*Hamlet* also explores religious matters, with its consideration of the sanctity of dialoguing with God in

prayer and its explorations of life, death, and the afterlife: in the titular character's contemplation of suicide, of what may come "when we have shuffled off this mortal coil," and of what fate might await him if he acts to avenge his father's ghost. But perhaps the most direct treatment of religion by Shakespeare continues to be *Merchant of Venice*, first played in 1598, with its problematic depiction of "Christian" mercy in Portia's speech and Shylock's own interrogation of "Christian" mercy in his soliloquy "Hath not a Jew eyes?" Shakespeare was interested in the power dynamics at play in a Christian society and what it means to "put on" religion, particularly when the shape of Christianity kept shifting in his own day.

### EMBODIED RESURRECTION

Shakespeare didn't write Christian drama. Except when he did. His aim was not to set out to script biblical narratives on stage nor even to have a clear "moral." However, his plays certainly contain Christian moments, and those that might point toward the dramatic Christian story. These moments do not need to occur in a Christian world. For instance in *King Lear*, Gloucester, scarred with his recent blinding, highlights the vulnerability and littleness of humans, in relation to the gods: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. / They kill us for their sport" (4.1). This recalls the *deus-ex-machina* of

**CENSORED YET VIBRANT** The Globe and Rose theaters (the tallest buildings on London's south bank above) persevered despite censorship. Shakespeare's (top left) characters like *The Merchant of Venice's* antagonist, Shylock (left), offer insight into early modern England's religious life.

Greek drama and the overwhelming power of the gods who seem to treat humans as their playthings. But it also recalls scriptural passages like Matthew 19:14 and the words of medieval devotional writers like Julian of Norwich, who spoke of understanding one's own "littleness" as a revelation of dependency upon God and his love. Her revelation is less bleak than that of *King Lear's* blind seer.

In *King Lear* (1606), *The Winter's Tale* (1611), *Henry IV part 1* (1600), and *Henry IV part 2* (1600), Shakespeare also gives us visions of—and, in the case of *Lear*, the crushed hope of—resurrections, risings, and bodies that (might) once again "stir" with "breath." In these he dramatized the movement of the heart in grief, the boundaries between life and death, and the fragility of the human body as well as the shock of miracles of resurrection.

The shock is not always happy. The resurrections do not always recall either Christ's or its foreshadowing as seen with Lazarus. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, as echoed in *King Lear*, has a sad rather than miraculously happy ending. Sometimes Shakespeare's plays reveal their dramatic predecessors, and certainly they remained steeped in religion as was the rest of early modern society. Shakespeare's English world and its drama was, as we have seen, fraught with religion, thrown back and forth between different interpretations of Christianity and shifting relationships between church and state. **CH**

*Sarah R. A. Waters is a scholar of Shakespeare and C. S. Lewis and is a lecturer in English literature at the University of Buckingham.*

# Reading Christ between the lines

Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare wove Christian concepts into their works. In these excerpts Faustus tries to avoid a well-deserved hell; Isabella reminds a judge he too will be judged; and Paulina assures Leontes she won't employ sorcery to make a statue live.

## UGLY HELL, GAPE NOT!

—from Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, 5.2 [1594]

**FAUSTUS:**

The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,  
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damn'd.

O, I'll leap up to my God!—Who pulls me down?—

See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

One drop would save my soul, half a drop:  
ah, my Christ!—

Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!  
Yet will I call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer!—  
Where is it now? 'tis gone: and see, where God  
Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows!  
Mountains and hills, come, come, and fall on me,  
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!  
No, no!

Then will I headlong run into the earth:  
Earth, gape! O, no, it will not harbour me!  
You stars that reign'd at my nativity,  
Whose influence hath allotted death and hell,  
Now draw up Faustus, like a foggy mist,  
Into the entrails of yon labouring clouds,  
That, when you vomit forth into the air,  
My limbs may issue from your smoky mouths,  
So that my soul may but ascend to heaven! . . .

*[The clock strikes twelve.]*

O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn to air,  
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!

*[Thunder and lightning.]*

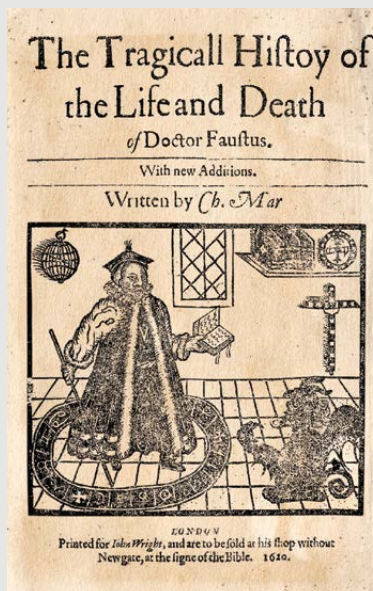
O soul, be chang'd into little water-drops,  
And fall into the ocean, ne'er be found!

*[Enter DEVILS.]*

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!  
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!  
Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!  
I'll burn my books!—Ah, Mephistophilis!

*[Exeunt DEVILS with FAUSTUS.]*

**A RAW DEAL** Dr. Faustus (*above*) traded his soul for supernatural power, but the play's great tragedy is his rejection of freely offered salvation.



## BREATHE MERCY

—from Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* 2.2 [1604]

**ISABELLA:**

How would you be  
If He which is the top of  
judgment should  
But judge you as you are? O,  
think on that,  
And mercy then will breathe  
within your lips  
Like man new-made.

## FROM STONE TO FLESH

—from Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, 5.3 [1611]

**PAULINA:**

Either forbear,

Quit presently the chapel, or resolve you  
For more amazement. If you can behold it,  
I'll make the statue move indeed, descend  
And take you by the hand. But then you'll think—  
Which I protest against—I am assisted  
By wicked powers.

**LEONTES:**

What you can make her do  
I am content to look on; what to speak,  
I am content to hear, for 'tis as easy  
To make her speak as move.

**PAULINA:**

It is required  
You do awake your faith. Then all stand still—  
Or those that think it is unlawful business  
I am about, let them depart.

**LEONTES:**

Proceed. No foot shall stir.

**PAULINA:**

Music, awake her! Strike!

*[Music sounds.]*

'Tis time. Descend. Be stone no more. Approach.  
Strike all that look upon with marvel. Come,  
I'll fill your grave up. Stir, nay, come away.  
Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him  
Dear life redeems you.—You perceive she stirs.

*[Hermione descends.]*

Start not. Her actions shall be holy as  
You hear my spell is lawful.



# Fuel on a demonic fire

CHRISTIAN CRITIQUES OF THEATRICAL PURSUITS

Jennifer Woodruff Tait

*That all popular, and common Stage-Plays, whether Comical, Tragical, Satirical, Mimical, or mixed of either . . . are such sinful, hurtful, and pernicious Recreations, as are altogether unseemly, and unlawful unto Christians: I shall first of all evidence, and prove it.—William Prynne, *Histriomastix, The Players' Scourge, or Actors' Tragedy* (1633)*

*In all the Churches those ministers most distinguished for piety . . . are most opposed to the Theater; while those notoriously indolent, luxurious, and tolerant to worldliness, with few exceptions, furnish ministerial apologists for the Theater.—James Buckley, *Christians and the Theater* (1876)*

*Almost as soon as there were Christians*, some of them opposed the theater (see pp. 6–10). *The Apostolic Tradition*, a document of church order from around the early 200s, lists actors as those who must give up their profession before seeking baptism—alongside pimps, prostitutes, idol makers, those who take part in gladiatorial games, astrologers, and soldiers.

Likewise, pagan Romans, though many patronized plays, had a low opinion of actors, who were largely foreigners or the enslaved. Pagans also associated forms of theater with prostitution and general sexual immorality. To this moral critique, Christians added theological ones: the theater for them was associated with idolatry and with unreality.

**PROBLEMATIC PLAYS** This painting shows a village fair production in which the main characters appear to be kissing. Critics opposed such displays as immoral.

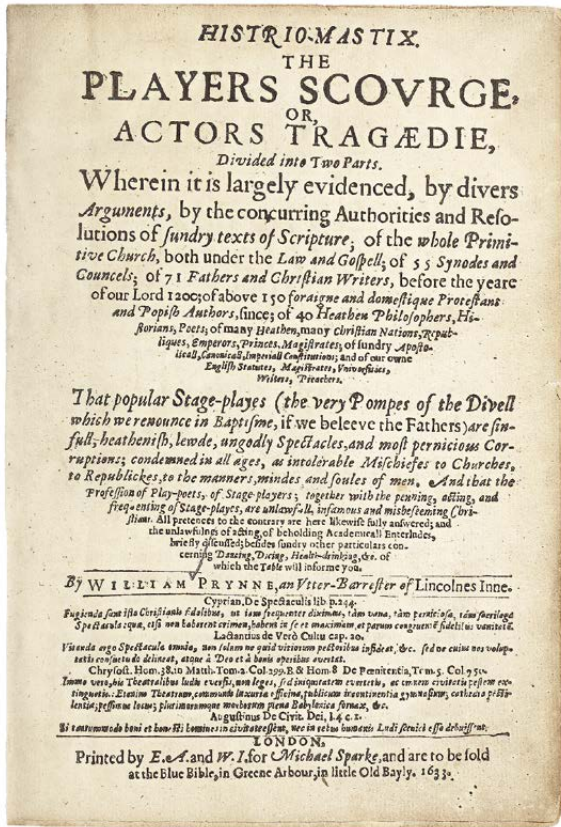
These three issues, raised by early church thinkers like Tertullian (p. 11), remain surprisingly consistent down through the centuries whenever Christians critiqued theatrical endeavors—from Roman *ludi scaenici* (public theater festivals) and traveling acting troupes, to the Puritan closure of English theaters in the seventeenth century, to various protests as part of Victorian movements for public morality.

## “FROTHY, VAIN, AND FRIVOLOUS”

The critique of *immorality* usually included both onstage immoral acts and the immorality of actors in their personal lives. Tertullian condemned “that immodesty of gesture and attire which so specially and peculiarly characterizes the stage” and accused theaters of bringing cross-dressing men and prostitutes on stage. William Prynne (1600–1669), Puritan author of one of the most famous antitheatrical treatises, *Histriomastix* (1632), argued:

If we survey the style, or subject matter of all our popular Interludes; we shall discover them to be either Scurrilous, Amorous, and Obscene: or Barbarous, Bloody, and Tyrannical: or Heathenish, and





**IDOLATROUS THEATER?** William Prynne’s (above right) *Histriomastix* (above) decried theater for many reasons, including depictions of God. For similar reasons iconoclasts vandalized this image of Christ (right).

Is it possible that the spectacle of women, painted, dressed as they are, with heaving bosoms, languishing glances, voluptuous attitudes, falling into the arms of men with whom they are on the verge, according to the play, of committing adultery, should make any other than the worst possible impressions? Persons of mature years and thorough self-mastery have found such spectacles to “tempt them to immorality”; while to expect the young to behold them without their imaginations being polluted is to defy reason and experience.

Prynne, who had condemned “Lascivious dancing. Amorous obscene songs: Effeminate lust-exciting Music. Profuse, inordinate lascivious laughter,” would surely have agreed.

Female roles were often a particular sticking point. In societies where it was the custom for women to appear on stage, critics assumed they must be women of low character. (Prynne’s description of female actors as “notorious whores,” taken as a reference to Queen Henrietta Maria, doomed him.) Methodist bishop John Heyl Vincent (1832–1920) commented in his 1892 book *Better Not* that theaters are

exhibiting women with such approaches to nakedness as can have no other design than to breed lust . . . getting us used to scenes that rival the voluptuous and licentious ages of the past.

If it was not the custom for women to appear, as in ancient Rome or in Shakespeare’s time, men dressed as women were condemned as cross-dressing “buffoons” (to quote Tertullian) or accused of “effeminate gesture, to ravish the sense; and wanton speech, to whet desire to inordinate lust” (as in a 1579 pamphlet by Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse*). Prynne also was concerned about the “gross effeminacy” and the aspects of costumes and sets that were “womanish . . . costly, fantastical, strange, lascivious, whorish, provoking unto lewdness.”

**WORSHIPING THE DEVIL-GODS?**

In the early church, the critique of *idolatry* was quite a literal

Prophane: or Fabulous, and Fictitious: or Impious, and Blasphemous: or Satirical, and Invective: or at the best but Frothy, Vaine, and Frivolous. Furthermore, he continued: as Stage plays are sinful, and utterly unlawful unto Christians in regard of their style and subject matter, so likewise are they in respect both of their Actors and Spectators.

*Histriomastix* came to the attention of King Charles I (1600–1649) because of perceived treasonous passages; Prynne was sentenced to life imprisonment (later cut short in 1640 by the Long Parliament that opposed Charles I), a fine, and having his book burned in front of him.

The Long Parliament prevented the staging of plays in 1642 (a prohibition that would ultimately endure for 18 years), claiming that a moment of war and conflict was no time for “Spectacles of Pleasure, too commonly expressing lascivious Mirth and Levity.” A later and even stricter prohibiting act in 1648, which allowed theaters to be destroyed and actors to be arrested, said that all actors “are, and shall be taken to be Rogues, and punishable.”

Two-hundred-odd years later, James Buckley (1836–1920), an American Methodist minister and newspaper editor, penned an equally famous theater critique, noting,

WILLIAM PRYNNE: HISTRIOMASTIX. LONDON, 1633—PUBLIC DOMAIN, PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY LIBRARY  
 WENCESLUS HOLLAR: WILLIAM PRYNNE ENGRAVING, 17TH CENTURY—PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA  
 THE MERGERS' CHRIST, LIMESTONE, 14TH TO 15TH CENTURY—PHOTO: MARK HEATHCOTE © PATINA ART



one; theaters and other forms of public entertainment should not be patronized by Christians because they were devoted to and inspired by pagan gods, whom Christians had abjured in their baptism and saw as demonic.

Later antitheatrical authors often transferred this critique to Roman Catholicism and to other liturgical traditions (Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran). Prynne referred to “all our Roman Catholics, (who are much devoted to these Theatrical Spectacles).” Buckley’s survey of the attitude of different religious groups to the theater noted that the rot, as he would have seen it, ran deep in Catholicism:

In its ritual it makes more use of dramatic representation than any other body bearing the Christian name, and in some parts of the world, at certain seasons, actually dramatizes the scenes of the crucifixion.

Later he called out, in addition to Catholics, the same periods in English religion that Prynne had singled out for critique:

It is not pretended that attendance on the Theater is inconsistent with the general moral and religious character of the average Roman Catholic population of the world, or with that of the Church of England in the times of Henry the Eighth, Edward, Elizabeth, or of Charles the First and his son.

## REJECTING UNREALITY

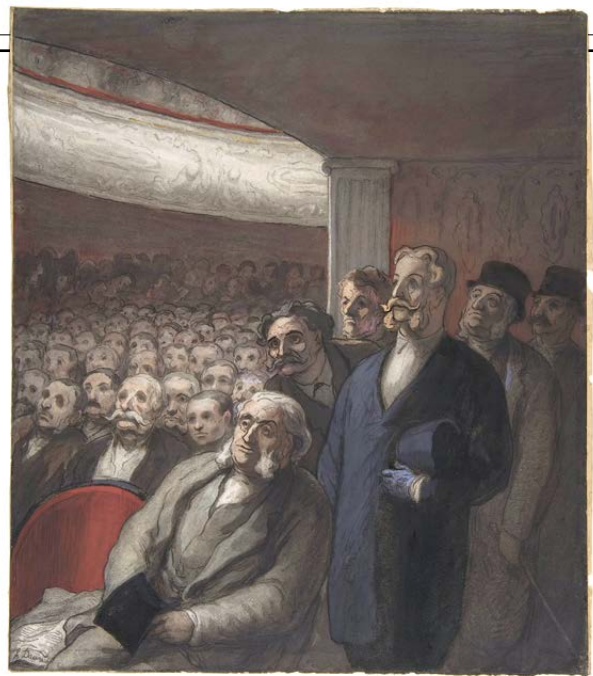
But beyond outward trappings of rich and revealing costumes, moral concerns that acting was too adjacent to prostitution and anxiety about the theater’s pagan origins and (later) Catholic associations, lay the most philosophical objection of all: plays are not Christian because plays are *fictional*.

