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THEATRE

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Early Christianity and the theatre

In fact, in each of these religions there is a substantial tradition of specifically religious drama well before modern times. Somewhat surprisingly, the first known Biblical drama, preserved only in fragments, was the creation of Jewish dramatist, Ezekial, who created a tragedy in Greek about Moses in the 2nd century BCE. In the Hellenistic and the later Roman Empire, as the theatre became both more associated with an oppressive rule, more decadent, and more dedicated to the suppression of such religious

minorities as Christians and Jews, the fathers of both religions condemned the theatre and its works as creations of the devil.

Ironically, in the late Middle Ages, when a literary theatre tradition re-emerged in Europe, it was within the Christian Church, where parts of the liturgy began to be enacted on special occasions, creating an atmosphere in which an amazing variety of theatre was developed. The earliest known such enactment was the *Quem Quaeritis*, c.925, a short Resurrection play. The first known medieval European dramatist was a northern German nun, Hrosvitha, who created six religious plays modelled on Terence later in this century. During the following century liturgy-based theatre spread through much of Europe except Muslim-occupied Spain. First performed inside churches and monasteries by priests and monks, during the 12th century the plays moved out into public spaces, and became large productions involving entire communities, but still maintaining their Biblical subject matter. In England, groups of such plays, called mysteries, were performed in series called cycles, and by the end of the 15th century, cycle performances were offered in several parts of Europe on festival days. In some places the cycle, which might cover only the life of Christ, or the entire story of the Bible, would be performed on different small stages, called mansions, around a central playing area. In England separate plays were often performed on wagons, called pageants, which would move in sequence about a city. Despite their great popularity, the cycles were viewed by Queen Elizabeth as too closely tied to Catholicism, and after the Church of England broke with Rome in 1534 such religious drama was banned in England (Figure 3).

Although the mystery plays are the best-known and most widely spread European religious drama in the late Middle Ages, they were supplemented by other popular forms of such drama, most importantly the miracle or saints' plays and the moralities. The miracle plays were based not on the Bible but on the lives and legends of the Christian saints and martyrs. Most of the preserved



3. Modern reconstruction of a medieval performance in Coventry, England

examples of this genre come from France, headed by Jean Bodel's *Jeu de Saint Nicolas*, from the end of the 12th century. The moralities developed around 1400 and continued to flourish until the middle of the following century. They did not deal with traditional characters, but with abstract qualities treated in a dramatic fashion. *Everyman*, the best-known medieval drama, is the outstanding example of such work.