THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS DRAMA IN ENGLAND IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

Thesis for M.A. Degree in English
presented October 1952.

June D. Ottaway.

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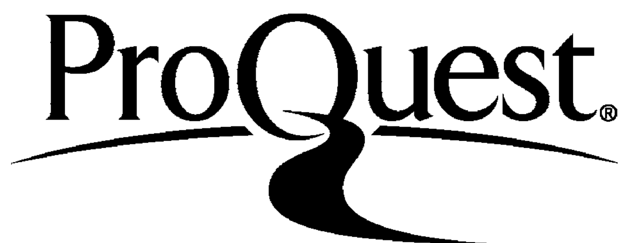

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OTTOWAY

Abstract of Thesis on

The Development of Religious Drama in England in the Twentieth Century

Presented by June D. Ottaway, October 1952, for M.A. degree in English.

The aim of this thesis is to trace the history, and examine the artistic achievement, of the modern revival of religious drama.

The thesis is divided into four sections.
In Section One, the nature of religious drama is defined, and the definition supported by a brief examination of some plays which are of that kind.
Section Two is concerned with the revival itself. In Chapter One, an attempt is made to account for it: the reconciliation of Church and Stage in England in the late nineteenth century, the interest shewn in England during that period in the Passion Play of Oberammergau, and some 'religious' tendencies apparent in the London theatre at the turn of the century, are considered. In Chapter Two, the history of the revival is traced, from 1871-1952.
Section Three is devoted to a critical examination of the most important religious plays written during the period of the revival. Special attention is paid to the work of the last thirty years. The plays are classified, for the purpose of critical discussion, under three headings - Bible Drama, the Church and the Saints, Plays of Modern Life - and are considered

in relation to the definition established above.
In Section Four, the achievement of this body of work is summed up, and its value assessed. The conclusion reached is that although few of the individual plays achieve artistic excellence, the religious impulse has given modern drama a new vitality.

An appendix giving the dates of publication and first performance of the plays considered in Section Three is added, together with a short book-list.

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Preface

There has been a dramatic renascence in England of a remarkable kind: within the space of eighty years, and after an interval of several hundred years, religious drama has been revived as a popular art. It is my aim in this thesis to attempt an explanation of the phenomenon, to trace the history of the revival, and to assess its artistic achievement. I am concerned with a movement which was starting in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and is now more vigorous than it has ever been; a movement which began in a church school-room in Shoreditch in 1871, with the representation of sacred tableaux, and which has borne such recent fruit as T.S.Eliot's play The Cocktail Party, described on its performance in New York in 1950 as 'one of the most enjoyable comedies imaginable.'

In attempting to account for the revival, I have considered developments which are of historical rather than of literary interest: the reconciliation of Church and Stage towards the end of the Victorian era, and the enthusiasm shewn by Englishmen during the same period for the Passion Play of Oberammergau. I have also given some prominence to various kinds of theatrical entertainment, such as Wilson Barrett's melodrama, The Sign of the Cross, not in themselves valuable, but indicative of a trend in public taste. In confining this enquiry into the causes to these specific developments, I do not pretend that there were no other contributory factors. I am aware that many European dramatists, the most notable being Ibsen, Strindberg

and Maeterlinck, were concerned with religious themes in many of their plays, and that their work may well have had an influence on the English religious drama. It is not my purpose here, however, to assess this influence, an influence not easily calculable, but to trace definite developments in this country which prepared the way for the revival.

Religious drama of the first quality is rare. In The Frontiers of Drama (1945) Professor Ellis-Fermor has established the reasons for its rarity, pointing to the fundamental incompatibility between large areas of religious experience and dramatic form. The fusion of form and content, essential to a work of art, is not easily achieved in this kind, and much so-called religious drama has little claim to that title. It is a convenient label, and in Section Two I have used it loosely to describe this whole body of work; but I have prefaced the entire discussion with a description of true religious drama, in order to establish a criterion by which the new work may be judged. In Section Three, that critical standard is applied, and the term 'religious drama' used only for those plays which prove, on examination, to be of that kind.

A great many religious plays have been written in this century. The Religious Drama Society's Catalogue of Selected Plays (1951) alone contains some eight hundred titles. It would be neither possible, in view of their number, nor profitable, in view of their quality, to discuss them all, and I have confined my critical examination to those plays which are wither

intrinsically valuable, or historically important, or both.

In its revival of religious drama, England is not alone. There has been a similar development on the continent, notably in France. The work of Paul Claudel and Henri Ghéon is outstanding, and such dramatists as André Obey, Boussac de Saint Marc, François Mauriac, Henri de Montherlant and Gabriel Marcel have treated religious themes. An amateur religious drama movement, similar to the one discussed below, exists in America, and bodies comparable to our Religious Drama Society have recently come into being in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Discussion of these parallel developments has no place in this thesis, but their existence is noteworthy. There would seem to be a climate of thought favourable to the revival of religious drama.

The history of the movement in England has not, to my knowledge, been previously recorded, and I have acquired much of my information in conversation and through correspondence with those who have had some part in it.

It is with warm gratitude that I acknowledge the help of Mr. E.Martin Browne, Mr. W.Nugent Monck, Sir Lewis Casson, the Rev. P.McLaughlin of St.Thomas's Regent Street, Canon Mortlock, Dean of St.Paul's, Mr. Reginald Mander, Honorary Archivist of the Vic-Wells Association, Miss Bainbridge Bell, Librarian of the Religious Drama Society, Miss Margaret Babington, Secretary of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, and Mr. Vincent Pearmain, former Business Manager for the Mercury Theatre.

For details of information I have to thank Mr. Christopher Fry, Mrs. Anne Ridler, Canon Andrew Young, Mr. Ronald Duncan, Mr. R.H. Ward, Mr. B.C. Boulter, Mr. Robert Speaight, Miss Phyllis M. Potter, Mrs. Douglas Pelly, Mr. O.V.Lawley of University College, Miss Garnham, Librarian of the British Drama League, the Rev. P.W. Seymour of St.Peter's, Vauxhall, the Rev. Henry Cooper of St. Michael's, Shoreditch, the Rev. L.M. Charles-Edwards of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and the League of Dramatists.

Information about the Morality Play Society was kindly furnished by Messrs. A.R. Mowbray, and details concerning the translations of Murder in the Cathedral and The Cocktail Party, and the sales of the latter, by Messrs. Faber and Faber.

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SECTION I

The Nature of Religious Drama.

Aristotle described tragedy as the imitation of an action that is serious, has magnitude, and is complete in itself, the imitation being effected by means of language and in the manner of drama: that is to say, by the representation on a stage of characters speaking in dialogue. This description, which I would apply to drama generally, remains an exact description, for the art form of drama, in two thousand years, has not fundamentally changed.

It is the function of art to communicate a vision of life by means of an imaginative composition which perfectly embodies it. Each form of art has its own way of interpreting life, and the way of drama, as Aristotle indicated, is by shewing character in action. It is the virtue of art that it imposes order upon life. A dramatic action is not simply a piece of life transplanted to the stage in all its disorder and shapelessness, but a sequence of related incidents, given significance by their arrangement in a coherent pattern. It is the excellence of art that in its interpretation of life, it achieves intensity. In drama, intensity derives from conflict.

Order, intensity, coherence and conflict: these things drama must have, and immediacy is its special prerogative. It cannot develop its theme with the leisure of the epic, nor unfold its story in the novelist's good time. Its business in not to relate what happened 'once upon a time', but to shew something happening 'here and now'. Drama communicates a vision of life

by the ordered but immediate representation of an action in which there is intensity and conflict.

Religion, I interpret as an awareness of the reality of the spiritual universe. The following discussion will not confine itself to drama which subscribes to a specific dogma. As I am concerned, however, with an art fostered by Western thought, it will be convenient to define religion more closely, in terms of Western religious concept. By religion, therefore, I would be understood to mean belief in the existence of a Supreme Being and in the importance of man's relation to Him.

Religious drama has a two-fold obligation. It must be at once religious and dramatic. It must effect a fusion of religious subject matter with dramatic form, if it is to achieve the integration of form and content essential to a work of art. Is such a fusion possible?

Since the nature of drama is action, it follows that only those aspects of the relationship between God and man which can be treated in terms of action are capable of dramatic expression. Belief itself, being a state of mind, and therefore passive rather than active, cannot be so treated. Religious ecstasy, being a condition of spirit, is similarly intractable. Mystic communion, the ultimate beatitude in which distinction between the self and God is lost and all conflict is resolved, can hardly be the subject of a dramatic action. Religious experience of this kind can be suggested dramatically as a moment of illumination, but it cannot be explored. There is a fundamental incompatibility between the

nature of such experience and the nature of drama. There are other aspects of the relationship between God and man, however, which are not equally intransigent. There is the phase of revelation, the manifestation of God to man in time; the phase of conversion, in which man, passing through a spiritual crisis, becomes aware of the existence of God, or, being aware of Him, sees more clearly into His nature; there is the phase of reconciliation, the attempt of the individual to reconcile his will to what he conceives to be the will of God. In each of these phases - and they may be independent and discontinuous - there is a progression, a potential element of conflict, and therefore potential drama. If religious drama is to fulfil its two-fold obligation to be at once religious and dramatic, it is with such active experience that it must deal.

From these observations, the conclusion emerges that religious drama is the dramatic expression of the relationship between God and man in one or other of its active phases. And this a priori deduction can be supported by evidence of the achievement which it presupposes. The manifestation of a God to men is the subject of Euripides' Bacchae. Conversion is the experience depicted in Aeschylus' Eumenides, in the mediaeval Everyman, in Ibsen's Brand, in Yeats' The Hour-Glass. Acceptance of the will of God is the theme of the mediaeval Brome play of Abraham and Isaac, of Milton's Samson Agonistes, of Paul Claudel's L'Annonce faite à Marie. In each of these plays a religious subject is given dramatic expression. Here is religious drama.

Let us look briefly at three of these plays: the Bacchae, Everyman, and L'Annonce faite à Marie. They belong to widely separate periods of drama and they are written within different dramatic conventions, but in each of them some aspect of the relationship between God and man is depicted in a dramatic action.

In the Bacchae, Euripides treated a legendary account of the introduction of the Dionysiac religion into Hellas, the epiphany of Dionysus. The material of the legend is subdued to dramatic form by means of the conventions of Greek tragedy: the crisis is reported by a messenger, and the nature of Bacchic ecstasy is conveyed in the odes of the chorus. The action shews the stages by which the power of Dionysus is revealed to the people of Thebes who have scoffed at the stories of his miraculous birth, and to Pentheus, King of Thebes, who has neglected to worship him. The opposition of Pentheus to Dionysus is the mainspring of the action, the manner in which it is overcome is its subject, and it moves with great speed and directness to the climax in which Pentheus and his mother are terribly punished, and the power of the God is revealed.

In treating the subject of epiphany, the Bacchae is related in kind to the mystery plays of mediaeval Europe, but where they for the most part lack the immediacy and intensity of drama, the Bacchae is highly dramatic.

Everyman depicts a very different kind of religious experience and by very different means. Here the dramatic convention is that of the morality play: the characters are

mostly personified abstractions, the action allegorical. Everyman discovers the worthlessness of things temporal, and the ultimate value of things spiritual. As Fellowship, Kindred, Goods, and finally his faculties, fail him, he is strengthened by Knowledge, Confession and Good Deeds, and the action consists in his encounters with these things. The play presents a spiritual progress and the action takes place within the theatre of the soul.

The morality play convention has severe limitations - delineation of character and the clash of character are beyond its scope - but here it is excellently used. The rapidity of the action, its steady movement towards the climax in which Everyman, dying, commends his soul to God, and the absence of any irrelevant detail, conduce to the intensity of drama.

The _Bacchae_ depicts external event. _Everyman_ is concerned with inner experience. In _L'Annonce faite à Marie_ there is a balance between the two: the inner experience of the characters is induced by external event. Here the action is naturalistic, and the theme is worked out in terms of character and situation. Claudel is concerned with 'des faibles créatures humaines aux prises avec la grâce',[1] and he shews the operation of grace through life. Violaine achieves her own spiritual salvation and that of her family by sacrifice and love, but the sacrifice is induced by circumstances. She is shewn at first rebelling against religious vocation, forced by leprosy to renounce the world,

1. A letter from Claudel quoted by Jacques Madaule, _Le Drame de Paul Claudel_, Paris, 1936, p.228.

not the subject of, the action; plays, such as St. Joan and T.C. Murray's Maurice Harte, in which the central character is understood to have religious experiences, the presentation of which is not part of the dramatist's purpose; plays, such as Rosmersholm, in which the central characters undergo a moral conversion, but do not arrive at an understanding of the nature of God. These plays are dramatic, but not strictly religious. In the second category, let us put all plays which have a religious subject, but fail to treat it in a genuinely dramatic way. Much of the mediaeval Bible drama belongs here, and much modern Bible drama. These plays are cast in the form of drama, but lacking immediacy, intensity and conflict are without its essential ingredients.

Genuine religious drama is at once religious and dramatic. It is a rare kind.

CHAPTER ONE

An Enquiry into the Causes.

A dramatic revival, such as this which is our subject, grows out of a situation. It would be an oversimplification to point to any one factor and claim it as a first cause; but it is possible to trace developments in the last quarter of the nineteenth century which prepared the way for a revival of religious drama, and created a situation in which it could emerge and prosper.

A change, which was to have important consequences, took place in the attitude of the Church towards the Stage. Drama began to recover from the decline into which it had fallen during the earlier part of the century, and to become again a serious art. And - a development of less significance than either of these, but, nevertheless, an influential one - the English discovered, and visited in large numbers, and were variously impressed by the performances of the Passion Play at Oberammergau.

Of these developments, the improvement in the relations of Church and Stage[1] may be considered first.

Clerical opposition to the playhouse derived from the Puritanism of the seventeenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, there were new influences at work in the Church, and the Evangelical Movement was succeeded by the Catholic Revival.

1. A brief account of this development is given by Allardyce Nicoll in A History of Late Nineteenth Century Drama, Cambridge, 1946, Vol. I. pp. 14-18. In view of its significance for the revival of religious drama, a fuller account of it is given here.

With this revival came a new realisation of the meaning of the Incarnation: Christ, in becoming man, had consecrated the whole of human life. The Tractarians[1.] taught the bearing of this doctrine on theology, and F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley taught its bearing on social conditions.[2.] Its application to the theatre was only a matter of time.

The theatre itself, moreover, acquired a new dignity in the second half of the nineteenth century - largely owing to the integrity of its leading actors - and underwent a virtual reform. And the work done by Kemble, Macready and Phelps in raising the status of their profession was carried very much further by Henry Irving. His knighthood in 1895, the first honour ever accorded a player by the State, was official recognition of what he strove all his life to achieve: the right of acting to rank among the arts.

Henry Irving not only helped to make the theatre a more worthy institution for the approval of the Church than it had been earlier in the century, but took the war into the enemy camp by addressing members of the clergy. In 1876, he read a paper at a conference of the Church of England Temperance Society defending the drama and claiming that

> the main stream of dramatic sentiment in all veins is pure, kindly, righteous and in a sense religious.

He urged the clergy not to denounce the Stage from their pulpits, but to use their influence rather for its purification. And he concluded:

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1. Newman, Keble, Pusey, etc.
2. See Maurice's The Kingdom of Christ (1838) and Social Morality (1869): Kingsley's Yeast (1848), Alton Locke (1850), The Water Babies (1863).

> Gentlemen, change your attitude towards the Stage, and, believe me, the Stage will co-operate with your work of faith and labour of love. It will help you in disarming and decimating the forces which make for moral evil, and in implanting and fostering the seeds and energies of moral good.[1]

The beginning of a change in the attitude of some members of the clergy is discernible in this decade, and though it cannot, of course, be precisely dated, there is evidence as early as 1877 that objection to the theatre on moral grounds was giving way to a desire to reform it. Salvation, even for actors, was seen to be an alternative to damnation.

In February, 1877, the Bishop of Manchester addressed members of the theatrical profession from the stages of the Theatre Royal and the Prince's Theatre, Manchester, and took credit to himself for being the first bishop of the Church of England to address a congregation from a stage. He said he did not wish to abolish the theatre, but to make it 'a great instrument for providing healthful and harmless recreation': and he urged those present to make good use of their opportunities for purifying the public taste.[2]

The Bishop's attitude was deplored, however, by the Dean of Carlisle, who hastened to publish a lecture which he had given some twenty-six years earlier on The Stage, Ancient and

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1. Laurence Irving quotes this passage in Henry Irving, London, 1951, p. 257, and gives the date of the address as 1875. It is printed in The Theatre, April 24th, 1877, pp.153-4, as a paper delivered 'last year': and contemporary evidence would seem to be the more reliable.
(The Theatre was published weekly from Jan. 1877 - July 1878. From Aug. 1878 - Dec. 1897 it existed as a monthly magazine. As it twice began a 'New Series, Vol. 1, No. 1' (in Aug. 1878 and Jan. 1880). I omit reference to series and volume, to avoid confusion, and give date only.)
2. His address is reported, but not verbatim, in The Theatre, Feb. 6th, 1877, pp. 21-2.

Modern: its Tendencies on Morals and Religion. In it he had denounced the Stage as a great evil, detrimental to morals and injurious to religion; and he now added a preface criticising the Bishop of Manchester's attempt to 'cleanse the Augean stable'.[1.] He was further outraged by the fact that a group of Primitive Methodists in Darlington had performed a play on the subject of Joseph and his brethren, and in a letter to The Rock[2.] he exclaimed:

> 'Primitive' indeed! ... Little do either the Anglican prelate (the Bishop of Manchester) or the Primitive Methodists really know the mischief they are surely doing.

The Rock, 'a Church of England Family Newspaper', supported the Dean[3.]; The Era, a theatrical newspaper, savagely attacked him[4.]; and various minor journals rushed to arms. The controversy between Church and Stage was in full swing.

In the autumn of 1877, a series of Sunday evening sermons on the Drama was given by the Rev. Panton Ham, a Unitarian minister, at his chapel in Essex Street, Strand. In the course of them he said he failed to see the necessity for any sweeping reform of the Stage.[5.] And in 1878, The Theatre was actually driven to protest against the extravagant enthusiasm of the Rev. S. D. Headlam, curate of St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green, who,

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1. Francis Close, The Stage, Ancient and Modern etc., London and Carlisle, 1877, p. iv.
2. March 2nd, 1877, p. 160.
3. March 9th, 1877, p. 180.
4. March 11th, 1877, p. 12.
5. Reported in The Theatre, Oct. 23rd, 1877, p. 200.

> not content with proving that there are plenty of high-class theatrical entertainments from which a Christian may derive not only harmless amusement, but actual benefit, must make out that it is an actual sin to stop away from theatres.[1]

The Bishop of London did not share his enthusiasm.

> I do pray earnestly, (he wrote in a letter to Headlam) that you may not have to meet before the Judgment Seat those whom your encouragement first led to places where they lost the blush of shame and took the first downward step towards vice and misery.[2]

And the Rev. Headlam was dismissed from his curacy. He did not lack support, however. The Church Times criticised the Bishop of London's treatment of him, and members of his congregation presented him, as a mark of sympathy, with a copy of Thackeray's works, and Gould's Lives of the Saints.

By 1878, Henry Irving was sufficiently hopeful of the new tolerance to assert his conviction that 'the prejudice against the Stage, as the Stage, is fast dying away'.[3] And in May of the same year The Theatre, discussing the two opposed schools of religious thought with regard to the drama, commended the 'enlightened, liberal, cultured' views of one section of the clergy.[4] The Rev. H. R. Haweis of St. James's, Westmoreland Street, had devoted a Sunday morning sermon to the subject and had named the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishops of Lincoln, Gloucester, Bristol and Manchester as having held out the hand of friendship to actors and acting.

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1. The Theatre, Jan. 9th, 1878, pp.379-80.
2. The letter was printed in The Theatre, Jan. 23rd,1878, pp. 405-6.
3. In an address delivered at the Perry Barr Institute, Birmingham, and reported in The Theatre, March 13th,1878, pp. 108-113.
4. In an article on 'Theatre and Church', May 1st,1878, pp.221-2.

In October 1878, discussion which aroused most interest at the Sheffield Church Congress concerned the Stage. The discussion began with 'an orthodox attack upon the theatre', but the latter was defended by several speakers, including the Bishop of Manchester; and the subject was treated, according to The Theatre[1], with 'comparative fairness.' The fact that it should have been touched upon at all was significant of the times.

The following year saw the foundation of a Church and Stage Guild by 'that uncompromising champion of the the music-halls', the Rev. Headlam. Its stated objects - to promote religious and social sympathy between the members of the Church and the Stage, to hold meetings for these purposes from time to time, and to meet for worship at least once a year - were interpreted by one critic[2] to imply respectively the introduction of curates to actresses and the promise of stage-players to go to church once a year. But the Guild survived criticism. The committee (which included the Kendals, Genevieve Ward and Rose Leclerq) said in a statement of their aims that they wished to bring together 'those who love the faith and love the Stage', and recalled that the Stage 'was among the earliest teachers of that faith through miracle plays.[3] - an interesting reminder of the potential value of drama to the Church, which it was not long to ignore.

In April 1882, an article on 'The Pulpit and the Stage'

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1. Nov. 1st, 1878, pp.255-9; 'The Church Congress on the Drama.'
2. Author of an article on the Guild, in The Theatre, Dec. 1st, 1879, pp. 245-8.
3. Ibid., July 1st, 1879, p.389.

was contributed to The Theatre by Martin Tupper, containing this observation:

> In fact we have turned right round. Lord Shaftesbury and his compeers pray and preach in the Victoria Theatre; Moody and Sankey become eloquent evangelists in the Opera House; and the pulpit is glad to welcome a coadjutor of good morals and pure religion in the once despised and long-neglected stage.[1]

Hostilities were by no means at an end but Irving's vindication of the theatre as a force for good was having effect. When he and Ellen Terry gave a recital of readings from Macbeth at the St. James's Hall in 1890, it was attended by clergymen of 'every Anglican creed and denomination.'[2] And in the same year a matinée of Henry Arthur Jones' play, Judah, was given especially for the clergy. The significance of this latter event was remarked by The Theatre:

> In inviting the clergy to see Judah, Mr. Willard is not only presenting one of their cloth, arrayed in the appropriate costume as the principal character in the play, a thing which would of itself have been considered grossly offensive twenty years ago; but he further exhibits the reverend gentleman as yielding suddenly to a great temptation, telling a lie with deliberate purpose and intention, and giving to it the added sanction of an oath. That the church-going public should not only tolerate this, but become sympathetically absorbed in the play, is in itself a wonderful fact, but that the officers of the Church themselves should attend and give a respectful hearing to it, speaks volumes alike for the catholic spirit of the clergy, and the earnest tendency of the higher forms of drama. It is hard to tell which phenomenon is the more gratifying.[3]

The Nonconformists, however, were less sympathetic. The clerical matinée was unfavourably commented upon by the Baptist

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1. Ibid., April 1st, 1882, p.217.
2. Henry Irving ~~op. cit.~~, p.524.
3. The Theatre, Sept. 1st, 1890, pp.148-9.

journal, The Freeman[1], and reproof meted out to 'clergymen of a certain section of the Established Church' who 'make no secret of their interest in the theatre', and 'openly accompany their choirs in attending a play.' The staff of The Freeman were not invited to the matinée, but would not have gone if they had been:

> We believe the tendency of the Stage is unhealthy. It is antagonistic to true religion. Its moral influence is sometimes very bad.[2]

And when an attack on the theatre was made in a sermon in 1891, by a young Methodist Minister of St. Helen's, Lancashire, The Methodist Times supported him:

> If the modern drama were the ideal and elevated and glorious thing which Mr. Irving imagined at Edinburgh, the attitude of the Christian Churches would be altered. But what is the use of ignoring ugly facts? It is inevitable that Christian Ministers should fix their attention very largely upon the terrible evils that have hitherto been identified with the theatre.[3]

That a change had taken place in the attitude of a large section of the Established Church towards the theatre was further evident in 1896 in their reception of Wilson Barrett's melodrama, The Sign of the Cross.[4] Indeed, The Sign of the Cross, in all its crude glory, was something of a turning point in the controversy. It was greeted with vociferous enthusiasm by large numbers of Anglican priests, and for many hitherto

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1. Sept. 12th, 1890, pp. 594-5: 'Parsons at the Theatre.'
2. Ibid., p.594.
3. Nov. 19th, 1891, p.1228.
[In an address on 'The Art of Acting' given at the Philosophical Institute of Edinburgh on Nov. 9th, 1891 (printed in The Drama: addresses by Henry Irving, London, 1893), Irving had made another of his spirited defences of drama. It is to this address that The Methodist Times refers.]
4. On August 26th, 1895, at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, it

hostile Nonconformists it was even the occasion of conversion.

Encomia were passed upon it by religious periodicals: The Church Times said it could claim to be 'a revival of the miracle play in modern form[1]; The Christian World spoke of it as a 'phenomenon of our times, the influence of which we believe is wholly for good'[2]. Sermons were preached upon it: an Archdeacon in Rochdale said it had 'helped many to understand the Book of Revelation as they never understood it before'.[3] And the clergy flocked to see it. A somewhat disrespectful description of the audience at one performance runs:

> It seemed to be the emptyings of the churches and chapels of London. Most of the people appeared to be unused to such surroundings. They walked as though they were advancing to pews, and took their seats with an air of reverential expectation. Parsons to right of me, parsons to left of me, parsons in front of me.... 'Ahs' and 'hear, hears' were distinctly audible, and I should not have been surprised at an 'Amen' or a 'hallelujah'.[4]

It seems likely that a certain Canon Thompson of Cardiff, eloquent in praise of The Sign of the Cross, was voicing a widely held opinion when he maintained that the treatment of such a theme on the stage was absolutely right in principle,

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began a tour of the provinces. On Jan. 4th, 1896, it opened at the Lyric Theatre, London.
1. Jan. 10th, 1896, p.52.
2. Dec. 3rd, 1896, p.924, on the publication of The Sign of the Cross as a novel. The fact that it was re-written as a novel is evidence of its popularity. The Bishop of Truro contributed a preface.
3. Quoted in The Theatre, Jan. 1st, 1896, p.58.
4. G.W. Foote, The Sign of the Cross: a candid criticism of Mr. Wilson Barrett's play. London, 1896. (This book has been mislaid at the British Museum since I ~~first~~ read it, and I am unable to give the page number.)

and that the theatre should be, conjointly with the church, an instructor in the highest things of life.[1]

A souvenir of the production[2] claimed that it had united, for the first time in dramatic history, 'Catholics, Protestants, Nonconformists and - mirabile dictu - both Jews and the Salvation Army.'

The claims of the Souvenir were probably exaggerated, but The Sign of the Cross did apparently attract to the theatre many who had formerly not attended it, and among them the Nonconformists. For some years there had been clergymen in the Lyceum audiences.[3] It remained for

> ... such pieces as The Sign of the Cross (to) capture the hearts and the imaginations of that large body of people who, though not playgoers, would like to be so if only they could find an excuse for so being. That has been Mr. Wilson Barrett's prime achievement, that he has lured to the theatre thousands who had never been there before, or, if at all had been there only incognito. He stormed Clapham and Little Bethel and carried them triumphantly. The alliance between the Church and the Stage is now an old one; but that between the Stage and Dissent dates, one may say, from the production of The Sign of the Cross.[4]

In 1897, a further step was taken in what The Theatre called 'the process of burying the old hatchet.' Sir Henry Irving was invited by the Dean of Canterbury to recite Tennyson's Becket in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral. The

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1. Reported in The Theatre, Oct. 1st, 1896, p.230.
2. The Sign of the Cross: a souvenir, London, 1896. (A copy is preserved in the British Museum Library.)
3. 'The large proportion of clergymen among the Lyceum audiences has long been a feature of that theatre under Sir Henry Irving's management'. (The Theatre, Nov. 1st, 1896, p.292)
4. Ibid., April 1st, 1897, p.199: 'What is the Theatrical Public?' by W. Davenport Adams.

appearance of a player - on May 31st 1897 - at a public function in the foremost of our cathedrals, reading a play on the life of a saint, was a sign of the times indeed. The Church was following the State in a formal recognition of the value of Irving's art.

On May 24th 1900, the Church and Stage Guild held its last service; and in a valedictory statement the Rev. S. D. Headlam said that the prejudices which the Guild had been formed to remove had 'to a large degree disappeared.'[1] By the turn of the century a hostility of some three hundred years standing had, to a large degree, ended.

The Church has become a patron of the drama in our time, and the removal of the prejudice against the Stage in the last decade of the Victorian era was the first step towards that patronage. The nature of the alteration in attitude foreshadows it to some extent. The long-standing condemnation of the Stage as essentially vicious, changed to a recognition of the possibility of reforming it. And the desire for its reformation changed to the realisation that the theatre had, potentially, a positive value as 'an instructor in the highest things of life.'

The Archdeacon of London, in April 1897, said that he believed 'the mission of the Stage to be a high one'.[2] And a paper on the Church and the Drama delivered by the vicar of

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1. Reported in <u>The Church Times</u>, June 1st, 1900, p.648.
2. Reported in <u>The Theatre</u>, June 1st, 1897, p.309.

St. John's, Waterloo Road, in 1902 recognised that

> the Drama is a powerful and popular force in our midst, full of vitality, pregnant with influence for good or for evil upon the minds and lives of the people ...[1]

The aim of the pioneers of modern religious drama was to instruct and edify: an aim to which the new realisation naturally led. The reconciliation of Church and Stage in England in the late nineteenth century was accompanied in some quarters by a vision of the art of drama as the handmaid of Christianity.

That the Oberammergau Passion Play aroused keen interest in England in the latter half of the nineteenth century is an historical fact of some curiosity. It must be briefly recorded here, because it has a bearing both on the attitude of the clergy towards drama, and on some of the tendencies in the professional theatre which will be presently discussed.