Tertullian argued, “the Author of truth hates all the false; He regards as adultery all that is unreal.” Furthermore, Tertullian feared, fictional theatrical scenes would produce passionate responses in the watchers—a passion twice as bad because it was not aroused by a legitimate object:

For the show always leads to spiritual agitation. . . .

When a tragic actor is declaiming, will one be giving thought to prophetic appeals? Amid the measures of the effeminate player, will he call up to himself a psalm?

Augustine’s *Confessions* describes this dynamic—a dynamic which, after his conversion, he looked back upon with regret:



**CAPTIVATED** Augustine wrote, “in the theaters I rejoiced with the lovers when they wickedly enjoyed one another . . . and when they lost one another . . . I sorrowed with them, yet had my delight in both.” He saw the capture of audience affections as grotesque, which the above paintings seem to reflect.

Stage-plays also carried me away, full of images of my miseries, and of fuel to my fire. Why is it, that man desires to be made sad, beholding doleful and tragical things, which yet himself would no means suffer? Yet he desires as a spectator to feel sorrow at them, this very sorrow is his pleasure. What is this but a miserable madness?

Over a millennium later, Buckley used similar language to compare the unreality of the theater to alcoholic intoxication:

Improper sentiments and forms of expression will be imperceptibly imbibed, the imagination filled with unhealthy ideas, and the passions prematurely aroused and morbidly excited.

Like his antitheatrical predecessors, he found this passion doubly problematic because it had no real-life correspondence:

When such a man or woman returns to real life ordinary distress fails to move him, and they who weep over imaginary scenes leave suffering work people unpaid, and consider it annoying to be solicited for charitable objects.

Of course these antitheatrical writers did not speak for all Christians—or you would not be reading the rest of this issue. However, their arguments have not gone away; today they are just as frequently used to condemn movies, television, and even YouTube. Tertullian certainly could not have dreamed of YouTubers. But had he encountered them, he would have known what he should say. **CH**

*Jennifer Woodruff Tait is a senior editor of Christian History.*

# Heel kicking and holy jumping

Some early twentieth-century preachers enhanced their oratory with theatrical flair

Professor and social critic Neal Gabler wrote in his book *Life: The Movie*:

Religion in America not only failed to inhibit entertainment but fed the appetite for it even as its ministers issued futile pronouncements against it.

Referring primarily to evangelical Protestantism's explosion in the mid-nineteenth century, Gabler identified a new wave of preaching as sermons changed from stern, theological expositions to narrative, theatrical performances containing humorous anecdotes, colloquial asides, and dramatic monologues. Perhaps the best-known example of this, baseball player-turned-evangelist Billy Sunday (1862–1935) used slang, exaggerated gestures, and sensational language as he preached—to the delight of crowds and the annoyance of critics. While some sought to quell this innovation, such tactics were not a mere trend. Theatrical preaching was here to stay.

## ENTERTAINING REVIVAL

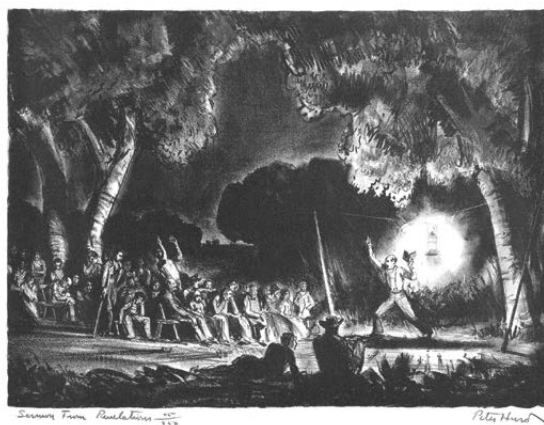
Though they would likely have bristled at being labeled “entertainers,” nineteenth- and early twentieth-century preachers nevertheless repeatedly used dramatic oratory and even theatrical performance in their ministries. The great Chicago revival and General Holiness Convention of 1901 that saw hundreds converted was a keynote example of performance in the revivalist pulpit. Leaders used both dramatic oratory and elements of stage performance to bring their preaching and (occasionally suspect) interpretations of Scripture to life.

The most colorful of the Chicago evangelists was Andrew “Andie” Dolbow (1846–1934), a reformed New Jersey prizefighter. While preaching Dolbow was known for kicking up his heels, as well as for executing what the *Chicago Tribune* called “the nearest imitation of a cakewalk that white men are capable of.” (Cakewalks began on southern plantations, where enslaved Blacks exaggerated ballroom dance steps favored by White elites.)

E. A. Ferguson (1869–1912), a former railroad engineer, may have been the perfect complement to Dolbow. Over six feet tall, barrel-chested, and with a booming voice, Ferguson towered over Dolbow, himself barely five feet in height. But both, when overcome by rhythmic music, would engage in a unique dance that vaguely “resembled a vaudeville act.”

## JUMP HOW HIGH?

Similarly Rev. John Norberry (1867–1937)—the only one of the Chicago evangelists who held a regular



**SPELLBINDING SPEAKERS** Revivalist preachers often employed dramatic gestures to keep listeners mesmerized (*above*). “Uncle Buddie” Robinson (*above right*) wasn’t demonstrative, but captured the audience through his masterful storytelling.

pastorate—used what became known as “holy jumping” to accompany his pulpit rhetoric. Believing anyone who experienced sanctification should be able to jump to their own height, Norberry often leaped from his chair after making that claim. A number of others would immediately join in the action. Norberry also developed a dramatic but effective technique for successful altar conversions—kneeling across from seekers and looking them in the eyes while admonishing them to raise their arms upward while repeating heavenly supplications. Typically that would result in both Norberry and the seeker breaking into spontaneous song or holy laughter.

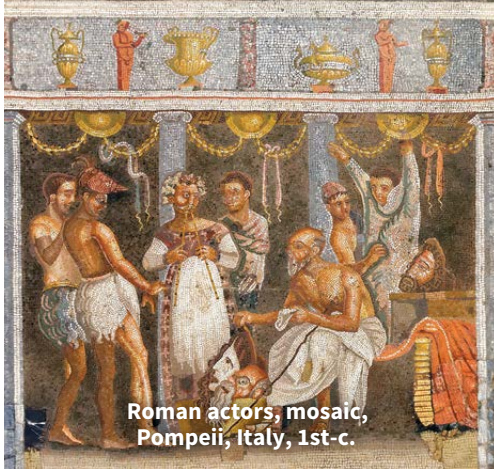
Finally, less physically demonstrative but no less rhetorically dramatic, were the Holiness stalwarts Seth Rees (1854–1933) and Ruben “Uncle Buddie” Robinson (1860–1942). Robinson, in particular, preferred to use his words to paint dramatic pictures of repentance, regaling the audience with the story of his poverty-ridden Appalachian upbringing, his conversion under the preaching of a traveling Methodist circuit rider after which he flung his gun and deck of cards into the Pecos River, and ultimately his sanctification in a Texas cornfield. Robinson was later referred to as the Will Rogers of the Holiness movement, and his simple, unassuming delivery held audiences spellbound.

Engaging and energizing, the style of these preachers helped fuel their movements as well as influence the preaching of the Word and the formation of religious identity across America. And if we consider the oratory styles of twenty-first-century preachers, no doubt that influence continues today.—Abram J. Book is assistant professor of communication studies and modern languages at Southeast Missouri State University.

PETER HURD, SERMON FROM RELATIONS, LITHOGRAPH ON PAPER, 1937, GIFT OF WILLIAM J. DONALD / COOPER HEWITT, SMITHSONIAN DESIGN MUSEUM  
REV. “UNCLE BUDDIE” ROBINSON VISITING CHURCH OF THE MAZERENE, BOURBONNAIS, KANKAKEE, ILLINOIS, OCT. 1937—MOSES / FINDAGRAVE.COM

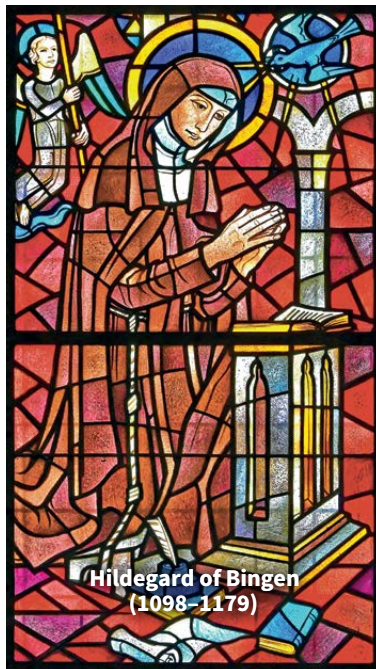
# FATH AND THE STAGE

## CHRISTIAN INTERACTIONS WITH THEATER



c. 200 Tertullian publishes “On the Spectacles,” which argues against Christian participation in pagan entertainment. Clement of Alexandria writes “Exhortations to the Greeks,” which denounces theatrical performances as demonic.

c. 300s Legalization of Christianity allows liturgical worship to be public.



348 Prudentius, a Christian Latin poet, is born. He would write the poetic Christian allegory *Psychomachia*, which becomes highly influential in the Middle Ages.

c. 397 Augustine writes *Confessions*, in which he decries theater as a distraction from God.

c. 400s *Quem quaeritis?* (*Whom Do You Seek?*) appears as the best-known precursor to the mystery cycle. Liturgical plays grow in popularity.

c. 935 Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, the first recorded woman playwright, is born.

c. 1151 Hildegard of Bingen writes *Ordo Virtutum*, an allegorical drama that anticipated the medieval morality play genre by about a century.

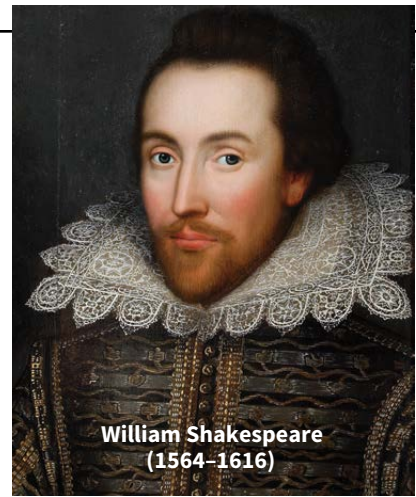
1210 Pope Innocent III forbids clergy from acting on a public stage. Instead craft guilds begin organizing, producing, and performing plays.

1376 The festival of Corpus Christi in York takes place. By this time pageant wagons and craft guild performances are well established.

1531 Juan Diego sees “La Morenita,” triggering mass conversions among Indigenous people in Mexico.

c. 1554 Jane Lumley produces *Iphigenia in Aulis* as a commentary on the slaughter of her first cousin, Lady Jane Grey.

c. 1470 *Mankinde*, one of the earliest and most popular English morality plays, is published.



1533 Thomas Heywood writes *The Play of the Wether* in an attempt to influence Henry VIII.

1536–1538 Protestant John Bale writes a polemical anti-Rome play, *King Johan*.

1589 William Shakespeare begins producing his best-known works, which often play on and with religious themes.

1604 Christopher Marlowe produces *Doctor Faustus*.

1613 Elizabeth Tanfield Cary becomes the first woman to publish an original drama in English with *The Tragedy of Mariam*.

1632 Puritan William Prynne publishes his famous antitheatrical treatise, *Histriomastix*.

1642 As the First English Civil War rages, the Long Parliament orders the closure of all London theaters.

1660 The restoration of the English monarchy leads to a reinstatement of English theater.

1678 John Bunyan publishes *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

ENGLISH CHURCH PAGEANT, REENACTMENT OF KING JOHN GIVING THE MAGNA CARTA TO THE BARONS. © LOOK AND LEARN / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES  
 INKLING JOHN WAIN, ENGLAND'S FIRST MODERN NOVELIST. © BRITISH LIBRARY / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA  
 MARK CONNELLY, ENGLAND'S FIRST MODERN NOVELIST. © BRITISH LIBRARY / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA  
 AARON B. GRAYCHAFF, LOS PASTORES TRADITIONAL PLAY, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, C. 1915. COURTESY OF THE PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS, PHOTO ARCHIVES (NHMMDCA), NEGATIVE NO. 013698  
 ERIC KOCH, SCENE FROM BLACK NATIVITY BY LANGSTON HUGHES, PHOTOGRAPH, ROTTERDAM, 1962. DUTCH NATIONAL ARCHIVES—ANEFO / (CC0) WIKIMEDIA



English Church Pageant, 1909

- 1689 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz writes *The Divine Narcissus*.
- 1738 George Whitefield arrives in the American colonies. His theatrical preaching attracts thousands.
- 1741 Jonathan Edwards preaches “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” a dramatic sermon often credited for spurring on the First Great Awakening in New England.
- 1844 *A Christmas Carol* enjoys its first theatrical adaptation.



York Minster Cathedral, 1742

- 1877 Louisa MacDonald adapts the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress* for the stage. The MacDonald family performs it together until 1889.
- 1879 Henrik Ibsen debuts *A Doll's House*, setting the stage for modernist dramas.
- 1892 Methodist bishop John Heyl Vincent condemns theater as licentious in *Better Not*.
- 1900s Revivalist preachers continue to use dramatic oratory, a preaching style that influences American Christianity into the twenty-first century.
- 1909 Clergyman Percy Dearmer helps write the *English Church Pageant*,

- which is staged with over 4,000 performers. British pageant plays become huge community events.
- 1913 G. K. Chesterton writes *Magic*.
- 1916 An all-Black cast performs Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel*.
- 1920s The Canterbury Festival begins, which features pageant plays by T. S. Eliot, Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers, and more over decades.
- 1921 William Butler Yeats writes *Calvary*, his first passion play.

- 1927 James Weldon Johnson publishes *God's Trombones*.
- 1930 *The Green Pastures* by Mark Connelly opens on Broadway. England's modern religious drama movement begins around this time.
- c. 1931 The Inklings begin meeting to discuss works in progress.

- 1935 Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* debuts at the Canterbury Festival.
- 1936 Inkling Neville Coghill founds the Experimental Theatre Club.
- 1937 Lanston Hughes's *Don't You Want to Be Free?* debuts. Charles



Black Nativity by Langston Hughes, 1962

Williams begins attending Inklings meetings and writes *The House by the Stable*.

