Mediaeval English Mystery Plays, Rituals, and Archetypes

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By

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Roman de Fauvel. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 146, f. 34.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Dedication and Acknowledgements

My second book on aspects of English mediaeval history is dedicated to my wife Claire, who is always supportive and kind. It is of course also dedicated to my eldest son Alex for his inspirational writing and encouragement. I especially dedicate the book to our twins Chris and Ben. Chris for making me laugh and always showing me the funny side of things, and Ben for his commitment to studying history and helping me keep some kind of academic rigour. I am in awe of all of you.

Grateful thanks are due to the staff of the Museum and Library of Freemasonry at Great Queen Street.

Any mistakes, omissions, apocrypha, or weakness of style are my fault entirely.

AEW

"Lord, what these weders ar cold,
And I am yll happyd.
I am nerehande dold,
So long have I nappyd.
My legys thay fold;
My fyngers ar chappyd.
It is not as I wold,
For I am al lappyd
In sorow."- The Shepherds

PART ONE

ENGLISH MEDIAEVAL MYSTERY PLAYS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"I pray you all that be present
That you will here with good intent,
And lett your eares to be lent
Hertffull, I you pray"- The Banns

During the Middle Ages in England, guilds or "gilds" were associations of skilled craftsmen who worked together to regulate their crafts and protect their social, professional, and financial interests. Guilds were an important feature of mediaeval society and played a vital part in influencing the economic and social structures of the Middle Ages. They were typically shaped by the craftsmen who shared a common trade or skill (or "mystery") such as goldsmiths, haberdashers, or ironmongers. Each guild was governed by a set of rules and regulations, known as the guild's constitution, which enforced the standards for workmanship, set prices for goods and services, and regulated the behaviour of members of the guild. Guilds also provided a structure and standards for the training of new apprentices and gave support and assistance to their members, especially those who had fallen on hard times. For example, guilds might provide financial assistance to members who suffered during a period of illness or economic hardship. Membership of the guilds was highly prized, and entry to the organisation was strictly regulated and often required an apprenticeship and a journeyman period before junior members could become full members. Guilds were also responsible for the strict enforcement of their regulations and standards, and fines or other penalties could be imposed on members who were in breach of the guild's rules.

Guilds also played an essential role in the mediaeval economy, as they facilitated the regulation of trade, and ensured that goods and services met the high standards of quality that were set. They also assisted in the promotion of economic development and modernisation by encouraging healthy competition and inspiring their members to develop innovative

practices and technologies. Guilds played an important role as social institutions in mediaeval society, facilitating a sense of local pride, community and loyalty amongst their members. They were important participants in religious and civic events, and often highly influential in local politics.

Mediaeval plays were a form of theatre that appeared in Europe during the Middle Ages between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. These plays were performed as part of religious festivals and were usually intended to teach the mainly illiterate local populations about religious principles and moral standards. Mediaeval plays were sometimes performed by itinerant actors and musicians, known as wandering minstrels, who would move from town to town and perform plays for the local inhabitants. The plays were usually performed in public spaces, such as town squares or greens, and were often accompanied by music, dance, scenery, props and colourful costumes. In addition, there were several specific categories of mediaeval plays, which included mystery plays, miracle plays, and morality plays. Mystery plays were founded on Biblical stories and were typically based on events from the Old or New Testament. Miracle plays, on the other hand, were based on stories about saints and the miracles they performed, whilst morality plays were intended to teach moral lessons through allegorical characters and settings.

One of the most well-known examples of mediaeval dramatic performances is the cycle of mystery plays known as the York Cycle, which was performed in England at York during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The cycle is comprised of forty-eight individual plays, each of which was intended to be performed by a different guild, such as the fishmongers, the carpenters, or the tanners. The plays were performed continuously over a period of several days and were intended to educate the audience about the important religious themes and stories that they contained. The card makers guild, who produced the third pageant in the York Cycle were a guild of craftsman who made cards for combing wool, at the time a major industry in the area. The fullers were also a guild associated with the wool trade and oversaw the fourth pageant, which introduced Adam into paradise.