In 1850, the play was almost unknown in England. It was seen in that year, and subsequently described, by two independent English visitors. Mary Howitt's daughter went to Oberammergau from Munich (where she was studying art), at the request of the editor of The Ladies Companion[2]; she wrote an account of it

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1. The Guildsman (the monthly paper of the Guild of St. Alban, the Martyr), March, 1902, p.33.
2. Henry Chorley, newly appointed editor of The Ladies Companion, asked her 'to go to a great miracle-play of the Passion, performed that year by the devout peasants of Oberammergau ... and he begged her to write for him a description of the whole thing... She willingly complied and thus made known this remarkably striking, pathetic, but now trite subject to the English public.' (Mary Howitt: an autobiography, ed. Margaret Howitt, London, 1889, Vol.II, Ch.2, pp.57-8.)

for that journal.[1] In the same year, William Charles Lake (afterwards Dean of Durham, but at the time an Oxford undergraduate) discovered it while on a walking tour with a friend in the Tyrol; he wrote to The Times describing the play, and spoke of it to Arthur Stanley.[2]

Between 1850 and 1860, its fame was widely spread by the two Oxford Travellers, Anna Mary Howitt's account was re-printed in An Art Student in Munich[3], and there was a description of it in 'the clever English novel of Quits'[4]. In 1860, Dean Stanley went to see it for himself, and wrote enthusiastically about it in Macmillan's Magazine[5]. And after the performances in 1871, Matthew Arnold wrote:

> Everybody has this last Autumn been either seeing the Ammergau Passion Play or hearing about it; and to find anyone who has seen it and not been deeply interested and moved by it, is very rare. The peasants of the neighbouring country, the great and fashionable world, the ordinary tourist, were all at Ammergau and were all delighted; but what is said to have been especially remarkable was the affluence there of ministers of religion of all kinds ... Roman Catholic priests mustered strong, of course ... Anglican ministers at Ammergau were sympathisers to be expected. But Protestant ministers of the most unimpeachable sort, Protestant dissenting

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1. Aug. 17th, 1850, pp.113-5, Aug. 24th, 1850, pp.129-31: 'The Miracle-Play in the Ammergau'.
2. The source of this piece of information is a letter in The Church Times, March 14th, 1930, p.308. I have been unable to substantiate it as there is no reference to Lake's letter or article in the Times Index for 1850. My only warrant of its accuracy, therefore, is the statement at the end of the letter in The Church Times: 'Dean Lake was my husband's uncle, so my information is first hand.'
3. London, 1853, Vol. I, Ch. 4: 'The Miracle-Play at Oberammergau'.
4. By Jemima, Baroness Tautphoeus. London 1857, Vol. II, Ch.2: 'A Remnant of the Middle Ages.'
(The novel is so described by Dean Stanley in Macmillan's Magazine, cited below.)
5. Oct. 1860, pp.463-77. 'The Ammergau Mystery; or Sacred

> ministers, were there, too, and showing favour and sympathy ...[1].

The Church Times, in a long account of the performance, described the play as 'a phenomenon of .. peculiar interest.'[2].

In May 1880, The Theatre published an article headed 'The Ober-Ammergau Passion Play: When to See It and How to Get There'[3]., in which it recalled the 'picturesque descriptions' given of the scene in many newspapers and magazines, on its previous representation, and observed:

> ... the impressive character of the scene has got wind; excursions from all parts of Europe will take the place of pious pilgrimages.

The June issue contained a note on the crowds attending it and the difficulty of getting seats and accommodation; and the September one, a reference to

> the great representations to which 'all the world and its wife' now flock.[4].

In 1890, the performance 'was being very warmly discussed throughout the whole of Christendom.'[5]. And in 1901, The Church Times remarked on

> ... the manner in which English people have associated - one might almost say identified - themselves with the performance of the Passion Play at Oberammergau.[6].

Drama of 1860.'
1. Essays in Criticism, First Series, (revised ed.) London,1895, pp. 223-4. (The essay in which this statement appears is on 'A Persian Passion Play', and was originally printed in The Cornhill Magazine, Dec. 1871.)
2. Sept. 15th,1871, pp.392-4; 'The Ober-Ammergau Passion Play.'
3. May 1st,1880, pp.255-64.
4. Sept. 1st,1880, p.147.
5. W.T. Stead: The Story That Transformed the World; or The Passion Play at Oberammergau in 1890, London,1891, Preface.
6. Oct. 25th,1901, p.481.

The reasons for this 'association' can only be surmised. Matthew Arnold thought the audiences were attracted 'by what was at once the fashion and a new sensation of a powerful sort.'[1.] The Church Times concluded that 'the Englishman's old ineradicable love for seeing his religion before his eyes' had reasserted itself. A combination of the three reasons would seem to provide a plausible explanation.

The possibility of a similar representation in this country was a natural speculation. Opinions differed as to its desirability. Dean Stanley wrote in 1860:

> There cannot be a doubt that the same representation in London ... would, if not blasphemous in itself, lead to such blasphemous consequences as to render its suppression a matter of absolute necessity.[2.]

Clement Scott thought, in 1880, that although the scenes in the life of Christ could be given without offence at Oberammergau:

> Under other circumstances, and certainly away from these mountain surroundings it would be impious to attempt them.[3.]

And when, in 1879, a Passion Play was performed in the Opera House at San Francisco, The Theatre had expressed the fear that its sober reception in America might lead to the revival of a project, announced some months before but soon afterwards abandoned, of producing such a piece in London.[4.] It had raised the following objection:

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1. Essays in Criticism, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.223.
2. Macmillan's Magazine, loc.cit., p.466.
3. The Theatre, July 1st, 1880, p.9. (Clement Scott was editor of The Theatre at this time.)
4. This reference is the only knowledge I have of the project. Of its renewal, The Theatre remarks: 'It is not improbable that Mr. Hollingshead, actuated by religious fervour and a desire to put money in his purse, will make the experiment at the Gaiety.' (May 1st, 1879, pp.215-6.)

The production of a religious play in this country could do no good and might do much harm ... The cause of religious progress does not stand in need of assistance from the stage... and would in all probability be materially retarded by the introduction of Passion Plays. The spirit of scepticism is abroad and such performances would often inspire irreverent mirth rather than graver sentiments.[1]

The opposite point of view was maintained by the Irish actor-dramatist Dion Boucicault, who thought that 'this style of the English drama in its most ancient form' could be revived, provided its presentation were spectacular, and the dialogue sung:

To gain a success it would be necessary to have an immense edifice that would allow of the grandest spectacular effects, as represented in the open air at Ober-Ammergau, and, as in Oratorio, every word should be sung, combined with the grandest creations in sacred music. By this method the very natural prejudices that many felt on the subject would be allayed, and the cause of religion might, as in olden times, be greatly benefited by the production of the sacred drama.[2]

'This', observed The Theatre, 'is a point on which opinions may reasonably differ.'

No such production materialised, and opinions continued to differ. The Church Times in 1896 declared itself to be 'not among those who desire the transplanting of the Passion Play to this country.'[3] Bernard Shaw, in 1897, wrote:

That we shall have Passion Plays in the London theatres ... has for a long time past been as certain as any development under the sun can be; and the sooner the better. I have travelled all the way to Ober-Ammergau to see a Passion Play which was

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1. Ibid., p.216.
2. A letter from Boucicault to a friend, quoted by The Theatre, June 1st, 1879, p.322.
3. Jan. 10th, 1896, p.52.

> financed in the usual manner by a syndicate of Viennese Jews. Why should not people who cannot go so far have a Passion Play performed for them in Shaftesbury Avenue? The fact that they want it is proved, I take it, by the success of Barabbas. (A novel by Marie Corelli, published in 1893.) Depend on it, we shall see Mr. Wilson Barrett crucified yet; and the effect will be, not to debase religion, but to elevate the theatre, which has hitherto been allowed to ridicule religion but not ~~yet~~ to celebrate it.[1]

Mr. Wilson Barrett was not in fact crucified, and the possible edification of such a spectacle never put to the test; but the prophecy, though unfulfilled, is an interesting comment on public taste.

The popularity of the Oberammergau Passion Play in the last decades of the nineteenth century was a phenomenon of peculiar interest. It had one direct consequence and an influence of incalculable extent. It inspired a London priest to attempt a representation, in tableaux, of the story of the Nativity - a representation which was the forerunner of the movement within the Church to revive religious drama.[2] It suggested - as The Sign of the Cross was to do, though in a rather different manner - that drama could be, conjointly with the Church, 'an instructor in the highest things of life.' And the enthusiasm it aroused was interpreted by certain theatrical managers as evidence that there was an audience in this country for religious drama. In this they were probably right. Their interpretation of religious drama was more questionable.

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1. Our Theatres in the Nineties, London, 1932, Vol. III, p.45. (A review of Wilson Barrett's The Daughters of Babylon, originally printed in The Saturday Review, Feb.13th, 1897).
2. See below p.39.

A condition preliminary to the revival of religious drama in this century, was the revival of drama itself towards the end of the last. The theatrical fare of the mid-nineteenth century consisted largely of melodrama, farce and mutilated classics, with a strong emphasis on spectacle; and Matthew Arnold was justified in saying in 1879:

We in England have no modern drama at all.[1]

Its seeds had been sown, however, in the sixties, by the naturalistic comedies of T. W. Robertson,[2] and in the eighties and nineties it emerged. Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero brought seriousness back to the theatre by treating drama as a serious art, and its reputationwas further redeemed by the work of Shaw and Granville-Barker.

A steady infiltration of Ibsen's work began in the seventies with the publication of some of his plays in translation, and led to their performance in the following decade;[3] and that section of the public which became acquainted with Ibsen's achievement in drama could no longer doubt its potential value as a great art.

J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre existed between 1893 and 1897 to give special performances of plays of literary and

1. Irish Essays and others, London, 1882, p.231: 'The French Play in London'. (Originally printed in The Nineteenth Century Review, August, 1879.)
2. Society (1865), Ours (1866), Caste (1867) etc.
3. A list of early translations, performances and articles about Ibsen's plays in England in this period is given in U. Ellis-Fermor's The Irish Dramatic Movement, London, 1939, Appendix 3. For a more detailed account of the introduction of Ibsen's work in England see Halvdan Koht, The Life of Ibsen, 1931, Vol. II, pp.114-5 and 266-70.

artistic rather than of commercial value; the Stage Society was formed in 1899 to

> secure production of plays of obvious power and merit which lacked, under the conditions then prevalent on the stage, any opportunity for their presentation.[1]

And from 1904-7, under the management of Vedrenne and Granville-Barker, the Court Theatre adopted a similar policy.[2] These three theatrical enterprises between them launched the early work of Shaw and Granville-Barker, continued the introduction of Ibsen to English audiences, and presented plays by other contemporary European dramatists, such as Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Wedekind, Sudermann and François de Curel. By its renascence in England, and this evidence of its vigour on the continent, drama was restored to a position of some reppect; it was reinstated as one of the arts.

It is not my purpose here to trace the growth of the new drama in England,[3] but to consider just those aspects of it which relate to the present discussion. The aims of its chief advocates are especially interesting in this connection, for among the 'serious interests of life' with which, they insisted, drama should deal, they specifically included religion.

In 1882, William Archer wrote:

> I should like to see in England a body of playwrights, however small, whose works are not only acted, but printed and read... The large proportion would probably deal with phases of modern life (following the natural bent of the age)... and the element

1. The Incorporated Stage Society: Ten Years, 1899-1909, London, 1909, p.7.
2. See Desmond MacCarthy, The Court Theatre, London, 1907.
3. For a useful survey see A.E.Morgan, Tendencies of Modern English Drama, London, 1924.

> of seriousness would generally arise from the relation of the work to some moral, social, political - may I add religious? - topic of the day, or better still of all time.[1]

The failure, in 1882, of Tennyson's play, The Promise of May, relating to the topic of religious scepticism, he attributed not to the subject of the play but to 'the total lack of tact with which the subject was handled.'[2]

In 1883, Henry Arthur Jones, the apostle of the new drama, expressed his confident hope that England was

> on the threshold of .. a living, breathing modern drama - a drama that shall not fear to lay bold and reverent hands on the deepest things of the human life of to-day and freely expose them, and shall attempt to deal with the everlasting mysteries of human life as they appear to nineteenth century eyes.[3]

And in January, 1885, he contributed an article on "Religion and the Stage" to The Nineteenth Century Review in which he defined the domain of drama as 'the whole of the nature, and heart and passions and conduct of men', defended the right of dramatists to depict 'modern religious life', and attacked those people who

> feel uneasy if religion is broached on the stage, because, having conveniently dispensed with it to a great extent in regulating their everyday lives, they think it may be very well allowed to remain in its present condition of honoured and respectable superannuation, as an affair of Sundays and parsons and churches and chapels.[4]

In 1896, Shaw joined him in defending the right of the

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1. English Dramatists of To-day, London, 1882, p.4.
2. The Theatrical World, Vol. I for 1893, p.44.
3. The Renascence of the English Drama, London, 1895, p.24. (from an article entitled 'The Theatre and the Mob', originally printed in The Nineteenth Century Review, Sept. 1883).
4. Ibid., p.35. The article was provoked by the reception of Saints and Sinners. See below p. 29.

dramatist to treat religious subjects. He wrote an article on 'Church and Stage' for The Saturday Review, in which he warned 'the man who regards (religion) as ~~man~~ only a watertight Sunday compartment of social observance' that

> the British drama is steadily annexing the territory on which he feels so uncomfortable. And whoever tries to obstruct that advance will be inevitably ground into the mud.[1]

And he approved of the annexation.

> I wish I could instil some true religion into the minds of the theatrical profession (he wrote in a subsequent article). Then, ceasing to regard the Church as an institution for which they have the greatest respect, and whose good opinion they are anxious above all to conciliate ... they would begin to regard it seriously as their most formidable rival, not only in business, but in the attachment, the esteem, the veneration of the masses... It is by identifying its religion with its art that Bayreuth draws people to its theatre as Mecca draws its pilgrims.[2]

He believed, as we have seen, that the effect of identifying religion with dramatic art would be 'not to debase religion, but to elevate the theatre.'

Neither Archer nor Jones nor Shaw was setting up to be a defender of the faith. They were defenders of the drama; and their anxiety to establish religion as a proper subject for the playwright arose from their desire to elevate the drama. If its subjects were to be limited to the trite and the frivolous, it would remain 'the plaything of the populace, a thing of convention and pettiness and compromise.'[3] Only by concerning itself with 'the everlasting mysteries of human life' could it

1. Our Theatres in the Nineties ~~op. cit.~~, Vol. II, p.23.
2. Ibid., pp.70-71.
3. ~~Vaudeville Theatre, Sept. 25th.~~ The Renascence of the English Drama, p.37.

ever reach forward to be a great art.

Immediate achievement fell somewhat short of intention - the plays of the nineties are not remarkable for the light they throw on the everlasting mysteries of human life - but the intention itself was laudable and not unfruitful. If drama did not become great in the hands of Pinero and Jones, it at least became serious, and its elevation thus far made it a possible vehicle for the treatment of religious subject matter.

Opinions as to what constituted religious subject matter varied, however. Archer had proposed the discussion of religious topics; Henry Arthur Jones, the depiction of 'modern religious life.' And the latter amounted to little more than the inclusion of parsons among the dramatis personae: a step more remarkable for the controversy it aroused than for any intrinsic interest.

Saints and Sinners, produced in 1884,[1.] having a priest as its hero and being set in a vicarage, had a mixed reception. 'Half the audience thought I was canting and the other half thought I was blaspheming'[2.] wrote Jones; and nearly all the critics commented unfavourably on the use of quotations from the Bible. Against this criticism he defended himself, in 'Religion and the Stage'[3.], by pointing to Shakespeare's use of biblical phraseology; and he maintained his right to depict 'modern religious life.'

In Judah (1890) and Michael and His Lost Angel (1896) he

1. Vaudeville Theatre, Sept. 25th.
2. The Renascence of the English Drama ~~op. cit.~~, p.320.
3. Ibid., pp.26-55.

went further, presenting ministers of religion in the throes of moral conflict and succumbing to temptation. Judah was sympathetically received and even given a respectful hearing by the clergy, but the church scene in Michael and His Lost Angel gave offence and the play was withdrawn after ten performances.[1] Shaw sprang to its defence in 'Church and Stage',[2] citing Goethe's Faust, Bach's St. Matthew Passion, Van Uhde's picture of Christ, Wagner's Parsifal, and the Passion Play at Oberammergau, and insisting that the theatre may claim its share in 'the common spiritual heritage.'

The share of Henry Arthur Jones' plays was, in fact, small. None of them has a religious theme in the sense defined above, and the moral conflicts which his priestly heros undergo are singularly unconvincing. But the question of 'religion and the stage' was raised by them; and that was important.

Jones was undeterred by criticism and opposition. Churchmen, treated sympathetically or unsympathetically, in major or minor roles, are to be found in most of his plays. He was determined to portray 'English religious life'. With Candida (1895) Shaw joined him in annexing vicarage territory for the drama, and in 1897 a dramatised version of Barrie's The Little Minister was played. The stage clergyman rapidly became a familiar figure, and remains one.

In this connection it may be remembered that by 1893 the

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1. Lyceum Theatre, Jan. 15th-25th, 1896. For an account of its production and withdrawal, see Doris Arthur Jones, The Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones, London, 1930, pp.174-80.
2. Our Theatres in the Nineties Vol.II, pp.21-8.

Lyceum audiences were familar with Henry Irving's renderings of three historical churchmen - Cardinal Richelieu[1], Cardinal Wolsey[2], and Becket[3] - and that with Becket he achieved one of his greatest successes. Tennyson's play dwelt on the romantic - historical aspect of its subject rather than the spiritual one, but, nevertheless, Irving made credible Becket's transformation from statesman and soldier to saint and martyr by the deep sincerity of his performance. A description of his attitude to the part, given by Laurence Irving, is of interest here for several of its implications:

> Unquestionably in Becket, Irving established a closer affinity with his public than in any other piece he played; he promoted, in a sense, a spiritual rather than emotional exhilaration in his audience. As Becket, he never stopped to play upon their emotions; his rendering of the part was most remarkable for its superb restraint and for the awful serenity of its repressed passion. Thus he came, like Becket, to regard the Augustinian habit which he assumed as the vestment of an officiating priest ... Having striven all his life to wring from the Church a benediction on his art, he persuaded himself that in the performance of Becket, spanning the gulf between Church and Stage, he and his audience united in an act of worship.[4]

Possibly Irving's audiences were largely unaware that they were uniting in an act of worship, but the theatrical public had a variety of experiences in the nineties, and it is significant that Irving's Becket was among those which pleased them most.

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1. In Lord Lytton's Richelieu, first produced at the Lyceum, Sept. 27th, 1873.
2. In Shakespeare's Henry the Eighth, first produced at the Lyceum, Jan. 5th, 1892.
3. In Tennyson's Becket, first produced at the Lyceum, Feb. 6th, 1893.
4. Henry Irving ~~op. cit~~, p.560.

To the gallery of minor clerics and eminent prelates, Christian martyrs were added, in 1895, with The Sign of the Cross. And with this play a commercial exploitation of the religious emotions of the public began.

The Sign of the Cross, having made its triumphant way through the provinces, reached London on January 4th, 1896, and was greeted with rapturous enthusiasm.

> What I then beheld (wrote a member of the first-night audience) was an audience notoriously addicted to the frothiest and most frivolous forms of entertainment, hushed to silence, spell-bound, and thrilled by dramatic pictures of the gradual purification by love and faith of a licentious Pagan, and the ecstatic exaltation of the early Christian martyrs. The whole house, it was apparent, was unable to resist a certain indefinable but undeniable spiritual charm evolved from an atmosphere of unassailable purity, simplicity and faith... The exquisite language of Holy Writ - frequently pressed into the dramatist's service - was listened to with a reverence that bordered upon awe. And as for the note of solemn reality struck during the final scene - of the gentle maiden-martyr's last moments upon earth - it affected that vast throng as never in my life had I seen a theatre audience impressed.[1]

The more discerning critical view of the piece as 'sheer crass melodrama... larded with scriptural unction'[2] did not detract from its commercial success.

When in April 1896, The Sign of Hulda was produced, its author, Stuart Ogilvie, was, according to William Archer

> reproached - or credited - with a desire to exploit the existing craze for so-called 'religious drama.'[3]

The play, a sentimental study of a saint struggling with her

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1. The Idler, March 1896, pp.270-2.
2. William Archer, The Theatrical World Vol.IV, 1896, p.xxii.
3. Ibid., p.106.

conscience, was in fact written before the craze set in, but its production may have been timed to profit by it. It was not a religious drama at all 'in the accepted sense of the term', Archer caustically pointed out, being 'neither pretentious, nor illiterate, nor brutal'.

In January 1897, romantic religion from the pen of Maris Corelli reached the stage, in a dramatised version of her novel, The Sorrows of Satan.[1] And on February 6th 1897, Wilson Barrett, stimulated by the success of The Sign of the Cross, presented another 'religious drama', The Daughters of Babylon. For this the Old Testament was pressed into the dramatist's service, and the captivity of the Jews in Babylon used as a background to the love story which was the chief pre-occupation of the plot. Shaw found it deplorable as literature and puerile in its conception of religion, but yet momentous as marking an advance from 'the exploitation of illiterate and foolish melodramatic conventions in which nobody believes, to that of a living contemporary reality.'[2] Its pseudo-religious sentiment appealed to a similar sentiment in the public. The drama was at least in touch with life.

Following in the wake of these pieces came Ben-Hur in 1902 - a dramatisation of the best-selling novel by the American author Lew Wallace. The story of a Jewish patrician youth set against the background of the life of Christ, it has

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1. The popularity of Marie Corelli's novels in the nineties is another indication of the kind of religious sentiment to which The Sign of the Cross appealed.
2. Our Theatres in the Nineties Vol. III, p.44.

as its climax Christ's healing of Ben-Hur's leprous mother and sister. The Censor did not allow the figure of Christ to be introduced, but the scene of His entry into Jerusalem was shown with 'a shouting multitude' and great 'theatrical display.'

The Bible was again exploited for theatrical purposes in September 1905, by another American importation, Joseph and His Brethren. A series of scenes in dumbshow, linked by a narrator in strict evening dress who sang his part from a side-box, it was presented at the Coliseum as the chief item in a variety bill which included music, dancing and ventriloquism. The Church Times deplored the fact that the Bible had been 'seized upon by an interprising syndicate of public entertainers to furnish a "turn" in the biggest music-hall in London' and remarked with considerable alarm that the first representation was received with high favour by a full house.[1.] The piece was apparently intended to appeal to a different section of the public from that which applauded the melodramas of Wilson Barrett. It was less pretentious; the scriptural story was used as good theatrical material, and not as an incitement to pseudo-religious feeling.

> The incident in Potiphar's house - could we expect it otherwise? - is dwelt upon at some length, (observed The Church Times) and with a good deal of dramatic force.[2]

The representation ended, however, with a song of praise by a choir.

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1. Sept. 29th, 1905, pp. 363-4.
2. An interesting parallel to this treatment of the story is the more recent use of biblical material to provide film scenarios, e.g. David and Bathsheba.

Another appeal to the 'religious' susceptibilities of the theatre-going public was made in 1908 by Jerome K. Jerome's The Passing of the Third Floor Back. The trepidation that Johnston Forbes-Robertson was reported to have felt in introducing a play 'of such delicacy and mystic suggestion',[1] was completely dispelled by its reception. The 'mystic suggestion' proved to be very much to the popular taste, and the part of the Christ-like Stranger whose sojourn in a Bloomsbury lodging-house changes the lives of all its inmates, was one of Forbes-Robertson's most popular parts. Sentimental, and in no true sense Christian, it was nevertheless considered to be a spiritual play,[2] had a wide appeal, and was several times revived. 'A greater enthusiasm have I seldom seen in a theatre', wrote Max Beerbohm.[3] He thought the play 'vilely stupid', but concluded that blasphemy paid.

Of these vulgar, various, and distant approximations to religious drama which so delighted London audiences in the early years of the century, one more must be chronicled: the production of The Miracle in the arena at Olympia in 1911. The most elaborate and costly 'religious' spectacle the theatre has so far staged, it was inspired by mediaeval drama! C. B. Cochran, who, with F. H. Payne, presented it, 'saw Olympia as a cathedral, pictured a great rose window at one end, great columns,

1. The Theatre, 1909, Vol. I, No. 6, p.174.
2. Even The Church Times critic was impressed by the 'saintliness' of the Stranger, and wrote: I do not say that the play is great. I do say that it is tender, that it is helpful, and that it is on the side of true righteousness. (Sept. 11th, 1908, p.328.
3. Around Theatres, London, 1924, Vol. II, p.384.

mysterious lighting, a rare setting for a mediaeval mystery play.[1] Karl Volmoeller, a German dramatist, supplied him with a scenario based on an old High German legend,[2] and bearing not the slightest resemblance to a mystery play, and Max Reinhardt was responsible for the staging of it. The story concerned the misdemeanours and eventual penitence of a nun, and the miraculous intervention of a statue of the Madonna on her behalf. The whole of the action was mimed, to the accompaniment of Humperdinck's music, and the production involved a cast of thousands, a vast orchestra, nine stage managers, and an elaborate telephone system. Whether the public was attracted by the 'greatest-show-on-earth' character of the performance, or by the spiritual implications of the story, such as they were, it is impossible to say; but enthusiasm ran high, and the attendance figures were enormous.[3]

> Of the whole achievement, all I can say by way of summing up, (wrote the critic of The Church Times) is that it is a development of the drama which has to be reckoned with by all of us to whom religion is sacred.[4]

The Sign of the Cross, The Passing of the Third Floor Back, The Miracle, and kindred theatrical enterprises, stand at a far remove from genuine religious drama; but they are developments which have to be reckoned with, and not altogether as a danger. They encouraged a new willingness on the part of the public to

1. Charles Graves, The Cochran Story, London, 1951, p.38.
2. Maeterlinck had used the same legend for the plot of Soeur Beatrice (1899).
3. An attendance of 10,200 persons at the performance on Feb.28th 1912 was recorded in The Times, Feb. 29th, 1912. The run lasted for twelve weeks, the longest lease of the arena obtainable, from Dec. 24th, 1911-March 16th, 1912. A revival of The Miracle at the Lyceum in 1932 was a failure, however. Taste had changed.
4. Dec. 29th, 1911, p.889.

have religion broached upon the stage, and that in itself was an achievement.[1]

The restoration of drama as a serious art in this country in the last years of the nineteenth century, the insistence of Archer, Jones and Shaw that religion was a proper subject for the playwright, the education of a small section of the public in modern European dramatic achievement by the Independent Theatre, the Stage Society and the Vedrenne-Barker seasons at the Court, and the preparation of a wider public for the stage presentation of religious subject matter by such pieces as The Sign of the Cross, played their various parts in preparing the way for a revival of religious drama. The way had already been paved by the reconciliation of Church and Stage; and the Englishman's 'old ineradicable love for seeing his religion before his eyes' had been warmed into new life at Oberammergau.

A situation conducive to the revival was thus created by a conglomeration of strangely diverse but mutually influential developments.

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1. It is interesting to find that when Sir Philip Ben Greet addressed a 'Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Guild of Players' in 1928 he remarked that The Sign of the Cross, though fustian, had done 'an enormous amount of good.' (The Church Times, March 23rd, 1928, p.339.)

CHAPTER TWO

The History of the Movement: an outline.

The modern revival of religious drama is, like Cerberus, a gentleman with three heads at once. There was a movement within the Church to revive the mediaeval practice of instructing by means of dramatic representation; a movement, largely outside the Church, to revive specimens of the mediaeval drama itself; and, partly as a consequence of these, the gradual emergence of a body of new religious plays. These were separate developments, neither of simultaneous birth nor of parallel growth, but each influenced the other and from time to time they converged.

The movement within the Church began first; in 1871. The revival of mediaeval plays dates from 1901. The writing of new religious plays began slowly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and has steadily gathered momentum ever since.

Modern religious drama did not grow out of Church ritual as the mediaeval drama had done, but it began in a way to some extent comparable: by the presentation at Christmas and Easter of tableaux depicting scenes from the life of Christ. These representations were devotional in character, and though not held in churches at first, they were intended as religious services.[1]

The Englishman's addiction to the Oberammergau Passion Play in the last decades of the nineteenth century has already

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1. I have traced this early movement in the Church by exploring the columns of The Church Times, and my information is derived therefrom except where otherwise stated. The Church Times showed itself keenly interested in the movement, and may I think be considered a reliable guide to the most noteworthy stages of its progress.

been described. It was after a visit to the production of 1871, that a London priest, the Rev. N.D.Nihill, vicar of St. Michael's, Shoreditch, conceived the idea of presenting to his parishioners, on similar lines but in tableaux only, the story of the Nativity. He proceeded to arrange an Order of Service, consisting of Gospel narrative and sacred songs and illustrated by living pictures. The service was held for the first time in the school-room of St.Michael's at Christmas 1871, on which occasion the vicar himself was the Choragus and sang the Gospel narrative, the curate was Joseph, and the other parts were played by men and women of Shoreditch.

'It at once attracted considerable attention, the general opinion being that the results of the novelty were both devotional and helpful', runs an article in The Church Times[1]. some thirty years later, describing this early enterprise.

The idea was copied a year or two later by St. Peter's, London Docks, where representations were given intermittently down to 1894, 'obtaining wide celebrity and drawing large audiences, not only from the neighbourhood, but from the suburbs and even the provinces'. In 1886, St.Clement's City-road followed suit, and held the service annually; in 1904 it was still being rendered there 'with artistic skill and religious

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1. Jan. 15th,1904, p.81. This article, the first reference I have found to these Tableaux, states that they were inspired by the performance of the Oberammergau play, and first given at Christmas 1871 or 1872. It seems likely that Father Nihill produced his Tableaux in the year he saw the Passion Play, 1871; unlikely that he nursed his inspiration for some eighteen months. I have therefore arbitrarily adopted 1871 as the year of the Tableaux.

feeling.'