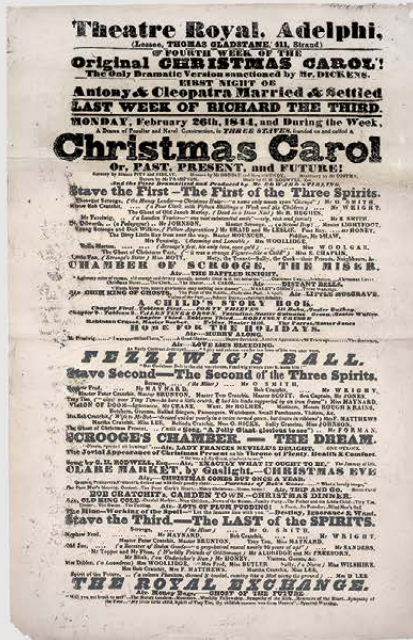
- 1941 BBC begins broadcasting Sayers's radio drama *The Man Born to Be King*.
- 1953 Inkling J. R. R. Tolkien writes his only play, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*.
- 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry becomes a Broadway smash hit.
- 1971 *Godspell* opens off Broadway.
- 1973 Inkling John Wain writes *Johnson Is Leaving*.
- 1974 Jim Young founds Workout, Wheaton College's theater ensemble.



La Pastorela, 1915

- 1979 *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez debuts on Broadway, launching national recognition of El Teatro Campesino.
- 1991 PBS broadcasts *La Pastorela: The Shepherd's Tale* on December 23.
- 1992 Max McLean founds Fellowship for Performing Arts (FPA).

# “Merry Christmas, Mr. Scrooge”



HOLIDAY STAPLE Performances of *A Christmas Carol* (playbill left) began in 1844, but have continued in many iterations since (far left in 1994).

Every Christmas, theaters around the world perform versions of Charles Dickens’s (1812–1870) novella *A Christmas Carol*. It has become a staple of modern Christmas—adapted, parodied, echoed in dozens of films and other works.

Some writers credit Dickens with “inventing” Christmas as we know it. Even the phrase “Merry Christmas,” though previously in use, became a much more standard greeting after the publication of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843.

The story’s first theatrical adaptation was performed in 1844; by the end of February of that year, eight different productions ran in London. Dickens himself gave dramatic readings of an abridged version more than a hundred times. The story was first adapted for film in 1901, and many other film versions followed.

## CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

In English-speaking Protestantism, Christmas was sometimes as controversial as theater. The Puritans (see pp. 22–24) famously opposed both. Christmas had traditionally been associated with riotous, alcohol-fueled merriment. But in the nineteenth century, a tamer, more middle-class Christmas was developing. Clement Moore’s 1823 poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” famously marked this cultural shift. It cemented the image of Santa Claus as we know it. Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* was another marker.

Dickens’s portrayal of Christmas is tinged with nostalgia. One of the novel’s most joyful scenes—often a major centerpiece of theatrical productions—is Fezziwig’s ball. Dickens contrasts this businessman of a previous generation, willing to stop business early and spend money on his workers’ merriment, with Scrooge’s more ruthless and “modern” form of capitalism. Ironically Dickens was singing the praises of a vanished “merry England” while helping create some of the central features of the modern commercial Christmas.

Dickens’s own religious views were rather vague. He expressed love and admiration for Jesus and his teachings, referred to him as the “Savior,” and identified as a Christian. Though brought up as an Anglican, he had no clear church affiliation as an adult and can perhaps best be described as a liberal Protestant of a moralistic and undogmatic sort.

Dickens was fiercely opposed to forms of religion he considered fanatical and dogmatic, including Catholicism and evangelicalism. In the dialogue between Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Present, the

ghost fills passers-by with Christmas spirit. Scrooge asks why, if the ghost takes such delight in the high spirits of Christmas merry-makers, he would cause shops to be closed on Sundays. While Scrooge’s brand of hard-heartedness is presented as purely secular, Dickens couldn’t resist a side-swipe at evangelical attempts to shutter businesses on Sunday.

## GOD BLESS THE OUTCASTS

Still, the story includes references to Jesus as the “Founder” of Christmas and particularly to Jesus as a child. C. S. Lewis argued the story is fundamentally devoid of “any interest in the Incarnation” and that its ghosts are a secular substitute for biblical figures. But perhaps we can read the book’s admittedly vague and nondoctrinal relationship to Christianity another way.

Rather than replacing a traditional Christian understanding of the holiday, Dickens builds on and assumes it. If we really believe God was incarnate as a poor child, how can we continue to live as if money and social status are the ultimate values? How can we shut our hearts to outcasts if we believe the world’s Savior was one?

Adaptations often accentuate the Christian elements of the story. Precisely through the medium of the dramatic arts that nineteenth-century evangelicals regarded with suspicion, a story that criticizes them while holding up a warm and morally transformative picture of the “meaning of Christmas” has become a standard and beloved part of the holiday for many Christians as well as for nonbelievers. —*Edwin Woodruff Tait is a contributing editor at Christian History.*

CLIVE FRANCIS (EBENEZER SCROOGE), JOHN BENNETT (THE GHOST OF JACOB MARLEY), IN *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*, ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY, BARRICAN THEATRE, 1994. DIRECTOR: IAN JUDGE—DONALD COOPER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO  
PLAYBILL ADVERTISING *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* BY CHARLES DICKENS AT THE ADELPHI THEATRE, LONDON, 1844—BRITISH LIBRARY / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA

# From drama to life

GEORGE AND LOUISA MACDONALD'S FAMILY TRULY LIVED *THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS*

Rachel E. Johnson

... as one set upon a hill, upon a stage, as in a Theatre, to play a part for God in the world.

**These words** from the English nonconformist John Bunyan (1628–1688) speak of the Christian life as visible to the world, communicating the gospel in daily life as a player points to the message of a play.

For still-beloved Victorian novelist and Scottish Congregationalist minister George MacDonald (1824–1905) and his wife, Louisa (1822–1902), communicating the gospel often happened upon an actual stage. Even as their family grew (the couple had 11 children in total), Louisa produced many plays, some performed by the family for their own amusement and for friends, but some as part of an education and housing project engineered by social reformer Octavia Hill (1838–1912). Hill's aim to improve slum dwellings in London included performances of the MacDonalds' plays.

These successful "Chamber Dramas" widened into a major production, *Dramatic Illustrations of Episodes from the Second Part of The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan*. Louisa focused on Christiana and her family as they followed her husband Christian, whose story the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* tells.

MacDonald's dramatization came at a time when many Christians frowned upon religious drama. In nineteenth-century England, theater was associated with the pursuit of pleasure, and, by connection to the popular culture of the music hall (rowdy entertainment originating in London pubs), it was regarded as a potentially corrupting influence. But for Louisa and George, drama, and this drama especially, was redemptive. A spiritual and literary influence in George's early life, *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be seen in his constant return to spiritual pilgrimage in his own works. In some ways, Christiana's crisis-laden journey paralleled Louisa's own, but it was the portrayal of Christiana by her oldest daughter Lilia that that brought the character to life.

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

The dialogue in MacDonald's script very closely followed Bunyan's own text wherever possible. The play needed nineteen characters and was made of up seven scenes. With their many eager children and their friends, the MacDonalds had plenty of artistic talent; not only to act,



**MULTITASKING MOM** While we often direct the spotlight on George MacDonald's accomplishments, Louisa MacDonald accomplished just as much. She was a musician, playwright, actor, author, and social advocate while raising 11 natural children and several adopted ones.

but also to produce sets, props, and music. Louisa's vision for spreading the gospel on stage was the driving force behind the drama. Greville MacDonald, George and Louisa's eldest son, noted that the sense of mission implicit in Bunyan's work—to tell the gospel to anyone who would listen—became their mission. At the same time, Louisa also realized lung disease and England's winter climate was damaging the health not only of George but also of several of the children. Performing in different places gave her ailing family a needed change of air.

Despite controversy and initial difficulties in getting the play licensed, *Dramatic Illustrations* proved a success. It filled venues and began garnering professional critiques. Although it received mixed reviews, negative comments focused on the uneven talents of the actors rather than the content of the play. A biography of George summed up the overall effect: "[Y]et all who came... went away feeling that no performance could be more unpretentious and reverential."

The family performed the drama over a period of 12 years, from 1877 to 1889, on a grueling touring



**A SENSE OF MISSION** Louisa MacDonald (*far left*) saw the performance of *Dramatic Illustrations* as a calling. She even involved orphans in her care when her children aged out of certain parts!

**DRESSING IN STYLE** Costumes involved Puritan-style dress for many characters, but others reflected particular personalities (*below*). For example, Greatheart's costume (*left*) took knightly inspiration from George MacDonald after his friend General Gordon gifted him with a real crusader's chain mail found in Sudan.

These curtains, as well as the costume of the key character Greatheart, are all conserved and held by the Aberdeenshire Museum Service.



### “SWEET, FELLOW PILGRIMS”

The 12 years during which the MacDonald family performed demonstrate a gradual blurring of their daily lives with the imaginative drama as they toured. George himself assumed the part of Greatheart during the first tour of 1877. Since many of his friends regarded him as a spiritual guide, his role in the play became synonymous with this aspect of his life. Also, the couple's letters to each other depicted difficult times as direct parallels to the trials met by Christiana and her family. George wrote to Louisa from Italy in the autumn of 1877:

I have once or twice been tempted to feel abandoned ----- in this messy and struggling house ----- But it is only a touch of the Valley of Humiliation ---- of the Hill of Difficulty rather.

Two years after the first performance, the family went through their own “Valley of the Shadow of Death.” Lilia wrote to one of her friends from Portofino a year after the death of Mary (the second daughter) and within a month of the death of Maurice (the fourth son). On April 1, 1879, she wrote:

You will wonder perhaps, as we did at first, how we can go through it [the drama] so soon after parting with our Maurice... but we thought we ought to try and are quite glad we did so, it has all come back to us with such force and truthfulness and fresh light as has made the rehearsing of it quite a help [along] the difficult path of the real daily pilgrimage. . . .

The family carried on with performing until 1889, but after Lilia, the most talented actor, died in 1891, the heart went out of all their theatrical performances. As a family the MacDonalds' life journey continued, as did their spiritual and dramatic impact. As one friend wrote to Louisa: “Farewell, sweet fellow pilgrims and may we meet again a little further on our journey.” **GI**

*Rachel E. Johnson is a George MacDonald and children's literature scholar and the author of A Complete Identity: The Youthful Hero in the Work of G. A. Henty and George MacDonald.*

schedule. Performances ranged over England and Scotland with some in Italy. Alongside this schedule George gave lectures, coordinating them with performances of the play.

The company managed with very few props, provided by Ronald (the MacDonalds' second son), who described himself as

Stage carpenter and performer ... to Mrs George MacDonald, Dramatic stage-manager, prompter, pianist, dresser, property man etc. ... to everyone [else].

In the preface to the script, we find these props mentioned:

A wicket gate and paling ... no scenery ... the stage was hung with curtains of appropriate colour and design to each scene.



# The pageant

British theater united the community and often told a Christian story

The word “pageant” might conjure the idea of beauty competitions or children’s Christmas and Easter plays today, but in twentieth-century Britain, the pageant was something else. Although largely forgotten now, pageants were everywhere. These massive theatrical and social events typically involved casts up to 15,000 players. Popular pageants attracted audiences of over 100,000 people across a weekend or two, bringing the history of a village or city to the public.

The genre was loosely influenced by earlier types of civic and religious ceremonies, such as medieval mystery or passion plays (see pp. 12–16) and Lord Mayor Shows. Still observed today, the Lord Mayor Show is a procession honoring each Lord Mayor of the City of London (separate from the mayor of London). As part of this procession in the early modern period, pageants were professionally staged along the route for the new Lord Mayor. Twentieth-century pageants, however, relied upon volunteer casts, largely made up of locals. A strong community spirit was crucial, most evident when audience and performers sang together the national anthem and popular songs like “Jerusalem” or the hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” at the pageant’s conclusion.

## COMMUNITY THEATER

Institutionalized religion and its close relationship with the British monarchy ensured the depiction of Christian spaces, figures, and themes. Cathedrals and churches, standing or ruined, often served as backdrops for outdoor pageants. Bishops, monks, nuns, and even Chaucer’s pilgrims were recurring characters alongside royalty, nobles, peasants, and knights. Pilgrimage, consecration, and conversion became conventional subjects for scenes that depicted the invasions of the Romans, Danes, and Saxons. These themes and characters featured most strikingly in *The Rock* (1934), an indoor pageant-play written by T. S. Eliot (1888–1965). The action staged the history of church-building in London; its title character was inspired by the apostle Peter.

An earlier pageant, the *English Church Pageant* (1909), had presented an entire history of English Christianity, drawing upon the talents of clergyman Percy Dearmer (1867–1936), who contributed some of the writing. Composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) served as musical consultant for the production, staged at the bishop of London’s Fulham Palace grounds. Among the 4,200 performers was G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936), who commented, “The mass of the common people cannot afford to see the Pageant; so they are obliged to put up with the inferior function of acting in it. I myself got in



**GOD’S CHURCH AND COUNTRY** The English church pageant (above) and Eliot’s *The Rock* (right) both captured England’s Christian history.

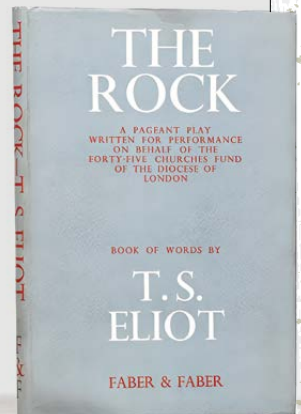
with the rabble in this way.” Chesterton performed as Samuel Johnson and later wrote a comical ghost-slash-mystery short story, “The Mystery of the Pageant” (1909), about his experience.

## CONTINUING THE TRADITION

Pageants often raised money for a local church. In E. M. Forster’s (1879–1970) *Pageant of Abinger* (1934), a woodman compares the fleeting passage of human history to the endurance of trees and forests; Forster thematically connected trees with the need for funds to repair the local church’s wooden roof beams.

Perhaps the most lasting contribution of pageants came through some of the works commissioned by Bishop George Bell’s (1883–1958) Canterbury Festival. These included Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), Charles Williams’s (1886–1945) *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936), and Dorothy L. Sayers’s (1893–1957) *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937). These writers had engaged with pageants before. Sayers, for example, had performed in a pageant as a girl. Eliot used the same choral techniques he had developed in *The Rock* for other works. Williams wrote the pageant-play *Judgement at Chelmsford* (1939), which tells “not only of the history of the [Chelmsford] diocese, but of the movement of the soul of man in its journey from the things of this world to the heavenly city of Almighty God.”

While this cultural phenomenon captivated the British imagination at the time, the pageant’s popularity has waned in the twenty-first century. Still, its extraordinary production power left its mark. In June 2022 a large pageant was staged for Queen Elizabeth II’s Platinum Jubilee in London. That same year Axbridge hosted a massive pageant in its town square, where an enactment occurs every 10 years. In both, the church and religious themes still loom large.—Parker T. Gordon, scholar of twentieth-century literature and music



# Wizards' duels and modernist mayhem

MAGIC, MYTH, AND CHRIST IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEATER

Sørina Higgins



**PIERCING THE VEIL** Famous poet W. B. Yeats painted this mural with fellow theosophist George William Russell at the Theosophical Society's former meeting place. He often blended occult ideas and mystical Christian imagery in his work.

is a good example: its heroine is a wealthy but ordinary young mother, neglected and controlled by her husband; the action follows her growing self-awareness and attempts to establish independent personhood. Such "naturalism" in plays by August Strindberg (1849–1912), George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), and others dominated the theater world, exploring psychologically complex characters in domestic conditions.

Christianity rarely featured in these plays, at least not positively. The same was true for other influential European authors. For example, Samuel Beckett's (1906–1989) famous *Waiting for Godot* (1953) has been often interpreted as a dramatization of God's absence, and Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905–1980) *No Exit* (1944) infamously suggests that "Hell is other people."