Mediaeval plays were an integral component of contemporary social life, religion, and culture, as they provided occasions for people to congregate and celebrate important religious festivals and saints' days. As well as

helping to educate the local population, they provided opportunities for actors and musicians to demonstrate their skills and abilities. In modern times, mediaeval plays are still performed in some areas and are considered a significant component of local history and cultural heritage.

Mediaeval mystery plays were performed in a variety of settings, including street performances, dramas, and religious festivals. The origins of mystery plays can be traced back to the Latin liturgy and religious services of the mediaeval church in several European countries including England, France, Germany and Spain. However, the origins of the plays themselves are still a matter of contention amongst historians. Some scholars argue that mystery plays emerged gradually from the tradition of religious processions that took place in mediaeval towns and cities, whilst others suggest that they were influenced by the performances of wandering minstrels and troubadours.

Fig 1.1 Mystery play, Flanders, 15th century. Creative Commons.

One of the most significant aspects of mediaeval mystery plays was their accessibility to the masses. The plays were performed in the vernacular languages of the local people, making them approachable for all levels of society, including the illiterate who made up most of the population. The fact that the plays were usually performed in public places such as marketplaces, town squares, and churchyards, made them publicly visible and easy to attend. The plays were often accompanied by musicians and dancers, which added to their spectacle and appeal. As the themes of the plays were religious, they usually depicted biblical stories including the creation of the world, the birth of Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection, among others. The plays were often performed as cycles, with each play representing a different aspect of the Bible. For example, the plays in the York Cycle referred to earlier each told a different story from the Bible. The cycle was performed over several days and involved hundreds of actors and other performers. The plays were often accompanied by sermons that further explained the religious themes of the plays.

Another essential historical and cultural aspect of mediaeval mystery plays was their influence on the development of drama and theatre throughout subsequent eras. The plays were a significant precursor to modern theatre, and many of the elements of contemporary drama, including character development, plot, and stagecraft, can trace their origins to the mystery plays. Additionally, the plays were early examples of community theatre, with actors and performers sometimes drawn from the local populace.

Guilds and mystery plays are closely related in mediaeval history. Many of the plays were performed by guilds retelling stories from the Old and New Testaments. These guilds were responsible for writing, producing, and performing the plays. Each guild was accountable for performing a specific play, which was often related to their trade or craft. For example, the stonemasons' guild might perform a play about the building of Solomon's Temple, while the bakers' guild might perform a play about the Last Supper. The rituals of modern Freemasonry have parallels with the traditions of the former.

Guilds and saints' days were also closely linked in mediaeval Europe. Each guild had a patron saint, who was believed to protect and watch over the members of the guild. The feast day of the patron saint was an important occasion for the guild members, and they would celebrate it with religious

ceremonies, processions, and feasts. On the day of their patron saint's feast, the guilds would often close their shops and businesses, and participate in processions through the streets, carrying banners, candles, and other religious symbols. They would also attend Mass, offer prayers, and make other offerings at the altar of their patron saint. Mystery plays also had a role to play in these religious ceremonies and celebrations.

Miracle plays were related mediaeval dramas that were also popular in Europe during the Middle Ages. These plays were religious dramas that depicted the lives of saints and miracles performed by them and were therefore also closely related to the guilds. Like the mystery plays, they too were performed in open spaces, such as marketplaces, and were intended also to be educational and entertaining. Miracle plays often involved a protagonist who was faced with a difficult situation or dilemma, and through the intervention of a saint or miracle, this situation reached a positive resolution. Reverend Oliver wrote a nineteenth century history of the Holy Trinity Guild at Sleaford (Oliver, 1837), with an account of its miracle plays as practiced in the fifteenth century. In this study he demonstrated the close relationship between theatre and ritual at the time. He describes the sequence of events of the plays as follows:

1. Proclamation of solemnity within the church
2. Celebration of Mass
3. Procession from the church to the town square with the Host and relics carried by monks and nuns
4. Procession of the trades' guilds
5. Procession of the pageant waggon with stage and set
6. Performance of the first act.