In 1898 a Service, modified in detail from the Rev. Nihill's arrangement but similar in form, was held in the Church hall of St. John the Divine at Kennington, and became 'a marked feature of the Christmas festival in that parish.'[1.] The tableaux appear to have been more effectively staged at St.John the Divine than elsewhere and to have achieved wider fame. In 1904 The Church Times referred to them as 'perhaps the most interesting and artistic example of the religious drama to be seen in England';[2.] and in 1903 had remarked that 'the accounts of them in the secular press have been, without exception, sympathetic - one might say reverent.'[3.]

In 1900, the bi-centenary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was commemorated in various parts of the country by 'many excellent tableaux illustrative of missionary history and enterprise'.[4.] And in 1902 Easter tableaux were presented in the parish of St. Thomas, Bethnal Green; the priest, in alb and cope, singing 'an appropriate portion of the Holy Gospels' between each group of incidents depicted, and 'a chorus of twelve young women from the Girls' Club' singing Easter hymns. The result was said to be 'very satisfactory to all concerned'.[5.]

Meanwhile the Bethlehem Service, as the versions of Father Nihill's original arrangement came to be called, had established itself in the favour of many churchmen, and was given, year by

1. C.T., Jan. 4th, 1901, p.11.
2. C.T., Jan. 8th, 1904, p.49.
3. C.T., Jan. 2nd, 1903, p.23.
4. C.T., Oct. 25th, 1901, p.481.
5. C.T., April 11th, 1902, p.450.

year, in an increasing number of London parishes, and in some provincial ones. By 1904 it had been introduced at Evesham, Paul's Walden, Edmonton, Southend-on-Sea, Hoo All Hallows and Ilkeston, and by 1910 it had even spread to Scotland, the United States and South Africa!

The aim of these representations seems to have been to 'kindle and reinforce devotion', and to 'bring home the mysteries of the Gospel to many whose knowledge is small, and whose imagination is sluggish'[1.] - an interesting parallel to the mediaeval motive for dramatic performances.

From the successful staging of tableaux, it was a short step to the staging of simple plays, and the aim here too was to instruct the ignorant in matters of church history.

As far as I have been able to ascertain, the first play written in England in modern times for performance to members of a church congregation was The Conversion of England, an ecclesiastical drama, by the Rev. Henry Cresswell. Written at the request of the vicar of St. Peter's, Vauxhall, in whose parish it was first produced,[2.] it was performed in 1889 at Croydon (on which occasion Archbishop Benson furnished some of

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1. C.T., Jan.5th,1906, p.24.
2. I have been unable to discover the date of this first performance, but it seems probable that it took place between June 1888 and June 1889. The present incumbent of St. Peter's has kindly furnished me with a copy of the Church accounts for that period, in which there is an entry: '"Conversion of England", Vicar - £10.0.0.' As he has discovered no earlier reference to it, it seems likely that this was its first production. The play was published in 1885, however, and may possibly have been played before June 1888. A daughter of Father Herbert, the vicar at that time, recalls the performance - but not the date - and tells me that it was played by the curates, and members of her father's family, she and her sister being the Anglo-Saxon slaves seen by Pope Gregory in the Forum at Rome.

the properties), and in Canterbury in 1897 during a commemoration of the coming of St. Augustine to this country. On January 13th 1898 it was played in the Great Hall of the Church House, Westminster, and attended by members of the Press, among whom was George Bernard Shaw.

> It has come at last, (he wrote in The Saturday Review)... the parson has carried the war (between Church and Stage) into the enemy's country. He has dramatised the lessons of the Church and is acting them with scenery, costumes, limelight, music, processions and everything complete.[1]

And The Church Times noted with approval:

> The production of this ecclesiastical drama at the Church House is a step towards the re-establishment of relations which originally existed between the Church and the Stage ... It may be said that this is a fresh beginning for one of the greatest means of education; for as a Puritan preacher, John Stockwood admits, "a playe wyth the blast of a trumpette wyll sooner call thyther a thousande than an houre's tolling of a bell bring to the sermon a hundred ..." Perhaps a great future lies before religious plays, for the unimaginative Englishman learns far more readily through the eye than the ear.[2]

Another early play, the next whose performance is chronicled in The Church Times, was also concerned with the conversion of England. It was given in 1901 in Torquay. The presentation of tableaux there in the previous year had 'so visibly laid hold of the imagination of the children and the many workers engaged in them, and aroused such genuine interest in the spectators', that the assistant curate of St. Michael's Mission 'felt emboldened to offer them a proper ecclesiastical

1. Our Theatres in the Nineties, ~~Op. cit.~~ Vol.III, p.292.
2. Jan. 21st, 1898, p.63.

play to be acted among themselves.' The play - St. Augustine of Canterbury[1], by the Rev. H. M. Downton - was acted with earnestmess and simplicity, and 'witnessed by the district with enthusiastic delight'.

> .. We believe that there is here a most efficacious and homely means of teaching the Catholic Faith, which will appeal to the people as in times past ...

observed The Church Times.[2]

In 1902 an attempt was made in Birmingham to instruct the people by means of the drama. The vicar of St. Patrick's Church, the Rev. G. J. A. D'Arcy, wrote a play on the life of its patron saint - St. Patrick: a sacred drama[3] which was performed in September of that year. He followed it in 1904 with St. Columba, Apostle of Scotland[4], and in 1907 completed the trilogy with St. Aidan, Apostle of England.[5]

These early plays had, as one might expect, little dramatic quality. In The Conversion of England there is some attempt at characterisation, but dramatic unity and tension are lacking, and it is significant that the scenes are called 'tableaux'. St. Augustine of Canterbury has some excellently comic dialogue for English rustics[6], but is stiff and

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1. Pub. Torquay, 1902, as 'an ecclesiastical and historical play for parochial use.'
2. Oct. 25th, 1901, p.481.
3. Not in the British Museum Library.
4. Not in the British Museum Library. 5. London, 1906.
6. cf. the mediaeval treatment of the Shepherds in the Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play. It is interesting to find a comparable freedom in the modern treatment of this kind of character. And the author's explanation may be noted: 'the play ... would have failed in its purpose had it not aimed at kindling the imagination and riveting the attention of those little accustomed to sustained habits of thought ... I would plead this as an apology for the prominent part taken by English rustics and for the use of the modern local dialect.' (Preface to play.) ~~Op. cit.)~~

artificial in its treatment of the Romans, and the Court of Ethelbert, King of Kent; and it is loosely constructed, being episodic in form. Of the Rev. D'Arcy's St. Patrick, the Church Times correspondent made the telling observation that 'judged by the ordinary standard of dramatic representations, the piece may be better described as a narrative poem arranged for representation in costume than as a "drama".'[1.] And that desdription applied equally to the other two plays of the trilogy. A beginning, however, had been made.

In this decade there was also a series of Church Pageants, inspired no doubt by the tableaux successes. The first was held at Sherborne in 1905, as part of a festival to celebrate the founding of the See by St. Ealdhelm. The enthusiasm it aroused all over England was 'evidence of general satisfaction that a religious spectacular ceremony should once more be held within this land.'[2.] In 1908, a Pageant at Dover 'adopted action and speech as its main features rather than ... processional.' It was produced by Louis N. Parker, a playwright and theatrical producer, with 'a sense of historical and religious reverence.'[3.] And in 1909 an English Church Pageant was held in the ground of Fulham Palace, with the warm approval of the Bishop of London. The relation between pageantry and drama makes it probable, I think, that this movement

1. Sept. 26th, 1902, p.348.
2. C.T., June 9th, 1905, p.764.
3. C.T., July 31st, 1908, p.155.

encouraged the performance of plays.

The references to such performances are still infrequent at this time. A Christmas play, The Two Courts,[1] written by the wife of the vicar, was given at St. Gabriel's Parish Hall, Cricklewood, in 1910, and a 'new morality play' with the engaging title, The God-Shop,[2] was given in the parish of St.Mary's, Primrose Hill in 1911. A Mystery Play in honour of the Nativity of Our Lord,[3] by Monsignor Hugh Benson was praised in a leader article on 'Church and Stage'[4] in December, 1911, and in Jan. 1912 The Monks of the North[5], written by the Rev. E.E.C.Elford was performed by the schoolteachers and children of St. George's Leicester, with the warm approval of the Church Times:

> It is greatly to be hoped that other parish priests will follow the example of the Vicar of St. George's in taking this method of awakening in their people a more vivid interest in the history of the early days of their Holy Catholic Church.[6]

Doubtless there were performances which passed unnoticed by the Church Times, but the observation made in January 1913 that

> possibly it is just as well to do it ('this devotional drama') by means of unspoken posturings for the present, though we shall see a revival of the true miracle plays shortly,[7]

suggests that tableaux were still in vogue, and a widespread

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1. Not in the British Museum Library.
2. Not in the British Museum Library.
3. In the British Museum Library.
4. C.T., Dec. 15th, 1911, pp.817-8.
5. London, 1927, Parish Plays No.3. (The play was originally published in Manuals for the Million, but this edition is not in the British Museum Library.)
6. Feb. 9th, 1912, p.184.
7. Jan. 10th, 1913, p.59.

revival of plays only anticipated.

In 1913 a proposal was made to give a perfomance of a play in a church. The tableaux and plays already mentioned had all been given in halls of school-rooms; but when a group of Newcastle players gave a Nativity play[1.] in 1904, the parish hall which was used for the purpose, was prepared exactly to represent the chancel of an early Norman church, and no doubt many felt that the setting and atmosphere of a church would enhance the effect of their performances. The proposal made in 1913 to give B. C. Boulter's The Mystery of the Epiphany[2.] in the Church of St. Silas-the-Martyr, Kentish Town, was rejected, however, by the Bishop of London. In 1918, satisfied that Mr. Boulter's play was scriptural and devout, the Bishop allowed its performance in St. Silas - and one of the earliest performances of a play in Church in modern times took place.[3.]

To Mr. Boulter and the St. Silas Players belongs the credit for another notable event: the writing, and performance in church, of a modern Passion Play. The Mystery of the Passion

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1. 'The "book" was collated from various MSS. - chiefly those of the York cycle of Gild Plays and the Ludus Coventriae.' (C.T., Feb.12th, 1904, p.195.)
2. London, 1920.
3. Mr. Boulter, who has kindly informed me of the incident, claims that the perfomance of his play in St. Silas in Feb. 1918 was the first performance of a play in a church in modern times. But The Church Times (Jan. 11th, 1918) records a performance of A. M. Buckton's Eager Heart in Christ Church, South Banbury, and states that that was 'the first example of a play being actually produced within the walls of a church.'

was written after a visit to Oberammergau in 1920, and played in the Church of St. Silas-the-Martyr in 1921. From the Church Times came the following tribute:

> Mr. Boulter, the St. Silas Players, and Father Whittingham (the vicar) have earned the gratitude of every lover of the Catholic religion by their reclaiming of the art of the theatre for the greater glory of God.[1]

And when the play was given there again in the following year The Times noted that

> many were unable to gain admission, the church being full. Some of those present sat on the floor, while others occupied the pulpit and the pulpit-stairs ...

and added

> The Vicar and Players are to be congratulated on a representation which makes the Church's Good Friday message effective as perhaps nothing else can.[2]

The revival of plays - or rather, of the habit of writing and performing plays - forecast by the Church Times critic in 1913, was anticipated with some accuracy. A body of amateur drama, that is to say, of plays written by clergymen, by their wives, by 'ladies of the parish', by people whose interest lay primarily in propagating the Gospel and only secondarily in drama as a means to that end, had come into being. It grew rapidly, and is still growing. In 1920 the Church Times had to admit:

> If we dealt faithfully with all the 'Mystery' plays to which we have been invited during the past fortnight, it would be at the cost of banishing all else from our columns.[3]

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1. April 1st, 1921, p.314.
2. April 17th, 1922.
3. Jan.6th, 1920, p.69. The placing of the word 'Mystery' between inverted commas was dictated by the looseness with which it had come to be used. Distinction in terminology between mystery, miracle and morality plays was not maintained.

It would be neither possible nor profitable to deal faithfully with this body of drama in this thesis or to trace its growth further. The greater part of it is called drama by courtesy rather than by definition, and with 'narrative .. arranged for representation in costume' we are not concerned. But the fact that it has come into being, and that it began and flourished in the Church is significant and important.

The patronage of drama by the Church in our time began officially in 1928,[1] but it was heralded by this early movement.

The first production of a mediaeval play in modern times, and an event of outstanding importance in the history of the revival, was William Poel's production of Everyman in 1901. It was played by the Elizabethan Stage Society[2] on July 13th in the Great Hall of the Old Charterhouse. In August the Society played it in the Quadrangle of University College, Oxford; in October, at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton. On March 17th 1902 they gave it again in London, at St. George's Hall, and on

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The terms appear to have been used indiscriminately and interchangeably for any play with a religious message and a high moral tone.
1. See below, p.62.
2. Founded by Poel in 1894 for the performance of plays, mainly by Shakespeare, under conditions approximating to those of their original production.

June 11th at the Imperial Theatre; in 1903, on April 6th, at the Coronet Theatre, and on May 23rd at the Court, and in April of the same year at the Opera House, Tunbridge Wells. The list of its performances[1] is evidence of its popularity. It was William Poel's one financial success, and the public, the press and the Church were apparently unanimous in their approval.

> The Elizabethan Stage Society's performance of Everyman deserves a place of its own among the stage performances of our time,[2]

wrote Arthur Symons.

> Thanks to the efforts of Mr. William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society, we have now an 'Oberammergau' in London, (J. T. Grein observed) ... If it were but sufficiently known among the millions of London, it would be the talk of every man.[3]

The Church Times saw in its production an attempt to 'regenerate the stage, and to restore it once more to its educational and religious purpose':

> No-one who has witnessed it could venture to say that the Stage is an exploded force. The simple story of Everyman as here set forth is as potent an influence as many sermons ... It might be wished that the Lenten preachers would send their people to hear this morality, for it moves upon the lines of the original stage-play, which was 'for begetting in the people a right apprehension of the Scriptures.'[4]

And the audiences, according to C. E. Montague, were representative of a cross-section of the community. They were

> made up of hardened playgoers seeking new thrills, of devout persons casting back to pick up the authentic scent of mediaeval devout thought, of literary students improving an opportunity, of archaic sentimentalists

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1. See William Poel and his Stage Productions, London, 1932.
2. Plays, Acting and Music: a book of theory, London, 1909, p.81.
3. J.T.Grein, Dramatic Criticism, London, 1904, Vol.IV (1902-3), pp.59-61.
4. March 21st, 1902, p.363.

> projecting themselves into the dear delightful Middle Ages, of theatre craftsmen edified by the cunning simplicity of the business with the bells 'off', and the electrifying patness of the successive exits of Everyman's friends ...[1]

and they were 'breathlessly quiet, polite, respectful.'

It is difficult to assess the influence of Poel's revival of Everyman, but it would appear to have been considerable. It was a spur to the movement already under way in the Church[2], it encouraged the writing of new religious plays[3], and it led to further rediscovery of mediaeval ones.

The first new religious play of the movement outside the Church was Laurence Housman's Nativity play Bethlehem. The Censor refused it a licence because of its scriptural subject matter, but it was performed privately on December 17th 1902, in the Great Hall of the Imperial Institute, and produced by Gordon Craig.

> I can but profess my appreciation of Mr. Housman's earnestness and his enthusiasm as a pioneer of a renascent form of art

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1. Dramatic Values, London, 1911, p.236.
2. The Church Times stressed its importance in 1928 in referring to 'that recovery by the Church of the Drama which began in the first year of the present century when the fifteenth century morality, Everyman, was revived' (June 1st,1928, p.661.) The recovery in fact began earlier, as we have seen, but Everyman accelerated it.
3. And even the composition of an Everyman cantata, first performed at Leeds in Oct. 1904, and subsequently 'by almost every choral society of the first rank in the British Isles.' The work is by Walford Davies. (Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians.)

wrote J. T. Grein.[1] He was justifiably less enthusiastic about the play itself:

> ... the impression remains that Bethlehem would not have been written but for Ammergau and Everyman. It is a product of imitation - of solemn, reverent, assimilating imitation.

On December 7th 1904, Eager Heart, 'a Christmas Mystery-Play' by Alice Buckton, was performed in the hall of Lincoln's Inn. A sentimental treatment of a legend that every year on Christmas Eve the Christ Child makes a progress through the land, the play is poorly written; but it enjoyed an immense and persistent popularity and was revived annually for many years. The critic of The Times perhaps accounted for its popularity when he referred to the charm of the staging and the appeal of the subject matter, describing the performance as

> an artistic pleasure, and a tender and reverent appeal to associations of which few are destitute.[2]

In 1905, the English Drama Society was founded by W. Nugent Monck (a member of the original cast of Poel's production of Everyman) for the purpose of reviving old English plays. Its first production was of The Interlude of Youth[3], given in December 1905 at the Bloomsbury Hall. And in 1906, the Society presented the Nativity group from the Chester cycle of mystery plays, first at a small studio in Chelsea, subsequently at the Bloomsbury Hall, and on November 29th in the old Music Hall at Chester. The performances were private, but were played to

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1. Dramatic Criticism, Vol. IV, ~~op. cit.~~, pp.205-7.
2. Dec. 8th, 1904.
3. Monck discovered this play where Poel found Everyman, in A Select Collection of Dodsley's Old English Plays, London, 1874, ed. W. C. Hazlitt.

packed audiences, and on one occasion 'even Her Royal Highness Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyle, turned up', Mr. Monck recalls.[1] 'There was undoubtedly an audience for these plays.'

The Church Times, however, so warm in its praise of Everyman was less happy about therevival of the Chester plays.

> It is hard to explain it (runs a notice of the performance at Chester) but there does seem to be some coarsening of the idea of the Incarnation in the presentation of such dramas ... On the whole it would seem to be best to cry 'Halt'.[2]

And when Eager Heart was played on December 10th 1906 - at the Beaumont Hall, Mile End, E. London, to an audience of 1,200 - the Church Times maintained its preference for Miss Buckton's play:

> While there is difference of opinion as to the advisability of producing the miracle plays such as at Chester, there cannot be two opinions with regard to the mystery play such as Eager Heart.[3]

Performances of Everyman and Eager Heart continued. In 1907, The Times observed:

> Lent never goes by now without a revival of Everyman, and the inevitable is taking place this year in three afternoon performances at the Coronet and Kensington Theatres.[4]

and in 1912 it recorded the sixtieth performance in London of Eager Heart, 'before a large and reverent audience.'[5]

Meanwhile, a revival of The Interlude of Youth had taken

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1. Much of this information I have acquired in conversations with Mr. Monck. He has no record of the exact dates of the English Drama Society productions, and I am therefore obliged to omit them except where I have been able to discover them from other sources, such as The Church Times.
2. Dec. 7th, 1906, p. 760.
3. Dec. 14th, 1906, p. 797.
4. March 22nd, 1907.
5. Dec. 19th, 1912.

place in Birmingham, quite independently of the English Drama Society's production.[1]. It was given privately in the autumn of 1907 by a group of players which was later to become the Birmingham Repertory Company. On October 2nd 1907 it was given a public performance at St. Jude's Mission Hall at the invitation of the vicar of St. Jude's Church, the Rev. Arnold Pinchard, who had previously arranged the visit to Birmingham of William Poel's production of Everyman, and whose interest in 'all that is best in the drama' was 'well-known'.[2] The performance on October 2nd was preceded by 'a short address on the Religious Drama'. In Christmas week, 1907, the company gave four performances of Eager Heart, and this production was revived annually for several years. It was by coincidence, however, and not by design, that these first two productions of The Pilgrim Players, as they called themselves, 'had as their aim an appeal to the religious sense.' The Players' work 'was all done in the service of the Drama, not of the Church.' [3]

In 1909, Nugent Monck proposed to revive the Passion group from the mediaeval Ludus Coventriae, but at a late stage in the rehearsals the police intervened, at the instance of a common informer. The representation on a public stage of the person of Christ is forbidden by the Blasphemy law.

In the same year the Censor refused a licence to Bernard

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1. 'In the course of his reading, Jackson (the founder of the Birmingham Rep. Theatre in 1913) had, in Dodsley's Old Plays, come across The Interlude of Youth, and he at once recognised its dramatic force. He and his friends rehearsed it and gave it a private performance ...' (Bache Matthews, A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, London, 1924, p.2.)
2. Ibid., p.3.
3. Ibid., p.10.

Shaw's The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet, on the grounds of blasphemy, and thus suppressed what its author describes as 'a religious tract in dramatic form':[1] the play depicts the conversion of a rough horse thief. When it was submitted for a second time, the Censor agreed to license it on condition that all passages 'implicating God in the history of Blanco Posnet' should be omitted; and Shaw remarked the irony of this:

> All the coarseness, the profligacy, the prostitution, the violence, the drinking-bar humor into which the light shines in the play are licensed, but the light itself is extinguished. I need hardly say that I have not availed myself of this licence and do not intend to. There is enough licensed darkness in our theatres today without my adding to it.[2]

The Censorship is not the least of the forces with which modern religious drama has had to contend.

1911 saw a very different development in the history of the movement: the foundation of a Morality Play Society - doubtless a delayed reaction to Poel's revival of Everyman - 'for the production of original moralities and other modern plays of a like nature.' Its first production, The Soul of the World, by its founder Mrs. Percy Dearmer, took place in the Great Hall of the Imperial Institute on December 1st, 1911. A free, though reverent treatment of Gospel narrative, it also was rejected by the Censor. Shaw, in an attack on the Censorship, described the (private) performance of the play as

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1. Prefaces by Bernard Shaw, London, 1934, p.398.
2. Ibid., p.437. (The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet was first performed, after much controversy, on Aug. 25th, 1909 at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, where the English Licensing Laws do not apply. For an account of the controversy, see Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, London, 1913, pp.140-68).

'extraordinarily impressive and touching.'[1] The Times, having no axe to grind, found it less impressive, pointing out that it fell short of 'the hearty, matter-of-fact certainty of the early miracles', and was 'too vague in its message to furnish a stout excuse for its existence.'[2] The Church Times complained of its lack of simplicity-

> so soon as the audience was gripped by simple incident, it was suddenly tormented by symbolism.[3]

- and concluded that the drama with biblical incidents was no longer possible in England.

In February, 1912, the Morality Play Society gave a programme at the Court Theatre of three 'modern morality plays' - Lady Gregory's The Travelling Man, Yeats' The Hour Glass[4], and Epiphany by the Rev. J. G. Adderley - to an audience that was 'keenly interested'.[5] And in an article headed 'The Drama: a Retrospect',[6] the Church Times remarked on 'the extraordinary boom in religious plays during the past winter.' The Morality Play Society had given 'performances of the highest significance and utmost value in revealing the possibilities of dramatic influence'. The Miracle had set England wondering at itself';

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1. Daily Telegraph, Dec. 5th, 1911.
2. Dec. 2nd, 1911.
3. Dec. 8th, 1911, pp. 793-4.
4. The Irish Literary Theatre, aiming 'to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland', produced several notable religious plays: The Hour Glass (1903), The Travelling Man (1910) Lady Gregory's The Story Brought by Brigit (1924) and Yeats' Calvary (1920) and The Resurrection (1934). The last three will be considered below (Section III) in relation to the English religious drama.
5. C.T., Feb. 16th, 1912, p. 219.
6. Feb. 23rd, 1912, pp. 258-9.

Mr. Poel had shown us 'that consummate art is not at all inconsistent with the highest moral motive'; and in other parts of the country 'similar enterprises on a smaller scale' had been attempted.

Of these similar enterprises, two of the more noteworthy occurred in Norwich and Birmingham. In Norwich, Nugent Monck had formed The Norwich Players who gave performances, in 1910 and 1911, of the mediaeval morality play The World and the Child, and of The Annunciation and The Flight into Egypt from the Wakefield cycle of mystery plays. The performances took place in his drawing room, before packed audiences. In Birmingham, the Pilgrim Players had presented Everyman in April 1911; in the summer of the same year they had taken The Interlude of Youth on a tour of neighbouring villages; and in April 1912 they played it at the Liverpool Repertory Theatre. The Liverpool Courier remarked on the unfamiliarity of the entertainment:

> The Players ... are veritably pilgrims in an alien world of theatredom, and the morality play which they submitted last evening is as strange and unusual among ordinary stage works as an old-time pilgrim would seem in the midst of the Lord Street saunterers of to-day.[1]

In 1911, Monck had taken a production of The Interlude of Youth from Norwich to Lambeth Palace, where it was performed in the crypt of the chapel to the great satisfaction of many eminent members of the Church who were present in the audience.[2]

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1. Quoted in A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.38.
2. Mr. Monck tells an entertaining story of how, during a break between the rehearsal and the performance, the Bishop of London took Lady Lechery in to dinner.

And in January 1912 he produced three plays from the Wakefield cycle[1], and a modern Nativity play by the Irish scholar Dr. Douglas Hyde, at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. The Church Times thought this venture 'highly meritorious and successful.'[2]

It had been wrong in supposing the drama with biblical incidents no longer possible in England. On November 29th, 1912, the Morality Play Society presented another scriptural play by Mrs. Dearmer, The Dreamer, a study of Joseph. And on September 2nd 1913, a play based on the same Old Testament story - Joseph and His Brethren, by Louis N. Parker, the producer of pageants - was presented at His Majesty's Theatre by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. It was the first play based on the scriptures to receive the sanction of the Lord Chamberlain for performance in a public theatre; but it has no other claim to distinction. 'In Joseph and His Brethren I try to tell the entire history of the man whose name the play bears', runs the author's note[3], and perhaps little more need be said by way of criticism. The play is painstakingly thorough in its translation of the biblical story, but

> no more than a magic-lantern entertainment such as you shall find in any church schoolroom.[4]

The by now steady progress of the revival was slightly retarded by the outbreak of war in 1914, but not for long. The Morality Play Society came to an end sometime during the

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1. The Annunciation, The Second Sehpherds Play, and The Flight into Egypt.
2. Jan. 19th, 1912, p.85.
3. Joseph and His Brethren, London, 1913. (The note is printed as a foreword, with no page number).
4. Poetry and Drama, London, Vol. I for 1913, p.469.

war[1], and the number of representations of Bethlehem Tableaux in London was 'not nearly so large as in pre-war times.'[2] There were various events of importance, however. The Norwich Players opened their new premises - the Old Music Room - in 1914, with a production of the Nativity group of the Chester cycle. Rutland Boughton set to music the old Coventry Nativity play, called the resulting 'opera' Bethlehem, and presented it for the first time at the Glastonbury Festival of 1915.[3] And at Christmas 1915, a mystery play was produced at the Old Vic. It was called The Star of Bethlehem and was a combination, by Professor Gayley of the University of California, of 'a number of well-known plays of the kind, including the Wakefield Shepherds Play, and portions of the Coventry Nativity Play, particularly the Herod scenes.'[4]

> In happier times the production of a mystery play at the Royal Victoria Hall ... would have been a striking event.[5]

In March 1916, Everyman was staged at the Old Vic. by Philip Ben Greet, who, according to a programme note, had presented it over a thousand times in the cities and colleges of America; and for the next twelve years Everyman was a regular feature of Old Vic. Lenten entertainment, being played

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1. Messrs. A.R.Mowbray & Co., who have furnished me with this information, are unable to date it precisely.
2. C.T., Jan. 5th, 1917, p.20.
3. 'Bethlehem and The Immortal Hour were our two most popular pieces, both having been acted by our players in various places, as well as being given by other bodies of performers.' (Rutland Boughton, The Glastonbury Festival Movement, 1922, Somerset Re-prints No. 03).
4. C.T., Jan. 7th, 1916, p.20.
5. Ibid.

on the Tuesday afternoon of Lent, and twice daily on the first three days of Holy Week. The performances were not immediately popular, but they became so.[1] Audiences were helped towards appreciation by introductory addresses, a custom begun in 1917 when, on one occasion, Mr. H. B. Irving 'dealt with the Miracle play, analytically and comparatively', and on another, the Rev. E. Brook Jackson 'gave an outline of the history of the drama in its connection with the development of religion.'[2] And speakers during the following eleven years included members of the Church, the theatrical profession, and the nobility.[3] The work done by Poel in the first decade of the century in making Everyman known, was ardently and worthily continued by its annual production at the Old Vic. from 1916 to 1928.

Three other religious plays found their way into the Old Vic. repertory during this period. The Coventry Nativity Play was given at Christmas 1918; a modern Nativity play, The Hope of the World by Father Andrew of the Order of Divine Compassion, in 1919 and 1920; and the Shepherds' Play of the Chester cycle in 1924, 1925 and 1926.

Meanwhile, the writing of religious plays had been taken up by a poet of greater stature than Miss Buckton and Mrs. Dearmer. John Masefield's Passion Play, Good Friday was given its first performance, by the Stage Society, at the Garrick

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1. 'When Everyman was first produced at the Old Vic. as a Lenten feature of the programme, it was a case almost of compelling the people to come in ... But year after year the Management persevered, and year after year the enthusiastic few increased; until last Lent the house was usually full at all performances.' (Old Vic. Magazine, March, 1924).
2. C.T., March 23rd, 1917, p.268.
3. The Lord Bishop of Southwark, the Lord Bishop of Stepney, the Rev. Dr. Scott Lidgett, Lady Henry Somerset, G.K.Chesterton

Theatre on Sunday February 25th 1917; and The Times described the poet's work as 'not unworthy of his high theme'.[1] His Old Testament play, A King's Daughter, was played on May 25th 1923, at the Oxford Playhouse; and his second Passion Play, The Trial of Jesus, an elaboration of the first, was privately performed in Masefield's own theatre in his garden at Boar's Hill, on May 29th 1925.