*One day in 1900*, William Butler Yeats kicked Aleister Crowley down a flight of stairs. This surprising "de-escalation" occurred after Crowley (1875–1947), a notorious practitioner of black magic, showed up wearing full Scottish regalia, complete with kilt and dagger, and sporting a mask of Osiris. In this way, he tried to take possession of the temple of a secret society. The great poet Yeats (1865–1939), who claimed to be guarding the sacred space physically and spiritually, reportedly engaged him in a wizard's duel on the astral plane. On the terrestrial plane, Crowley picked himself up and dusted himself off, only to be fined five pounds for breaking and entering.

What in the world (this world or any other) such a story has to do with Christianity and theater in the modern era is an excellent question. The answer is a little complicated, entangled with several interrelated religious movements in roughly the first half of the twentieth century, starring an overlapping cast of characters.

## MODERNITY AND MYTH

Starting in the 1890s, what we might call mainstream modernism began stealing the spotlight of most major theaters around Europe. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) dominated the scene with his dark realism, setting the standards for those who followed. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879)

In response to the disasters of the twentieth century, these playwrights and their American counterparts frequently staged plays featuring insanity, substance abuse, bodily horrors, murder, sexual violence, suicide, and utterly absurdist chaos. Such despair would only deepen when World War II began and later, after the concentration camps were discovered.

However, this modernist mayhem was not all one could find at the theater: myth and enchantment also appeared. In Dublin the Irish Literary Revival produced dramas steeped in Celtic folklore and ceremonial magic. Some also reflected their Roman Catholic milieu, and even the occultist Yeats himself wrote two passion plays: *Calvary* (1921) and *The Resurrection* (1934). They are weird and unorthodox, combining the Crucifixion with a pagan festival, but they do affirm the Incarnation.

But a brilliant point of contact between these darlings of modernist playwriting and robust public Christianity was the noisy, bellicose, affectionate friendship between Shaw and G. K. Chesterton. They knew each other for decades and teased and argued endlessly. They staged public debates over economics, politics, religion, writing, and personal appearance. Reportedly they once opened a debate with the following exchange:



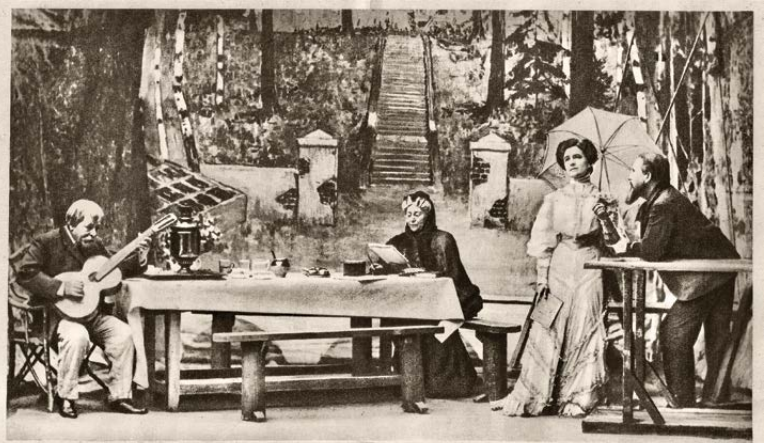
Chesterton: "I see there has been a famine in the land."  
 Shaw: "And I see the cause of it. If I were as fat as you, I would hang myself."  
 Chesterton: "If I were to hang myself, I would use you for the rope."

One point of serious conversation between them was the relative importance of drama. Shaw chose plays as his main genre, and he cajoled Chesterton to do the same. Finally Chesterton wrote *Magic* in 1913. While it can hardly be what Shaw was hoping for—it is supernatural, spiritual, and more twilit than Shaw's satirical comedies or hardy political plays—Shaw stood up for his friend and reviewed it positively. Whether Shaw liked it or not, Chesterton's one foray onto the stage contributed to the reenchantment of a jaded culture.

### QUIRKY NATIVITIES

Chesterton was not alone. Indeed so many Christian plays were written and performed in England in the first half of the twentieth century that we can identify something that George R. Kernodle (1907–1988), in 1940, called "England's Religious-Drama Movement." While he was talking specifically about the 1930s, religious drama moved through England (and Europe and America) over and over throughout the modern era. It wasn't insulated from the mainstream, either. Indeed two playwrights provided strong, enduring links between modernist theater and the church: T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden (1907–1973).

Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism in 1927 was widely publicized: praised by some, vilified by others. There is no question it benefited his drama. His previous works for the stage were few and fragmentary; after he came to faith, he wrote six successful plays. The magisterial *Murder in the Cathedral* was the most celebrated. It was commissioned for



«Дядя Ваня». Сцена 1-го действия. Телери — А. Р. Артем, Войницкая — Е. М. Раевская, Елена Андреевна — О. Л. Книппер, Войницкий — А. Л. Вишневский. Московский Художественный театр. 1899 г.



**REAL CHARACTERS** Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (top), a modernist drama, points to life's meaninglessness. Humorously, G. K. Chesterton (above left) often challenged this "realism" as absurd. Poets T. S. Eliot and Yeats (above, right and left) each experimented with the more mystical sides of modernism, albeit from quite different faiths.

the 1935 Canterbury Festival—an important center of ecclesiastical drama of the highest quality (see p. 31).

The Canterbury Festival was the ingenious idea of actor/director E. Martin Browne (1900–1980). It ran from 1928 until 1948 (with a couple of years off during the Second World War, when Canterbury itself was bombed and sustained some damage), then restarted and is still going in 2024. During its first two decades, the festival commissioned several preeminent playwrights to write dramas that connected to the locale and embodied elements of Christian history on the stage.



Results included a quirky Nativity story, inspiring martyrdoms, demonic temptations, magi, artists, mystical figures, and music. Most of them were poetic dramas, written in meter. They were arguably the most important pieces in the larger “Verse Drama Revival” going on at the time. They blended medieval mystery, morality, and miracle plays with modernist experimentation and a new approach to traditional metered poetry for twentieth-century ears. For instance, Dorothy L. Sayers’s *The Devil to Pay* (1939) married these elements in a retelling of the legend of Faustus as a “serious comedy.”

One author commissioned for a Canterbury play was also a member of another small group of writers who must be mentioned in any survey of Christian literature in English in the twentieth century: the Inklings (see *CH* #113). This group consisted mostly of Oxford graduates and faculty, the majority of whom were writers by vocation or avocation, and all of whom were Christians of one sort or another. They met weekly or biweekly from the late 1920s until 1945 to share drinks, talk, and drafts of works in progress.

While they produced few dramas overall, one of them was an avid playwright: Charles Williams (1886–1945). He was also the central point of overlap among mainstream modernism, the Canterbury Festival, and the Inklings. Williams was a Londoner, was not a college graduate, and was only in Oxford from 1939 to 1945 as a result of evacuation from London during the Blitz. While we primarily remember him as a novelist or poet, during his lifetime he was better known for his plays.

In addition to Williams’s 1935 Canterbury commission, he worked with several other theatrical companies and directors to write scripts specifically with their actors and venues in mind. During the Second World War, for example, he roomed in the house of the extremely talented young director Ruth Spalding (1913–2009), who founded and ran the Oxford Pilgrim Players. This itinerant group traveled around Oxfordshire, performing in churches, schools,

**MEDIEVAL REVIVAL** Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* (playbill opening spread, above left), Charles Williams’s *Cranmer of Canterbury* (top), and Sayers’s *The Devil to Pay* (above) proudly display medieval inspirations.

air-raid shelters, or wherever they could provide some artistic nourishment to frightened and exhausted audiences. For Spalding, Williams wrote his most “intelligible” plays, as C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) called them: *The House by the Stable* (1939) and *Grab & Grace* (1941). While Williams’s dramas range from the barely comprehensible to the celestially enlightening, they are all beautiful, inspiring, and radiant.

### DRAMATIC INKLINGS

The rest of the Inklings were hardly involved in public drama. Lewis tried to write for the stage a few times, but never succeeded. J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973) wrote only one play: *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son* (1953), a continuation of the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. Surprisingly performable and moving, it has only two characters and is in verse. It was actually broadcast on the BBC in 1954.

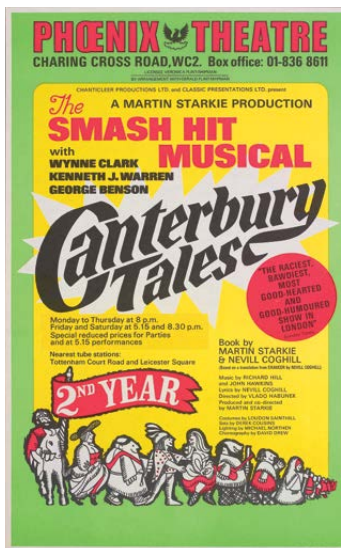
Owen Barfield (1898–1997) wrote one play entitled *Orpheus* (1938), some pieces of “eurythmy,” and some Anthroposophical mystery plays. Eurythmy is a kind of choreographed movement performed over a textual narration, and the Anthroposophical Society is a quasi-religious school of thought founded by esotericist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). Barfield’s dramatic works, then, were written for a specific philosophical-spiritual context, not for general performance.

PROGRAMME FOR MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL, THEATRE ROYAL NOTTINGHAM, 1937. TRC ACC 3817 PROGRAMME 1864—UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM MANUSCRIPTS AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
 SYDNEY BLIGH CHARACTERS FROM CRANMER OF CANTERBURY BY CHARLES WILLIAMS, 18MM FILM, CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL, 1938. CANTERBURY AMATEUR FILM ARCHIVE—© HELEN JARRETT / TIM JONES, CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY  
 SYDNEY BLIGH, SCENE FROM THE DEVIL TO PAY BY DOROTHY L. SAYERS, 16MM FILM, CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL CHAPTER HOUSE, 1939. CANTERBURY AMATEUR FILM ARCHIVE—© HELEN JARRETT / TIM JONES, CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY



**UNLIKELY PAIR** Williams (above) and Yeats (above right) were modernist poets involved with esoteric societies; Williams was also a devout Christian.

**SMASH HIT** Inkleling Nevill Coghill's musical adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* (middle) was wildly popular.



extraordinary influence on English drama. And thanks to Williams, the Inklings (in a tangential way) were connected not only to modern Christian theater but also to the theater of the modern occult revival. From 1888 until 1945, secret societies flourished in Europe and America. They came on the heels of spiritualism, which nurtured a couple of crackpots claiming to take dictation from dead dramatists and publishing their posthumous plays! The more serious groups attracted many notable members, including several brilliant authors. Under the influence of the ceremonial magic they practiced, such playwrights produced an astonishing number of dramas both didactic and invocatory.

Oddly, the occult movements overlapped with some Christian dramatic movements. Williams was a high-ranking leader in a secret society while also calling himself a Christian. A well-known theological author, he packed his plays with doctrines from both traditions, seeing the deepest union between the two. Other writers also were simultaneously members of Christian churches, magical secret societies, and modernist literary movements.

It should be clear, now, what a story about Yeats and Crowley in a wizards' duel has to do with Christianity and theater in the modern era. Among many of these writers, Christian religion, other spiritualities, magical secret societies, and drama were all interrelated and could not be disentangled. None of their stories can be told without bringing in the others. Christian theater has, throughout its history and to varying degrees, been a kissing cousin with magic and myth (see pp. 22–24). In the modern period, they were allies in the quest for reenchantment.

Even though Williams was a member of a secret society distantly related to Aleister Crowley's personal religion, and even though he saw no contradiction between Christianity and hermeticism, it seems likely that if Williams had met Crowley, he too would have kicked him down the stairs. **CH**

But there were two exceptions. The youngest Inklings, John Wain (1925–1994), wrote four plays. *Johnson Is Leaving* (1973) is a monologue depicting the great Samuel Johnson's last days, while *Frank* (1984) imagines the life of Johnson's Jamaican servant, Frank Barber. Wain often worked with others: jazz composer Michael Garrick wrote music for *Harry in the Night* (1975), and Hungarian scientist Laszlo Solymar coauthored radio plays entitled *Three Scientists of the Ancient World: Anaxagoras, Archimedes, Hypatia*. They were broadcast on the BBC in 1991.

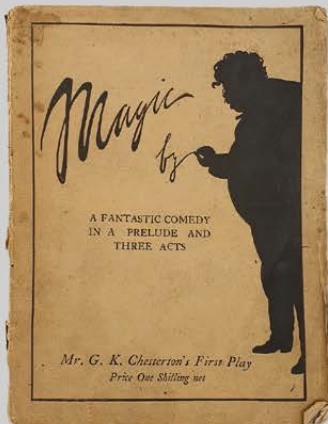
The most important Inklings, by far, when it came to the stage, was Nevill Coghill (1899–1980). He was an excellent director, founder of the Experimental Theatre Club in Oxford, coauthor of at least one play, an integral part of theatrical life at Oxford University, a notable interpreter of Shakespeare, and editor in various capacities for Eliot's plays. Perhaps most memorably he taught Auden and directed a young Richard Burton, both on stage and then later on screen with Elizabeth Taylor. He also made a musical adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* that became a hit on Broadway and later made it to television.

**THE OCCULT AND THE ESOTERIC**

Thanks to Coghill, Wain, and Williams, the Inklings had an

Sorina Higgins is an editor, writer, and scholar of British modernist literature.

# Demons, tricks, and belief



**THE MADNESS OF DOUBT** Chesterton (*left*) wrote *Magic* (*far left*) as a challenge to skepticism, highlighting the logical inconsistencies of disbelief.

In G. K. Chesterton's 1913 play *Magic*, the supernatural intrudes into a rural family through a wandering conjuror in love with Patricia, a Christian, who has mistaken him for an elf. The family doctor, Patricia's brother Morris, and a clergyman named Smith are all either agnostics or atheists.

**DOCTOR.** [*to PATRICIA.*] Well, it must be nice to be young and still see all those stars and sunsets. We old buffers won't be too strict with you if your view of things sometimes gets a bit—mixed up, shall we say? . . . We should only say, "Dream as much as you like. . . . But do not quite forget the difference."

**PATRICIA.** What difference?

**DOCTOR.** The difference between the things that are beautiful and the things that are there. That red lamp over my door isn't beautiful; but it's there. You might even come to be glad it is there, when the stars of gold and silver have faded. I am an old man now, but some men are still glad to find my red star. . . .

**PATRICIA.** . . . Yes, I know you are good to everybody. But don't you think there may be floating and spiritual stars which will last longer than the red lamps? . . .

**MORRIS.** You were right on the spot, Doc, when you talked about that red lamp of yours. That red lamp is the light of science that will put out all the lanterns of your turnip ghosts. . . . [*Points at it in exalted enthusiasm.*] Your priests can no more . . . change its colour . . . than Joshua could stop the sun and moon . . .

[*The CONJURER has a demon turn the light blue.*]

**MORRIS.** [*Splitting the silence on a high unnatural note.*] Wait a bit! Wait a bit! I've got you! I'll have you! . . . [*He strides wildly up and down the room, biting his finger.*] You put a wire . . . no, that can't be it . . . Could it be done with mirrors? [*He clasps his brow.*] You have a mirror . . . [*Suddenly, with a shout.*] I've got it! I've got it! Mixture of lights! Why not? If you throw a green light on a red light. . . .