Guilds and these dramas were closely intertwined, with the plays providing an opportunity for guilds to showcase their skills and talents to the wider community. They also helped to reinforce the guilds' social status and their importance in mediaeval society. As these plays often also included themes related to the guilds' trades or crafts, they helped to educate the public about the skills and knowledge required for each profession. Sometimes guilds would collaborate on an individual play. Some of the plays were divided into several scenes or acts, with each scene focusing on a particular aspect of the story. Every guild would be responsible for producing and performing one or more scenes, which were then combined with the scenes from other

guilds to create a complete performance. This organization helped to reinforce the importance of each guild's role in the production and ensured that the play was a collaborative effort.

This book summarises the development of mystery plays, the importance of ritual in the human psyche and how Masonic traditions may have been influenced by these mediaeval dramas. As Edwards states:

> "...ritual of one sort and another forms the basis of all popular theatrical entertainment and the root from which the dramatic art itself has grown" (Edwards, 1976, 9)

A connection may be seen between ritual and the mediaeval plays, particularly the mystery plays. The Masonic ritual is a set of symbolic ceremonies and practices that are designed to teach moral lessons and impart wisdom to members of Freemasonry, a fraternal organization whose origins some historians trace back to the mediaeval guilds. In several ways like the mediaeval mystery plays, elements of Masonic ceremonial use symbolic characters, stories, and rituals to convey moral and spiritual teachings to its members. These rituals are steeped in symbolism and draw on a wide range of historical and cultural sources, including ancient mythology, biblical stories, and mediaeval legends.

One of the common features of both Masonic ritual and the mystery plays is their use of dramatic performances to convey moral and spiritual teachings. In the mystery plays, actors performed stories from the Bible and other religious texts, using costumes, music, and other dramatic devices to bring the stories to life. Similarly, Masonic ritual used and still uses symbolic performance to convey its teachings. Masonic ceremonies are often performed in elaborate settings, with members dressed in traditional regalia and performing complex rituals that are rich in symbolism. It is noteworthy that a Jewish play (circa 200 BCE) includes acts or signs of Moses that were dramatised in the same manner as those of the Scottish Masonic Royal Arch Veils ritual, using similar regalia.

Another shared similarity between Masonic ritual and the mediaeval plays is their emphasis on community and fellowship. Both the mystery plays, and Masonic rituals are performed within a community of like-minded individuals who share a common interest in moral and spiritual development. This book examines the connection between Masonic ritual

and mediaeval plays and attempts to highlight the enduring power of symbolic performance and the importance of belonging and fellowship in the pursuit of moral and spiritual improvement.

The connection between ritual and the mediaeval mystery plays is a subject of much debate amongst scholars and historians. The hypothetical connection is a tantalising one, as Freemasonry is a fraternity or brotherhood that some Masonic scholars claim has its roots in the mediaeval stonemasons' guilds whose members built the great cathedrals and castles of Europe. The mediaeval stonemasons' guilds certainly participated in the mystery plays, especially those that depicted biblical stories relating to the building of King Solomon's temple. The Ordinalia are examples of these and are three mystery plays dating to the late fourteenth century, written principally in Middle Cornish so that the local illiterate peasant population could understand them, although stage directions are Latin.

One tradition suggests that the stonemasons' guilds used the mystery plays as a means of educating their members about the connection between their craft and Christian morality. Another theory proposes that the mediaeval mystery plays were direct precursors to the rituals and symbolism of Freemasonry. The plays involved allegorical characters and symbolic imagery that may have influenced the development of Freemasonry's later rituals and symbols. Parallels may likewise be seen between the hierarchical structure of both guilds and Freemasonry. Like Freemasonry, the stonemasons' guilds also had secret signs and passwords, which were used to identify members and regulate their activities. Some historians maintain that the relationship between Freemasonry and the mediaeval mystery plays is more likely to be symbolic rather than historical. However, it is entirely possible that the plays and the stonemasons' guilds may have served as a source of inspiration and allegory for the early Freemasons, who were seeking to formulate a new system of spiritual education that used allegory and symbols to inculcate moral lessons. Freemasonry may have adopted or appropriated many of the symbols, paraphernalia and rituals of the stonemasons' guilds and integrated them into a new system of initiation and personal advancement. This seems to be the most likely link.