In 1922 the first volume of what was to become a body of religious drama in itself was published: Laurence Housman's Little Plays of St.Francis. In a preface to them, Granville-Barker wrote:

> It is surely a very salient sign both of our new drama's vitality and of the fact .. that its life is now truly a part of the people's life, when it turns - and quite simply and normally turns - to religion for a topic ... One sees very shortly a Guild of the Players of St. Francis being formed with these plays for its text-book. Will they tramp, barefooted and brown-frocked, round the English countryside as their prototypes tramped Italy? ... They will be welcome for certain. They had better be ready to play in a tent by the roadside. But, as often as not, the parson may come out to meet them.[2]

Their performance was not quite in this manner, but they achieved a wide popularity. The Glastonbury Festival gave the Little Plays, in Housman's own phrase, their 'send-off.'[3] One was performed during the Festival of 1921. In 1922, a full programme of Little Plays was given, and Housman shared equally

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St.John Ervine, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, William Poel, etc.
1. Feb. 27th, 1917.
2. Little Plays of St.Francis, London, 1922, pp.XIV-XV.
3. For an account of the writing and early performances of these plays, see Housman's autobiography, The Unexpected Years, London, 1937.

with Boughton the time over which the Festival extended: an arrangement which continued until 1925. After the 1926 season - for which Little Plays and Prunella formed the entire programme - a small travelling company played the former in 'about a dozen large towns', and ended its tour with a week at the Polytechnic in London. The Times critic was left with the impression that 'not all of them gained anything by being performed.'[1]

But performed they were, and continued to be, by amateurs all over the country. In a preface to the second series, published in 1931, Granville Barker stated that the Little Plays were acted

> ... by all sorts of people in all sorts of places - performances of them by hundreds (quite literally) a year.[2]

In January 1925, the Dramatic Society of University College, London, had begun a series of annual performances of the Little Plays which lasted until 1939[3]; and this tradition led to the doubling in number of the plays, for the Society pestered him for more. Followers of St. Francis - an additional four plays 'of the early Franciscan legend' - had been published in 1923. The Comments of Juniper - containing another six - in 1926. But

had the University College Dramatic Society not

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1. Nov. 16th, 1926.
2. Little Plays of St. Francis, Second Series, 1931, p.X.
3. During its war-time evacuation to Wales, the College gave a programme of Little Plays at Aberystwith in 1940 and at Bangor in 1941. In 1947, the College having returned to London, annual performances were resumed until 1950, when owing to many difficulties they had to be discontinued.

> continued so faithfully to produce my plays from year to year, some at least - perhaps most of the Second Series, and all that came after[1]. - would never have been written.[2]

The movement within the Church was flourishing in the twenties. A Pageant of the Holy Nativity, given in the parish of St. Mary's, Graham Street, at Christmas 1922, was revived at Chelsea Town Hall in 1923, and pronounced by the critic of The Church Times 'the most joyous, the most glorious, and the most moving to devotion of all the plays and tableaux I have seen.'[3] A Miracle Play of the Christ Mass by Prebendary Hibbert was performed at Tewkesbury Abbey on December 27th 1923; and in February 1924, The Church Times expressed the opinion that

> the revival of the mediaeval custom of acting Nativity and Passion Plays in church is altogether admirable.[4]

In 1928, the seal was set on the revival of this custom, and a new relationship between the Church and drama began. After consultation with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Dean of Canterbury - Dr. George Bell, now Bishop of Chichester - invited John Masefield to write a Nativity Play for performance in Canterbury Cathedral. Gustav Holst wrote the music for it, Charles Ricketts designed the costumes; and The Coming of Christ

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1. Nunc Dimittis: an Epilogue, 1933. Four Plays of St. Clare, 1934. (The Society had asked for parts for women.)
2. The Unexpected Years, ~~Op. cit.~~ p.359. The popularity of this particular contribution to modern religious drama may be gauged in one way by the fact that by 1937 the Little Plays had brought Housman 'more profit than any of my other books up to date.' (Ibid., p.363.)
3. Dec. 14th, 1923, p.695.
4. Feb. 1st, 1924, p.110.

was performed on Whit Monday and Tuesday, May 28th and 29th 1928, in the nave of the Mother Church of England. The Times spoke of the 'rare and curious pleasure to be had from the performance of Mr. Masefield's mystery play in Canterbury Cathedral.[1] The Church Times referred to the performance as an 'event of the highest significance as marking an important stage in (the) recovery by the Church of the Drama.'[2] And Charles Ricketts remarked in a letter to a friend, 'The Canterbury Mystery has been a tremendous success... Mary Pickford and Oberammergau not in it, a real National event.'[3]

After 1928, one event trod upon another's heels, so fast they followed. The Religious Drama Society - 'an interdenominational body offering advice and help on every aspect of religious drama' - was founded in 1929, with Dr. Bell as its president, its object being

> To foster the art of drama as a means of religious expression and to assist the production of plays which explore and interpret the Christian view of life.

In the same year, the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, formed by Dr. Bell in 1927, held the first of their Festivals of Music and Drama. Drama at this first festival consisted of Everyman and Dr. Faustus, the former being played before the West Door of the Cathedral, and the latter in the Chapter House, by Nugent Monck's Norwich Players. In 1930, a Director of Religious Drama was

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1. May 29th, 1928.
2. June 1st, 1928, p.661.
3. Self-Portrait, taken from the Letters and Journals of Charles Ricketts, ed. Cecil Lewis, London 1939, p.400.

appointed in the Diocese of Chichester by the new Bishop of Chichester, Dr. Bell, in the belief that

> through Religious Drama, religious truth may be brought home afresh and the imagination healed and stirred.[1]

The duties of this officer were 'to assist and supervise all the work of the parishes, and to supply Religious Drama of a kind or quality which the parishes could not achieve, where such was desirable.' Productions of Paul Claudel's L'Annonce faite a Marie, and Henri Ghéon's La Vie Profonde de S. François d'Assise, in translation, were among those supplied. They were played by the Chichester Diocesan Players, a small group of ex-professional actors, formed by the newly-appointed Director, Mr. E. Martin Browne. In December 1930, a School of Religious Drama, arranged by the British Drama League, and with Mr. Martin Browne as its Chief of Staff, was held at Bournemouth. It was a course of practical instruction in the production of religious plays. Between 1930 and 1939 Directors of Religious Drama were appointed in the Dioceses of Guildford, St. Alban's, Bristol and Chelmsford; and in others the job was done through a committee. And each of these developments gave a further impetus to the writing and production of religious plays, of which only the more important can be mentioned here.

Gordon Bottomley was invited to write a play for the octocentenary celebrations of Exeter Cathedral in 1933, and his The Acts of St. Peter was performed in the nave of the cathedral on June 27th of that year. In the same year T. S. Eliot was

1. C.T., Sept. 26th, 1930, p.393, quoting the Bishop.

invited to write the choruses for a pageant-play to be performed at Sadler's Wells Theatre in aid of a fund for the building of forty-five churches in Outer London. And this invitation - issued by Mr. Martin Browne at the suggestion of Dr. Bell - was responsible for bringing Mr. Eliot into the arena of the theatre[1], and so was to have an important consequence for modern religious drama. The Rock, with Mr. Eliot's choruses, was performed at Sadler's Wells from May 28th to June 9th, 1934.

In 1935, the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral resumed the policy of commissioning new plays begun there by Dr. Bell in 1928; T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral was written for performance in the Chapter House during the Festival of 1935.

> In the service of religion, few arts can be more effective than the drama, itself by origin a liturgical act (wrote The Church Times critic on the publication of the play.) Recently in many countries there have been plays about religion... Death in the Cathedral (sic) is more than a religious play; it is an act of faith... Here drama returns to its origins; here is liturgical drama.[2].

And The Times observed significantly:

> Over modern religious drama there is often spread a kind of pious mist, timid and thickly traditional. This has been cast off.[3].

From 1935 to the outbreak of war in 1939, a new play was given each year in the Chapter House at Canterbury: Charles

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1. Eliot's earlier dramatic poem Sweeney Agonistes: Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama, was not intended for performance. It first appeared in The Criterion, in instalments, 1926-7, and was published in book form in 1932. It was produced by the experimental Group Theatre in 1935.
2. June 14th, 1935, p. 729.
3. June 17th, 1935.

Williams' Cranmer of Canterbury in 1936; Dorothy Sayers' The Zeal of Thy House in 1937 and her The Devil to Pay in 1939; and in 1938 Christ's Comet by Christopher Hassall. And of these five plays, three were subsequently transferred to the commercial theatre, where, by now, plays with a religious bias and plays based on biblical and apocryphal stories were not unfamiliar.

In 1926, Barry Jackson had presented, at the Kingsway Theatre, The Marvellous History of St. Bernard, his own translation of Henri Gheon's La Merveilleuse Histoire du Jeune Bernard de Menthon, itself an adaptation of a mediaeval miracle play. James Bridie's Tobias and the Angel, first performed at the Festival Theatre, Cambridge, in 1930, was produced in London at the Westminster Theatre on March 9th 1932; and with Jonah and the Whale, which opened on December 12th 1932, Mr. Bridie continued in James Agate's phrase, 'to make of every week-day evening a pleasant Sunday afternoon.'[1] Jonah was less successful than Tobias, but the Westminster Theatre 'weathered it for forty days, like the ark but not so full.'[2] In 1934, John Drinkwater's A Man's House, a study of the impact of the events of Holy Week on a middle-class Jewish household, had its first performance at the Malvern Festival, and reached London on September 12th, where it 'held the interest of the audience as at Malvern.'[3] And on December 14th 1936, Barrie's biblical play, The Boy David, began a short - and unsuccessful - run at His Majesty's.

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1. Red Letter Nights, London, 1944, p.302.
2. James Bridie, One Way of Living, London, 1939, p.276.
3. Times, Sept. 13th, 1934.

Murder in the Cathedral, an incomparably greater play, had a greater success than any of these. On November 1st 1935 it opened a season of 'Plays by Poets' at the Mercury Theatre, where it ran for two hundred and twenty five nights. Ashley Dukes, who presented the play, records that 'for many weeks and even months it was hard to get a seat', and that

> the audiences were oddly and almost equally divided between Churchpeople and the Chelsea-Bloomsbury public; and at the theatre bar one saw priests in cassocks and rationalists in tweeds, each with a glass of wine in hand, discussing Eliot's work.[1]

In October 1936 it was transferred to the Duchess Theatre where it ran four months longer, 'surviving even the Abdication.' In 1937 it toured the provinces for ten weeks[2]; and during a short run at the Old Vic on its return - from June 8th to July 10th 1937 - it achieved its five hundredth performance. It was played on tour by the Pilgrim Players during the war, and twice revived at the Mercury Theatre after the war, where one performance was attended by the King and Queen on the recommendation of Queen Mary who had seen the play three times. It has been given innumerable performances by amateurs, translated into ten languages[3] and made into a film.[4] And

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1. Ashley Dukes, The Scene is Changed, London, 1942, p.206.
2. Provincial theatres were unwilling to book a religious play, but those which took the risk did good business. The Grand Theatre, Leeds, made £1,330, a record for a 'straight' play.
3. Swedish (1939; another translation 1948), Spanish, French and Italian (1946), Flemish and Dutch (1947), Danish (1947), Greek and Welsh (1949), German and Japanese (1951).
4. The film version, for which Eliot wrote an additional scene, was published this year, 1952. The film was first exhibited in 1951.

its popularity persists. Murder in the Cathedral has done more than any other single play to bring modern religious drama to the notice of the general public and to win its favour.

The other two Canterbury plays to reach the professional stage were Dorothy Sayers' The Zeal of Thy House, which began a short run at the Westminster Theatre on March 29th 1938, and The Devil to Pay which opened at His Majesty's on July 20th 1939. Neither was an outstanding commercial success.

On March 21st 1939, T. S. Eliot's second play TheFamily Reunion was presented at the Westminster Theatre; and with this play modern religious drama reached a peak of achievement and a new kind of achievement. Material for the plays already mentioned had been furnished by the Bible, the Lives of the Saints, Church history, legend and myth. The Family Reunion, relying neither on historical nor biblical subject matter, treating a religious theme in terms of contemporary life, is in every sense a modern religious drama. Audiences found the play difficult, however, and it was withdrawn after five weeks.

The precedent created at Canterbury in 1929 was followed by other churches. Festivals in which drama played a part were held at Winchester and Truro Cathedrals in the thirties, and plays were staged at Tewkesbury Abbey in three successive years. In 1937 Murder in the Cathedral and A. Kingsley Porter's The Virgin and the Clerk were played, before the great West Door of the Abbey. In 1938 Tobias and the Angel and Jonah and the Whale were given; and in 1939 The Boy David, and a pageant- play by

Christopher Fry, written specially for the occasion, The Tower.[1]
A tradition was thus established, and of the many celebrations of smaller churches, that of the village of Coleman's Hatch in Sussex may be singled out as having been responsible for the production of Christopher Fry's first play. The Boy with a Cart was written for the fiftieth anniversary of the parish church in 1938, at the invitation of the vicar and at the suggestion of Dr. Bell. It was staged in the garden of a house near the church, and, later during the same summer, in the grounds of the Bishop's Palace at Chichester.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 put a stop to the Cathedral Festivals, but not to the performance of religious plays. Mr. Martin Browne, acting on a suggestion half-humorously put forward by Mrs. Allardyce Nicoll that he should 'take the plays round the country in a wagon', formed, in November 1939, a small company of professional players to 'take the theatre to the people.' The Pilgrim Players of Canterbury (as this company called itself), after a tentative beginning in the neighbourhood of Canterbury, toured England until 1943 with a repertory of religious plays.[2] The Oxford Pilgrim Players were formed by Ruth Spalding in the same month, November 1939, to work on similar lines; and these two bands of

1. The Tewkesbury Festivals were held to raise funds for the repair of the Norman tower. Fry's play, which is unpublished, was written to celebrate its completion.
2. For an account of their work, see Henzie Browne, Pilgrim Story, London, 1945. A list of plays performed is given in the appendix, pp.118-9. It includes Murder in the Cathedral, Tobias and the Angel, Yeats' The Resurrection, D.H.Lawrence's David.

players in four years 'covered Britain from end to end.' They played

> to every kind and size of audience, in barns and tents, in village halls and air raid shelters, in a destroyer, in schools and colleges, even in theatres ... and much in the churches.[1]

On May 1st, 1941, the Adelphi Players set out, under the direction of R. H. Ward, to give plays under similar conditions, and though they were not a specifically religious drama body, as the two companies of Pilgrim Players were, they included religious plays in their repertory. Marlowe's Dr. Faustus and some of Housman's Little Plays of St. Francis were given, and R. H. Ward's Holy Family, a 'nativity play for our times', was specially written for performance in the company's peculiar circumstances - without scenery or stage equipment of any kind.[2]

The work of these travelling companies kept the movement alive during the war years, and infused it with new energy. Audiences all over the country were able to see professional players in religious plays of unequal but mainly good quality: an experience for which they had been prepared by amateur performances of 'parish plays', but in fact a quite different experience. And in the course of his travels Mr. Martin Browne met and encouraged several poet-dramatists, and was himself encouraged to present a season of these plays at the Mercury

1. E. Martin Browne, Religious Drama, Glasgow, 1944, (Community House Pamphlets No. 1), p.8.
2. The Adelphi Players divided into two companies in 1943, one to play 'larger dates and stages, the other to play in more exacting war-time circumstances.' (I quote a letter from Mr. Ward.) Holy Family had been played in 1941. For the second company he wrote three more religious plays suitable for their special circumstances: The Destiny of Man (1943), Faust in Hell (1944), The Figure on the Cross (1945).

Theatre after the war. He has, in the words of Christopher Fry, 'driven more poets to drama than any man living.'

One other war-time development must be mentioned: an experiment in religious broadcasting which resulted in Dorothy Sayers' play-cycle, The Man Born to Be King. Prompted by the success of her Nativity play, He That Should Come, which had been broadcast on Christmas Day, 1938, the Director of Religious Broadcasting asked Miss Sayers to write a series of plays on the Life of our Lord, for broadcasting in the Sunday Children's Hour. The cycle composed for that purpose is essentially radio-drama, but it is the most comprehensive adaptation of the Gospel attempted in our time, and the only one at all comparable in extent with the mediaeval mystery cycles.[1] It was broadcast - after an initial controversy about the propriety of introducing Christ, and of interpreting the Gospel in modern colloquial speech - between December 1941 and October 1942. The plays had been 'submitted to and approved by the recognised leaders of the main Christian confessions in this country,'[2] and the hundreds of letters of gratitude written by listeners proved that there was an enthusiastic audience for this specialised form of religious drama.

1. Unlike those cycles, it is confined to the New Testament. In Dorothy Sayers' The Just Vengeance (1946) episodes from both the Old and New Testaments are compressed into a single action. But no work on the scale of a mediaeval cycle has been written in this century.
2. The Man Born To Be King, London, 1943, Foreward, p.9. (An account of the commissioning of the play, its production, and the controversy it aroused, is given in this Foreword by Dr. Welch, the Director of Religious Broadcasting.)

The Man Born To Be King was an experiment in the broadcasting of Christian truth. In 1945, a similar innovation was made at St. Thomas's church, Regent Street. The Rev. Patrick McLaughlin instituted a policy of religious drama there

> mainly because the exigencies of modern society seem to require some methods of presenting the Gospel other than the conventional ones.[1]

The absence of all local resident population made it possible to 'use this church as a sort of laboratory', and the experiment, begun with a production of Everyman in March 1945, has been steadily continued. Sixteen plays have been produced in the church in seven years.[2]

On September 13th 1945, Martin Browne opened a season of 'New Plays by Poets' at the Mercury Theatre, with Norman Nicholson's The Old Man of the Mountains, a re-telling of the story of Elijah in terms of modern life. It was followed, on October 11th, by Ronald Duncan's This Way to the Tomb, a saint-play cast in the form of a Masque and Anti-Masque, and on December 19th by Anne Ridler's Nativity play, The Shadow Factory. The fact that these first three plays had a religious theme was indicative not of a definite policy at the Mercury, but of the

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1. I quote a letter from Father McLaughlin.
2. The Way of the Cross, Christmas in the Market Place, and The Marvellous History of St. Bernard (translations of plays by Henri Gheon), Ronald Duncan's Ora Pro Nobis and Part One of This Way to the Tomb, Charles Williams' Seed of Adam, The House by the Stable and Grab and Grace, Anne Ridler's Cain, the mediaeval Castle of Perseverance and two plays from the Wakefield cycle, between 1946 and 1950; and Christ's Emperor (Part Two of Dorothy Sayers' The Emperor Constantine) in Feb. 1952. The plays produced there during the Festival of Britain are given below.

poets' inclination to that kind of subject.[1] And audiences were, to some extent, similarly inclined. This Way to the Tomb was immensely popular - largely, perhaps, because of the extreme liveliness of its second part. In November 1945, it began a season of matinée performances at the Garrick Theatre, and by the end of 1946 it had been played more than three hundred times in London, and had been presented for a special season at the Studio des Champs Elysées in Paris. The two subsequent seasons of poetic drama at the Mercury included, in addition to many plays that were not religious, a revival of The Family Reunion in 1946, and of Murder in the Cathedral in 1947 and 1948; and two plays that were 'religious' but not 'poetic', James Bridie's The Dragon and the Dove and A Change for the Worse[2] in 1948.

> It can now be seen that the return made at Canterbury in 1928 to the Church's traditional patronage of drama exerted a wide influence,

observed The Times in 1946.[3] Dorothy Sayers' The Just Vengeance had been written to celebrate the seven hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Lichfield Cathedral in June of that year, and in November, the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral announced their intention of holding a festival in the following year. A fourth

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1. 'The poets were inclined to that kind of subject and I perhaps encouraged them', Mr. Martin Browne tells me. The Old Man of the Mountains was written for the Pilgrim Players, but not performed before its production at the Mercury. It is interesting to discover that Ronald Duncan was 'first convinced of the feasibility of contemporary verse-drama' by Murder in the Cathedral. (Richard Findlater records this fact in The Unholy Trade, London, 1952, in an excellent chapter, 'The Drama: A Hope for Poetry', pp.123-169.)
2. I use the word 'religious' very loosely here. The plays were written for the Pilgrim Players and performed by them during the war. The former is in prose, the latter in a doggerel verse.
3. Nov.5th.

leader article headed 'Church and Poet', welcomed this decision, alluded to the fact that at the Mercury Theatre where pioneers were 'bravely intent on discovering a modern poetic drama' most of the new plays were 'concerned with religious experience' and speculated as to the possibility of the Church poets arriving at a form of verse which the theatre could use for its own purposes.

> At all events (it concluded) religious drama is manifestly worth developing for its own sake and it is good to know that the movement is no longer to be without its fountain-head at Canterbury.

Three new plays have been produced at Canterbury since then: Laurie Lee's Peasants' Priest in 1947, Christopher Fry's Thor with Angels in 1948, and Robert Gittings' The Makers of Violence in 1951. The Friends have found it impossible to hold festivals annually, but it is money and not enthusiasm that is wanting.[1]

With The Cocktail Party, first produced at the Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama in 1949, one of the Church poets arrived at a form of verse which the theatre could use for its own purposes. T. S. Eliot, that is to say, had perfected a technique of versification which he was able to adapt to the rhythms of contemporary speech. And with this play he met the commercial theatre on its own ground, working out his religious theme in a play that bears a considerable resemblance to a 'drawing-room comedy.' Further than this in its invasion of the secular stage, modern religious drama has so far not gone.

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1. Four Festivals and two Festival Days have been held since the end of the war. At the 1949 Festival, The Zeal of Thy House was revived. On the second Festival Day, held this year, an entertainment entitled 'The Drama of our Festival Years' was made up of readings from past Festival plays. The Friends are justly proud of what may be called their dramatic achievement.

The play held the attention of the ordinary theatre-going public. It was received in Edinburgh, in London, in New York and elsewhere, not with unqualified admiration but with strongly stimulated interest.[1]

Of this strange, eventful history, one chapter remains to be written. The movement to revive religious drama was given a short, sharp acceleration last year by the Festival of Britain.

The Advisory Committee of the Christian Churches, under the Chairmanship of the Dean of Westminster, asked the Religious Drama Society

> to participate in special performances of a religious play in a London church, and to encourage the working groups of players of religious drama throughout the country to present productions of the highest quality possible wherever opportunity presents itself in the Festival Summer of 1951.[2]

The consequence of the first part of this request was Christopher Fry's A Sleep of Prisoners, commissioned by the Religious Drama Society and presented by them in association with the Pilgrim Players Ltd.[3], and with the Arts Council of Great Britain, in the

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1. It opened in Edinburgh, Aug. 22nd, 1949; New York, Jan. 21st, 1950; London, May 3rd, 1950. An article discussing the production of the play, and its reception by the critics and the public, in Germany, Austria, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the U.S.A., appeared in World Theatre Vol. I, No. 3 for 1951, pp.53-6. It has been translated also into Spanish, Danish, Japanese, French and Dutch (1950) and Finnish (1951). Approximately 55,000 copies of the play have been sold in the United States, 50,000 in this country, up to date (Aug. 1952).
2. Christian Drama, March 1950, p.1. (This publication, the organ of the Religious Drama Society, first appeared in November 1946.)
3. The Pilgrim Players of Canterbury disbanded, and the Oxford Pilgrim Players changed their name to the Rock Theatre Company, in 1943. Martin Browne used the name Pilgrim Players for his company at the Mercury, 1945-8, and for a company which gave the first performance of Christopher Fry's The Firstborn at the Gateway Theatre, Edinburgh, on Sept. 6th, 1948. In 1950, the

church of St. Thomas, Regent Street, and in ten churches in the provinces. The Society responded to the second part of the request by sponsoring some thirty other enterprises in London and throughout the country.

Of these, the most remarkable was the production at York of a slightly shortened and slightly modernised version of the York cycle of mystery plays[1], their first performance in anything approaching entirety for three hundred and seventy nine years. Mr. Martin Browne's production of the plays, in the grounds of St. Mary's Abbey, and with the ruined Abbey as setting, was one of extraordinary beauty. It earned this journalistic tribute:

> The revival of the York cycle is without question one of the most exciting experiences which the Festival of Britain has yet had to offer in the way of live performances.[2]

A shortened version of the Chester cycle was played in the Cathedral Refectory at Chester, and the two surviving Coventry plays in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral; and at Derby on Corpus Christi Day a group of mediaeval plays[3] were played according to mediaeval custom, at various stations in the city, from morning till night.

There was, amid much metropolitan activity, a production of <u>Everyman</u> in St. John's, Waterloo Road, the Festival Church, a pageant in Southwark Cathedral, a production of Milton's <u>Samson</u>

Pilgrim Players Ltd., a limited liability company, was formed by the Religious Drama Society to 'organise and manage professional companies as and when required.' Its Directors are Councillors of R.D.S.

1. Ed. J.S.Purvis, London, 1951.
2. <u>News Chronicle</u>, June 4th, 1951.
3. <u>The Deluge</u>, and <u>Abraham, Melchisidec and Lot</u> from the Chester

Agonistes in St. Martin-in-the-Fields[1], and a season of religious plays at St. Thomas's.[2] In the provinces, a new play by Dorothy Sayers - The Emperor Constantine - was produced at the Playhouse Theatre, Colchester; Ronald Duncan's Our Lady's Tumbler was specially written for performance in Salisbury Cathedral, and for the Festival of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, Robert Gittings wrote The Makers of Violence.

> The renewal of the traditional associations between Church and drama (wrote the Times critic with reference to these projects) is to be one of the festival's principal themes. At York Chester, Coventry, Salisbury and at churches in towns and villages all over the country, the native drama is to be reminded in the coming months of the place of its birth. These events will come about through something more than a mere idea in programme planning; they may be regarded as the genuine manifestation of an ancient tradition's new-sprung vitality.[3]

By way of postscript it may be added that in March of this year, Nugent Monck succeeded in presenting the Passion group of the Ludus Coventriae - to the production of which in 1909 the police had cried 'Halt' - with the permission of the Lord Chamberlain. And the Bishop of Norwich, in a letter to the local

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cycle; a combination of the Chester and Brome versions of Abraham and Isaac; Terence Tiller's translation of the Cornish The Resurrection; and The Interlude of Youth.

1. Dick Sheppard first revived the tradition at St. Martin's, in the summer of 1916, with a series of Missionary and Historical Tableaux shown in the churchyard. In 1917 a Christmas Mystery Play, later continued and enlarged by the Rev. Pat McCormick, was given; and in 1921 a St. Martin's Pageant was specially written by Laurence Housman to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the present building. More recently, David Lutyen's Judas Iscariot was performed in the church (Autumn 1951), and The Vigil by Ladislas Fodor (May 1952).
2. A Sleep of Prisoners was followed by R.H. Ward's Holy Family, the mediaeval Castle of Perseverance, and Charles Williams' The House of the Octapus.
3. May 8th, 1951.

press[1], referred to the performance (at the Maddermarket Theatre) as 'one of the most moving experiences of my life.'

The Movement begun unconsciously by Father Nihill in 1871, stimulated unintentionally by William Poel in 1901, given the official sanction of the Church in 1928, and subsequently invading a corner of the secular stage, has now, in mid-century, arrived at a point where both Church and theatre recognise and welcome a renewal of their traditional associations.

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1. Eastern Daily Press, March 17th, 1952.

SECTION III

The Achievement.

CHAPTER ONE

Bible Drama

> What an upheaval there might be if the literature of the Bible were given real dramatic life on the stage!
> Gilbert Cannan.[1]

> The English theatre could not possibly make a worse use of the Bible than the sects have done, or misunderstand it so completely.
> Henry Arthur Jones.[2]

> ... no matter how great an idea a play may have for its foundation that idea cannot be conveyed, nay, it is ruined, unless it is conveyed in adequate language.
> Henry Arthur Jones.[3]

The dramatist who translates a biblical subject into a dramatic action has, in common with some of his Greek ancestors, a familiar story that has been adequately told elsewhere. His justification for re-telling it in dramatic form rests on his ability to subdue it to that form and to give it fresh significance by the particular means at his disposal.

The modern English dramatist is beset not only by the problem of form, but also by the problem of language. For the cadenced prose of the Authorised Version, he must substitute a different idiom of speech; and in doing that he is, in Granville-Barker's phrase, 'laying his hand upon the very Ark of the Literary Covenant.'[4] He does so with impunity only if the

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1. Poetry and Drama, Vol. 1 for 1913, p.469.
2. The Renascence of the English Drama, p.123.
3. Ibid, p.180.
4. J.M. Barrie, The Boy David, London, 1938, Preface, p.XV.

language he uses is the right and inevitable form of expression for his treatment of the subject.

Let us see with what success modern dramatists have re-created biblical stories, and by what means they have attempted to solve these problems; remembering that the ultimate value of their work must be judged by the significance which the subject derives from its statement in dramatic terms.

The New Testament

The Bethlehem Tableaux were the forerunners of modern religious drama. They were followed by those early saint-plays, whose quality has already been mentioned, and by plays based on the New Testament.

Laurence Housman's Bethlehem (1902), Mabel Dearmer's The Soul of the World (1911), B. C. Boulter's The Mystery of Epiphany (1913), Father Andrew's The Hope of the World (1919) all set forth the story of the birth of Christ. Alice Buckton's Eager Heart (1904) had to do with it, though it was not a representation of it. And John Masefield's play for Canterbury Cathedral, The Coming of Christ (1928) was a Nativity play. The subject of Christ's Passion was touched upon in The Soul of the World; it was the main theme of Masefield's Good Friday (1917) and The Trial of Jesus (1925), and of B. C. Boulter's The Mystery of the Passion (1921). The central doctrine of Christianity, of the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of God in Jesus Christ, was the chief preoccupation of the writers of religious drama in the first quarter of the century.

Their plays vary in quality, but none is an outstanding achievement. The movement to revive religious drama was at this time more vigorous than the new drama itself.

Laurence Housman's Bethlehem treats the story of the Nativity as one would expect an early venture in this kind to do: simply and reverently and with a good deal of singing. It takes no liberties with the Gospel story save that of transplanting it to another medium, and presents it without any exercise of invention save that required to supply the dialogue. Its fidelity to the Gospel is its chief dramatic defect, for by adhering too closely to the source of his story, the dramatist ignores the demand of his form. The action is merely a shifting from shepherds to Kings and to Holy Family, and the play has the ordered sequence of narrative, none of the intensity of drama.