**SMITH.** [*Quietly to the DOCTOR.*] You don't get blue.

**DOCTOR.** [*Stepping across to the CONJURER.*] If you

have done this trick, for God's sake undo it. [*After a silence, the light turns red again.*]

**MORRIS.** [*Dashing suddenly to the glass doors and examining them.*] It's the glass! You've been doing something to the glass! . . .

**CONJURER.** [*Still without moving.*] I don't think you will find anything wrong with the glass.

**MORRIS.** [*Bursting open the glass doors with a crash.*] Then I'll find out what's wrong with the lamp. [*Disappears into the garden.*] . . .

**SMITH.** Here is a poor boy who may be going mad. Suppose you had a son in such a position, would you not expect people to tell you the whole truth. . . ?

**CONJURER.** Yes. And I have told you the whole truth. Go and find out if it helps you. . . .

**SMITH.** You know quite well it will not help us.

**CONJURER.** Why not?

**SMITH.** . . . Because he would not believe it.

**CONJURER.** [*With a sort of fury.*] Well, does anybody believe it? Do you believe it?

**SMITH.** . . . Your question is quite fair. Come, let us sit down and talk about it. Let me take your cloak.

**CONJURER.** I will take off my cloak when you take off your coat.

**SMITH.** [*Smiling.*] Why? Do you want me to fight?

**CONJURER.** [*To SMITH, violently.*] I want you to be martyred. I want you to bear witness to your own creed. I say these things are supernatural. I say this was done by a spirit. The Doctor does not believe me. He is an agnostic. . . . The Duke does not believe me; he cannot believe anything so plain as a miracle. But what the devil are you for, if you don't believe in a miracle? What does your coat mean, if it doesn't mean that there is such a thing as the supernatural? . . . [*Exasperated.*] Why the devil do you dress up like that if you don't believe in it? [*With violence.*] Or perhaps you don't believe in devils?

**SMITH.** I believe. . . . [*After a pause.*] I wish I could believe.

**CONJURER.** Yes. I wish I could disbelieve. . . .

**SMITH.** It is much more marvellous to explain a miracle than to work a miracle. What was your explanation, by the way?

**CONJURER.** I shall not tell you.

**SMITH.** [*Starting.*] Indeed? Why not?

**CONJURER.** Because God and the demons and that Immortal Mystery that you deny has been in this room tonight. Because you know it has been here. Because you have felt it here. . . .

# From Aztlán with love

MEXICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC IDENTITY PLAYED OUT ON THE STAGE

Daniel F. Flores

Ladies and gentlemen  
The play you are about to see is a  
construct of fantasy.  
The Pachuco Style was an act in Life and  
his language a new creation.  
His will to be was an awesome force  
eluding all documentation....  
A mystical, quizzical, frightening being  
precursor of revolution  
Or a piteous, hideous heroic joke  
Deserving of absolution?—*Zoot Suit*

*The play Zoot Suit (1979)*, by Chicano (Mexican American) playwright Luis Valdez (b. 1940), is based on the 1942 Sleepy Lagoon murder case and the Zoot Suit Riots. Henry Reyna, the main character, is accused of murder along with members of the 38th Street gang of Los Angeles. El Pachuco, unseen and unheard by the other characters, is Henry's wise-cracking, zoot-suit-wearing alter ego. El Pachuco taunts and teases Henry, trying to provoke him to act on his antisocial thoughts.

Most Americans may never encounter the plays of Valdez outside of university drama or Chicano history courses. Valdez was the founder of Teatro Campesino (Farmworker's Theater), the drama company associated with activists Cesar Chavez (1927–1993) and Dolores Huerta (b. 1930) of the United Farm Workers. Teatro's gritty, irreverent style was used in skits presented on picket lines and fields to encourage strikers and discourage the "scabs" hired to replace them.

## FAITH IN AZTLÁN

Teatro Campesino leaped onto the national stage when *Zoot Suit* played on Broadway on March 25, 1979. Released in theaters in August of 1981, it was nominated for a Golden Globe Best Motion Picture (Musical or Comedy) in 1982. It won the 1983 Critics Award at the Festival du Policier de Cognac, and it also launched the career of Edward James Olmos (b. 1947) who played El Pachuco.

Teatro Campesino introduced its star-studded cinematic version of *La Pastorela: The Shepherd's Tale* on December 23, 1991, on PBS Great Performances. For the first time, English-dominant audiences were granted front-seat access to *La Pastorela*, one of the most

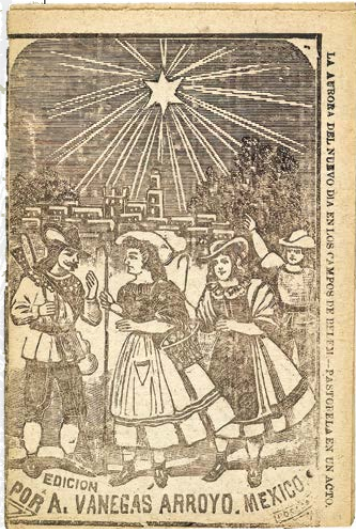


**MATACHINES AND LA MORENITA** Traditional Mexican dancers called *matachines* parade through downtown Austin, Texas, in honor of Juan Diego's vision of the Virgin Mary. Mexican Americans call her La Morenita.

cherished stories of Aztlán. Aztlán is Mexico's mythical world of magical realism where Mexican religion and culture thrive.

The play is set in a California migrant farmworker camp on La Nochebuena, Christmas Eve. Teenager Gila Diaz, played by Karla Montana, suffers a head injury while watching a presentation of *La Pastorela* during Midnight Mass.

In a dream sequence reminiscent of Dorothy's transport to Oz, Diaz awakens at a rural campsite of poor shepherds minding their sheep. The archangel San Miguel (Saint Michael), played in the movie by Linda Ronstadt, appears in the sky singing an announcement of the birth of the Messiah. Filled with faith the ablest of the camp embark on a pilgrimage where they must face trials by Luzbel (Lucifer), played by Roberto Beltran; Satan, played by Paul Rodriguez; and the trickster El Cosmico, played by Cheech Marin. The shepherds persevere, finally reaching Belen (Bethlehem) while dancing



and singing songs of faith. San Miguel sends Luzbel and his minions back to hell as they wail in agony. Diaz is injured again but awakens safely at home surrounded by the actors who populated her dream.

*La Pastorela* and *Zoot Suit* both draw their stories from the challenges of social location familiar to Mexican Americans. They carry forward a message of hope against the harsh realities of oppression and poverty.

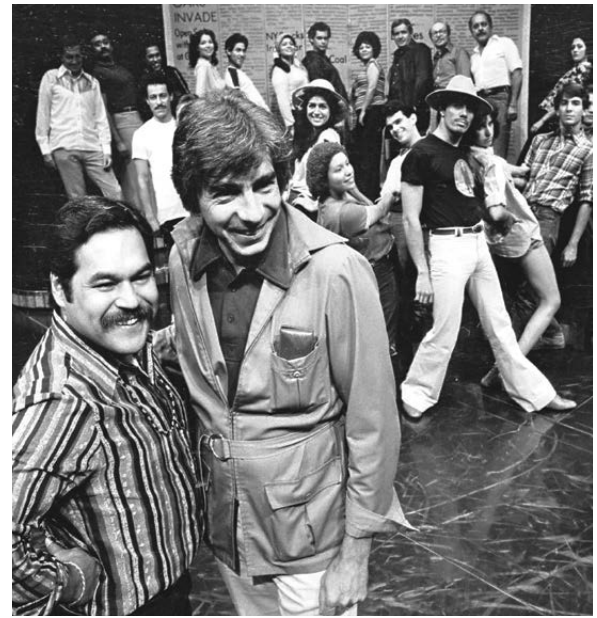
#### SACRAMENTAL DRAMA

Though seemingly quite modern, Valdez was drawing on old traditions unique to his Mexican American culture. Both in Valdez's time and generations before,

a Roman Catholic and Indigenous identity played out on the stage.

In Mexico the early modern thinker Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695) stood out for her brilliant literary works (see p. 45). She is not as well known as Valdez in the English-speaking world. However, this former lady-in-waiting who ended up a Hieronymite nun is held in high esteem as Mexico's first theologian and celebrated poet—and playwright.

Sor Juana wrote her plays in the style of the *auto sacramentales* of Spain. *Auto sacramentales* were religious mystery plays that used allegory to teach theological concepts of Roman Catholicism. In Mexico and other parts of New Spain, they were a means of missionizing Indigenous peoples living in colonial lands. Sor Juana's most celebrated work is a mystery play entitled *The Divine Narcissus* (1689). The players include Occident,



**FATHER OF CHICANO THEATER** Luis Valdez (pictured above front left) founded El Teatro Campesino and brought Mexican American theater into the spotlight with productions like *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba* (1987).

**KEEPING WATCH BY NIGHT** *La Pastorelas*, or shepherd's plays, originated in 15th-c. Spain. This chapbook cover (left) is from the 19th c. The plays gained popularity in Mexico where the Lady of Guadalupe was central to both cultural and Christian imagery (above left).

America, Zeal, Religion, Music, and Soldiers. At the end of scene 4, Religion, speaking to Occident, explains the reason for using visuals to explain the concepts of faith:

**RELIGION:** All right, let us begin. First, you must know it is a metaphor, an idea dressed in the colors of rhetoric and visible therefore to your eyes, as I shall reveal to you; for I well know you are more inclined to favor objects that can be seen over the words that faith can tell you; and so, my friends, instead of ears you need to use your eyes to learn the teaching that faith will show you.

**OCCIDENT:** True: I would rather see it than have you recount it to me.

Sor Juana's works are not just didactic, but engaging, witty, and deep with symbolic meanings that capture the intended audience. Indeed the use of religious imagery in plays has a long history in Mexico predating Spanish colonial times. Later Mexican Indigenous tribes shaped their dramas around the cult of La Virgen de Guadalupe, a dark-skinned apparition of the Virgin Mary, known in English as Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Known affectionately as La Morenita, her cult replaced that of the Aztec fertility goddess Tonantzin. Where the Roman Church repeatedly failed in its efforts

LUIS DE MENA, CASTA PAINTING OF THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE, 1750—MUSEO DE AMERICA, MADRID / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA TONY BARNARD, LUIS VALDEZ, GORDON DAVIDSON AND THE CAST OF ZOOT SUIT, 1978, LOS ANGELES TIMES—UCLA LIBRARY / CC BY 4.0/WIKIMEDIA JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA, THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY IN THE FIELDS OF BETHLEHEM, ONE-ACT PASTORELA, CHAPBOOK COVER, MEXICO CITY, 1880 AND 1913.—PUBLIC DOMAIN, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





to missionize Mexico's Indigenous tribes, sight, as Occident had noted, was far more effective.

According to tradition, La Morenita appeared to Juan Diego, an Indigenous man, on December 9, 1531 (see CH #130). News of this event triggered mass conversions among Indigenous tribes and unified them as Mexicans. The lasting importance of this event was highlighted by Juan Diego's beatification on May 6, 1990, and canonization on July 31, 2002, by Pope John Paul II.

Today *matachines*, traditional carnivalesque sword dancers, keep La Morenita's story alive with their dances and dramatic storytelling. They combine the European *auto sacramentales* with Aztec Indigenous tradition to preserve and promote their Mexican form of Catholicism.

Dancers wear feather headdresses and embroidered skirts with rattles and bells called *nagüillas*. They also wear vests adorned with rattles, jingle bells, and fringes. They carry *arcos*, nonfunctional bows and arrows, and *sonajas*, or rattles. *Matachines* dance to beating drums and accordions in simple to advanced choreography.

Dances may feature iconic characters such as La Malinche, a multilingual Indigenous woman blamed for betraying her people to the Spanish conquistadores. Actors may also portray tricksters who wear the mask of a demon, or *diablo*, and carry weapons such as whips or clubs. *Matachines* dance anywhere, but one is most likely to see them perform at Roman Catholic churches on May 3 for the feast of the Holy Cross or on December 12 to honor La Morenita.

#### SHOW, DON'T TELL

These forms of Mexican American religious dramas serve to preserve culture by teaching Roman Catholic

**A PLAYWRIGHT FOR THE PEOPLE** Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (*above left*) brilliantly tied Indigenous sensibilities into her religious dramas, appealing to her Mexican audience.

**ECHOES OF THE PAST** *Matachines* incorporate these wands (*top*) into their costumes; La Malinche masks (*above*), representing the woman who aided Spanish conquistadores, are often a part of performances. Both are a nod to an Indigenous past.

thought mixed with Indigenous cosmology to new generations. While the plays differ in their religious content and messaging, all share the hope that comes from the Mexican concept of *familia*, which reflects the Roman Catholic esteem for the Holy Family. Aztlán's values may be difficult to appreciate outside of the Mexican American community. Once again some may agree with Sor Juana's character, Occident, that they would rather see a good story than have it recounted to them. **CH**

*Daniel F. Flores is senior librarian at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and director of the Goddard Library.*

# “Don’t you want to be free?”



African Americans staged the gospel and their own story.

**The gospel story** has had a robust and complicated relationship with African American theater. It might come as a surprise that the biggest hit on Broadway in 1930 was *The Green Pastures*, a retelling of Bible stories set in depression-era Louisiana, performed by a Black cast. Even before opening it sparked controversy. Some religious leaders saw the cigar smokin’ “Lawd” and Abraham and Noah as blasphemous.

More controversially the play’s romantic version of downtrodden but inspirational African Americans was written and directed by Marc Connelly (1890–1980), a White man. Despite a relatively positive response from some Black leaders, including W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), other cultural leaders challenged its version of longsuffering patience rooted in a Christian worldview. That lynchings were still going on in the American South, the play’s romanticized setting, and that cast members could not stay in segregated hotels while on tour demonstrated the play’s disturbing context.

## DIGGING DEEPER

Around the same time, Black playwrights and performers were producing a body of work expressing a more complex view. From 1920 to 1945, they produced numerous plays highlighting religious themes, reflecting a serious dialogue about religion’s place for people no longer willing to have their “essence” explained by someone else. They refuted the “happy Negro” image, denouncing inequality, stereotyping, and injustice—embodying African American religiosity in ways that still drew upon the Bible.

Performed by an all-Black cast, Angelina Weld Grimké’s (1880–1958) *Rachel*, produced in 1916, was one of the first plays to protest lynching and racial violence. *Rachel*, the protagonist, refuses to marry and have children because of the racism she and her family face. The characters struggle

---

**THEN AND NOW** *The Green Pastures* (1930, above right) was a smash hit, yet its all-Black cast faced constant racism. The 1961 comedy *Purlie Victorious* satirized the issue; its recent revival (above) is wildly popular.



with and revise their faith in a God who allows racism to prosper.

In another register altogether, James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) wrote *God’s Trombones* (1927), a poem-sequence based on traditional sermons, often turned into theater. Johnson’s apparent reversion to a sentimental, traditional faith creates a visionary passage to ecstatic wonder about both the creation and redemption of the world, reflecting the power of the greatest Story ever told, when told well, to lift and unite a community.