The possible connections between Freemasonry and the mediaeval mystery plays are complex and opaque. Whilst there is significant evidence to suggest that the mediaeval plays and the stonemasons' guilds strongly

influenced the development of Freemasonry's symbols and rituals, the exact nature of this connection is somewhat obscure. Nonetheless, mediaeval mystery plays continue to be an important part of our cultural and religious heritage, and their possible influence on the development of later theatre, drama, and ritual cannot be ignored.

CHAPTER TWO

MEDIAEVAL GUILDS

"All, hayll, all hayll, both blithe and glad,
For here com I, a mery lad!"- The Killing of Abel.

Fig 2.1 The Seal of the Guild of the Holy Cross, Birmingham. Creative Commons.

During the Middle Ages, formalised associations of merchants and artisans emerged, their main purpose being to protect their professional and financial interests and to promote their trades. Commonly known as guilds, they were a major force in the economic growth of mediaeval Europe and were to play a significant role in the development of cities and towns. The origins of guilds may be traced back to the Roman Empire when they were known as collegia. These collegia were professional associations that provided mutual support and assistance to their members. They also played a role in regulating the professions and ensuring the quality of goods and services.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, guilds continued to endure in some parts of Europe, but their influence declined, and they gradually diminished in importance. However, during the eleventh century, guilds began to experience a revival in Italy and in parts of northern Europe. This revival was due to several factors. European towns and cities were growing and becoming increasingly sophisticated, there was a rise in the new merchant classes, and there was a mounting need for skilled workers in the various trades to produce goods and services. New technologies and manufacturing techniques accelerated this.

Before the Norman invasion of 1066, England had been under the rule of Anglo-Saxons who for over five centuries had developed both a social and a political system, which moved the country "from a tribal to a territorial organization." (Payne, 2012). These foundations foreshadowed some of the principles of later feudalism with social coalitions and a nobility-based hierarchy. To keep citizens and members of the nascent guild communities informed, social events and meetings were conducted annually, to hear grievances, collect taxes, and establish new laws. The concept of fellowship was critical in the creation of the guilds.

Master craftsmen in the various trades would indenture apprentices to assist and learn the skills or "mysteries" of the profession. At the conclusion of an agreed apprenticeship period, the apprentice frequently continued employment with the master, in return for a daily wage. At this point the young person was referred to as a journeyman (from the word 'journee', meaning 'a day'). If they so desired, journeymen were free to work for a different master. This enabled them to save their earnings so that in time they could establish their own business. Before this was permitted however, the guild would set a test. Journeymen had to produce a 'masterpiece'. This was a singular piece of work to demonstrate that they were skilled and qualified to establish their own business. If they passed, then they too became masters of their craft (Aylett, 1991).

Across Europe during the Middle Ages, an increasingly high proportion of masters, as well as apprentices and journeymen, were coming from a wider geographic area, and a smaller percentage of recruits into the guild could rely on already established social networks to forge their economic and political status (Stabel, 2004). It is worth noting also that guilds treated

women particularly severely, usually excluding them from apprenticeship and forbidding any female other than a guild member's widow from running a workshop (Ogilvie, 2020). Ogilvie also concludes that:

> "Guilds, as we shall see, discriminated against women, poor men, Jews, Slavs, gypsies, migrants, people they defined as 'dishonourable' or 'untouchable', and members of minority ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups" (Ogilvie, 34, 2019).

De La Croix et al. have developed a model of interpersonal exchanges of ideas, and they reasoned that apprenticeship institutions, such as guilds that regulate the communication of implicit expertise between master and apprentice are key for understanding the performance of pre-industrial economies (De La Croix, et al., 2017).