Bethlehem makes apparent the problem of form by failing to solve it. It also, and in the same way, indicates the problem of language. The verse is a jingle of rhyming couplets intermingled with a variety of stanza forms. It is artificial at its best and clumsy at its worst. Only once does the dialogue approach the simplicity of style which characterises the mediaeval versions of the story, and then only for a moment. Joseph has been told by the Angel to take Mary to Egypt. He wakes her:

Joseph. Mary, arise, hence must we go,
Even before the dawn of day.

Mary. It is God's will?

Joseph. 'Tis even so:
His Angel's word.

Mary. Which we obey.[1]

For the rest, the Choruses which frame the action are studiously simple and have a tendency to archaism; the shepherds speak a mixed dialect, suggestive of London and Lancashire:

D'you think stars have a way
Of coming out like, special, when they got summut to say?[2]

and Mary's lines are stilted and often dwindle into doggerel. Bethlehem fails to be dramatic, fails to be genuinely simple, and is further marred by its style. And being thus defective it is typical of its immediate successors.

The Soul of the World sets the story within a vaguely symbolic prologue and epilogue depicting a conflict between Time and Eternity for the soul of the world. The Mystery of Epiphany has no dramatic shape at all; it is a series of scenes of which a different set were given year by year, 'the length of the play making this possible.'[3] The Hope of the World elaborates the Gospel narrative in a wholly unconvincing way, supplying among other things a scene between Mary and her nurse. And the language of them all is heavily archaic and stilted, in the manner of the following passage:

> Now is the quiet hour of eventide when our father, Isaac, loved to meditate in the fields. I would sit awhile, and think on the Presence of God, and pray to Him, as once our mother Eve, or ever sin began, knew His voice in the garden in the cool of the day.[4]

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1. Bethlehem, London, 1902, p.52. (Act II)
2. Ibid., p.12. (Act I)
3. The Mystery of Epiphany, London, 1920, p.vii.
4. The Hope of the World, London, 1920, Prologue, p.15.

Masefield's The Coming of Christ, written some years later, marks an artistic advance. It is superior to these plays in literary quality, though hardly more successful in its solution of the problem of form.

Masefield's addition of an incident of his own devising to the essential facts of the Gospel narrative introduces an element of conflict but is unfortunate in its implications. It consists of a dialogue, taking place in heaven between four angels and the Anima Christi, before His coming to earth. The angels - of Power, Sword, Mercy and Light - attempt to dissuade the Anima Christi from taking flesh.

> Know what Man's life is ere you enter Life,
> And what you will endure being on earth[1].

says the Angel of Light, and proceeds to tell Him. He is undeterred by their prophecy of danger, temptation and suffering but asks for comfort in His going; and by way of comfort, Mercy shows Him the spirits of Peter and Paul who outline for Him their future conduct as men. The intention of this opening scene - to bring home the meaning of Christ's Incarnation and Passion to the audience - is good, and is, broadly speaking, the intention of all New Testament drama. But it cannot be accomplished by the representation of a heavenly dialogue bringing home the meaning of them to Christ.

In his interpretation of the Kings, Masefield demonstrates the value of the Nativity more surely. But their need and their search for God are revealed in direct statement to the audience

1. The Coming of Christ, London, 1928, p. 7. (The play has no act or scene divisions.)

and not in action - not, that is to say, dramatically.

There is an element of drama in the Shepherds' scene. The appearance of the angel with the news of the birth, at the moment when two of the Shepherds are denying the existence of a God, is an effective climax; and there is a truly dramatic economy in making the Angel of Power, from the opening dialogue, Gabriel, and the Angel of Light, the Star. These are skilful touches, but they are incidental. They do not constitute a dramatic action.

In structure, The Coming of Christ is scarcely more satisfactory than Bethlehem and its followers. It is happier in its use of language. The verse differentiates between the speech of angels, kings and shepherds by metrical and verbal variety; and though it is not poetry of a high order, it is a style capable of expressing its subject by virtue of its sincerity.

These early Nativity plays are characterised by their sincerity and piety, and even those which expand the Gospel narrative, treat it with a dramatically inhibiting reverence. The 'pious mist, timid and thickly traditional', which The Times noted in 1935 as having hung over modern religious drama, had not yet been cast off.

It hung with slightly less gloom over the early Passion plays of the modern period, and the achievement in this kind is slightly greater.

The subject of Christ's Passion is at once more susceptible of dramatic treatment than the story of the Nativity, and less so.

It can hardly be called undramatic, but it involves the dramatist in a problem of another kind. There are two major difficulties in the dramatisation of the Passion-narrative: one is absolute, the other temporary and local, and they pertain to the central figure. The first is that of satisfactorily representing Christ, the second that by English law He may not be represented at all - not, that is to say, on a public stage which comes under the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain. Where the first difficulty is eliminated by the existence of the second, the problem is that of writing a play round a character who does not appear. Where the ruling of the Lord Chamberlain does not apply, the somewhat larger problem remains.

In Good Friday John Masefield succeeded in solving this problem. He makes Christ the centre of the action without representing Him, by a careful selection of incident, by conveying briefly in dialogue what cannot be shewn in action, and by the evocative power of language.

The play takes up the story at a point after Christ's appearance before Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod. That Herod has sent Him back to Pilate, that the mob has chosen Barabbas to be set free, and that Pilate is anxious to spare Christ, is conveyed in the first twenty lines of dialogue. Procula's description of her dream, which follows, anticipates the impending horror of Christ's death, and Pilate's interview with Caiaphas reveals the political danger, as Caiaphas sees it, of His remaining alive. The situation is thus delineated without

recourse to a narrator.

The only part of the trial which takes place - off - in the course of the play is the last questionning by Pilate; and while it is in progress, the talk of the rabble, and of a madman, maintains the interest strongly in its outcome. The condemnation is effectively predicted by the voice of one in the crowd who hears a cross being nailed together; and when Christ is led out by the soldiers, He is visible, not to the audience, but to the crowd, and His presence is suggested by their jibes.

The Crucifixion itself is made vividly and horribly real by three devices. The first is naturalistic: an interpolation in the dialogue between the madman and a sentry, which follows the departure of the soldiers.

> Madman: They have nailed the teacher Jesus by those yells.
> Sentry: It is darker. There'll be earthquake before night.[1]

The second is a poetic device. The madman, left alone, reflects, in soliloquy, on suffering and luridly images Christ's suffering which he sees in his mind's eye.

> The creaking door of flesh rolls slowly back:
> Nerve by red nerve the links of living crack...[2]

And the third is the use of a convention of Greek tragedy: the messenger speech. Longinus describes the crucifixion to Pilate in vivid detail.[3]

The meaning of Christ's death is suggested with a double

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1. Good Friday, London, 1917, p.46. (The play has no act or scene divisions.)
2. Ibid., p.49.
3. Ibid., pp. 63-6.

irony in the interchange between Herod and Procula after the Crucifixion:

> Herod: ... the news from Rome is bad.
> But this atones.
>
> Procula: O, fully.[1]

And in the last words of the play, spoken by the Madman, in whose folly is much wisdom, is the reflection that after

> The passion, the sweat, the pains,
> ... the truth remains.[2]

The dramatic skill evinced by Masefield in choice and use of incident is further apparent in contrast with Lady Gregory's Passion play, The Story Brought by Brigit (1924). Where Masefield was sparing and selective, she incorporates all the main incidents of the narrative. Here, the action begins before the betrayal, an account of which, and of the trials before Annas, Caiaphas and Herod, is related by one character to another as the play proceeds. It is vigidly done, but it is overdone. Masefield's one messenger speech is strikingly effective; the constant narration of event is tiresome and undramatic.

The two plays provide an interesting comment also on the representation of Christ. Masefield made Him the pivot of the action without presenting Him, and He was dramatically real though unseesn. In Lady Gregory's play Christ appears, briefly, twide, but remains remote and is dramatically unreal. Joel and Daniel, the creatures of her imagination, are roundly drawn and have vivid life. Their dialogue, and that of the other

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1. Ibid., p. 72.
2. Ibid., p. 78.

characters is in her best Irish manner[1] and is immensely intertaining. Christ speaks in biblical phrases, and in the context of racy dialogue, appears to be quoting His own words rather than delivering them for the first time. Lady Gregory's free handling of the minor characters and her reverent treatment of Christ result in an unsatisfactory mixture of styles.

Masefield's second Passion Play, The Trial of Jesus, is dramatically inferior to Good Friday of which it is an elaboration.[2] In the second play, Christ is shewn, and His presence is effective as being part of the action, and not, as in The Story Brought by Brigit, superimposed upon it. But because He was, historically, silent through much of His trial, and because Masefield was here primarily concerned with the trial, His power as teacher and saviour does not appear. It is not, as it was in Good Friday, suggested by the whole tenour of the dialogue because Christ is there to speak for Himself. The unfortunate fact for the dramatist is that that is what, at this juncture, He did not do.[3]

In B. C. Boulter's The Mystery of the Passion, the almost

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1. 'I knew I could best write it through the voice, as it were, of our own people, and so I have given the story as I think it might have been told by Brigit, had she been present.' (The Story Brought by Brigit, London, 1924, p.91.)
2. In 1917 Masefield wrote to Charles Ricketts: '(Good Friday) is only a draft of a play. I meant to recast it and have Christ on, and make it all dramatic instead of episodic; but the war broke out and I had to leave it as it was.' (Charles Ricketts, op.cit., p.277). The Trial of Jesus is the recasting he intended.
3. Shaw's observation is apt: '...he went like a lamb to the slaughter, dumb. Such a spectacle is disappointing on the stage, which is the one thing that a drama must not be.' (Preface to On the Rocks, 1933, Prefaces, p.369.) But his reconstruction of the trial, supplying Christ with Shavian argument (Ibid., pp.370-374) is not, I think, the solution.

silent figure at the trial is interesting because he is already established dramatically. The earlier scenes of the play shew Him with His disciples in the temple at Bethany, and at the Last Supper. The prologue to The Trial of Jesus which presents Him in an unimpressive colloquy with Wisdom (rather in the manner of the prologue to The Coming of Christ) is insufficient to establish Him as a man, much less as God incarnate. Nor is the picture of Him effectively completed in Masefield's play by His post-Crucifixion appeal to men to

Open your hearts and let me in.[1]

It is far better completed by Boulter's orthodox presentation of the Resurrection.

The Mystery of the Passion is able to compass the main incidents of the narrative, from the Purification of the Temple to the Resurrection, because it boldly shews the protagonist at the centre of the action. The ten scenes of the play have the directness of the Gospel account and a consequent inevitability which is essentially dramatic.

Good Friday and The Mystery of the Passion, in their different ways, solve the problem of form; they fail to solve that of language. Masefield's failure arises largely from his choice of verse form. The rhyming couplets in which the dialogue is cast give an effect of banality and monotony. Where he breaks away from them - in the soliloquy of the madman - the expression is immediately freer and more powerful. Boulter's failure is in vocabulary and style. He uses the words of the Authorised Version

1. The Trial of Jesus, London, 1925, p.97.

wherever possible, but supplements them with an imitation of that prose which is forced and artificial and self-consciously archaic.

To this record of partial failure, there is one exception. Within its self-imposed limits and in a unique way, Yeats' Calvary is wholly successful. It is an unorthodox interpretation of the loneliness of Christ on the Cross, shewing His agony intensified by His powerlessness to help certain types of creature. This freedom of treatment is justified because the play does not depict the historical scene of the Crucifixion, but a subsequent Good Friday, a day 'whereon Christ dreams His Passion through',[1.] which allows Yeats to surround Him with 'the images of those He cannot save.' And the statement of the theme in the form of a Noh play, with stylised movement, music and masks, perfectly conveys the remoteness and isolation of the experience. The Song for the folding and unfolding of the cloth describes the heron, a symbol of loneliness, and sets the mood:

> God has not died for the white heron.[2.]

Lazarus, masked, has 'a deadly face', 'death-stricken and death-hungry.' He and Judas, types of the subjective man who desires only solitude, and the Roman soldiers, typifying the objective man desiring only material comfort, remain outside Christ's sympathy. Their position is coldly stated, with an impersonal, unemotional clarity, possible to masked figures who are only half-real. And the pain of Christ's cry

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1. The idea derives from an Eastern belief that the dead dream back through the intense experiences of their lives. (See Yeats' note to The Dreaming of the Bones, in Plays and Controversies, London, 1923, p. 454).
2. Ibid., p. 401.

My Father, why hast Thou forsaken Me?

is emphasised by the final song whose theme is loneliness:

> Lonely the sea-bird lies at her rest...
> God has not appeared to the birds.[1]

Being neither orthodox in concept, nor genuinely dramatic in form, Calvary does not indicate a direction in which drama of the Passion might fruitfully proceed. Not even the sects have 'misunderstood' the Gospel 'so completely.'[2] But it is, in its own right, a work of art.

With the exception of Calvary - which in any case belongs outside the movement - the early Gospel plays of this century failed to solve the problems attendant on dramatisation of the Bible. Inadequate language and a timid piety are impediments to dramatic achievement.

The work of the second quarter of the century is characterised by a growing freedom of treatment. A new kind of Gospel play emerged in the thirties, related to the Passion play but avoiding its peculiar problem by focussing the interest not on the experience of Christ but on the effect of the events of Holy Week and Easter on others involved in them. To this kind belong Caesar's Friend (1933) by Campbell Dixon and Dermot Morrah, John

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1. Ibid., p.411.
2. Another unconventional interpretation of the Passion-narrative, George Moore's The Passing of the Essenes (1930) proposes the thesis that Christ did not die on the cross. A revision of an earlier play, The Apostle (1923), which he based on his novel The Brook Kerith (1916), it sincerely and movingly imagines Christ living in seclusion among the Essenes, and a meeting with the apostle Paul. The hero of the play is not recognisable as the protagonist of the Gospels, however, and the narrative element is stronger than the dramatic one. (The play was produced at the Arts Theatre in 1930).

Drinkwater's A Man's House (1934), Andrew Young's Nicodemus (1937) and Christopher Hassall's Christ's Comet (1937). In the same decade, Charles Williams broke free from the traditional presentation of the Nativity in Seed of Adam (1936) and The House By the Stable (1939); and Dorothy Sayers interpreted it in the idiom of modern colloquial speech in He That Should Come (1938). And in the forties, a similar freedom of treatment was accompanied by a new urgency of purpose. The Man Born To Be King is a re-statement of the whole Gospel narrative 'in terms identifiable and intelligible by a contemporary audience;'[1] R. H. Ward's Holy Family (1941) and The Figure on the Cross (1945), combine technical experiment with an attempt to relate Christian truth to the contemporary dilemma.

These plays, the best in this kind written in the last twenty years, form a more vigorous body of work than those of the earlier period.

Caesar's Friend, a reconstruction of the events leading to the Crucifixion, places the dramatic emphasis on Pontius Pilate. Character and situation are freely handled, the former without penetration, and the latter for the sake of theatrical effect. The sympathetic treatment of Pilate, who is shewn to condemn Christ half-heartedly under pressure from Caiaphas, and the interpretation of Judas as a keen nationalist and former lover of Mary Magdalene, are more ingenious than cogent; and the religious doubt attributed to Pilate at the end of the play is inadequately

1. The phrase is R. H. Ward's, used in a note to his Nativity play Holy Family, Ilkley, 1942, p.3.

suggested by his wondering 'if there be a God', and 'looking off up centre' as the curtain falls. But the play is at least an attempt to depict character in action, more dramatic than its more reverent predecessors, and successful in its use of a plain prose style.

John Drinkwater's A Man's House examines conjecturally the impact of Christianity on a middle-class Jewish household of A.D. 33. A prosaic study of individual reactions, it remains on the surface of human life, and fails to communicate the spiritual crises which the events of Holy Week are shewn to have precipitated. The idea is, again, more remarkable than its execution.

Yeats' one-act play The Resurrection (1934) is also concerned with spiritual crisis but the experience of its central character - a Greek, who, seeing the risen Christ is suddenly forced to believe in a new reality - is communicated vividly and with an artistic sincerity lacking in the other two plays. Here, the experience is the sole climax of the action, and the action leads directly to it without deviating into an examination of the private lives of the characters. The personal problems which obtrude in Caesar's Friend and A Man's House give those plays a domestic interest which overshadows their spiritual implications. The Resurrection is concerned entirely with belief and spiritual reality, and thus the climax, when it comes, has an unalloyed intensity. The realisation of the Greek, as he passes his hand over Christ's side, that He is not the spirit,

insubstantial and unreal, that he had believed Him to be, is wonderfully conveyed in his cry, 'The heart of a phantom is beating! The heart of a phantom is beating!'[1].

The exploration of experience in this kind of play which presents a reaction to the life and death of Christ, and indeed in any play, is far more effective dramatically than the implication that an experience has occurred. In Andrew Young's Nicodemus the conversion of Nicodemus in his meeting with Christ happens off-stage and makes no dramatic impact whatsoever. And the final scene in which he arrives at a perception of the meaning of the resurrection is less moving than the crisis in Yeats' play because the action leads up to it in a desultory episodic way. The part played by Nicodemus in the events of Holy Week is presented credibly but without dramatic force.

In Christ's Comet Christopher Hassall used the Nativity and the Crucifixion as a backgrouhd to his story, but to a different end. His fable of a fourth Wise Man is not a reconstruction of events, like Caesar's Friend and Nicodemus, nor a naturalistic study of their impact, like A Man's House, but an allegory of a spiritual progress. The first act outlines the situation, and is concerned with external circumstance: the four Wise Men set out on their journey. In the second act the interest shifts from the plane of event to that of inner experience, and the business of the third act is to illuminate that experience. This it largely fails to do. What separates Artaban from the other Magi, that he feels he must continue his journey - now a journey of the spirit-

1. W. B. Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies, London, 1934, p.128.

while they are fit to worship Jesus as soon as they reach Bethlehem, is not explained. Nor is it clear what special act renders him at last able to 'unload his cares on God', his conduct for thirty years having been uniformly self-sacrificial. The play, however, has many virtues. It is informed by a lively imagination, the characters live, the interest is sustained, and the dialogue vigorous. It is written in verse that is both natural and flexible, being

> ... often little more than present-day prose conversation, coaxed, almost imperceptibly, into iambics, but elevated into rhetoric, or something more than rhetoric, as occasion demands.[1]

The speech of the Blind Man is close to prose conversation:

> The streets are very pleasant for a stroll!
> - Nobody wants to talk, nobody wants
> To spare a minute for a poor old wind-bag.[2]

For Artaban the rhythm is tightened and the language enriched by metaphor:

> I shall not offer, nor presume to meet
> His face, until the altar of my soul
> Be truly consecrated to his service.[3]

And there is no disparity between the styles.

The intensity of The Resurrection and the vigour of Christ's Comet are evidence of the possibilities of this new approach to the material of the Gospels. It is more happily employed in these two plays than elsewhere, however. The promise of the new kind is largely unfulfilled.[4]

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1. Christ's Comet, London,1937, Note prefaced to play.
2. Ibid., Act I, Sc. 3, p.37.
3. Ibid., Act II, Sc. 2, p.87.
4. It is much exploited. The Religious Drama Society's Catalogue of Selected Plays (London,1951) contains such entries as
Behold Your King: Thomas Doran, 1942. Events of Easter from the point of view of Mary Magdalene.
Mary of Magdala: Ernest Milton, 1949. Reconstruction of the

With Seed of Adam, the last vestiges of pious mist were dispersed and the inhibiting barrier of timidity thrown down. The licence which Charles Williams allowed himself in the handling of his material resulted in a play in which dramatic form and religious content are perfectly fused.[1] Let us examine it in some detail.

Seed of Adam is concerned with spiritual truth and not at all with historical verisimilitude. The Nativity is integrated with a myth of Williams' own making, centring round Adam; and the myth is an allegory of man's alienation from and search for God, and an exposition of the Christian doctrine that Fallen Man cannot attain to a state of grace until Christ is born to redeem him. The dramatic realisation of the myth and its implications is a highly skilful feat of craftsmanship.

By a truly dramatic compression, the situation is revealed in the first hundred lines of dialogue. The action begins after the Fall but at no particular point after it, and in no particular place. Adam, regretting the loss of Paradise, is seeking the Way of Return. His children occupy themselves in other ways, half of them serving Gaspar, Tsar of Caucasia, whose business is with gold and the multiplication of wealth; the other

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Magdalen's way of living and of her revolutionary following of Christ.
This Rock: Alan Poole, (1948). St. Peter on the night of Good Friday.
The Lonely Place: Vera I. Arlett, 1947. Verse reconstruction of an imagined meeting between the Mother of Our Lord and the mother of Judas after the Crucifixion.
1. His earlier play, The Rite of the Passion, written for the Three Hours Service on Good Friday, 1929, at St. Martin's, Kensal Rise, is in the nature of a meditation. Only in a few short

half following Melchior, Sultan of Bagdad, who provides them with 'gnomic patterns of diagrammatic thrills' which they study in austere academies. Adam can neither interest them in the search for Paradise, nor prevent them fighting among themselves.

That Time and Space have been abolished[1] is already clear by the fact that Adam exists in company with Gaspar and Melchior, and that the action has an interest that is neither local nor historical is thus established. It is reinforced by a display of modern knowledge on the part of Adam's children. They reject his idea of Paradise in the clichés of modern psychology:

> Solo (one of the Chorus): Wise men have recognized
> it is only our mothers' forms rationalized.
> Solo: It is the loss of the one thing prized
> masochistically advertised;
> Solo: or adolescence flushed with immature sense.[2]

It is evident that the protagonist is man, his situation timeless, his experience universal ; and that he is both searching for and indifferent to God.

Into this situation the incidents and characters of the Gospel story are neatly, and freely, fitted. Mary is among Adam's children, and Eve complains that she spends her time

> Watching mountebanks, laughing at clowns,
> applauding jugglers and tightrope walkers,
> listening to talkers, admiring lovers,
> riding with children on the roundabout,
> everywhere in the middle of the rout,
> being by her nature, all things to all men.[3]

She is betrothed by Adam to an upright young Mohammedan called

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passages (in the Betrayal and Trial sequences) has it the force of drama.

1. 'I had, in my usual way, abolished Time and Space', wrote Williams in a note to the play, 'I was prepared to bring in anyone.' (Seed of Adam and other plays, London, 1948, p.95.)
2. Ibid., p.5. (The play is in one act.)
3. Ibid., pp.6-7.

Joseph,[1] And after the Annunciation Adam reappears as Augustus Caesar.

The introduction of the historical fact of the census into this allegory of man seeking God is masterly. Adam, as Augustus, is still searching for the Way of Return, and he takes a census of the whole world, living and dead

> to find whether anywhere it has been said
> what place or person Paradise lies behind.[2]

It is followed by an equally skilful stroke. The soldiers, having taken a census, return to Augustus with the salutations of the living and the dead:

> First Soldier. Hail, Caesar; those who are dead
> Second Soldier. and those about to die.
> Both. salute you.

At which point, the Third King, entering, asks:

> What is this difference between the dying and the dead?
> What provincial talk is this? what academic
> pedantic dichotomy?[3]

The gladiatorial echo of Rome suggests the background to Christ's bibth; the quibble over living and dying looks forward to the Nativity itself which will give life and death a new meaning; and it is peculiarly appropriate, as we soon discover, that the Third King should question the distinction between the two, for he has

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1. 'I was quite clear that the old man leading a devout girl on a donkey was not for this play.' (Ibid., Notes, p.95.)
The complete break with the traditional conception of Joseph and Mary is perfectly justified in Williams' treatment of the story. It is 'not so much a presentation of the historic facts as of their spiritual value.' (p.93). And so Joseph can be a young Mohammedan, and Mary can ride on roundabouts, and the audience be further assured thereby that for the moment Time and Space do not exist.
2. Ibid., p.14.
3. Ibid., p.16.

been many times eaten by his mother.

With the appearance of the Third King and his mother the allegory is reinforced by symbolism and becomes more intricate. Adam and his seed are representatives of mankind, but they are human beings. The Third King and his mother are symbolic figures. He stands for Adam's rejection of Paradise at the Fall, she for evil and pain; And her participation in the birth of Christ - she acts as midwife to Mary - is a dramatic statement of Williams' recurring theme that evil ministers to good and is in fact a part of perfection.

The Nativity is the climax of the action and a resolution of the various elements of conflict. Adam finds in it the Way of Return, his seed attain a state of harmony and grace and join in a hymn of adoration, and evil is reconciled with good. The theme is thus worked out in terms of action, and the fusion of form and content thereby achieved.

The play has a fault of detail in the obscurity which surrounds the two symbolic figures. The author's synopsis[1] reveals that the Third King represents 'the experience of man when he thinks he has gone beyond all hope of restoration to joy.' When one knows that, his appearance to Adam at the moment when the census has failed to provide a clue to the Way of Return is perfectly intelligible; and so is his talk of growing out of the core of the Paradisal apple (the seed of hopelessness having been sown at the Fall) and the fact that he is consumed by his mother,

1. Ibid., pp. 93-4.

called Hell, but does not die (for man in despair of God lives in Hell). But all this is clear only in the light of the author's exposition. It is intellectually sound but not immediately obvious, and the talk of apple-cores and worms and their mutual dependence obscures rather than illuminates Adam's experience.

This weakness flaws the play's excellence, but, in spite of it, Seed of Adam is the most powerful and the most profound interpretation of the Nativity in modern religious drama. The story gains fresh significance in its dramatic context, and Charles Williams' highly personal style is appropriate to his treatment of the subject.

His second Nativity play, The House By the Stable, is a slighter piece of work, but equally successful in its way. Here the birth is set within the framework of a morality play, and the result is an ingenious and witty statement of the theme that Pride is man's undoing and humility the beginning of salvation. The morality theme gives both background and meaning to the incident of the Nativity and the Nativity gives the morality theme an unusual poignancy. The difficulties of both dramatic kinds are thus skilfully surmounted by their fusion into one.

Dorothy Sayers' intention in He That Should Come was

> to show the birth of Christ against its crowded social and historical background (and) .. to make real to the audience the bustling and variegated life of an autonomous province in the great, sprawling heterogeneous Roman Empire of the first century.[1]

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1. Dorothy L. Sayers, Four Sacred Plays, London,1948, p.215.

It is accomplished by means of a dialogue taking place in the courtyard of the Bethlehem inn, and involving Roman soldiers, an orthodox Pharisee, a Hellenised Jew, a Greek, a centurion and a merchant. The play was written for broadcasting, and the action consist largely of argument, revealing local conditions and religious controversies, and so suggesting the background to the birth which occurs while it is in progress.

The play is chiefly remarkable for its use of modern colloquial speech. It is an improvement on the archaic diction of the early Gospel plays, but it is not altogether satisfactory. 'The chief effect of s tyle in dramatic speech should be unconscious'[1], and the chief effect of modern slang in an historical play is to make the audience aware of its incongruity. We are prepared to believe in the reality of the 'social and historical background' until a peculiarly modern expression jolts us roughly back into the present. When Joseph, arriving at the inn, asks the landlord for a 'shake-down', and when the Jewish Gentleman offers the shepherds 'a quick one', we are less impressed by the truth of the incident than by the quaintness of the anachronism. It is only the more striking phrases that jerk us into consciousness of the language, however. The ear accepts a less ardent colloquialism, and the mind is not distracted.

It is interesting to notice that Bethlehem and The Coming of Christ contained realistic touches only in their treatment of

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1. T. S. Eliot, Poetry and Drama, London, 1951, p.13.

the shepherds - in just those parts of the Nativity Story where the mediaeval dramatists allowed themselves most licence. Housman gave the shepherds a dialect of sorts; Masefield made two of them talk as the plain man might talk today of inequality and injustice and the horrors of war. The naturalism of He That Should Come extends that method to the whole action.

In The Man Born to be King, Dorothy Sayers' play-cycle on the Life of our Lord, the same treatment is applied to the whole Gospel story. The cycle, like those of the Middle Ages, presents its material in a protracted series of episodes, translating the biblical narrative into a sequence of more or less dramatic situations. The separate episodes are given continuity by the provision of an underlying theme concerning the nature of earthly and spiritual kingdoms, and by various manipulations of the plot: the insertion of a political intrigue between Judas and a fictitious character called Baruch, the early introduction of Procula and the centurion Proclus, and the stressing of the Roman element in the story.

The shaping of the narrative into twelve sequences linked by a narrator makes the cycle excellently suitable for broadcasting, and criticism of it as drama would be impertinent. Similarly, the total absence of any literary quality in the dialogue, is part of Miss Sayers' design, and to criticise it on that score would be to misunderstand her intentions. In He That Should Come and The Man Born to be King she solved the problem of form for the particular medium of radio; and she solved the problem of language for her particular purpose of shewing the

biblical characters to have been people like ourselves, by making them talk in the modern idiom.

R. H. Ward's experiments in technique in Holy Family and The Figure on the Cross were dictated by the special circumstances of their war-time production. They consist in the identification of chorus and actors, in an action which is not naturalistic and requires no scenery and few properties.

The dramatis personae of Holy Family are a group of ordinary people, living in our time and full of despair. A faint memory of the story of Christ gives them hope, and as various passages of the Gospel are recalled, individuals detach themselves from the chorus to act the parts of the biblical characters and merge with it again when their scene is played. The experience communicated is that of the group - their reaction to the story which is unfolded - and there is no interplay of character because the individuals have no identity. Like the expressionist drama of the twenties, the experiment is an interesting but an abortive one. The entertainment which results is akin to drama but not drama, lacking one of its essential ingredients.[1]

R. H. Ward's aim in Holy Family was to 'recreate the scenes of the legend .. in terms identifiable and intelligible by a contemporary audience.'[2] He makes the chorus participate in the turning away of Joseph at Bethlehem, and the rejection

1. Ronald Duncan's Nativity play Ora Pro Nobis (1939) has a comparable lack of character, and less action. It narrates the incidents 'within the Order of the Mass', in which voices from the congregation join, making confession, prayer and supplication. The play is nearer to ritual than drama. Again, an interesting rather than a fruitful experiment. 2. Holy Family ~~op cit~~, p.3.

and crucifixion of Christ, shewing their attitude to be characteristic of human beings in all ages, but expressing it in terms of modern life.