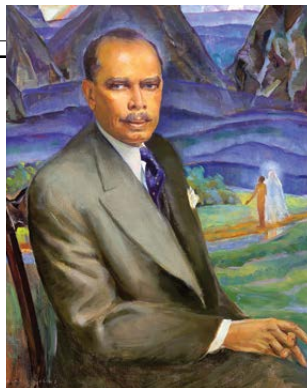
African American churches served as major staging grounds for Black religious drama, expressed through folk stories ranging from parodies of “District Conventions” to morality and mystery plays like *Heaven Bound* (1930) and *In the Rapture. Time* (August 10, 1931) praised the “morality play called *Heaven Bound*,” while Theatre Guild called it “the first great American folk drama.” Others contrasted it with *The Green Pastures*, calling it “a genuine all-Negro product . . . produced for religious instead of commercial purposes.” And it’s still running. In November 2023, audiences watched the play’s ninety-first production, making it the longest running stage performance in North America.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967), whose *Don’t You Want to Be Free?* (off Broadway, 1937) used the free-flowing, minimalistic, direct address style of the folk play for political purposes, later drew on the church pageant tradition in his commercially successful *Black Nativity* (1961). The ultimate folk production was Vinnette Carroll’s (1922–2002) *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*, a musical retelling of Matthew’s Gospel, which opened Christmas 1976 and ran for 429 performances (and several revivals).

In mainstream theater Lorraine Hansberry’s (1930–1965) Broadway smash hit *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) explores the conflicting aspirations of the Youngers, a Chicago tenement family. It offered responses to the situation of African Americans during the civil rights movement. Few moments in the play are as powerful as Mama Younger’s assertion, rooted in the faith sustaining her generation through racism and poverty: “In my Mother’s house, there is still God.”

At about the same time, actor and civil rights activist Ossie Davis (1917–2005) wrote and starred in *Purlie Victorious* (*A Non-Confederate Romp through the Cotton Patch*), a comedy about the South in the civil rights movement’s early days. The play tells of Reverend Purlie Victorious Judson returning to

**GABRIEL'S HORN** James Weldon Johnson (*right*) captured the provocative beauty of Scripture in *God's Trombones*. This picture (*far right*) illustrated "The Judgment Day."



his home in rural Georgia to save its small church from the community's segregationist "boss." Premiering on Broadway in 1961, it ran for 261 performances. The recent Broadway revival is a smash hit, has been extended numerous times, and has garnered six Tony Award nominations. **GH**

**LORD, LEAN OUT AND LISTEN**

James Weldon Johnson called the poems in *God's Trombones* "Sermons in Verse." He set out to capture how, as he said in his preface to the book, "the old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator, and in good measure an actor." The poems have been set to music and performed theatrically numerous times.

**O** Lord, we come this morning  
 Knee-bowed and body-bent  
 Before thy throne of grace.  
 O Lord — this morning —  
 Bow our hearts beneath our knees,  
 And our knees in some lonesome valley.  
 We come this morning —  
 Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,  
 With no merits of our own.  
 O Lord—open up a window of heaven,  
 And lean out far over the battlements  
 of glory,  
 And listen this morning.  
 —from "Listen, Lord: A Prayer"

**A**nd God stepped out on space,  
 And he looked around and said:  
 I'm lonely—  
 I'll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see  
 Darkness covered everything,  
 Blacker than a hundred midnights  
 Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,  
 And the light broke,  
 And the darkness rolled up on one side,  
 And the light stood shining on the other,  
 And God said: That's good!

Then God reached out and took the  
 light in his hands,  
 And God rolled the light around in  
 his hands  
 Until he made the sun;  
 And he set that sun a-blazing in  
 the heavens.  
 And the light that was left from

making the sun  
 God gathered it up in a shining ball  
 And flung it against the darkness,  
 Spangling the night with the moon  
 and stars.  
 Then down between  
 The darkness and the light  
 He hurled the world;  
 And God said: That's good!

Then God himself stepped down—  
 And the sun was on his right hand,  
 And the moon was on his left;  
 The stars were clustered about his head,  
 And the earth was under his feet.  
 And God walked, and where he trod  
 His footsteps hollowed the valleys out  
 And bulged the mountains up.  
 —from "The Creation"

**A**nd God sat back on his throne,  
 And he commanded that tall, bright  
 angel standing at his right hand:  
 Call me Death!  
 And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice  
 That broke like a clap of thunder:  
 Call Death!—Call Death!  
 And the echo sounded down the streets  
 of heaven  
 Till it reached away back to that shad-  
 ovy place,  
 Where Death waits with his pale,  
 white horses.

And Death heard the summons,  
 And he leaped on his fastest horse,  
 Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.  
 Up the golden street Death galloped,  
 And the hoofs of his horse struck fire

from the gold,  
 But they didn't make no sound.  
 Up Death rode to the Great  
 White Throne,  
 And waited for God's command.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,  
 Go down to Savannah, Georgia,  
 Down in Yamacraw,  
 And find Sister Caroline.  
 She's borne the burden and heat  
 of the day,  
 She's labored long in my vineyard,  
 And she's tired—  
 She's weary—  
 Go down, Death, and bring her to me.  
 —from "A Funeral Sermon"

**I**n that great day,  
 People, in that great day,  
 God's a-going to rain down fire.  
 God's a-going to sit in the middle of  
 the air  
 To judge the quick and the dead.

Early one of these mornings,  
 God's a-going to call for Gabriel,  
 That tall, bright angel, Gabriel;  
 And God's a-going to say to him: Gabriel,  
 Blow your silver trumpet,  
 And wake the living nations.

And Gabriel's going to ask him: Lord,  
 How loud must I blow it?

And God's a-going to tell him: Gabriel,  
 Blow it calm and easy.  
 Then putting one foot on the  
 mountain top,  
 And the other in the middle of the sea,  
 Gabriel's going to stand and blow  
 his horn,  
 To wake the living nations.  
 —from "The Judgment Day"

# Custom-breakers

CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND THE THEATER

Elizabeth Schafer



**GREEK TRAGEDY** This mosaic depicts the Greek myth of Iphigenia. Her father sacrificed her to Artemis for political gain. Jane Lumley adapted this play in the 16th c., holding a mirror to her own political context (p. 44).

*Although women have been making theater* for centuries, they have been excluded from this public, collaborative art in many societies, from ancient Greece onward. The relationship between Christianity and theater has not always been an easy one. Yet long before the first professional women playwrights entered history, Christian women were making theater—writing plays, dialogues, and scenarios. Some also performed, directed, costumed, sang, and danced. Many of the women who we know did this were nuns.

## **HROTSVITHA (c. 935–c. 1000)**

Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim is usually identified as the first recorded woman playwright. She was a well-educated Benedictine secular canoness who wrote several original plays. Hrotsvitha lived in a privileged environment where she had access to libraries and where classical learning was respected. She was also surrounded by women who performed daily services, singing, memorizing, and repeating liturgy.

Today Hrotsvitha's plays seem an odd mixture. They deal with virgin martyrs and prostitutes, battles and torture, tragedy and farce. In *Dulcitus* (10th c.), a play loosely based on a true story, the pagan villain Governor Dulcitus tries to control, punish, and then seduce three Christian virgins. Bizarrely, Dulcitus gets into a farcical fight with brooms, saucepans and other kitchen utensils, and becomes

covered with soot. He then has the poor virgins martyred. In another play, *Abraham*, a young woman, Mary, becomes a prostitute and enjoys her life. Later she repents and retreats to live in penitence in a cell. A courtesan named Thais is at the center of Hrotsvitha's *Paphnutius*. Thais reveals that she is a Christian, and she is brought to repentance by a holy man who disguises himself as a customer.

Most of Hrotsvitha's plays are named after her male characters, but the action always focuses on women and the challenges they face. Were the plays performed? We don't know. Although Dulcitus's battle with the pots and pans begs to be staged, Hrotsvitha's scripts may have been read aloud rather than acted out. But convent life involved plenty of ceremonial and musical performance, and it is perfectly possible

the nuns could have staged her dramas. One reason Hrotsvitha's plays were preserved is that convent life valued and encouraged learning and the ability to speak well.

## **HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098–1179)**

The early woman Christian playwright best known today, abbess and Catholic saint Hildegard of Bingen, was also a composer, visionary, theologian, preacher, natural scientist, herbal healer, and enthusiastic letter writer. She was a political power broker and, like Hrotsvitha, wrote in the international European language, Latin. But she took a very different approach to dramatic characterization. Hildegard's play, the *Ordo Virtutum*, or *Order of the Virtues* (c. 1151), is a musical and liturgical drama that shows 16 female Virtues struggling against the Devil for the possession of a female soul, Anima. Although the Devil entices Anima into dallying with worldly pleasures, she later repents, returning somewhat battered to the Virtues. After joining together, Anima and the Virtues defeat the Devil.

In creating the *Ordo*, Hildegard thought very theatrically in terms of space, pacing, and dramatic conflict, anticipating the development of medieval morality plays by about a century. The play was probably staged when Hildegard moved with her 20 nuns into a convent she had founded at



Rupertsberg on the Rhine. This relocation was made in defiance of her abbot who opposed the move.

### ANONYMOUS

It is possible but unlikely that women may have written some of the medieval morality plays and mystery cycle plays that today have to be ascribed to “Anon.” The mystery plays, inspired by stories from the Bible, were produced for the feast of Corpus Christi by the trade guilds (see pp. 12–16), but women would have contributed to and supported these performances even if it was backstage helping to create costumes, doing the laundry, and performing other essential tasks.

### KATHERINE OF SUTTON (d. 1376)

Another pioneering nun playwright, Katherine of Sutton was probably England’s first woman playwright, as well as the abbess of Barking. A politically powerful baroness, Katherine staged Easter plays at her abbey, dramaturging (writing and adapting plays in Latin) for the specific performance conditions there. Her nuns would have performed the roles of the male characters, which is startling because it was not until 1660 that women could legally appear on an English stage performing as female characters, let alone as men. In Barking, the enclosed, relatively safe space of the convent allowed women the freedom to express their faith through theatrical performance.

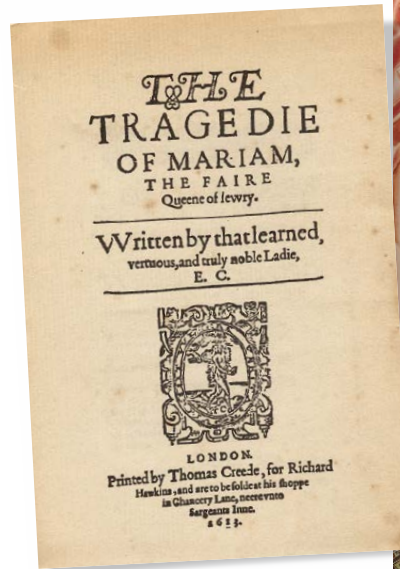
### MARGUERITE OF NAVARRE (1492–1549)

While some puritanical Protestants were antitheatrical,



**WOMEN IN THE SPOTLIGHT** Hrotsvitha (*above left*) was the first recorded woman playwright; Hildegard of Bingen (*above*), famous polymath, wrote the earliest forms of medieval morality plays; and Marguerite of Navarre (*top*), reforming queen, patronized artists and writers and wrote incisive works of her own.

Catholic Marguerite of Navarre used plays to encourage reform within her church. Marguerite, sister of Francis I, king of France, was a powerful, well-educated member of the French ruling class. She upset many traditionalists with her reforming and proselyting activities. Marguerite is best known as a writer of short stories, assembled in the often-bawdy *Heptameron*, but she wrote prolifically in many genres. Her plays sometimes mocked those in authority in the Catholic Church, especially authorities who were corrupt, lazy, and poorly educated. Marguerite also produced translations, which was seen to be less presumptuous for women than authoring their own writing.



### LADY JANE LUMLEY (1537–1578)

The first woman known to have created a play in the English language, Lady Jane Lumley also worked with translation, producing an English version of Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis*. But Lumley shifted, even adapted, Euripides's text, cutting back on the choruses as she turned Greek verse into English prose. The focus is on the violent and ritual sacrifice of the young woman Iphigenia so that her father, King Agamemnon, can go and fight his war in Troy.

The story connects with the realities of Christian life in England in 1554, the time Lumley was writing. Lumley's first cousin was Lady Jane Grey (1537–1554), and Lumley's father, Henry Fitzalan (1512–1580), Earl of Arundel, Lady Jane Grey's

uncle, had initially supported his niece as the successor to King Edward VI.

Jane Grey became the Protestant queen of England for just nine days. But Fitzalan quickly abandoned his niece and switched sides to support the Catholic Queen Mary, who then executed Lady Jane Grey (one of the reasons being her refusal to convert). Shortly after the execution of her cousin, Jane Lumley produced *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which asks the reader to contemplate the sacrificial slaughter of a young woman to further the ambitions of her family. Evidence suggests that Henry Fitzalan was intended to be the first reader of Lumley's play.

### ELIZABETH TANFIELD CARY (1585–1639)

The Protestant and Catholic divide also affected the life of Elizabeth Tanfield Cary. Cary wrote her play *The Tragedy of Mariam, Fair Queen of Jewry* around 1605. She is remarkable for, in 1613, being the first woman known to have published an original drama in English. Cary only used her initials,

**ART REFLECTS LIFE** Jane Lumley's (left) *Iphigenia at Aulis* was a commentary on the death of Jane Grey (above left) and the politics of the Protestant/Catholic divide. This atmosphere also inspired Elizabeth Cary (above) to write *The Tragedy of Mariam* (middle), which questioned women's freedom in marriage.

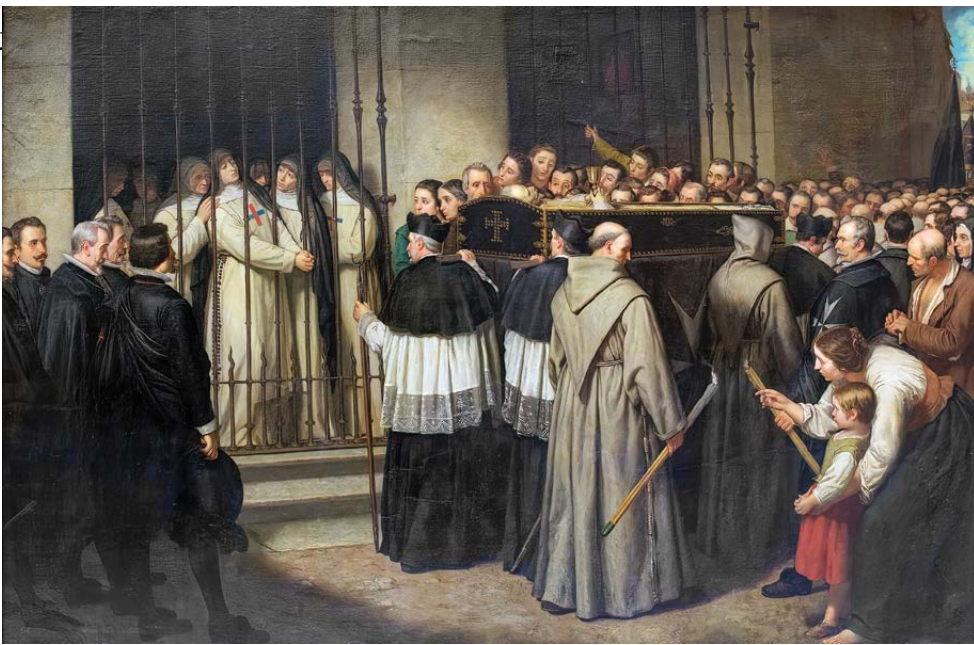
E. C., on the title page because by publishing her work and putting it in the public domain, Cary risked damage to her reputation. In this period theater-making was seen as low-status work. Actors, or players, even those as talented as Shakespeare, were associated in English law with rogues and vagabonds.