In such a socially rarified environment, only guild members were permitted to sell within the town, except on market days. People travelled from surrounding or distant areas to trade goods at these markets. Considerably more people, including foreign merchants, attended the annual fair. This was usually held after the harvest when people were in possession of more disposable income. The market fair were also celebrations, which became more formalised over time. The guilds were influential in the development of the associated traditions and practices. However, some authors have argued that their role was not as significant as has been assumed. Reynard has maintained that:

> "It is always necessary, in considering the economic life of the Middle Ages, to bear in mind the relatively tiny place which industry occupied in Society. England, and indeed every country, was predominantly agricultural; and England differed from the more advanced Continental countries in that she was long an exporter of raw materials and an importer of manufactured goods." (Reynard, 15, 1918)

Notwithstanding this viewpoint, writers such as Richardson firmly and convincingly assert that guilds usually improved economic efficiency and promoted economic improvement (Richardson, 2001).

Initially, there were two main types of guilds: merchant guilds and craft guilds. Merchant guilds were societies of merchants who traded goods and services, both domestically and overseas. Craft guilds were associations of artisans who produced goods, often specialising in a particular form of

merchandise. Merchant guilds also protected their members against exploitation by the upper classes. Nobles attempting to extort revenue had the opportunity to seize money and goods from foreign merchants. Guilds were powerful enough to threaten to embargo the lands of these nobles, a practice known as 'withernam' in mediaeval England (Richardson, 2010). Since boycotts disadvantaged both kingdoms which depended on trade, and governments for whom levies were a major source of income, the threat of retribution discouraged mediaeval leaders from such extreme forms of exploitation.

These guilds evolved to serve several functions, including the protection of the interests of their members and the promotion of their trades. In time, they began to regulate the quality of goods and services provided by their members and established systems for the training of apprentices. They also took on important social and benevolent roles. These included the provision of financial assistance for their members in need, the building and maintenance of guildhalls, and the supporting of charitable causes.

At the end of the High Middle Ages, and into the beginning of the sixteenth century, guilds once again began to experience a decline due to several factors, including the rise of capitalism and the growth of international trade. Their decline was further hastened by the weakening of the feudal system across Europe and the rise of government regulation. Henry VIII abolished guilds during the Reformation of the mid-sixteenth century, primarily because of their conflation of religious activities with economic ones, but also because he wished to seize the property of the guilds to help meet his financial obligations. Occasionally, the occupational guilds re-emerged in some English towns, often by bribing the local authorities. However, they died out completely in most others, with only twenty-five percent of the English guilds in existence in 1500 continuing through to 1600 (Ogilvie, 2014).

By the eighteenth century, the guilds had largely disappeared in most parts of Europe. However, they left an enduring legacy, and their influence can still be seen in the modern world. The City of London is still inextricably connected to the livery companies who play such an importance role in the governance, social and political life of the capital.

During the Middle Ages, guilds played a crucial role in the economic development of countries across Europe, although relationships between guilds and government were particularly fraught in some countries. It has been argued (Wahl, 2014) that a city's urban potential, and its relative position to other cities and the degree to which it dominated were important in the occurrence of guild revolts, especially in German-speaking parts of the Holy Roman Empire. However, in England they actively promoted both trade and commerce, helped to improve the quality of the production of goods and services, and provided both professional and personal support to their members. Although guilds may be seen as largely anachronistic in the modern world, their influence and their importance may still be seen in their twenty-first century heirs in the form of professional associations, trade unions, livery companies, and chambers of commerce.

Historically, the first mediaeval guilds were formed in Italy in the eleventh century with the most powerful guilds at the time being those of the merchants and the clothmakers. Guilds became powerful agents in politics and government and were often opposed by the nobility and the church, who saw them as a threat to their power. The last of the original guilds in England was dissolved in 1847, although livery companies have continued to grow in number during the ensuing centuries. In 1516 the livery companies were allocated a strict order of precedence by the Lord Mayor of London at the time. The precedence list was fundamentally arranged around their wealth and many of the livery companies were exceptionally prosperous and extremely powerful. At the beginning of the sixteenth century there were only forty-eight livery companies in the City of London, but in the twenty-first century the number of companies has more than doubled. From the original group, twelve have been deemed to be the most important. They are comprised of the twelve most prestigious, formidable, and prominent companies in the City of London, which dominate many aspects of city life and trade. Some historians see a clear connection from mediaeval guilds through to modern times. They see recognizable lines of continuity emanating from the mediaeval guilds, through the industrial revolution, and into the twenty-first century (Merges, 2004). Certainly, there is at least a continuity of influence over the centuries.