> We are the men who go home, who close the door,
> Hide behind the newspaper, behind detective stories,
> Hide behind the cinema, the radio, the bar ...
> Retire into the not-real.[1]

And he demonstrates the value of the Gospel Story for his generation by shewing this group of despairing people finally strengthened and exalted by it.

In The Figure on the Cross, he interprets the Seven Last Words by means of seven episodes in which people of our time experience seven kinds of suffering, and thereby appreciate the agony of Christ on the Cross. The episodes are unrelated to each other except by their burden of grief, and the choral reflections which link them express a wearisome repetition of remorse.

The laborious accumulation of incident, the recurrence of idea and phrase, and a profusion of verbiage, dissipate the emotional intensity which both plays sporadically evince. Mr. Ward's work is more significant for what it attempts than for what it achieves.

The attempt to relate Christian truth to the contemporary dilemma is the basis, also, of the most ambitious Gospel play written since the war,[2] Dorothy Sayers' The Just Vengeance.

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1. Ibid., p.13. (The play is in one act). cf. this passage in the last chorus of Murder in the Cathedral:
   Forgive us, O Lord, we acknowledge ourselves as type
   of the common man,
   Of the men and women who shut the door and sit by
   the fire...
2. And the only one which demands consideration. Anne Ridler's The Shadow Factory (1945) is only incidentally concerned with the Nativity, and will be discussed below, ch. 3.

The play shews 'God's redemptive act set against the background of contemporary crisis.'[1] The whole of the action is presented as taking place in the moment of the death of an airman, and the doctrine of original sin, and of the Incarnation and Redemption, is demonstrated as an answer to the bewilderment of the airman at the human predicament. He is shewn the domestic squabbles of Adam and Eve after the Fall, Cain's murder of Abel, and the Nativity, Ministry, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, in a continuous action in which, as in Seed of Adam, the characters of the Old and New Testaments co-exist. In this action, the airman is to discover both the reason for and the solution to the human predicament, and the significance of the incidents is expounded for his benefit - and for that of the audience - by the characters involved. The Persona Dei is at pains to explain 'God's act', and subsidiary explanations are offered by Cain, Eve, Judas and the Recording Angel of Lichfield, of which city the airman is, appropriately, a native.[2] The play is thus a mixture of action and commentary, and is dramatic and undramatic respectively.

It contains strikingly effective moments, such as that in which the airman comes to recognise the guilt of mankind. Absorbed in the drama of the Passion, he joins in the crowds' cry of 'Crucify', and suddenly finds himself shouting alone. The trials in this sequence are well telescoped together, and the

1. Four Sacred Plays, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.280. (The author's note to the play.)
2. The play was written for performance in Lichfield Cathedral.

whole play is skilfully constructed, with its interweaving of episodes and its use of the chorus of Lichfield citizens to link the two planes of action.

It is, nevertheless, an imperfectly dramatic statement of Atonement theology, and it is written in an incongrous mixture of styles. A colloquial tone is used for the Old Testament passages, a stiff rhetoric for the discourses of the Persona Dei and a pedestrian verse for the rest. The play treats a tremendous question in a manner which is only 'workman-like'.

The efforts of modern dramatists to give expression to the central doctrine of the New Testament have not resulted in a conspicuous artistic achievement. An advance, nonetheless, has been made: The Just Vengeance stands at a considerable distance from Bethlehem, and not only in time. The various experiments with form, the numerous solutions to the problem of language, and finally the attempt to relate the story of Christ to the dilemma of modern life, mark the gradual liberation of the dramatist from the fetters of a conventional piety. This is a definite progress. And in Seed of Adam the movement can boast one small, imperfect, but fine specimen of religious drama.

The Old Testament and Apocrypha.

James Bridie described the Apocryphal narrative of Susannah and the Elders as 'one of the best stories in the world', and as 'several different kinds of story':

> It may be looked upon as a moral story, rebuking wickedness and glorifying virtue. It may be read as a tribute to womanhood, to the Jews, to the genius of Daniel, to the jurisprudence of the Captivity, to the mercy of God. It may be read as a plain story of a persecuted heroine ... as a detective story ... as a piece of character delineation. It may be regarded as comprising all these things with one or other feature predominating.[1]

Plays based on the Gospels are inevitably concerned, if they are concerned with the protagonist of the narrative at all, with a religious subject. The stories of the Old Testament, out of their context, have a religious significance only if the dramatist interprets them in such a way as to reveal and illustrate it. The relation of the patriarchal figures to their God may or may not be the 'feature predominating': plays borrowing their material from the Old Testament and Apocrypha may or may not have a religious theme.

With those that have not, we are not closely concerned, but it may be briefly noted that scriptural stories have been treated by some modern dramatists as moral stories, plain stories, and pieces of character delineation.

John Masefield's A King's Daughter (1923) is a study of Jezebel. The business of the plot is to shed a new and more

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1 Susannah and the Elders and other plays, London, 1940, pp. ix-x.

kindly light on the character of Ahab's Phoenician queen by presenting her as an enlightened and civilised woman, trying to impose peace upon the bloodthirsty Israelites, and suffering an unmerited death at their hands. The biblical story of a wicked woman, a worshipper of false gods, receiving due punishment as the Word of the Lord foretold, is completely reinterpreted.

Barrie, in The Boy David (1938) used the story of David and Saul to depict a human relationship. The Lord God of Israel is referred to, whimsically, as 'the Other One', and David is understood to commune with Him from time to time, but the relationship between David and Saul is the subject of the action, and the theme is that of the cruelty of circumstance which can turn the love of two human beings into hatred and fear.

The sadness of some aspects of life is the final reflection of Susannah and the Elders (1937) itself. Bridie, having suggested various ways of regarding the story, proceeded to point out that in his view it was a tragedy: the tragedy of the Elders, and his play is a lively, humorous, pathetic illustration of one kind of human folly.

In Tobias and the Angel (1930) and Jonah and the Whale (1932) he set out to treat 'the relation of the individual man to God', but as the 'jocular-conversational manner' was, on his own admission[1], the only manner he had at his disposal, the religious theme amounted to no more than the light pointing of

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1. Bridie comments on the writing and production of these plays in his autobiography, One Way of Living, ~~op. cit.,~~ pp. 272-8.

a moral.[1] Tobias and the Angel shews how Jahweh blessed Tobit because of his righteousness, and Jonah and the Whale shews how He humbled Jonah because of his absurd pride. The plays have a neat shape, an abundance of wit and gaiety, and a plain style. They interpret their originals as 'moral stories', and make excellent entertainment out of them.

The treatment of biblical subjects as 'plain stories' is nowhere better exemplified than in the plays of Gordon Daviot. The Stars Bow Down (1939) and The Little Dry Thorn (1947) exploit the history of Joseph, and of Abraham and Sara, respectively, for the sake of a plot and striking theatrical situations. Both plays have a notable absence of significant theme, and the former treats its subject somewhat in the manner of the American mime-play which so appalled the critic of the Church Times in 1905, on its presentation at the London Coliseum. The 'incident in Potiphar's house' is 'dwelt upon at some length'[2], though, in this case, without any real dramatic force.

There are, however, some plays in which the religious implications of certain of the Old Testament stories have been explored and re-stated. The 'amateur drama' abounds in plays of this type[3] - none of which lays claim to serious consideration as a work of dramatic art - and D.H. Lawrence's David (1926), Laurence Housman's Abraham and Isaac (1941), Anne Ridler's Cain

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1. cf. Paul Claudel's treatment of the story of Tobias in L'histoire de Tobie et de Sara (1942).
2. op. cit., p.34.
3. See the Religious Drama Society's Catalogue of Selected Plays, ~~op. cit.,~~ Section IIA, 'Old Testament and Apocrypha', pp. 10-15.

(1943), and Christopher Fry's The Firstborn (first version 1946, revised version 1952) variously repay examination. These four plays are all concerned in some way with religious experience, and each throws some light on the difficulty of turning the Bible into drama.

D.H. Lawrence's David is a chronicle-play in fifteen scenes, following its biblical source with great fidelity, incorporating all the main episodes related there from Saul's victory over the Amalekites to Jonathan's warning to David,[1] and elaborating most of them. It has, consequently, neither the shape nor the intensity of drama. But from Lawrence's imitation of the language of the Authorized Version, certain conclusions may be drawn. In its use of biblical imagery and phraseology, his style is perhaps as close an imitation of its Jacobean original as can be made at this distance of time. David describes to Jonathan his moments of exaltation:

> When I feel the Glory is with me, my heart leaps like a young kid, and bounds in my bosom, and my limbs swell like boughs that put forth buds.[2]

To Michal he says:

> The Lord My God is a glowing flame and he loveth all things that do glow. So loves He thee, Michal, for thou glowest like a young tree in full flower, with flowers of gold and scarlet, and dark leaves. O thou young pomegranate tree, flowers and fruit together show on thy body. And flame calleth to flame, for flame is the body of God, like flowers of flame...[3]

And Samuel's prayer, a mystical communing with the Infinite, is

1. I Samuel, chs. 15-20.
2. David, London, 1926, Sc. V, p.39.
3. Ibid., Sc. XII, pp. 91-2.

couched in these terms:

> I sink like a stone in the sea, and nothing of my own is left me. I am gone away from myself, I disappear in the deeps of God. And the oracle of the Lord stirs me, as the fountains of the deep. Lo! I am not mine own. The flood has covered me and the waters of the beginning sound in the shell of my heart.[1]

This pseudo-biblical style - Lawrence appears to have taken the Song of Solomon as his model[2] - is rich and rhythmical and high-sounding, but it has an essential artificiality fatal to the communication of religious emotion. The value of attempting to reproduce the language of the Authorized Version would seem to be small.

David is diametrically opposite in treatment to Lawrence Housman's Abraham and Isaac, which seeks to reduce its subject to the flat level of prose. Here, the supernatural element in the story is made natural, and the language used is that of contemporary speech. The play - like Housman's other Old Testament plays[3] - demonstrates his disbelief in miracles, the intrusion of which, he thinks, 'obscures the meaning and lessens the spritual value of many a beautiful Old Testament story.'[4] Believing that 'the best one can do for them to-day to restore the respect they have lost is to eliminate these useless

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1. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
2. cf. especially these verses with the second passage quoted: 'Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks'; 'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits..' (Song of Solomon, Ch. 4, vv. 3 & 12-13).
3. Laurence Housman, Old Testament Plays, London, 1950, contains them all: Abraham & Isaac, Jacob's Ladder, Ramoth-Gilead, The Burden of Nineveh, Samuel the Kingmaker. Their quality is poor.
4. This view is expounded in the author's preface to the volume, pp. 11-12.

excrescences', he attempts a rational interpretation of the miraculous.

In Abraham and Isaac, Abraham's hand is stayed at the crisis, not by the appearance of an angel, but because he changes his mind. Abraham's realisation that God does not demand human sacrifice is expressed by his standing 'rapt in the revelation that has come to him', and then voicing his thoughts in a prayer. The meaning of the experience is thus stated with considerably less dramatic force than it has either in the mediaeval Brome play of Abraham and Isaac, or in the Bible.

The domestic setting - in Scenes One and Three, Housman depicts Isaac's 'home background' - and the use of modern colloquial speech further reduce its power. The wrangling of Abraham and Sara in their kitchen lessens the pathos of the journey up Mount Moriah, which follows, and the scene in their kitchen which concludes the play, dispels the very slight emotional impact made by Housman's rational interpretation of the revelation.

The problems of form and language attendant on dramatisation of the Bible are solved neither in Lawrence's transposition of an Old Testament story, nor in Housman's domestication of one. They are not solved in Anne Ridler's Cain, but something of value is attempted - the use of a particular story to treat a question of universal significance: the problem of pain.

Anne Ridler's subject is the consequence of the Fall, and its renewal in Cain, and in every human being, by his own sin.

The relevance of the story to all human experience, is pointed by the two Archangels who act as Chorus. They comment on the condition of Adam and Eve:

Michael (to audience)
... the taste of pain at its full bitterness
Grows duller on the tongue: they have their times of peace,
And, like you, at the most irrational moments:
Supper and a bright fire annul the day's hostility.

Gabriel
Yet you may say, knowing all that has happened since,
You their descendants have more reason to reproach them
Than they can now know - or could endure to know.

Michael
Yet you share the blame, as they bear equal pain.

Gabriel
If you refused the apple, it was later you fell
To a similar temptation.

Michael
And to Adam and Eve
It will seem, as often to you, that evil prevails,
That good is valueless to avert its invasion.

Gabriel
Yet still they will be wrong — [1]

Cain's envy of Abel, his murder of Abel, and his subsequent misery are shewn, and commented upon by the Archangels in an Epilogue. Cain is to be pitied, not condemned, living in a hell with which all are acquainted. Man's condition is Cain's condition, but with an important qualification:

Michael (to audience)
The shuttles are wound with misery; but you know more than Cain,
You can invoke the power that gives hope to these labours.
God Himself descending, as at this time, as at all times,

1. Cain, London, 1943, p. 10. Act I, Sc. I.

> Working upon the world by a free intervention,
> And in the world by the breath of His creating,
> Heals that wound by man made into His final peace.[1]

Anne Ridler's solution is the Christian solution, imaginatively apprehended; and by re-creating the story of Cain in her own poetic idiom, she gives it a fresh significance.

She is less successful in integrating form and content. With its long soliloquys, its meditative tone and its two-dimensional characters, the play more closely resembles dramatic poetry than poetic drama, but it has moments of intensity which derive from the action. Cain's fear of the Archangels, rising to a scream of terror as they appear, is most moving in performance; and the game played by Cain and Abel, with its stylised movement and the repeated cries of 'Skin. Blade. Stone.', leads effectively up to the murder. There is, also, a strongly dramatic quality in some of the dialogue[2], which gains by being spoken; and the Christian solution to the problem of pain is put forward in a passage full of antitheses. Michael reassures Cain:

> No hope is greater than yours: look and take comfort.
> Over the sharp edges of frustration and pain
> You are torn towards God; the mark of your misery
> Is the furrow of His glory engraved in your forehead
> Nothing else can hurt you. Now begin your journey -
> Its end is unthinkable yet always attainable.
> You are the child of man and of God, immortal
> Though doomed to die; hopeless, yet fed on salvation;
> Capable of intelligence, of murder and of mercy.

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1. Ibid., pp. 31-2.
2. Cain enters hurriedly to Abel, in Act I, Sc. 2, and the sharp staccato ring of his words immediately established his nature. Ibid., pp. 11-12.

> Remember your end, attend to the pricks of perfection -
> Swords in the sun, in the rain unceasing.
> But now go in peace, now go forward in peace.[1]

Cain only approximates to drama, but it is rich in thought and language, and the imaginative expression of the experience at its core, artistically justifies the re-telling of the story.

Christopher Fry's The Firstborn has a similar theme. The problem of pain, the interrelation of good and evil, the human predicament are explored in an interpretation of the story of Moses - or, rather, of one part of that story. Eight chapters of the Book of Exodus[2] furnish material for the plot, but the narrative is subdued to the shape of drama and its emphasis shifted for the working out of the theme. The salvation of the Israelites by the Lord God of Israel is, in the Bible, the 'feature predominating.' In Fry's play, it is the experience of their leader.

Moses returns to Egypt from Midian, resolved to free the Israelites from the tyranny of the Pharaoh. He finds that in the act of liberating them he also perpetrates an evil. The plagues inflicted on the Egyptians bring about the freeing of Israel, but the innocent as well as the guilty are their victims. 'Take evil by the tail', says Miriam, 'and you find you are holding good head-downwards.'[3] Moses' perception of this dilemma, and finally his resolution of it, constitute a spiritual progress capable of dramatic treatment.

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1. Act 2, Sc. 3, p. 30.
2. 5 - 12.
3. The Firstborn, London, 1952, Act 3, Sc. 1, p. 69.

The dilemma is centred - and Moses is made acutely aware of it - in one single instance. Ramases, whom Moses loves, is the eldest son of the Pharoah. He is good, just, concerned for the plight of the Israelites, and has a hatred of his father's tyranny; but in the last plague visited on Egypt, he is doomed to die with the firstborn. Moses' realisation of this fact brings a recognition of the problem:

> ... Can we go forward
> Only by the ravage of what we value?[1]
>
> ... All was right except this, all, the reason,
> The purpose, the justice, the culmination.
> Good has turned against itself and become
> Its own enemy ... What must we say
> To be free of the bewildering mesh of God?[2]

But his despairing conviction that he has 'followed a light into a blindness' is followed by a new kind of vision:

> I do not know why the necessity of God
> Should feed on grief; but it seems so. And to know it
> Is not to grieve less, but to see grief grow big
> With what has died, and in some spirit differently
> Bear it back to life.[3]

The Firstborn offers no doctrinal solution to the problem which it states. Rather, it gropes towards a meaning, which it fails to discover, but it ends with the affirmative assumption that there is a meaning to be found.

> Moses ... what does eternity bear witness to
> If not at last to hope? ...[4]
>
> We must each find our separate meaning
> In the persuasion of our days
> Until we meet in the meaning of the world.[5]

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1. Act 3, Sc. 1, p. 76.
2. Act 3, Sc. 2, p. 86.
3. Ibid., p. 88.
4. Ibid., p. 89.
5. Ibid., p. 90.

In this play, form and content are integrated. The thought is implicit in the experience of the characters, and where it is explicit, as in Moses' last speeches, its expression is prompted naturally by the incidents of the plot. No omniscient Archangels are provided for its exposition. There is constant meditation on the theme - not only Moses, but Ramases, Anath, Aaron, and even the Pharaoh's daughter Teusret, are bewildered by the mystery of being - but their reflections are justified by the strange and violent events in which they are involved. Fry chose a subject eminently suitable for the expression of his thought.[1]

He has, moreover, brought the story to vivid life without recourse to modern colloquial speech. A clear delineation of character gives life to Seti, the Pharaoh, and a sympathetic presentation of his problems as ruler lends an interest to the portrait. He is shewn opposing Moses in the belief that he is saving Egypt from disintegration. Anath, who has found and nurtured Moses, has a warm humanity, conveyed in the quality of her humour and the depth of her feelings - though the nature of her feelings towards the hostility between Moses and Seti is nowhere fully explained. Miriam and Aaron are adequately drawn, their interest in Moses' project dulled by years of suffering; and Ramases is a sensitive study in the idealism of youth.

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1. In the first version of the play reflective passages are, even so, too prolonged. The play is very much improved by the cuts Fry made in his revision of it. (Apart from these cuts, and a slight rearrangement of the last scene, there is no material alteration.)

The characterisation of Moses himself is a masterly piece of work, deriving partly from the Bible and partly from the imagination of the dramatist. He is the patriarch of the Book of Exodus, an immensely powerful and commanding figure, but made credible and human by his perplexity. This chink in his armour is carefully chosen. A moral flaw would have invalidated his divine mission; by attributing bewilderment to his hero Fry makes him sympathetic in his integrity, and a spokesman for his own thought. Ramases, admiring Moses' clarity of purpose, draws this exclamation from him:

> Clear?
> Evidence of that! Where in this drouthy
> Overwatered world can you find me clarity?
> What spirit made the hawk? a bird obedient
> To grace, a bright lash on the cheek of the wind
> And drawn and ringed with feathered earth and sun,
> An achievement of eternity's birdsmith. But did he
> Also bleak the glittering charcoal of the eyes
> And sharpen beak and claws on his hone of lust?
> What language is life? Not one that I know.
> A quarrel in God's nature.[1]

The biblical Moses at first doubted his fitness for his divine mission, but gained confidence as he saw it succeeding. Fry's hero is at first confident that he can 'discover justice' for his people, but doubts his justice when he sees what it involves.

The conception of The Firstborn is sound, its characterisation subtle, and the plot is well contrived to cover a whole sequence of episodes without depicting them in the manner of a chronicle-play. In Act One, Moses returns to Egypt, and demands the liberation of his people. In the interval which elapses

1. Act 1, Sc. 2, pp. 27-8.

between Acts One and Two, the Pharaoh has seven times promised to release the Israelites, seven times broken his promise, and Egypt has been visited by seven plagues. Only three of the twelve plagues of Egypt have any place in the action. The turning of the Nile waters into blood, discovered by Miriam in Act Two Scene One, is used as a focal point, indicating what is being done to Egypt. What has gone before is conveyed in Act Two Scene Two in Anath's accusation of Seti. The plague of darkness, with which the scene ends, shews Moses' indomitable will:

Moses   Seti
May see better without the light of day
The hand of God has gone across his eyes
And closed all life upon itself...
                                        Tell him, tell Seti
That I wait for his answer.[1]

The final plague of the slaying of the firstborn precipitates the crisis. The outward action is thus economically traced, and it is matched by an even development of the inner action.[2] Moses' purpose is sealed at the end of the first Act, when his question

Am I given power to do what I am?[3]

is answered by a beating of thunder which he takes to be the verdict of the 'infinite eavesdropper'. In the second Act it is confirmed by the plagues:

1. Act 2, Sc. 2, pp. 66-7.
2. ct. P.J.Lamb's Go Down, Moses (1944), in which a contest for the soul of Moses, between Satan and the Archangel Michael, is depicted in a loose sequence of episodes, partly historical, and partly allegorical.
3. Act. 1, Sc. 3, p.43.

Moses   Creation's mutehead is dissolving, Aaron.
         Our lives are being lived into our lives.
         We are known.'[1]

The third Act poses the dilemma, and ends with its resolution. And the sub-plot of Shendi's appointment as an officer, in which capacity he drives the Hebrews more cruelly than their Egyptian task-masters, is well linked to the main plot and stresses the confusion at the root of things.

The structure of the play is faulty at one strategic point, however. The relationship between Moses and Ramases is insufficiently established. Ramases' admiration for Moses is shewn in Act One; Moses' love for Ramases is not apparent until the action culminates in his death. His agony of grief is therefore partly inexplicable, and it is less moving than it should be because there has been no preparation for it. The death of Ramases gives the play its title; its meaning for Moses is central to the play's thought; but its dramatic force is seriously weakened by Fry's failure to establish the relationship between the two men.

The Firstborn is a fine play, marred by this weakness. It is the only modern play, based on the Old Testament, which approaches greatness; the only one in which the 'literature of the Bible' is 'given real dramatic life on the stage'. The problem of form is solved by Fry's skilful compression of the narrative; the problem of language, by the fact that he is a poet speaking in the idiom most natural to him. As Shakespeare

1. Act 2, Sc. 1, p.46.

transformed his borrowed plots, so Fry has taken a biblical story and made it his own.

The difference of treatment in the four Old Testament plays we have examined points to a development akin to that observed in the Gospel drama of this century. There, we noted a growing freedom of treatment and an increasing urgency of thought. In the romantic elaboration of _David_, the prose naturalism of _Abraham and Isaac_, and the high seriousness of _Cain_ and _The Firstborn_, a similar progress is discernible. The development itself is an important one. What began as a movement to arrange the biblical narrative for 'representation in costume' has given way to an attempt to find in it some hint of the meaning of the world.' Yet individual achievement is limited: in New Testament drama it resides chiefly in _Seed of Adam_, in Old Testament drama in _The Firstborn_, which, however, fails to lead dramatically to its crisis.

Bible drama and true religious drama, as we realise from the fact that they coincide here only in _Seed of Adam_, are by no means synonymous.

CHAPTER TWO

The Church and the Saints

O driven in search or dire in mastery, the mind
of God's Church is the only final subject of song.[1]
Charles Williams.

Il suffit d'ouvrir le livre de la Chrétienté pour en voir jaillir les plus beaux conflits, les plus humains, les plus divins motifs de drame.[2]
Henri Ghéon.

Un dramaturge ne devra pas craindre d'offrir a nos Saints ses services; il ne sera pas rebuté. Le prestige de la scène est grand: ils l'ont autrefois fréquentée ...[3]
Henri Ghéon.

'Créer le théâtre des Saints, voilà le mot',[4] writes a critic of the work of Henri Ghéon. It was Ghéon's ambitious desire that every parish in France should be made acquainted with its Patron Saint through the medium of drama, and he contributed towards its realisation by writing a large number of plays celebrating the Church and the Saints. English religious drama has produced no single body of work to equal Ghéon's in extent[5], nor any one play comparable in artistry with his La Merveilleuse Histoire du jeune Bernard de Menthon, but it has, over a period of some seventy years, created a diverse and interesting 'théâtre des Saints'.

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1. The House of the Octopus, London, 1945, p.9.
2. Henri Brochet, Henri Ghéon, Paris, 1946, p.75, quoting an article by Ghéon, 'Pour un théâtre catholique', in La Vie et les Arts liturgiques. (Date not given.)
3. Jeux et Miracles, 1st series, Paris, 1922, p.11. (Quoted by Maurice Déléglise, Le Théâtre d'Henri Ghéon, Sion, 1947, p.140.)
5. For a bibliography of his plays, see Le Théâtre d'Henri Ghéon, ~~op. cit.,~~ pp.363-8.
4. Déléglise, loc. cit.

The attention of the pioneers of modern religious drama in this country went first to the saints. St. Augustine, St. Columba, St. Patrick and St. Aidan, were their subjects. After the war of 1914-18, Laurence Housman, finding 'escape from a world gone mad' in 'the serene sanity of St. Francis'[1], began work on the first of his little plays which grew into a cycle on the life of St. Francis. And when the Church, in 1928, began the practice of commissioning new plays, a body of work celebrating her saints and martyrs not unnaturally came into being.

For the purpose of critical discussion, these plays may be divided into groups according to their treatment and choice of subject.

Some concentrate on the presentation of historical fact: Henry Cresswell's *The Conversion of England* (1885), H.M.Downton's *St. Augustine of Canterbury* (1901), G.J.A.D'Arcy's *St. Aidan, Apostle of England* (1906) and a later play, Gordon Bottomley's *The Acts of St. Peter* (1933) are of this kind. Others are concerned less with historical truth than with what Laurence Housman calls 'a spiritual interpretation of character'[2]; this is the preoccupation of his own plays of St. Francis (1922-35). Some largely disregard character in an exploration of spiritual truth and experience: T.S.Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and Charles Williams' *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936) belong here. Some few are pre-occupied with the Christian ethic:

1. *The Unexpected Years*, ~~op.cit.,~~ p.321.
2. *Little Plays of St. Francis*, 1st series, ~~op.cit.,~~ p.xvii.

Christopher Fry's Thor, with Angels (1948)[1], and Robert Gittings' The Makers of Violence (1951) have this in common. And one, Fry's The Boy with a Cart (1938), an exuberant comedy on the life of St. Cuthman of Sussex, defies classification.

In addition to these studies of the saints, there are a few plays which celebrate the Church either more or less directly. In two pageant-plays - The Rock (1934), for which T.S.Eliot wrote the choruses, and Charles Williams' Judgement at Chelmsford (1939) - the Church takes the place of the saint as the central figure. In The Zeal of Thy House (1937) and The Emperor Constantine (1951), Dorothy Sayers has treated subjects relating to Church history. And in The House of the Octopus (1945) Charles Williams has made the spiritual reality to which the Church bears witness, the 'final subject of song'.

Let us look more closely at the individual plays, assessing their artistic achievement, and drawing what conclusions we may as to the compatibility of their subject matter with dramatic form.

The early saint-plays were intended to teach Church history, and were concerned with event. The Conversion of England is episodic in character. The historical facts concerning the coming of St. Augustine to England are conveyed in a series of scenes, which are aptly called 'Tableaux', and between which there is only a loose historical connection. The

1. Though not properly a saint-play, Thor, with Angels is concerned with the coming of St. Augustine to this country, and for that reason is included here.

action lacks cohesion. In St. Augustine of Canterbury, the chronicle of events is enlivened by being interspersed with rustic dialogue:

> I zay, Will, what be they black-hooded blokes us seed landing on the beach yesterday, d'ye know? They seem a rummy looking lot with their bare legs and long brown cloaks and their hair growing round their heads like mushrooms in a ring. I never seed the likes afore! They can't be come for to vight, for they ain't got no bows, nor spears, ne'et no axes; and I guess they'd have a mighty hard job to vight in them there petticoats[1]...

but the play has less unity than its predecessor and an incongruous mixture of styles. And St. Aidan, Apostle of England has the faults of the chronicle-play without the virtue of humour. The three plays make apparent, by failing to surmount it, the difficulty of imposing dramatic unity on historical subject matter.

Gordon Bottomley's The Acts of St. Peter, ~~(1933)~~ a

> ... celebration of the story
> Of that Apostle...[2]

goes some way towards surmounting it. It traces the history of St. Peter from the beginning of his discipleship at Capernaum to his death by crucifixion at Rome[3], and its separate episodes are linked by a Chorus of women. Their role is that of narrator and commentator, and they have also a more specifically dramatic

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1. St. Augustine of Canterbury, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.23. Act 2, Sc.1 (a).
2. The Acts of St. Peter, London, 1933, p.2. (The play has no act or scene divisions.)
3. The play is based on the Gospels of the New Testament, and on Dr. Montagu James' Apocrypha of the New Testament. (See Bottomley's note prefaced to the play.) It is more convenient to discuss it here, as it is a saint-play, than with the New Testament plays considered in Chapter 1, all of which are primarily concerned with the life of Christ.

function. The movement, rhythm and mood of many of the choral passages heighten the effect of the scenes which they introduce. Thus, the scene on Calvary is anticipated by a passage whose rhythm is that of a dead march, having three strong beats in each line, like a knell tolling:

> Ròme's wìsdom fàiled -
> Còld, secùre, blìnd.
> The spènt nìght pàled;
> Èarth's hèavy mìnd
>
> With dàwn wòke in glòom
> And dàrk fìerce flàme.
> With whìps, cròss, tòmb
> His Kìngdom càme ...[1]

The same rhythm is used for the chorus which is interpolated during the Crucifixion scene, and for that which immediately follows it; and in the latter the movement begins to quicken in the third stanza, leading up to the statement that death is 'no void, but an infinite.'[2] Towards the end of the play a similarly dramatic use of rhythm suggests what is to follow: Peter's death is anticipated in the movement, as well as in the words, of the chorus.