In *Mariam* Cary presents the second wife of Herod the Great, Mariam, as a Christ-like martyr, who chooses integrity and principles over life, refusing to compromise even when she knows this will result in her death. Meanwhile Cary's villain, Herod's transgressive sister, Salome, defies convention, is utterly shameless and, in performance, very hard to resist. Salome schemes to bring about the downfall of the virtuous but theatrically less interesting Mariam. Salome refuses to accept the constraints society sought to impose on her and demands, "Why should such privilege to man be given?" She decides to become a "custom-breaker" and the first Jewish woman to secure a divorce.

The play focuses on two women struggling within marriage, with one accepting oppression and the other scheming her way toward divorce. Later on life began to imitate art. Cary had married Sir Henry Cary in 1602, but the marriage became troubled, and Cary, like Salome, became a rebel.

She converted to Catholicism when her husband was the Protestant Lord Deputy of Ireland and in charge of keeping the predominantly Catholic population under control. Cary defied her husband and King Charles I and sought the protection of his Catholic queen, Henrietta Maria. The great-granddaughter of Marguerite of Navarre, Queen Henrietta Maria also shocked many in England because of her love of participating in court theatricals.

PAUL DELAROCHE, THE EXECUTION OF LADY JANE GREY, OIL ON CANVAS, 1833. © NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON / ART RESOURCE, NY  
 ELIZABETH CARY, THE TRAGEDY OF MARIAM, LONDON, 1613. COLLUMBA / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA  
 WILLIAM LARKIN, PROBABLY ELIZABETH CARY, AEE TANFIELD, OIL ON CANVAS, C. 1614 TO 1618—SUFFOLK COLLECTION, KENWOOD HOUSE / PUBLIC DOMAIN, WIKIMEDIA  
 AFTER SIEUWERT VAN DER MEULEN, PORTRAIT OF LADY JANE LUMLEY, LITHOGRAPH WITH HAND-COLOURING, 19TH CENTURY—[CC BY-NC-SA 4.0] © THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



**ANCHORITE ACTRESS** In this painting (*above*), nun Sor Marcela watches her father’s funeral procession while anchored in the convent. Her works did not survive, but like her parents, she was a playwright and an actress.

**QUEEN OF CRIME** Dorothy L. Sayers (*above right*) was first famous for her crime novels, but her plays also gained critical acclaim, as well as causing controversy.

We know much about Elizabeth Cary’s life because one of her daughters, a nun in the Benedictine convent at Cambrai, wrote a manuscript account of it. This biography does not mention that Cary wrote plays—she probably wrote two, but one play, set in Sicily, is lost—but the biography does state that Cary loved seeing plays performed. It also narrates how Cary arranged for six of her children to be kidnapped so that they could receive a Catholic rather than a Protestant upbringing. Four of Cary’s daughters chose to live their lives in convents in France, while Cary in later life lived in extreme poverty as her husband would not pay her any maintenance.

**SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ (1648–1695)**

Theater-making by women in convent settings garnered criticism when subjects moved beyond safe matters like liturgical drama or virgin martyrs in peril. Mexico’s Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Spanish Criolla (a Hispanic American of full Spanish descent), hosted literary salons, was friends with the vice-regal family, and wrote a defense in favor of women’s education. Sor Juana became a controversial figure when she scripted plays that dealt with worldly romance. Toward the end of her life, she may have destroyed much of her work, possibly as an act of penitence. On the other hand, many of her writings may have been destroyed after Sor Juana was compelled to give up her huge library.

**SOR MARCELA DE SAN FÉLIX (1605–1688)**

A similar fate lay in store for the writings, including plays, produced by another nun, Sor Marcela de San Félix. A



daughter of famous Spanish playwright Lope de Vega (1562–1635) and actress Micaela de Luján (1570–1614), Sor Marcela’s dramatic texts were mostly destroyed on the advice of her disapproving confessor.

**DOROTHY L. SAYERS (1893–1957)**

As professional women playwrights began to gain a foothold in the theater, their Christian identity, experience, and imagination tended to move into the background. The commercial theaters rarely staged overtly Christian material and, in England, censorship laws severely restricted what could be staged. Until the 1920s even church Nativity plays were controversial. All representations of the Holy Family on stage, even the baby Jesus, were banned. In 1941 a furor erupted when respected crime novelist, playwright, and critic Dorothy L. Sayers was commissioned to write a 12-part radio play series, *The Man Born to Be King*, on the life of Jesus.

Sayers wrote the plays in a realistic style, using colloquial language. They were scheduled to be broadcast for the Sunday Children’s Hour. Despite Britain being in the midst of the Second World War, people found time to protest Sayers’s plays and condemn her work before they had any idea what she had written. Later the plays of *The Man Born to Be King* were judged to be among Sayers’s best works.

**THEATER MAKERS**

Today it is commonplace for churches, schools, and youth clubs to stage Nativity plays, passion plays, and Bible narratives. Many women who do not see themselves primarily as theater makers are adapting, rewriting, and reshaping plays and dialogues. They are designing sets and costumes, composing and playing music, teaching dance, and providing refreshments. They may not be star names like Hildegard of Bingen, but long may their theater-making continue. **CH**

*Elizabeth Schafer is professor of drama and theatre studies at Royal Holloway, University of London.*

# “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

*In liturgical traditions, such as the Orthodox Church, believers who participate in Holy Week’s drama enter into Christ’s passion.*

**M**idnight approaches. Darkness shrouds the Orthodox parish. Lamentations for the death of our Lord fill the sanctuary. The chanting ends, from within the altar a single flame appears, and with it the song: “Come receive ye the light from the light that is never overtaken by night. Come glorify Christ risen from the dead.”

From this flame the faithful light their candles, and then all process three times around the church, singing over the pealing church bells, “Thy resurrection O Christ our Savior, the angels in heaven sing.” Before the church doors open, the angel’s proclamation from Mark’s Gospel is read: “He is risen; He is not here.” And following this, the shouted exchange: “Christ is risen!” “Indeed He is risen!”

These actions open the two-hour Pascal Liturgy and close a journey of 70 days from the Sundays leading up to Lent, through Lent itself, and then to Holy Week—a specific cycle followed by the Orthodox Church for at least 1,700 years. Certain details will differ depending on whether you attend a Greek, a Slavic, or a Syrian church, but for each, Holy Week’s multiple services (some 30 hours), the readings, processions, prostrations, and lamentations all focus on God’s work of redemption accomplished in Christ’s Passion 2,000 years ago. It asks the worshipers to enter into that time, that life, that suffering, that grief, not just of Christ, but of those around him who loved, mourned, and even denied him.

## SPECTACLE AND DIALOGUE

The term “drama” aptly describes this week. A spectacle, as Christ’s Resurrection “made a spectacle” of the powers of hell. This celebration by mimesis (imitation and representation of physical truth) enters an arc of historical events anticipated since “He shall crush your head, and you will bruise His heel” (Gen. 3:15).

All art—every word uttered and performed—requires of its readers and viewers a dialogue, and the dramatic most of all. The Evangelists crafted narratives to summon a response from their hearers. Their audiences were always hearers, since in the ancient world reading was done aloud and almost always with others. We solemnly observe the momentous days of our lives: weddings, funerals, graduations—marking their importance with rites and conscious actions, with drama. The dramas of the ancient world formed dialogues, not between audience and cast, but within the viewers themselves. Drama, as is often said, demands a response.



**SACRED PERFORMANCE** A metropolitan washes a priest’s feet, dramatizing Christ’s actions on Holy Thursday.

Each communion and parish approaches Easter with a different level of solemnity. In the weeks leading up to it, the joy that accompanies the Eucharist is muted. The colors within the sanctuary go from white to purple or dark, indicating a season made sober for repentance. Among Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholics, and Orthodox, Good Friday usually occurs without any Eucharist at all, a day of solemn observance, for on this day the bridegroom has been taken away. On this day his disciples fast. In local Lutheran churches, the banner inscribed with the alleluias processes out of the sanctuary on the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday. Alleluias, normally sung preceding the reading of the Gospel, have no place, it is held, in the solemnity of Lent. But upon Easter the banner returns. Likewise kneeling throughout Eastertide is forbidden, for Christ has risen, raising us with him into the heavens.

## RELIVING TO REMEMBER

Why all of this? Is not the memory that our Lord died, was buried, and rose again enough? But how do we remember? For Christians of past centuries, Christ’s life and Passion constituted the norm that defines and gives meaning to history. To ancients, memory was no mere recollection, but an entrance into events themselves, to be numbered among the mockers and the lamenting women, to weep bitterly with Peter. Through the dramatic, we are pulled into Christ’s journey to Golgotha and his third-day Resurrection. The drama of the liturgy asks us with our whole being—our five senses, our affections, our intellect, and our memory—to imprint Christ’s saving life upon our soul, making it fundamental to our character, to who we are; that is, conforming us to his death that we might attain his Resurrection.

—Cyril Gary Jenkins, PhD, director of St. Basil Center for Orthodox Thought and Culture and coeditor-in-chief of the center’s journal, *Rule of Faith*



# The most important story: an interview with Max McLean



*Max McLean, stage actor, writer, producer, and artistic director and founder of Fellowship for Performing Arts based in New York City, spoke to CH about his vocation in the theater and his calling as a Christian.*

**CHRISTIAN HISTORY:** Tell us about your work.

**MAX MCLEAN:** Fellowship for the Performing Arts (FPA) produces theater and film from a Christian worldview meant to engage an intellectually diverse audience. Among the plays we have produced are our current touring work, *C. S. Lewis On Stage: Further Up & Further In*, as well as *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Most Reluctant Convert* (both stage and film), *Martin Luther on Trial*, a modern adaptation of *Paradise Lost*, the first New York revival of *Shadowlands*, as well as a well-received revival of *A Man for All Seasons*. Over the course of our history, our plays have been seen by well over a million people.

**CH:** How long have you been involved in the performing arts? What drew you to the stage in the first place?

**MM:** I got into theater during college to get over my fear of being in front of people. That was in the mid-70s, so I've been doing this close to 50 years. FPA was incorporated in 1992.

**CH:** How was theater influential in your faith journey? When did you feel a desire to use your gifts and talents to serve the Lord through performance?

**MM:** I started in the theater as an actor; however, not long after I graduated from college, I had encounters with several Christians that led me to a born-again experience with Jesus Christ after reading John's Gospel in one sitting. I knew this was the most important story in the world. I also realized theater was a

**FURTHER UP AND FURTHER IN** Max McLean has brought C. S. Lewis to the silver screen and the stage as Lewis himself in *The Most Reluctant Convert* (left); he has also adapted Lewis's works for the stage, playing the demon Screwtape in *The Screwtape Letters* (above).

powerful medium to tell stories. So, I was immediately drawn to find a way to integrate the two.

**CH:** How has portraying C. S. Lewis on stage affected your faith?

**MM:** C. S. Lewis was one of the first authors I encountered after my conversion. I was most affected by *The Screwtape Letters* because it gave me a very clear picture of spiritual warfare and how it works in our day-to-day life. About 20 years ago, we decided to do a theatrical adaptation of the book. To make it clear on stage, I knew I had to dig really deep to make sure Lewis's ideas came through. That was a very satisfying experience. I also realized that you never get to the bottom of Lewis. There's always more to explore, and that led to other productions such as *The Great Divorce*, *The Most Reluctant Convert* and, most recently, *Further Up & Further In*.

**CH:** Was there ever a time when you experienced internal conflict over whether or not you should perform as a Christian? If so, how did you resolve that conflict?

**MM:** In the early years of my career, I did have internal conflict. The more I grew in my faith, the less satisfying I found the roles I was being offered. I realized that an actor is sort of a hired hand. An actor's job is to brilliantly communicate other people's ideas, whether he agrees with them or not. That caused conflict. Jesus said you cannot serve two masters. That's when I turned my attention to producing stories from a Christian worldview. **CH**

# Faith's "Workout" on stage



*Mark Lewis is a Wheaton College professor and director of Wheaton's theater program, Workout. Workout has a unique history that parallels Christian attitudes and responses to drama throughout the years. CH spoke with Lewis to find out more.*

**CHRISTIAN HISTORY:** *What is Workout and what is its relationship to theater at Wheaton?*

**MARK LEWIS:** Wheaton College does not have a theater major. For 50 years, what has operated instead is a theater ensemble called Workout. Founded in 1974 by Dr. Jim Young, Workout admits participants by audition. Typically there are between 35 and 45 students in the group. Most who gain entrance as freshmen stay in the group all four years. Requirements include regular attendance at two "Workouts" a week as well as a commitment to building, staffing, advertising, technically supporting, and acting in Arena Theater's 3-play, 27-performance season.

**CH:** *How did Workout start?*

**ML:** Jim Young was an unlikely person to be Wheaton College's first full-time theater professor. Raised in a fundamentalist Christian home of modest means in Michigan in the 1930s and 1940s, he first aimed to be a missionary. Arriving on campus in the early 1970s, he imagined theater at Wheaton would be a formal group rather than an academic major or a casual club. He liked to say that the name "Workout" came to him written across the sky. With the name, Jim was not seeking in any way to emulate the sweaty experience that has confused everyone for almost 50 years. Rather he imagined the activity of the group to be "working out faith, with fear and trembling," as commanded in Philippians 2:12.

**CH:** *This issue explores the often-conflicted relationship between Christians and theater. Is this tension still present, and if so, how has Workout navigated it?*

**ML:** I think any Christian's view of theater has everything to do with the process of their lived faith (shaped by the convictions of the communities that have formed

**MUSIC AND MOVEMENT** Wheaton students perform a stage adaptation of texts from the Psalms.

them) and by what they think theater is and how they experience it. I have spent my life in evangelical circles, and I think that objections I have heard (or intuited) from Christians willing to speak about it are various. Some restate Plato's objection to theater as being a harmful "lie" that distances us from reality. Additionally good theater operates both intellectually and emotionally, and some find this realm of feelings confusing to navigate.

Others struggle to reconcile their interaction with the physically embodied imagination. Being in the room with an event that is being cocreated in real time by an audience and a performer and is occurring very powerfully—maybe even most powerfully—in the imagination of the audience is hard for some to find peace with.

**CH:** *Setzuan, Workout's main ensemble room, has a stained-glass image of Genesis of Rome (see our Did you know?). How does he connect to the ethos of theater making at Wheaton?*

**ML:** Jim Young gifted the stained-glass image to Workout. It hung for many years in his home. As far as his presence in the tradition of Workout (for 50 years, Workout seniors have been presented with Genesis medals at graduation), I have always attributed it to Dr. Young's deep belief that, counter to evangelical tradition, it is not only possible to be both a committed theater artist and a committed Christian, but that a life in the theater can be met and pursued full-heartedly by a follower of Christ.

**CH:** *You have devised and directed several iterations of KJV, a theater production centered around the text of the King James Version, and just last year you produced The Psalms. What inspired these projects?*

**ML:** My parents brought me up to believe that memorization of Scripture has deep inherent value: "Hiding God's word in my heart" in the Psalm 119:11 sense. The first KJV project was born simply out of the belief that it would be good for students in Workout to spend time first memorizing and then embodying some major chunks of Scripture.