The involvement of mediaeval guilds in religious ceremonies and performances such as the mystery plays begs the question as to why

organisations which were predominantly social, commercial, and professional would become so closely linked to the church and to religion. Apart from the powerful influence that religion exerted on the lives of all mediaeval people, Richardson sees some other factors at play. Binding together what he calls "piety and profit" (Richardson, 31, 2005) increased the risk associated with expulsion from guilds. People banished from guilds with both craft and religious responsibilities stood to lose both commercial and spiritual benefits. They suffered the loss of contact not only with their fellow craftsmen but also with their church, not only their trading partners but also their priests, and most important, not only their attainment of prosperity in this life but also their hope of passing quickly through purgatory. Guild members had sound reasons to remain loyal to their companies. A simple craft guild that did not have religious traditions may have found enforcement of its rules and regulations more difficult. Fraudsters would calculate their risks entirely on the prospect of profits, rather than jeopardy to their immortal souls.

Guilds were therefore closely tied to the religious lives of their members and sometimes also paid for the burials and dowries for impoverished families. When the Black Death caused the devastation of the population of Europe during the fourteenth century (Wallace, 2023), guilds became extended families for plague survivors. Guilds also undertook important religious functions for their members. They encouraged prayer for living and dead members, monitored church attendance, and inculcated pious behaviour. This is not to conclude that moral and ethical standards were universally unimpeachable. Over one hundred and fifty years ago, Seligman wryly observed that:

> "The standard of morality was not all too high, and the reason advanced for shutting the shops on Sunday is, that the journeymen and apprentices had wasted and purloined the property of their masters while they have been attending at their parish churches." (Seligman, 74, 1887).

Although the following chapters describe the mystery and other plays in which the guilds were so instrumental, it should be noted that frivolous entertainments were frowned upon generally and that some guilds explicitly forbade their members to:

> "danse, dyse, carde or mum, or use any gytternes, or use any cut hose, cut shoes, pounced jerkins or any berds." (Seligman, 74, 1887).

CHAPTER THREE

MEDIAEVAL MYSTERY PLAYS

"What are thou that thus
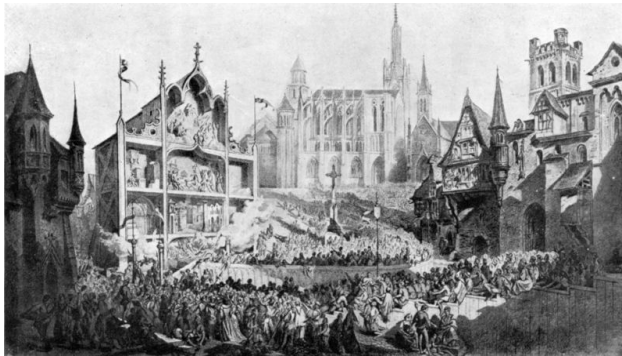*Tellys afore that shall be?*
Thou art full mervelus!"- Noah

Fig. 3.1 Depiction of a performance of the Mystery Play of Saint Clement in Metz during the Middle Ages. Creative Commons.

Mediaeval mystery plays were a form of religious theatre that emerged in the Middle Ages and then flourished in Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They were usually performed by members of local guilds in public spaces such a town square, and they often recounted stories from the Christian Bible starting with the Creation through to the Last Judgment. Each guild typically had its own biblical story, which it was responsible for retelling during special festivals or on specific occasions.