The dramatic effect of such choral passages increases their value as links in the chain of events which make up the action. Bottomley's use of the chorus is skilful, but it provides only a superficial continuity, easing the transition from episode to episode. The successive portrayal of Peter's home at Capernaum, the main incidents of the Passion-narrative,

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1. pp. 34-5. The stresses are marked in the text, with a stage direction that the passage is to be spoken 'adagio'.
2. p. 40.

the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost, a meeting between Peter and Paul at Antioch, and Peter's life among his followers in Rome, has neither a real organic development nor a single unifying theme. Bottomley was defeated, as his predecessors were defeated, by the difficulty of imposing unity upon the necessarily episodic character of a chronicle-playy[1].

Laurence Housman's plays of St. Francis rest, in the words of their author, 'only lightly on any actual record of events.'[2] The material of legend and history is supplemented by much that is pusely imaginary, Housman's main purpose in writing the plays being to present 'a spiritual interpretation of character.' The first series of Little Plays of St. Francis has a coherent pattern but no single thread of plot. It is divided into three parts, each containing six little plays, and each relating to some aspect of St. Francis' life and character. Part One, The Foregoing, shows his conversion from pleasure-seeker to ascetic; Part Two, The Following, displays the effect of his teaching and and personality on all with whom he comes into contact; and Part Three, The Finding, is concerned with the establishment of the Franciscan Order, and the Passion and death of its founder.

The individual plays vary in dramatic quality. The incidents depicted in Part One are lively and credible, and, except in Our Lady of Poverty, demand no profound psyghological

1. The medium of radio is better suited to this type of play than the stage. Hugh Ross Williamson's Paul, a Bondslave, London, 1945, was written for broadcasting - in four parts - and so required to be episodic in character.
2. Little Plays of St. Francis, 1st series, lop.cit., p.xvii.

depth in their presentation. In the merry-making of The Revellers, it is enough to hint at feeling and seriousness behind Francesco's mask of gaiety; and in the following four plays, to suggest briefly his generosity, fear of death, remorse and growing sobriety. Even in Our Lady of Poverty, the greater part of the action centres round a Court of Love, but the business of its closing incident, Francesco's meeting with a leper, is to show the conversion of his instinctive revulsion into a love for all God's creatures, and here the words carry only a superficial conviction.

Housman's inability to communicate a profound spiritual experience is fully evident in The Seraphic Vision in Part Three, where he attempts to shew Francis receiving the Stigmata, in an ecstacy of mystic communion. The long soliloquy spoken by Francis is carefully worked out: meditation on the Passion of Christ, the use of biblical quotation and biblical imagery, and the quickening rhythm of the verse as the speech proceeds are appropriate to the subject, but they do no more than suggest that an attempt is being made to shew religious exaltation. The effect is contrived.

Housman's interest in St. Francis did not lie in his religious experience,[1] and he failed to communicate it. It lay in the salutary effect of his gentleness and goodness on friends and enemies alike, and in the value of his doctrine of love and peace as a rule for living. This subject finds expression in

1. cf. Henri Ghéon's La Vie Profonde de S. François d'Assise, where it is the subject of the play.

the plays of Part Two, which are the most successful in presenting 'a spiritual interpretaion of character', and the least dramatic. The moral conversion of Lupo, the leader of a band of robbers, in Brother Wolf, is effected by means of a quiet dialogue between Francis and Juniper on the miseries attendant on robbing. The miser, in Sister Gold, is shamed into repentance by Francis's gentle reproach; and the Soldan, in Brother Sun, is moved to set the captured Francis free by his sermon on Christian love.

By treating his subject in this way Housman demonstrates his point. The same kind of treatment is used in most of the plays which followed: Followers of St. Francis (1923), The Comments of Juniper (1926), and the second series of Little Plays of St. Francis (1931). They consist largely of dialogue between Francis and his disciples, illustrating what Housman has referred to elsewhere as the saint's 'artistry in human nature.'[1] The subject does not require, and does not provide, intensity in its expression. It is well served by these series of dialogues, but at no point do they achieve the intensity of drama.

Housman's plays of St. Francis form a group by themselves, and it is perhaps significant that no one else has attempted precisely what he has done. Drama is not easily made out of 'a spiritual interpretation of character'.

The next group of plays - those which explore spiritual

1. '... what most attracted me to St. Francis was not his exalted piety or his practice of holy poverty, but his artistry in human nature, and the extraordinarily effective use he made of it, whereof Juniper the fool is the outstanding example.' (The Unexpected Years, p.324.)

truth and experience - has a more considerable achievement.

In Murder in the Cathedral, T.S. Eliot treated a subject which lends itself more readily to dramatic expression than either the life of St. Peter or the character of St. Francis; and Murder in the Cathedral has what the chronicle-plays lack - a single central theme. It is a study of martyrdom, and its dramatic intensity derives from its singleness of purpose.

Under the discipline of his theme, Eliot exercised a ruthless economy in the selection of his material. Tennyson's Becket, like Bottomley's The Acts of St. Peter, ranged over the whole life of its saint-hero, and for that reason lacked immediacy. Murder in the Cathedral concentrates upon his death. 'A man comes home foreseeing that he will be killed, and he is killed.'[1] The return of Becket to Canterbury after seven years of exile, the arrival of four Knights in Canterbury to kill him, and the murder itself, are, in terms of event, all that happens. And within this narrow framework of event, the drama unfolds with a highly dramatic inevitability.

The whole of Part One, the Interlude, and the beginning of Part Two are a preparation for the martyrdom. The Women of Canterbury anticipate it at the opening of the play in their sense of approaching calamity, though they do not yet know the nature of the calamity. The Messenger who reports Becket's return to England hints that it is a prelude to trouble. The satisfaction of the Second Priest at the Archbishop's return is

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1. Eliot's summary of the action, Poetry and Drama, ~~op. cit.,~~ p. 25.

echoed by the Third Priest with an ominous qualification:

For good or ill, let the wheel turn.[1]

And Thomas Becket himself, whose entrance follows shortly, has a certain expectation of death.

> For a little time the hungry hawk
> Will only soar and hover, circling lower,
> Waiting excuse, pretence, opportunity.
> End will be simple, sudden, God-given.
> ... Heavier the interval than the consummation.
> All things prepare the event.[2]

His encounter with the four Tempters, which occupies the second half of Part One, is a spiritual preparation for martyrdom; the arrival of the four Knights in the first scene of Part Two prepares the way for it in terms of event; And the interlude which divides the two parts both foreshadows and interprets it, being a sermon on the meaning and value of martyrdom to the Christian Church.

The crisis loses none of its effect by this anticipation. Indeed, it is effective precisely because it has had such careful preparation, precisely because the whole of the action has led directly to it. The absence of any irrelevant matter is the play's strength. It is a perfect illustration of Yeats' dictum that a dramatic action is 'an energy, an eddy of life, purified from everything but itself',[3] and a fulfilment

1. Murder in the Cathedral, 1950, p.18. (There are no act or scene divisions). The play has been several times revised. The fourth edition, 1938, contains the final revision, and it is from this text, reprinted, that I have quoted. The publishers list this fourth edition as a reprint of the third, published in 1937. Eliot's note to the 1938 edition, referring to his revisions, makes it clear that it is a revised edition & not a reprint.
2. Ibid., p.23. 3. Plays & Controversies, London, 1923, p.103.

of Eliot's own demand for 'an hour and a half of intense interest.'[1]

The intensity achieved by the bareness of the action is heightened by a skilful manipulation of its tempo. The gradually mounting tension of Part One, its suspension during the Interlude - due partly to the use of prose, the only appropriate medium for the sermon - and the swift approach of the crisis in Part Two, lead up to the emotional climax of the play, the agonised cry of the Women at the moment of the murder:

> Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind! take
> Stone from stone and wash them.
> The land is foul, the water is foul, our beasts and
> ourselves defiled with blood ... etc.[2]

The tension is then immediately relaxed by the second prose sequence in which the Knights explain to the audience, in modern colloquial language, why they acted as they did; and another climax, more controlled and longer sustained, is reached in the final exultant chorus of praise.

The main theme of the play is implied in Thomas's statement, in his sermon, that the souls of the martyred are 'numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men';[3] and in the observation of the chorus at the opening of Part Two, that

> ... war among men defiles this world, but death in
> the Lord renews it,
> And the world must be cleaned in the winter, or we
> shall have only
> A sour spring, a parched summer, an empty harvest.[4]

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1. 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry', Selected Essays, 3rd enlarged edition, London, 1951, p.58.
2. pp. 76-7.
3. p. 49.
4. pp. 53-4.

Murder in the Cathedral is concerned with expiation. The fate of Becket is shewn to be of less moment than the fact of expiation; the redemptive value of martyrdom is of greater significance than Becket's act in consenting to it. His spiritual conflict occupies only a small part of the action: his rejection of temptation is only one incident in the working out of the design of God for the salvation of men.

'A martyrdom is always the design of God', he explains in his sermon, 'never the design of man,'[1] And the idea of a pattern eternally fixed, which must yet be worked out in time, is expressed in his first speech.

> ... action is suffering
> And suffering action. Neither does the agent suffer
> Nor the patient act. But both are fixed
> In an eternal action, an eternal patience
> To which all must consent that it may be willed
> And which all must suffer that they may will it,
> That the pattern may subsist, for the pattern is
> the action
> And the suffering, that the wheel may turn and still
> Be forever still.[2]

In the working out of this design, it is the experience of the Women of Canterbury which is the heart of the matter. In their release from a sense of sin to a sense of exultation, the meaning of Thomas's sacrifice is made plain.

> ... war among men defiles this world, but death

1. p. 49.
2. p.21. The importance of this passage is stressed by its almost exact repetition as the final observation of the Fourth Tempter at the end of the temptation sequence. (p.40.) The idea, and the image are present in the earlier speech of the Third Priest: 'For ill or good, let the wheel turn For who knows the end of good or evil?' (p.18.)

in the Lord renews it.

Eliot's dependence on the Chorus, necessitated by his immaturity as a dramatist at this time[1], was also dictated by his theme. It has the odd dramatic effect of making the experience of the protagonist subsidiary in importance to that of the Chorus. And two other factors contribute to this effect: the character of the protagonist is not strongly drawn, and such experience as he does undergo in the course of the action is not presented with much dramatic force.

The use of allegorical figures to depict a spiritual struggle tends almost invariably to rob it of urgency[2]., and this is its effect here. The substance of Becket's encounter with the four Tempters is, in his own words;

... shadows, and the strife with shadows.[3].

The absence of urgency is the more noticeable because only the last episode contains any real conflict. The first three temptations have long ago been overcome and Thomas is shewn rejecting them without hesitation. He weighs them but does not waver. Their appearance here is a recapitulation of a past struggle. It is only the fourth, the desire for the glory of being a martyr, that is an actual temptation, recognised and contended with now for the first time. 'Who are you?' Thomas

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1. '... a poet writing for the first time for the stage, is much more at home in choral verse than in dramatic dialogue.' (Poetry & Drama, lop. cit., p.25.)
2. As can be seen in several of the mediaeval moralities, e.g. The Castle of Perseverance. Everyman is saved from this fault by the concision and rapidity of the action.
3. p.23.

asks him,

> 'I had expected
> Three visitors, not four.' [1]

For the impersonality of Becket himself, Eliot's lack of experience in the delineation of character may be partly responsible.[2] But it is ultimately a larger question than that, and one peculiar to religious drama, for in a religious sense, the character and personality of the protagonist are of less account than his soul. So, Eliot's purpose here is not to establish the character of Becket, but to shew him losing his will in the will of God. He is concerned with him not as a man but as a martyr, and

> ... the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr.[3]

The function of the temptation sequence is to shew Becket making perfect his will. A close study of his character would confuse the issue. For the same reason, Eliot deliberately avoids the drama of personal relationships, as one critic has pointed out: 'The King does not appear, and the Knights are not persons, but at first a gang, and then a set of attitudes.'[4] Delineation of character and the clash of character are not for this play.

With these restrictions imposed by his theme, Eliot has

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1. p. 35.
2. It is true that, 'After creating the "characters" of Sweeney and Prufrock and The Lady, it is but a step to Archbishop Becket and Harry Lord Monchensey." (Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre, London, 1946, p.2.) But the creation of character for the stage makes different demands on the poet.
3. p. 49.
4. Helen Gardner, The Art of T.S.Eliot, London, 1949, p.133.

nevertheless succeeded in effecting a reconciliation between form and content. There is a strong element of conflict in the play. In Part One, it lies in the opposition of the Women of Canterbury to the approaching event. They oppose Thomas's decision to remain in danger in Canterbury, and rebel against the necessity of his death, refusing to consent to the pattern of action and suffering in which they are implicated. When their resistance weakens, in Part Two, and they accept their share of 'the eternal burden, the perpetual glory', opposition to Thomas's readiness to die is raised by the Priests, who attempt to save him against his will. His refusal to be sheltered in a locked church, his insistence that they shall unbar the door, is a moment of strong tension. And implicit in the whole action, and essentially dramatic in its contradictions, is the paradox inherent in martyrdom itself, that safety lies in danger, and, in death, life. The Women, urging Becket's return to France, and the Priests, urging refuge or flight, are in truth opposing his salvation and their own.

The paradox of martyrdom is evident in Thomas's assertion:

> I am not in danger: only near to death.[1]

He has explained it a few lines earlier:

> Death will come only when I am worthy,
> And if I am worthy, there is no danger.[2]

And in his serene anticipation of death, the reality of the spiritual universe in which life and death have a different

1. p.70.
2. p.69.

meaning, is wonderfully affirmed.

> I have had a tremour of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper,
> And I would no longer be denied; all things
> Proceed to a joyful consummation.[1]

Murder in the Cathedral is entitled to the claim which has been made for it, that it is 'the most sustained poetic drama in English since Samson Agonistes'.[2] In neglecting character, in omitting to examine personal relationships, and in laying the dramatic emphasis on the experience of the Chorus, Eliot has given us something new in the way of drama[3]; but something which by its intensity, its strong element of conflict and its communication of the experience of the Chorus, achieves that catharsis of the emotions of which drama is peculiarly capable. With its affirmation of the reality of the spiritual universe it may be said to be, also, the most sustained religious drama in English since Samson Agonistes.

The subject of Charles Williams' Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury is not martyrdom itself, but the spiritual salvation of the martyr. The prayer of the Singers at the opening of the play, that

> ... we may pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal.[4]

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1. p.70.
2. F.O. Matthiesson, The Achievement of T.S.Eliot, 2nd ed. revised and enlarged, London, 1947, p.174.
3. Or perhaps it would be truer to say something very old. The situation of Aeschylus' Supplices provides an interesting parallel to Eliot's play. Here, as there, it is the fate of the chorus which is in the balance, a chorus of women who seek & find refuge at an altar.
4. Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, London, 1936, p.7. (The play has no act or scene division.)

relates closely to the action; for the action shews Cranmer passing through things temporal and coming at the end of his life to an understanding of things eternal. His question before his martyrdom:

> Can life itself be redemption? all grace but grace?
> all this terror the agonizing glory of grace?[1]

is a recognition of the truth of which the play is an assertion.

The manner in which Charles Williams gives dramatic expression to his conception of grace is both original and striking. He introduces an abstract figure, called the Skeleton, who manipulates events to his purpose, which is the working out of Cranmer's salvation. The Skeleton thus represents both destiny and the means of grace, and the identification of the two underlines the argument that life itself is redemption, that all chance is heavenly, and all luck good.

The Skeleton's participation in the action is at first slight, but sufficient to suggest his power over it. He leads Cranmer to the King, when the King summons Cranmer, passes a crozier to the King when Cranmer is to be made Archbishop, covers Anne Boleyn with his cloak when she is condemned to death, and brings about the death of the King by touching him and saying

> Give the King thy judgment, O Lord![2]

His participation in Cranmer's downfall is demonstrated by a symbolic action, preceded by this observation:

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1. p.69.
2. p.33.

> The way he treads is turning into a rope
> under my hands; he pauses; I pick it by a trick
> from under his feet, and fling it to these hands that fling
> it to those,
> each time circling his body: he feels the pain
> constrict his rich arteries - love, and faith, and hope:
> tight round his drawn muscles the pressure grows.[1]

He makes a motion of throwing a rope to the Lords. This action is followed by their active opposition to Cranmer, the accession of Queen Mary, and Cranmer's degradation - events which lead to the recantation - and he assists in the degradation by wrenching the crozier from Cranmer's hand and giving it to the Bishop. The point of the Skeleton's betrayal of Cranmer is the point of the entire action. When Cranmer arrives at 'the place of derelict grief', he finds God:

> Blessed Omnipotence, in whom is heaven,
> heaven and earth are alike offended at me!
> I can reach from heaven no succour, nor earth to me.
> What shall I then? despair? thou art not despair.
> Into thee now do I run, into thy love ...[2].

The Skeleton is the agent of his misfortune and thus of his salvation.

This abstract figure is at the centre of the action, but he is used also as its interpreter. His comments, observations, asides, keep the audience informed of the spiritual realities of the situation - the truth which underlies the conduct of the characters, and the eternal truths, as Charles Williams sees them, of life, death, and salvation. The Skeleton is essential to the working out of the plot and the exposition of the theme.

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1. p.53.
2. p.73.

Cranmer's passage through things temporal is traced from 1528, when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge, to the year of his martyrdom, 1556, in a continuous action which moves him from one event to another without any change of scene to indicate change of time and place. As in Seed of Adam, the naturalistic conventions are not observed. When the point of each incident in shewing the relation between Cranmer's public life and his moral progress is established, the action moves without more ado to the next.

The virtue of this telescopic method is its economy: the significance of the action emerges unencumbered by realistic detail, the plot moves without deviation to its conclusion, and the faults of the chronicle-play are thereby avoided. Its drawback is that it results in a loss of what one legitimately expects from drama - some concentration on character and situation. No incident is either long enough to have an intrinsic interest, or so written as to establish the characters of those with whom Cranmer is associated. Williams' play, like Murder in the Cathedral, is not concerned with personal relationships; and its deficiency in this respect is not compensated, as that of Eliot's play is, by a communication of intense experience. Cranmer's life is depicted, and commented upon by the Skeleton, with critical detachment. The Skeleton is destiny, the means of grace, and 'the delator of all things to their truth,'[1] and the stages by which he forces Cranmer to face truth have the

1. p.46.

fascination of a story of detection, but their interest remains on an intellectual plane. Even when he drives him to the last admission of truth, shorn of all false comfort -

The Skeleton: ... Friend, let us say one thing before the world -
I for you, you for me: let us say all:
If the Pope had bid you live, you would have served him.
Cranmer: If the Pope had bid me live I should have served him -[1].

Cranmer's humiliation is not moving, because his predicament is not wholly real. The minor characters are puppets, the Skeleton an abstraction, and the Lords and Commons only voices - the voices of Sixteenth century England. Cranmer exists in a void.

The play has some of the attributes of drama, however. Not only does the action move swiftly from episode to episode, but it involves much movement by the way. The Skeleton himself is hardly ever still: he mixes with the characters, directs their conduct, comes forward to address the audience, goes round the stage singing, does all manner of odd but appropriate things. And the stage directions for all the charaters are many and precise. The play was obviously conceived in terms of action. It has, also, tension and conflict. The delation of all things to their truth provides a constant element of opposition; and the relationship between Cranmer and the Skeleton is a perpetual struggle until the Skeleton finally achieves Cranmer's salvation, and all conflict is resolved.

Charles Williams' thought is always stimulating, and the

1. p.75.

presence of so much that is dramatic in its expression here, makes Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury a vivid and exciting play. It fails to arouse our pity and fear for the protagonist, to make us participants in his experiences, because it does not establish him as a living human being, And the reason for this is to be found in the nature of the subject. Charles Williams' concern is not to shew character in action but to demonstrate a spiritual truth.

The intransigeance of this kind of subject matter is well illustrated in a third saint-play whose emphasis is on religious experience: Ronald Duncan's This Way to the Tomb (1945). Part One of this play, called a Masque, is an attempt to give dramatic expression to the meditation of an ascetic in his search for God. The saint is a fictitious one, created, apparently, solely for the purpose of exploring this area of experience, but the medium chosen is singularly unsuited to the exploration. The saint's progress towards beatitude, by way of fasting and contemplation, is traced with a certain subtlety of thought, but an almost total absence of action.

An opening dialogue between three novitiates who are with Father Antony - in the fourteenth century, and on the island of Zante - serves to convey to the audience the necessary information concerning his asceticism, and the fact that he sees himself as 'a proud old man, full of fear and full of desire'. But the situation thus established is developed in a series of meditations. Antony's state of mind, his imperfect faith, his

unhappiness and fear of death, are described by him as he sits fasting and musing upon a rock. Of the five long passages of introspection which occupy the greater part of the play, one is addressed to the novitiates (who contribute no more than their presence, and are in no way instrumental in the unfolding of Antony's thought), one is spoken in their presence but 'as if in a trance', and three are soliloquys. An excuse for this mode of revelation is made in Antony's explanation to the novitiates of his reason for speaking his thoughts aloud:

> ... I find that in silent meditation
> The agile mind conjures an awkward conclusion
> Into a comfortable cushion
> On which the soul sits like a lap dog
> And dreams.[1]

The excuse will not serve as a vindication of Duncan's dramatic method, however, and there is no real development in the thought itself to compensate for the absence of outward action.[2] The direction of Antony's dialectical meditation is round and round rather than progressively forward. He does not free himself from fear, desire, distraction and pride; he merely ponders thereon. At the end of the sixth passage of meditation, all he has done is, in his own metaphor, to turn over his heart like a coin in his pocket.

At this point, Duncan resorts to the use of allegory to depict Antony's inner conflict. Until now, such movement as there has been - the visits of the novitiates to Antony on his

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1. _This Way to the Tomb_, London, 1946, p.18. (Part 1 is continuous).
2. As there is in _Samson Agonistes_, for instance, where the steady development of Samson's thought _is_ the action.

rock - has been only an interruption of the experience which is the subject of the play. With the introduction of personified temptations, which distract him from contemplation and so separate him from God, the action becomes a representation of that experience, and the last stages of Antony's journey towards God are presented with some dramatic effect. The dialogue between Antony and Gluttony, and Antony and Lechery, has a lively ring;[1] the death of Marcus and Julian, who now represent Antony's body and sensual appetite, and the dismissal of Sight, effectively imply his rejection of the pleasures of this world; and a final subtlety is added in that he hears the Voice of God when his pride (represented by Bernard) weakens, and the Voice tells him to renounce his pride utterly by eating what his servants have brought him. Both fasting and contemplation end in union with God. He takes the cup from Marcus, drinks, then stands, saying

Jesu, I come.[2]

This sequence is well linked to the earlier part of the action by the introduction of the three novitiates into it as

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1. The appearance of Gluttony and Lechery seems superfluous, however, because they are not temptations into which Antony has been in any danger of falling. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that Duncan had to manage, midway in his play, a transition from the naturalistic to the allegorical. The appearance of two of the traditional deadly sins makes the transition obvious, and prepares the way for the more subtle temptations - Marcus, as his body, tempting him to eat; Julian, as his love of pleasure, tempting him to delight in song.
2. p.53.

allegorical figures, and the fact that their personalities have already been established makes them more interesting here than abstractions commonly are. It is an ingenious stroke. But it is only in this sequence that Duncan has succeeded in fusing form and content, and then only within the restricted scope of the morality play convention. Solitary musing does not lend itself to dramatic treatment.

Part Two of This Way to the Tomb, called an Anti-Masque, is concerned in a very different way with religious experience. It is a witty and biting satire on contemporary habits of thought. In an 'actuality relay from the sanctified studio reserved for televising services and religious experiences', a group of people 'in search of Faith and religious experiences' are shewn visiting the tomb of St. Antony on the island of Zante. Materialist values are brilliantly mocked in the rehearsal of the Litany and Creed of the Group, and the exploitation of religion for the sake of sensation and novelty is mercilessly exposed. An experiment in form[1], the Anti-Masque is no more genuinely dramatic than the Masque, though it is considerably more diverting. Composed of these two parts, divergent in theme and treatment, This Way to the Tomb is something of a freak among saint-plays.

The Masque of Ronald Duncan's play is in striking contrast to the early modern saint-plays. The kind has passed from a

1. Duncan's introduction of a television screen, and a microphone, and his use of popular songs, 'blues' rhythms and doggerel rhymes, derive from the technical experiments made by Auden and Isherwood in their plays of political and social satire, The Dog Beneath the Skin (1935), The Ascent of F.6 (1936) and On the Frontier (1938). He has adroitly turned their innovations to his purpose.

concentration on historical event to a preoccupation with inner experience, to the almost total exclusion of action of any kind.

Further in this direction it was impossible to go; and the two later plays - Thor, with Angels, and The Makers of Violence - treat a quite different subject. Their business is not with God and the soul, but with principles of conduct and the relations between men.

> Man will end man on earth, unless somewhere,
> Somehow, at some point, we call an end
> To killing.[1]

is the theme of Robert Gittings' play about St. Alphege. Christopher Fry's play ends with a reflection on the responsibility of every individual for

> ... this blundering cruelty
> of man.[2]

Thor, with Angels treats the coming of St. Augustine to this country with a freedom comparable to that shewn in Charles Williams' Seed of Adam. He presents, not the story itself, but an interpretation of it, and his play is as different from Henry Cresswell's The Conversion of England, as Charles Williams' Nativity play is from Bethlehem. The comparison may be taken one stage further: Fry, like Williams, created a legend as a vehicle for his interpretation. The effect of the coming of St. Augustine, and the substitution of the Christian ethic for the pagan one, is depicted in the story of one man, Cymen, a Jute; and the whole of

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1. The Makers of Violence, London, 1951, p.60.
2. Thor, with Angels, London, 1949, p.53. (Neither of these two plays has act or scene divisions.)

the action takes place on a Jutish farmstead of A.D.596. The antithetical opposition of the two codes is shewn in the conflict it creates in Cymen, and out of this conflict Fry builds his drama.

He treats it imaginatively but without recourse to allegory or symbolism. The new religion is imposed on Cymen by supernatural agency, his natural belligerency giving way under this compulsion to gentleness and mercy. Returning home from battle - in which he has, to his shame, been overcome by a strange power forcing him to spare the life of an enemy Briton - he tries to drink to his gods:

> The sustaining sinews of tremendous Thor:
> The unwearying, turbulent, blazing loins of Woden![1]

But the toast, 'Let us love one another,' comes to his lips. When he makes, for a second time, to kill Hoel, his sword turns against his son, Quichelm. Enemy and kin seem 'all one. There's no distinction.'[2] And when he questions Merlin and Hoel about his experience, he rejects the answer that he gets:

> Do you dare to say
> The world has a secret direction passing the gods?
> And does it run through me? (To Clodesuida) Take me from them.
> I'm mad, mad to talk to the slaves.[3]

His conversion, his willing suspension of disbelief, comes when he is called to

> the general assemblage
> Of all householders, copyholders, smallholders, and tenant-farmers,

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1. p.14.
2. p. 15.
3. p.30.

> At the command of Ethelbert, lord and king of Kent,
> To receive the person and words of Augustine
> Exponent of the Christian god.[1]

He returns from it, preaching that faith, to find Hoel crucified by his brothers in order to conciliate Woden.

Fry has evolved a plot which aptly fits his subject. Cymen's bewilderment at the dictates of 'the cuckoo power' that 'usurps the nest of his soul, destroying him with a cry of love,' his fury at being mocked with 'a mood of mercy, and therefore defeat', point the fundamental difference between the Christian code and the ethic which it superseded. His grief at the death of Hoel indicates the completeness of his conversion.

In addition to this theme there is the subsidiary one, somewhat vague in concept, that the coming of Christianity was a stage in a kind of religious evolution;&for its exposition Fry has introduced the delightful but structurally irrelevant figure of Merlin.

Fry's Merlin is a wise, benign, very old man, slightly bemused with excessive thinking, who still floats on the river of life 'in a desultory, though delighted kind of way.' It is an original portrait of great charm, but the thought with which he is charged is nebulous. Fry seems to be suggesting that a power controlling the world has propelled it over a long period towards Christianity. 'Still I observe', says Merlin,

> ... the very obdurate pressure
> Edging men towards a shape beyond
> The shape they know.[2]

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1. pp. 38-9.
2. p.46.

He approaches definition of the shape by a series of negations, and after rejecting natural phenomena and human science as the intended consummation, arrives at Christianity:

> The shape shone
> Like a faint circle round a moon
> Of hazy gods, and age by age
> The gods reformed according to the shape.
> According to the shape that was a word.
> According to Thy Word.[1]

The legendary, supernatural character makes an excellent spokesman for this train of thought since he can stand outside time, having no precise place in history, and interpret the unfolding of events with superhuman understanding, but he is totally unnecessary to the plot and plays no part in it. He comes along because he hears voices, lies semi-dormant until he has delivered his evolution speech, and then goes back to the ruined tower from which he came, to 'break more ground for dreams.' His casual intrusion into the otherwise close-knit action, and its long suspension while he

> (whiles) away a spring
> Day, with thoughts so far beyond the moss
> He roots in, they're as nebulous
> As the muted flute of a dove to the root of a tree.[2]

deprives it of that appearance of inevitability by which dramatic interest is sustained.

The statement, through the mouth of the converted Cymen, of St. Paul's doctrine that we are members one of another, is more cogent, and more germane to the action. Cymen accepts

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1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.

responsibility for Hoel's death, and the sorrow of the world.