What continues to surprise me is just how theatrically compelling these texts are for our audiences and our actors alike. I have come to realize that, while we often have the Bible read to us, we do not often hear it simply spoken. I believe it operates differently as embodied, unmediated text. If it really is sharper than a two-edged sword, maybe we should consider treating it less as a text we must illustrate to make clear, and more as a text that we should allow to operate theatrically in the way that any great text does. **CH**

# Christian interaction with theater

*Here are a few questions to guide reflection on Christianity's relationship with and response to the performing arts over the years.*

1. What were Tertullian's arguments against Christian participation in public "spectacles" (pp. 6–10)? Do these arguments apply to entertainment today? If so, how?
2. How has the Hebrew approach to drama (p. 10) influenced Christian attitudes?
3. What was something new or surprising you learned about medieval religious drama (pp. 12–16)?
4. How did the volatile religious environment of post-Reformation England affect theater (pp. 17–20)?
5. How do Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare invoke Christian themes in the play excerpts on p. 21?
6. How did William Prynne and James Buckley echo Tertullian's and Augustine's critiques about theater (pp. 22–24)? Given their arguments against it, how would you defend Christian participation in drama?
7. In what ways did revival preachers utilize dramatic elements in their sermons (p. 25)? Should preachers today be just as "theatrical"? Why or why not?
8. Regardless of Charles Dickens's original intentions, is *A Christmas Carol* Christian (p. 28)? Why or why not?
9. Why do you think the MacDonal family's chamber dramas (pp. 29–30) so strongly affected the lives of the family and audience?
10. How did British pageants bring the local community together (p. 31)? Can you think of any Christian-influenced events like this today that do something similar?
11. Consider the Christian, occultist, and modernist strands in twentieth-century theater (pp. 32–35). Compare and contrast how various Inklings pushed back against or blended these strains in their writing.

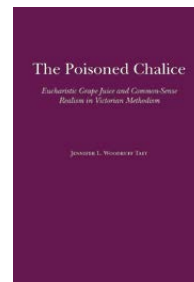
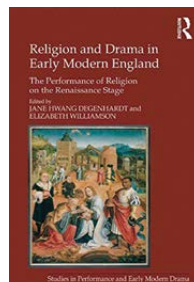
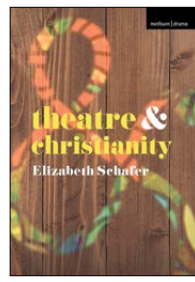
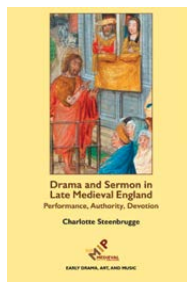
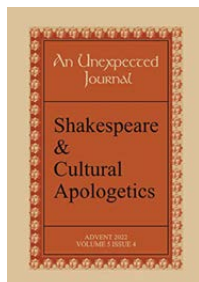
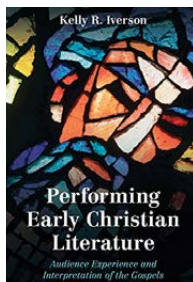


**CARICATURE ACTING** This Roman incense burner shows an actor wearing a mask with exaggerated comic features. Scholars believe this particular depiction alludes to a specific scene in a real play.

12. How does G. K. Chesterton's *Magic* show the absurdity of disbelief (p. 36)?
13. Why are the Roman Catholic and Indigenous identities of Mexican Americans important (pp. 37–39)? How does this play out in Chicano theater?
14. What were the problems with *The Green Pastures* (pp. 40–41)? In what ways did drama by African American creators address these problems?
15. Which figure in the Gallery (pp. 42–45) most interested you? Why?
16. How does the drama of the liturgy in high church traditions involve the worshiper (p. 46)? Does your church tradition utilize drama in worship? How?

# Recommended resources

READ MORE ABOUT HOW CHRISTIANS HAVE PARTICIPATED IN, CREATED, AND CRITIQUED THEATER IN THESE RESOURCES RECOMMENDED BY OUR AUTHORS AND THE CH TEAM.



## BOOKS

Some **general** books on the topic include Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (1990); Shimon Levy, *Theater and Holy Script* (1999); Todd Johnson and Dale Savidge, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (2009); and Kevin Wetmore Jr., ed., *Catholic Theatre and Drama* (2010).

Read about **drama and the early church** in Christine Schnusenberg, *The Relationship Between the Church and the Theatre* (1988, 2017) and Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives* (2001), as well as some books below discussing liturgy and opposition to theatrical pursuits.

The field of **medieval drama and the church** is a large one. Start off with Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (1972); David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (1975); Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* (1987); Donalee Dox, *The Idea of the Theater in Latin Christian Thought* (2004); Margaret Rogerson, ed., *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City* (2011); Wim Hüsken and Peter Happé, eds., *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350–1600* (2016); John Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context* (2016); Charlotte Steenbrugge, *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England* (2017); Julie Paulson, *Theater of the World: Selfhood in the English Morality Play* (2019); and Jody Enders, ed., *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Middle Ages* (2019).

The same goes for **early modern drama**. A few books to begin with are David Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe* (1962); John Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (2007); R. Chris Hassel Jr., *Faith and Folly in Shakespeare's Romantic Comedies* (2011); Louise M. Burkhart, ed., *Aztecs on Stage: Religious Theater in Colonial Mexico* (2011); Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson, eds., *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England* (2011); Kurt A. Schreyer, *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft* (2014); Hannibal Hamlin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*

*to Shakespeare and Religion* (2019); and Michael Collins and Michael Scott, eds., *Christian Shakespeare: Question Mark* (2022).

Learn more about how Christians have **critiqued** theater in Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre* (1980); Colin Rice, *Ungodly Delights* (1997); Claudia Durst Johnson, *Church and Stage* (2007); Jennifer Woodruff Tait, *The Poisoned Chalice* (2011); Katrin Beushausen, *Theatre and the English Public from Reformation to Revolution* (2018); and James Papandrea, *A Week in the Life of Rome* (2019).

Some books treating the relationship of theater to **preaching and worship** include O. B. Hardison Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (1965); Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist* (1991); Edith Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (1993); Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre* (2005); Roger Grainger, *The Drama of the Rite* (2008); Kelly Iverson, *Performing Early Christian Literature* (2021); and Abram Book, "Uncle Bud" Robinson (2025).

Learn more about the theatrical pursuits and impact of **George MacDonald** in William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (1987); Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie, eds., *Faithful Performances* (2007); and Alison Searle, *The Eyes of Your Heart* (2008); and of **Charles Dickens** in Paul Davis, *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* (1990) and Les Standiford, *The Man Who Invented Christmas* (2011). Read about **pageants** in David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry* (1990) and Angela Bartie et al., *Restaging the Past* (2020).

There are many books on **Christians and modern drama**. Some places to start are Kay Baxter, *Contemporary Theatre and Christian Faith* (1965); William Spanos, *The Christian Tradition in Modern British Verse Drama* (1967); Gregory Coleman, *We're Heaven Bound!* (1994); Yolanda

Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino* (1994); Jorge A. Huerta, *Chicano Drama* (2000); Katie Normington, *Modern Mysteries: Contemporary Productions of Medieval English Cycle Dramas* (2007); Craig R. Prentiss, *Staging Faith: Religion and African American Theater from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II* (2013); Wallace Best, *Langston's Salvation* (2017); Elizabeth Schafer, *Theatre and Christianity* (2019); and Robert Botello, *We Dance for the Virgen* (2022).

Finally, read more about (and by) the women playwrights in our **gallery** in Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1943, 1990); Nancy Cotton, *Women Playwrights in England, c. 1363–1750* (1980); Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The “Ordo Virtutum” of Hildegard of Bingen* (1992); Peter Dronke, ed., *Nine Medieval Latin Plays* (1993); Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson, eds., *The Tragedy of Mariam . . . With the Lady Falkland: Her Life* (1994); Jane Spencer, *Aphra Behn's Afterlife* (2000); Patricia Francis Cholakian and Rouben Cholakian, *Marguerite de Navarre* (2005); Derek Hughes and Janet Todd, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn* (2005); and Anna More, ed., *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz: Selected Works* (2016).



### VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO

Relevant videos include *Biblical Theater: The Gospel of John*; *C. S. Lewis Onstage: The Most Reluctant Convert*; *Genesis with Max McLean*; *Mark's Gospel On Stage with Max MacLean*; *Scrooge*; and the eight biblical dramas produced by Sight and Sound. Some of these titles are only available for purchase (both DVDs and digital download) at Vision Video; you may access more content by streaming on Redeem TV.



### PAST CH ISSUES

Related past issues of *Christian History* can be read online; some hard copies are still available for purchase.

- 37 – *Worship in the Early Church*
- 49 – *Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*
- 75 – G. K. Chesterton
- 78 – J. R. R. Tolkien
- 86 – George MacDonald
- 89 – *English Puritans*
- 103 – *Christmas*
- 113 – *Seven Literary Sages*
- 147 – *Everyday Life in the Early Church*
- Guide – *The History of Worship from Constantine to the Middle Ages*

### WEBSITES

You will find helpful primary sources at the Ancient History Sourcebook and Medieval Sourcebook as well as the Christian Classics Ethereal Library. The “Fathers” collection at New Advent has documents from early church critics of the theater, as does The Tertullian Project. Gutenberg.org has many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors including MacDonald, Dickens, and Chesterton. The Society of G. K. Chesterton also has many of Chesterton’s works excerpted, plus helpful commentary.

Standard EBooks is a newer but promising source for public domain texts (Hrotsvitha’s plays are here, for instance), and the University of Michigan Digital Collections is another good place to look—James Buckley and William Prynne both can be found here. *God’s Trombones* can be seen with its original art at Documenting the American South.

There are many, many Shakespeare sites with full text and/or commentary. Three good ones are Internet Shakespeare, Open Source Shakespeare, and the Folger Library. The special issue of *An Unexpected Journal on Shakespeare* (2022, vol. 5 no. 4) edited by Joe Ricke and Sarah Waters is online.

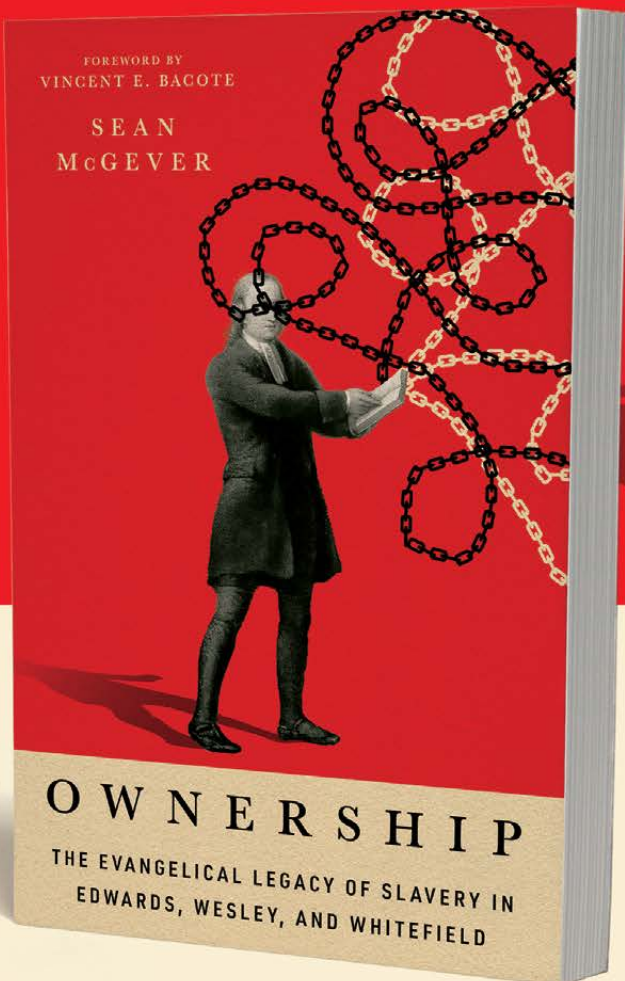
Redress of the Past website is an interactive map of pageants in Britain along with blogposts, a database of 600+ pageants, downloadable books, and documentary films. Find *El Teatro Campesino* here and Fellowship of the Performing Arts at [FPAtheatre.com](http://FPAtheatre.com). Finally, you may enjoy a YouTube lecture survey of the entire history of Christians and the theater delivered in May 2024 by Crystal Downing, recently retired codirector of the Wade Center at Wheaton College. [G+](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

# EDWARDS. WESLEY. WHITEFIELD.

Heroes of the faith.

What do we make of their  
relationship to slavery?

What does that mean for us?



[ivpress.com](http://ivpress.com)

# RedeemTV

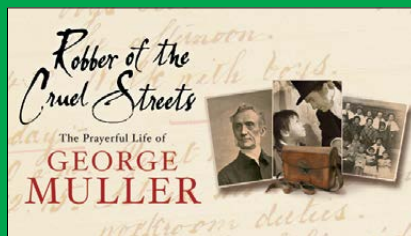
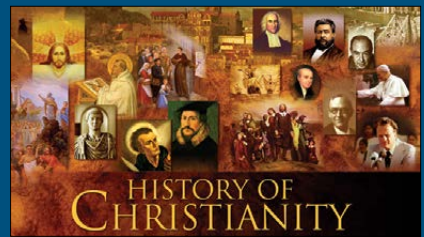
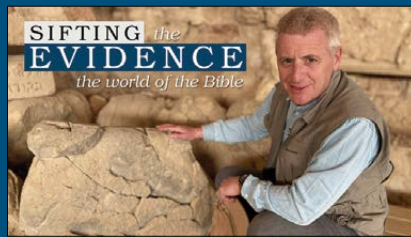
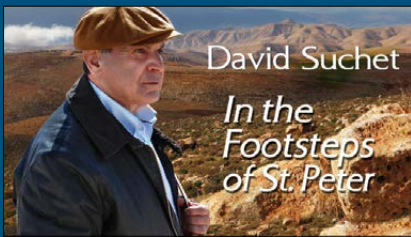
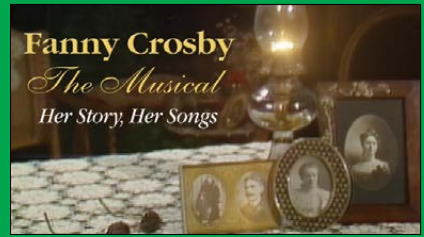
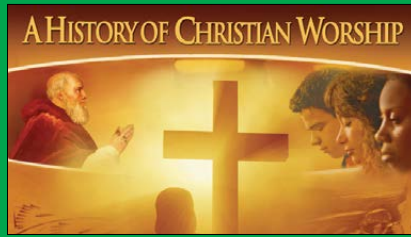
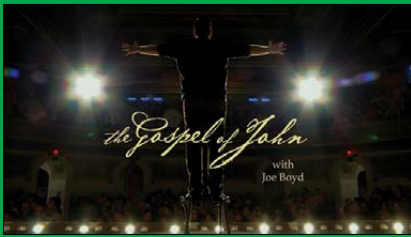
Streaming Goodness



RedeemTV is a FREE streaming service for faith building and family entertainment!

Join over **300,000** subscribers in **200** countries  
for viewer-supported, ad-free, hope-filled programming.

Visit us at [RedeemTV.com](http://RedeemTV.com) or download our app and stream goodness wherever you go!





Subscriber #

Source Code

# Your roots run deep

## Explore how far they go

Discover the roots of your  
faith with *Christian History*  
magazine, one story at a time

Each issue of *Christian History* connects you to your past—the 2,000-year story of the church—through vivid images, accessible storytelling, and careful research you can trust. For more than 40 years, *Christian History* has been telling the story of the church for the people of the church, one topic at a time. Discover just how deep your roots run today!

Enjoy a FREE one-year subscription with code CH152.\*



\*CH is made possible by generous donations from our readers. Free one-year subscriptions available in U.S. only; a free sample issue can be sent to all other international destinations.

ChristianHistoryMagazine.org

1-(800) 468-0458