The term "mystery" refers to the skill or trade in which the individual guild specialised, and the performances were eagerly awaited and warmly received by the local populace. The mystery plays were a popular form of entertainment and instruction, and they helped to spread Christian doctrine

to a wide audience through storytelling and drama. They were also a significant cultural phenomenon, as they helped to lay the foundations for Elizabethan, Jacobean and later, modern theatre. Indeed, Fincham (2017) argues that Shakespeare may have utilized aspects of familiar themes and characters influenced by mystery plays. Although Shakespeare's characters are more sophisticated and complex, Fincher sees characters and ideas like those drawn from mediaeval plays in dramas such as *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Richard III*. Still (1921) also sees resemblances between The *Tempest* and ceremonial rites of initiation, especially in the use of natural symbolism and the concept of salvation through the seeking of that which was lost. He links the three degrees of initiation (which are also found in Freemasonry) with the elements and with human attributes as follows:

First degree	Ascent to water	Passional
Second degree	Ascent to air	Intellectual
Third degree	Ascent to fire	Revelatory

The mystery plays had their origins in the Roman Catholic Church, where they were initially performed as part of religious ceremonies, especially the liturgy. Many of these early plays were called 'liturgical dramas,' and they were typically performed on special feast days, such as Easter or Christmas.

The first recorded piece of theatre in Britain was called the Quem Quaeritis, which were four lines spoken by two choirs addressing each other in a dramatic form. The Church had quickly harnessed the power of drama as an effective means to communicate and to trigger a congregation's' response and it began to produce what eventually became known as mystery plays. The liturgical dramas were simple in form, consisting of a series of tableaux or 'stations' that depicted different scenes from the Bible. These tableaux were sometimes accompanied by music and song and were typically performed in the nave of the church.

Over time, these liturgical dramas became more elaborate, requiring increasingly sophisticated sets, costumes, and props, and they eventually were performed outside of the church buildings. As the guilds became more involved, these later plays were referred to as 'mystery plays,' which were then typically performed in public spaces, such as market squares or town halls.

The mystery plays evolved gradually into a series of cycles, in which each play told a different story from the Bible. Some of the most famous cycles are the Chester Cycle, the York Cycle, the Wakefield Cycle, and the N-Town Cycle. Each of these cycles consisted of a different number of plays, but over time they all began to follow a similar pattern. The plays normally started with the Creation of the World, and then ended with the Last Judgment, loosely mirroring the structure of the Bible. In between, the plays would portray a wide variety of well-known biblical stories, including, amongst others, the Fall of Man, the Flood, the Exodus, the Life of Christ, and the Ascension into Heaven. Most of the famous play cycles were written anonymously with the cycles being well-known and based on the regions in which they were originally performed. It is usual to know the plays by their location rather than through knowing the playwrights.

There are several other extant regional mystery plays including a trilogy of Cornish plays called the Ordinalia. The first play, Origo Mundi, dramatises the creation of the world along with other stories from the Old Testament. The Passio Christi recounts the story of Christ's trial and crucifixion whilst the final play, Ressurexio Domini follows with the resurrection and the harrowing of hell. Another Cornish mystery play called Gwrians An Bys translates from the Cornish as The Creation of the World. It seems to be based on the Ordinalia and was written two hundred years after the Ordinalia by William Jordan of Helston (Stewart, 2012).

Although sequential to a certain degree, the plays were not necessarily performed in a strict chronological order, but rather in a manner that highlighted different themes or aspects of the Christian faith. For example, the Chester Cycle begins with the Creation of the World, but it largely ignores the stories that immediately follow in the Old Testament, moving directly to the story of Noah and the Flood (Appendix Two). This is largely because the Chester Cycle is primarily concerned with the theme of salvation, and the story of Noah is seen as a prefiguration of later stories from the Old and New Testaments that deal with this subject. Mediaeval people understood themselves to be in a similar dilemma as Noah. Their choice was between an acceptance of divine will, or an intentional rejection. It was a binary decision with nothing in between. The Noah plays also raise the issue of the female response to this dilemma, a concept which is largely unexplored in other plays. Plays involving the Fall of Man are mainly