

# The Development of English Drama

Greek tragedy = corporate religious exercise

Roman comedy and tragedy

- Entertainment not edification
- *Ludi* = farces
- Comedy = Plautus and Terence = stock characters (*miles gloriosus*, *senex*, parasite)
- Tragedy = Seneca = sensational and violent (murder, revenge, incest); oratorical (probably not performed but read)

Sixth Century

- The Church closed the remaining theatres (sex, blood sport, violence, little rock and roll)
- mimes, acrobats, dancers, animal trainers, jugglers, wrestlers, minstrels, and storytellers
- the folk play
  - Wild Man of the Woods (leaf-covered figure representing winter is hunted and killed)
  - Morris Dance (mimetic and used fool or clown character)
  - Mummer's Plays (hero killed during fight and revived by a healer or doctor)
  - St. George Plays (variation on cycle of death and rebirth)

Medieval Theatre

- By the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, the Church began to incorporate pagan festivals into its own liturgical calendar
- Feast of Fools: end of 12<sup>th</sup> Century, lower clergy wearing grotesque masks, dressing as women or minstrels took over a church and elected a mock bishop and burlesqued the mass.
- Carnival (celebration just before Lent) and New Year's Saturnalia had Lord of Misrule who guided the follies by turning everything upside down and absorbed the guilt of the participants
- During 10<sup>th</sup> century, Hrosvitha, a nun, wrote six short plays about chaste maids, honest men, and martyrs but based on Terence's style

Liturgical Drama

- The liturgy of the Church is essentially dramatic enactment.
- From 9<sup>th</sup> century, plainsong of the Church embellished by antiphonal singing to increase musical effectiveness. Early antiphon embellishment to the final syllable of the Alleluia became known as trope. (Words)
- By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Easter trope united words and action in *Quen quaeritis*
  - An addition to the Easter liturgy to enact three Mary's visit to the empty tomb of Jesus, where an angel asks "Whom do you seek?"

- More than 400 surviving versions in Europe.
- During 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, other tropes developed around Nativity, Ascension, and other stories from biblical and church history.
- These tropes played in various parts of the church.
- By 12<sup>th</sup> century, the plays incorporated spoken dialogue in the vernacular and moved outside to the front of the church and were performed independent of the liturgical service. (e.g., *Adam French*, approximately 1170)

#### Mystery or Miracle Plays

- Once these plays had moved outside of the church they began to become more secular and were taken over by the laity and performed in the vernacular.
- The short pageants (dramatized episodes) were organized in to CYCLES covering the whole of biblical and church history from creation through the stories of Hebrew scriptures, to the birth and passion of Christ to the Last Judgment and the end of time. These plays were known as MYSTERY PLAYS from French word for craft and were produced by guilds.
- Initially, in 12<sup>th</sup> century, the cycles were staged on platforms known as houses or MANSIONS. In Italy, plays were enacted on stages erected throughout the city.
- In England by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, plays performed on carts known as PAGEANT WAGONS, which were either drawn from place to place or stationary with audiences moving from one to the other.
- In England, cycles associated with four towns: York, Wakefield, Coventry, and Chester.
- Mystery plays were for entertainment and not edification and were civic events.
- Lasted until end of 16<sup>th</sup> century in England.

#### Morality Plays (or Morals)

- Developed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century from homiletic tradition.
- Didactic allegory of characters who are abstractions like Everyman or Mankind struggling with forces of good and evil (psychomachia), with temptation, or with approach of death.
- Earliest and longest = *Castell of Perseverance*
- Vice character = principal comic tempter
- In England, later adapted to political and religious struggles of late 16<sup>th</sup> century as propaganda.