Martina. You haven't made the sorrow -
Cymen. All make all:
For while I have one muscle of my strength
Undisturbed, or hug one coin of ease
Or private peace while the huge debt of pain
Mounts over all the earth,
Or fearing for myself, take half a stride
Where I could leap; while any hour remains
Indifferent, I have no right or reason
To raise a cry against this blundering cruelty
Of man.[1]

In The Makers of Violence, Robert Gittings has treated his subject more prosaically. The plot depicts the conversion of the Norwegian prince, Olaf, by the teaching and example of Alphege, Arbishop of Canterbury. The clash between Olaf and Canute, the quarrels among their men, and the attempts of the English to avenge the capture of their Archbishop, form a vivid background to the story of Olaf's conversion; and the Christian doctrine of love, exemplified in the saintly Alphege, is thrown into sharp relief by the cruelty and violence of the Norse and Danish fightingmen.

In structure the play is more solid than Thor, with Angels, and indeed errs in this direction. There is a stiff symmetry in the arrangement of the duologues between Stigand and Thorkel, Stigand and Alphege, Alphege and Canute, and Alphege and Olaf in Part One; and the delivery of the sermon in Part Two is too deliberately contrived.

The theme emerges clearly. Alphege preaches the futility of war:

1. loc. cit.

> This senseless equalising
> Of blood with blood smears on till doomsday...[1]

Olaf is brought, not to an awareness of God, but to an acceptance of the Christian ethic as 'the answer to the world's question.'[2] The play is less rich in dramatic poetry than Thor, with Angels, and less imaginative in its presentation, but the contrast between the Christian way of life and other codes of behaviour proves in both plays to be susceptible of dramatic treatment.

In its reliance on historical fact and its emphasis on the saintliness of its hero, The Makers of Violence has something in common with the early chronicle-plays and with Housman's plays of St. Francis; but the action is continuous, not episodic, the character of Alphege is subordinate to the theme, and the theme, like that of Thor, with Angels, is one of contemporary urgency.[3] There has been a distinct advance.

Christopher Fry's The Boy with a Cart may be considered last, despite its earlier date of composition, because it belongs outside the main development discernible in the other plays.

Based on legendary accounts of the life of St. Cuthman of Sussex[4], The Boy with a Cart is, essentially, a comedy. The episodes which make up the action are almost all comic, and

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1. p.60.
2. p.79.
3. Laurie Lee's Peasant's Priest (1947) develops a similar theme violence and bloodshed will never end until collective man learns mercy & compassion. The play, which shows the part played by John Ball in the Serfs' Rebellion of 1381, was aptly described by The Times (June 23rd, 1947) as having produced 'nothing very memorable in the way of drama'.
4. See Harrison Ainsworth, Ovingdean Grange, London, 1891, Bk.6, Ch. 4, 'The Legend of Devil's Dyke' for some of the legends relating to St. Cuthman.

broadly comic. Cuthman trundles his mother across country in a cart, and when the rope breaks, spills her out. His zeal for the building of his church is demonstrated by his yoking together two interfering villagers to do the work of the oxen they have impounded; and when their mother becomes troublesome, Cuthman uses his supernatural power to remove her. She is swept off her feet by a strong wind and blown out of sight. Only the final miracle, by which Cuthman's church is completed, is of a serious nature.

The thread on which these episodes are strung is the faith of Cuthman, but Fry does not set out to explore it. It is the mainspring of the action, not the subject of it; and it is only once described, and then in a fanciful metaphor that suggests a greater interest in the manner of expression than in the matter of it. 'I tell you, Mother', says Cuthman - after his intimation that where the withies supporting his cart break, he is to stop and build his church - 'God rode up my spirit and drew in beside me.'[1]

The play has, however, a metaphysical meaning superimposed upon it. In an opening chorus, the People of South England assert the immanence of God in nature, and their own awareness of Him as they work on the land.

> We have felt the joint action of root and sky, of man
> And God ...
> Guessed at divinity working above the wind,
> Working under our feet ...
> We can discern the hand.[2]

That the working together of man and God is apparent in the story

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1. The Boy with a Cart, London, 1939, p.29.
2. pp.7-8.

of Cuthman, is their excuse for introducing it, but the ponderous tone of the choral passages sorts oddly with the comedy they reflect upon. After the blowing away of Mrs. Fipps, the chorus observes with absurdly exaggerated solemnity

> The word's gone round:
> There will be no quarter, no pouring of oil.
> The roots clutch in the soil, frantic against
> The sobbing of the bough.[1]

In addition to their incongruity, and perhaps partly accounting for it, the choral passages have a strong similarity of tone to those of Murder in the Cathedral. The People of South England would appear to be the literary descendants of the Women of Canterbury; their ominous utterances, pregnant with incommunicable truth, would be appropriate if Fry's subject were martyrdom; but they are inappropriate to his story of Cuthman, the boy with a cart.

The solemnity of the choruses is perhaps to be attributed to the fact that the play was written for a church celebration, and their style, to the influence which Mr. Eliot's verse has exerted over more than one of our modern poets. In Cuthman's speeches, the individual style of Fry's later verse can already be detected, and in Cuthman's exuberance the essential quality of the play is to be found:

> This is the morning to take the air, flute-clear
> And like a lutanist, with a hand of wind
> Playing the responsive hills, till a long vibration
> Spills across the fields and the chancelled larches
> Sing like Lenten choirboys, a green treble;
> Playing at last the skylark into rising,
> The wintered cuckoo to a bashful stutter.

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1. pp.42-3.

It is the first day of the year that I've king'd
Myself on the rock, sat myself in the wind:
It was laying my face on gold. And when I stood
I felt the webs of winter all blow by
And in the bone-dry runnel of the earth
Spring restart her flood.[1]

The Boy with a Cart, with its incongruities and its looseness of construction, is the work of an immature dramatist, but its freshness, charm and youthful high-spirits make it a valuable contribution to the English 'théâtre des Saints.'

It is a little inappropriate that this survey of modern saint-plays should end on Cuthman's note of promise. Achievement in this kind has been only partial and success qualified, the material having proved in almost every case recalcitrant. The chronicle-play does not easily fulfil its obligation to history and drama, and in those plays which depict the lives of the saints, dramatic unity is lacking. Laurence Housman's interpretation of the pacific effect of the teaching and personality of St. Francis does not require intensity in its expression, and in his many plays of St. Francis, dramatic conflict is lacking. Where the experience presented is purely spiritual, as in Part One of This Way to the Tomb, there is little opportunity for dramatic action; and in Murder in the Cathedral and Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, character and situation are subordinated to the statement of spiritual truth. Eliot's play

1. pp.9-10. The imagery of this passage is more dramatic than it commonly is in Fry's verse. The 'chancelled larches' and 'lenten choirboys' introduce the idea of a church and so anticipate the story of Cuthman's church-building. Elsewhere, Fry's poetic imagery tends to bear little relation to his theme.

achieves intensity despite its neglect of the ordinary attributes of drama but it could not profitably be imitated. And although the contrast between the Christian ethic and other codes of behaviour lends itself more readily to dramatic treatment, neither Thor, with Angels nor The Makers of Violence is artistically of the first order.

It is possible to trace a progression. In content, the development has been from the historical, through the spiritual, to the ethical aspect of the lives of the saints, and the preoccupation with contemporary problems in the later plays may be paralleled in the field of Bible drama. In technique also, the movement has been in three stages. The naturalistic method of the early plays, used also by Housman, was rejected by Eliot, Williams and Duncan, and has been reverted to by Fry and Gittings.

In their treatment of the saints, few of these dramatists have concentrated on the 'beaux conflits' of which Ghéon spoke, and which form the basis of his own La Merveilleuse Histoire du jeune Bernard de Menthon. The conflict between the world and the spirit, the struggle to renounce worldly pleasures in an acceptance of religious vocation, would seem to provide just such a conflict as could be treated in drama, but in fact it is not the chief subject of any of these plays. Housman touched upon it in the first series of his Little Plays of St. Francis, but without having any real interest in it. What attracted him to St. Francis was not his 'exalted piety or his practice of

holy poverty' but his 'artistry in human nature.' Eliot touched upon it in Murder in the Cathedral, but his interest lay rather in martyrdom than in the martyr. And the dialectical meditations on the sins of the flesh of Ronald Duncan's St. Antony have the appearance of an intellectual exercise rather than a real spiritual struggle.

It is perhaps the neglect of this aspect of the Saints' lives which has made their appearance on the stage less compellingly dramatic than it might have been. Murder in the Cathedral is the one great play to emerge from this body of work.

It remains to be decided with what success the Church has been celebrated independently of her saints and martyrs. There are, as we observed above, some few plays in which the Church herself or chapters in her history form the central subject.

Of these, two are pageant-plays, and criticism of them as drama would be impertinent. The Rock consists of historical episodes relating to church-building, linked by dialogue between modern workmen engaged in building a church. A chorus of seven male and ten female figures speak as the voice of the Church of God, and The Rock, an omniscient figure, observes

> There shall be always the Church and the World
> And the Heart of Man
> Shivering and fluttering between them, choosing & chosen,
> Valiant, ignoble, dark an full of light

Swinging between Hell Gate and Heaven Gate,
And the Gates of Hell shall not prevail.
Darkness now, then
Light.

Light.[1]

The choruses, written by T.S. Eliot, comment upon contemporary ignorance of the Word of God, and testify to the Light Invisible of which the Visible Church is a sign. The play is chiefly interesting for these choral passages which finely celebrate their subject.

In Charles Williams' Judgement at Chelmsford, the diocese of Chelmsford is the central figure. A prologue shews her at the Gate of Heaven, talking with the Great Sees of Christendom - Canterbury, Rome, Constantinople, Antioch and Jerusalem. She is called upon to exhibit her ways of living and to reveal with what energy she has followed God, and the eight scenes, depicting episodes in the history of the diocese, are her answer. The play is closely related to Charles Williams' other work, and two points may be made in that connection. An abstract figure, The Accuser, is introduced to demand that Chelmsford shall shew herself as she really is: he is, like the Skeleton in Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, 'the delator of all things to their truth.' And in the Epilogue, the themes of that play, of Seed of Adam, and of the later The House of the Octopus find expression. In the words of the synposis, prefaced to the play:

> Chelmsford binds herself to the Cross, finds that grief brings joy and that peace awakes through all moments at

1. The Rock, London, 1934, pp.47-8.

> once. The Accuser is her lover. All who are in her, past, present and to come, unite themselves to her in the great exchange of mortal and divine love through the Incarnation and Atonement. He leads her to the Great Sees who welcome and embrace her ... The Diocese of Chelmsford achieves its end in God.[1]

In The Emperor Constantine and The Zeal of Thy House, Dorothy Sayers treated, respectively, a chapter in Church history, and an episode in the history of Canterbury Cathedral. The life of the Emperor Constantine, by whom the Christian Church was established as the State Church of the Roman Empire, provides the material for that play. It is a sprawling chronicle in twenty-six scenes, of which only one has any real force. The scene shewing the Council of Nicaea debating the Arian heresy and drawing up the Nicene Creed, is clearly and powerfully written; but a colloquial style, a loose episodic structure, and some ninety characters contribute to the artistic failure of the rest. The Emperor Constantine has no more claim to consideration as drama than the two pageant-plays which do notprofess to be of that kind. The earlier play may detain us longer.

The Zeal of Thy House is based upon the rebuilding of the Choir of Canterbury Cathedral after the fire of 1174. The designer and architect, William of Sens, is the central figure, and on a foundation of fact Miss Sayers has built a story of her own devising.

On one level her plot is a simple record of event. William is chosen as architect, begins his work of re-building, falls in love with the Lady Ursula, has an accident which cripples him, and

1. Judgement at Chelmsford, London, 1939, p.

leaves his work to be completed by another architect. But a moral interpretation of these incidents is supplied by the introduction of three Archangels and the Recording Angel who observe and comment upon the action. William's sins are noted, his skill as an architect admired; and to the Archangels is entrusted the exposition of the theme of the play, that the creative artist glorifies God by his work:

... to labour is to pray.[1]

The plot is skilfully managed, with due attention paid to character and situation, the angels are an original and useful device for interpreting it, and in her treatment of both Miss Sayers has introduced an element of humour unusual in religious drama. Into this neat structure, a less cogent episode is interpolated. William, interpreting his accident as a divine punishment, has repented of his sins and undergone a moral conversion, as is aptly shewn in his confession to the Prior; but it is followed by a spiritual conversion, which involves the intervention of the angels: Michael appears to William in a dream, tells him of his sin of pride in wishing to be solely responsible for the completion of the building, and reminds him of Christ's sacrifice and His example. The incident provides Miss Sayers with the opportunity for a brief exposition of Christian doctrine - an opportunity which is made at some point in all her plays - but it carries very little conviction as being part of William's experience. To some extent this is due to a failure in intensity, and comparison of one of the Archangel's

1. Four Sacred Plays, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.38, Sc. 2.

speeches with a passage from Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury is illuminating in this respect. The latter is a poet's vision of glory expressed in an intensely personal style; the former, a statement in pedestrian verse, using traditional imagery, and failing to give it new life. The Archangel Michael says to William:

> How hardly shall the rich man enter in
> To the Kingdom of Heaven! By what sharp, thorny ways
> By what strait gate at last! But when he is come,
> The angelic trumpets split their golden throats
> Triumphant, to the stars singing together
> And all the sons of God shouting for joy.
> Be comforted, thou that wast rich in gifts;
> For thou art broken on the self-same rack
> That broke the richest Prince of all the world,
> The Master-man. Thou shalt not surely die,
> Save as He died; nor suffer, save with Him;
> Nor lie in hell, for He hath conquered hell
> And flung the gates wide open. They that bear
> The cross with Him, with Him shall wear a crown
> Such as the angels know not. Then be still,
> And know that He is God, and God alone.[1]

The Skeleton calls to the Commons:

> Have you forgotten, have you forgotten,
> how you saw and handled aboriginal glory,
> sown from spirit, seeding in flesh?
> what is the plot of each man's story
> but the wonder and the seeking and the after-sinning,
> O bright fish caught in the bright light's mesh?
>
> ... Have you forgotten, have you forgotten,
> O my people, have you forgotten,
> The moment of central and certain vision,
> when time is faithful and terrors befriend,
> when the glory is doubled by the sweet derision,
> in the grace and peace of the perfect end?
>
> Have you forgotten, have you forgotten,
> O my people, have you forgotten,
> the moment when flesh and spirit are one,
> - are they ever separate, but by a mode?

1. Ibid., p.100, Sc.4.

> Though the skull look out, will you fear, will you run?
> will you forget how the glory showed?[1]

The Zeal of Thy House is the best constructed of Miss Sayers' plays, and the most homogeneous in style. The lightness of treatment does not detract from the seriousness of the main theme, and the verse reaches a higher level than it does elsewhere in her work.[2] But the play does not succeed either in identifying its statement of Christian truth with the action or in making it with any real poetic intensity.[3]

Charles Williams' The House of the Octopus succeeds where Miss Sayers' play fails, and fails where hers succeeds. In plot and characterisation, it is weak; in the communication of imaginatively apprehended truth, it is very powerful indeed.

In this play, the 'mind of God's Church' is expressed in an action concerned with a newly-converted band of Christians 'in a land in the Outer Seas'. The protagonist, a symbolic figure like the Skeleton of the earlier play, is called the Flame, and

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1. Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, ~~op. cit.~~, pp.55-6.
2. In The Devil to Pay (1939), a treatment of the Faust legend, the prosaic humour of the earlier scenes detracts from the intended sublimity of the Judgement scene; and the verse of that final scene is not of a sufficiently high quality to establish its own level there. In Marlowe's Dr. Faustus that is, in fact, what happens. In the verse passages, the play is lifted on to an altogether different level from that of the extraneous buffoonery, by sheer poetic intensity.
3. An observation made by T.S.Eliot, in another connection, is relevant here. 'The capacity for writing poetry is rare; the capacity for religious emotion of the first intensity is rare; and it is to be expected that the existence of both capacities in the same individual should be rarer still.' (After Strange Gods, London, 1934, p. 29).

represents 'that energy which went to the creation and was at Pentecost (as it were) re-delivered in the manner of its own august covenant to the Christian Church.'[1] And the whole play is instinct with the fervour of a passionately held faith. The Flame speaks of the blessed condition of this 'new congregation o the faithful':

> Sins flooded away,
> a stay of guilt granted for old faults
> by the joyous equity of heaven, food given -
> well might they thrive![2]

The converts proclaim their faith, their readiness to be left without their priest:

> We take refuge in the Maker of all and the Flesh-Taker;
> we believe that his deeds are enough for our needs
> we believe that we are in him and he is in us.
> Leave us, father, and go with God.[3]

And everywhere it is serenely asserted that

> This smallness of death is only an incident
> in the new life ...[4]

The salvation of the 'congregation of the faithful' from the dangers which threaten them is contrived by the Flame, as Cranmer's salvation is contrived by the Skeleton, and here as there, outward calamity is the means of inner victory. The Christians die by martyrdom, having resisted evil, and strong in faith. The end achieved by the Flame is

> heaven's kind of salvation, not at all to the mind
> of any except the redeemed, and to theirs hardly.[5]

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1. The House of the Octopus, ~~op.cit.~~, Preface, p.5.
2. Ibid., Act 1, p.10.
3. Act 1, p.26.
4. Act 1, p.23.
5. Act 1, p.10.

In form <u>The House of the Octopus</u> is more conventional than Charles Williams' other plays: it is divided into three acts, each of the divisions marking the passage of time. The action is partly realistic and partly symbolic, a combination integrated by the p resence of the Flame, directing, guiding, interpreting. In his treatment of the islanders, Williams emphasises the realistic aspect of the situation: they live in 'a land of the Outer Seas', and they are captured, questioned and threatened by the invading forces of an enemy state, P'o-l'u. In his treatment of their missionary p riest, he stresses the spiritual evil for which P'o-l'u stands. Anthony is a victim of self-love and pride, both subtly indulged by the Marshal of P'o-l'u. The islanders, refusing to compromise with the enemy, suffer physical death at the hands of his soldiers. The Flame achieves Anthony's spiritual salvation by shewing him his sin in a dream.

The plot and the analysis of spiritual temptation are interwoven, and the main theme of the play is worked out in close relation to them. The youngest of the Christians, Alayn, terrified by the threats of the invaders to throw her to the octopus, recants her faith when she is questioned about it. She is struck down by one of the soldiers, and inadvertently killed. But by her death, the rest of the band are strengthened. They refuse a compromise with P'o-l'u when it is offered, because they will not have to do with the murderers of Alayn. Thus evil ministers to good. And the incident is given further significance in relation to Anthony. It assists in his humiliation

when he is made to realise that Alayn's act has been of value to the islanders:

Siru ... See, because of her death we live more strong
in his clear goodness - much less doubt,
less fear; this is God's way -
to cause his day to dawn in sheer blood.
It is she, let me say, as well as you, to whom
we owe now all that we know of grace.

Anthony This is unbelievable and unbearable
Do you say that this apostate woman and I
are equally profitable to you?

Siru Sir, why not?
... her blood has mothered us in the Faith, as
yours fathered.[1]

This relationship between Anthony and Alayn is taken further in the dreamsequence and is made to illustrate the underlying idea of the play: the power of individuals to intercede for one another in the City of God, in whom we are united.[2]

The Flame, having made Anthony aware of his sin, forces him to agree to an exchange by which Alayn shall bear his fear when he is thrown to the octopus, and he, having no fear, shall be saved from the danger of apostasy. The Flame says to the ghost of Alayn, whom he has summoned:

he will die purposefully as you were meant to do;
he will die your death and you fear his fright.
This is the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.[3]

With the working out of this theme allthe threads of the drama are drawn together. Anthony accepts the final humiliation of owing to Alayn his own salvation from apostasy, and so

1. Act 2, pp.81-2.
2. For a theological exposition of this concept see Charles Williams, He Came Down from Heaven, London, 1950, Ch.Vl: 'The Practice of Substituted Love', pp.82-94. It forms the underlying idea, also, of his novel, Descent into Hell.
3. Act 3, p.110.

renounces his pride; Alayn's cowardice is redeemed by Anthony who goes to his death without fear and dies as she should have done; the band of Christians, made resolute by her death, are saved from compromise with P'o-l'u and die innocent in the sight of heaven; and the Flame exults that all is concluded

> Well, well and again well at last!
> fast is our sphere fixed, and fast it moves,
> all loves circling in exchange of loves.[1]

This idea of exchange lends itself to dramatic expression, because it involves an active relationship between individuals. It requires exposition, but in the Flame, Williams has created a figure capable of expounding it. As 'that energy which ... was at Pentecost', he can speak 'the mind of God's Church', as Williams interprets it:

> Blessed is the intercession of all souls ...
> This is the mind of the Church -
> to discover always the way of the lover and the love.
> The young shall save the old and the old the young.
> The dead the living and the other living, the dead.[2]

The Flame is Charles Williams' mouthpiece, as the Archangel Michael was Miss Sayers' mouthpiece, but here both the thought of the play and its spokesman are at the centre of the action. The Flame is 'one of the masters of exchange',[3] and as such he directs ~~the~~ its operation, stands between the living and the dead, arranges that Alayn shall intercede for Anthony, and he for her.

To this extent Williams has succeeded in translating his subject into drama, but the play has a fault of detail, and a

1. Act 3, p.114.
2. Act 3, pp.96-7.
3. Act 3, p.95.

more serious deficiency.

The flaw is in the symbolism. The octopus is a powerful poetic image of evil, imperfectly converted into a dramatic one, for Williams has failed to adjust this symbol to his two planes of action. P'o-l'u is evil, and those whom P'ol'u captures are devoured by cephalopods. Evil consumes man - the idea is similar to that of Seed of Adam, in which the Third King is eaten by his mother, Hell. The islanders resist P'o-l'u and escape the cephalopods; Anthony finally resists evil, but is thrown to the cephalopods. He frees himself from the 'spiritual octopus clutching a man's soul', when he recognises his sin in the dream sequence, but he is thrown to the physical octopus kept by P'o-l'u, when he proceeds to defy the Marshal of P'o-l'u. In the symbolic action he resists evil; in the realistic action he is its victim: the two are not perfectly integrated. And as in Seed of Adam, the issue is confused by an extensive application of the idea of consuming and being consumed. It is applied to P'o-l'u, where there is only one choice: to be 'the swallowed or the swallower.' It is applied to Christian ritual

> Glory to the only God who made us and bade us
> all be food and all eaters of food.
> Is it a wonder Christ gave you your Eucharist?[1]

To the spiritual life

> (The Flame runs to the front of the stage) Oho, my people,
> can you bear us? can you hear us? can you see us? are your hearts pure
> to endure everywhere the speech of heaven and us?

---

1. Act 3, p.100.

> do you die daily and live daily in us?
> are you consumed and consuming?[1]

To the pagan Assantu, who thinks to save himself from 'being consumed' by finding a scapegoat to die in his place. And finally to the law of exchange by which the individual takes and gives, consumes and is consumed. 'These are fascinating metaphysics',[2] as the Marshal observes, but they do not further the action.

Williams' failure to work out his symbolism fully and clearly is a technical fault not due to any difficulty inherent in the material. But his preoccupation with spiritual truth results in a neglect of character and a failure to balance inner and outer action, which is more serious. Alayn is human in weakness, Anthony in his self-love and his power of self-deception, but these are their only characteristics, and the rest of the Christians are scarcely differentiated at all. The situation, which in the first act has an intrinsic interest, has, in the second and third acts, only a symbolic one. What happens to the islanders in terms of event matters, we soon realise, very little, and neither their capture nor their death moves or excites us. The balance of inner and outer action, essential to the creation of great drama, is not maintained.

In both The Zeal of Thy House and The House of the Octopus the 'mind of God's Church' is the 'central subject of song.'

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1. Act 3, p.103.
2. Act 3, p.109.

Neither plays succeeds fully in achieving a fusion of form and content, though both go some way towards it. Dorothy Sayers interpolates a doctrinal statement into an otherwise complete action; Charles Williams' statement is made in terms of action, but such is his pre-occupation with 'things eternal' that character, situation and event are neglected. The theme of both plays, like that of L'Annonce faite à Marie is 'L'homme et la Grâce', a theme capable of dramatic treatment, but neither Dorothy Sayers nor Charles Williams has Paul Claudel's capacity for expressing it wholly through character and situation. 'The capacity for religious emotion of the first intensity is rare,' as Eliot remarked, and the capacity for creating drama is rare; and 'it is to be expected that the existence of both capacities in the same individual should be rarer still.'

Perhaps it is also to be expected that in plays commissioned by a Christian body, Church history and Church doctrine should be better served than drama. In The Acts of St. Peter, Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, The Rock, Judgement at Chelmsford, The Zeal of Thy House and The House of the Octopus, this is the outcome. The claims of the subject matter have been put before the demands of the form, and although there is in all of them a strong element of drama, form and content are not perfectly fused.

As these plays are not perfectly dramatic, so others are not genuinely religious. Thor, with Angels and The Makers of

Violence do not subordinate drama to dogma, but nor are they primarily concerned with the relation of the individual to God. Their business is with the relations between men, with calling an end to killing, with the ethic of Christianity rather than the spiritual reality that lies behind it.

Only Murder in the Cathedral succeeds in fulfilling - and in a way that could not be imitated - the two-fold obligation to be at once religious and dramatic. Only Murder in the Cathedral, of this whole group of plays, belongs to that rare kind: religious drama.

CHAPTER THREE

Plays of Modern Life.

... a truth
Looks freshest in the fashion of the day ...[1]
Tennyson.

The creation of a living religious drama in our time is not to be conceived as a problem entirely separate from that of the secular threatre.[2]
T.S.Eliot

A playwright's view of the contemporary theatre is one with his view of the contemporary world, and his view of the contemporary world is one with his view of all time. He is exploring for the truth of the human creature, his truth in comedy or his truth in tragedy, because over and above the drama of his actions and conflicts and everyday predicaments is the fundamental drama of his ever existing at all.[3]
Christopher Fry.

When The Family Reunion was produced in March 1939, modern religious drama reached an important stage in its development. One of the Church poets, as The Times aptly designated those writers who had received clerical commissions for plays, had turned his attention from past to present, from the material of history to that of contemporary life. Writing plays for performance in church, or in connection with a religious festival, the poets had chosen subjects appropriate to the occasion. They had treated biblical subjects, the lives of the Saints, episodes

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1. The Epic (English Idyls, 1842).
2. University of Edinburgh Journal, Autumn 1937, p.8, 'Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern,' (An address delivered to the Friends of Rochester Cathedral.)
3. The Listener, Feb. 23rd,1950, p.331.

in the history of the Church. With The Family Reunion, the scope of modern religious drama was extended and a new kind of achievement brought within reach.

Eliot was intent not only on the creation of a living religious drama, but also on a living poetic drama, and the change of subject was largely due to his aims as a pioneer of the latter. In Murder in the Cathedral, he had demonstrated the feasibility of modern verse drama, but he believed that audiences, who 'are prepared to put up with verse from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age', should be made to hear it 'from people dressed like ourselves, living in houses and apartments like ours, and using telephones and radio sets':

> What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audiences lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated. What I should hope might be achieved, by a generation of dramatists having the benefit of our experience, is that the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry and that it is saying to itself: 'I could talk in poetry too!" Then we should not be transported into an artificial world; on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured.[1]

Conceiving the problem as one not to be isolated from that of the secular theatre, he wrote his second play not for the Chapter House at Canterbury but for the commercial stage, and he took 'a theme of contemporary life, with characters of our own time living in our own world.'[2]

1. Poetry and Drama, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.27.
2. Ibid.

It was six years before another religious play with a contemporary setting appeared. The war intervened, and the work of the Group Theatre which had produced the experimental verse plays of Auden and Isherwood in the thirties was suspended. But the first season of Mr. Martin Browne's 'New Plays by Poets' at the Mercury Theatre after the war opened with Norman Nicholson's The Old Man of the Mountains, a re-telling of the story of Elijah in terms of modern life; and it was followed, two months later, by Anne Ridler's modern 'Nativity play', The Shadow Factory: the creation of a living religious drama and the creation of a living poetic drama were now closely associated.

Norman Nicholson pursued the experiment by writing for the stage with Prophesy to the Wind (1949), and Anne Ridler continued to write plays with a religious theme and a modern setting, and published Henry Bly, The Mask and The Missing Bridegroom in 1950. In 1949 Ronald Duncan followed suit, turning from his study of a fourteenth century mystic, in This Way to the Tomb, to the portrayal of a modern K.C. and his family, in Stratton. In the same year Eliot's second play of modern life, The Cocktail Party, was produced, and revealed a greater readiness to compromise with the secular theatre than his first. And when Christopher Fry was invited to write a play for performance in a London Church during the Festival of Britain, he chose a contemporary subject: A Sleep of Prisoners is concerned with prisoners of war.

It is not possible to trace a single line of development in these plays, for they follow no single path. Eliot's

experiment in The Family Reunion has its sequel in The Cocktail Party, rather than in any play that came between, and the two plays mark successive stages in the development of Eliot's dramatic technique. Similarly, Anne Ridler's plays form a group of their own, representing a poet's various attempts to express her experience in a new medium. Prophesy to the Wind evolved out of the experience Nicholson gained in writing The Old Man of the Mountains; and Stratton and A Sleep of Prisoners bear little relation either to each other or to the rest of the group. The plays are the product of separate experiments in writing plays with a religious bias and a contemporary setting, and for that reason they are more conveniently discussed according to authorship than chronologically. Let us consider Eliot's work first.

The transition from a treatment of the death by martyrdom of Thomas Becket, to a presentation of 'characters of our own time living in our own world' is less abrupt than it at first appears. There is in all Eliot's dramatic work a continuity of theme. The Family Reunion develops ideas implicit in the quotation Eliot prefixed to his early dramatic fragment, Sweeney Agonistes:

> Orestes: You don't see them, you don't - but I see them: they are hunting me down, I must move on.
>
> Choephoroi.
>
> Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.
>
> St.John of the Cross.[1]

1. Sweeney Agonistes, London,1932.

and a passage in one of the choruses of The Rock looks forward to the three later plays:

> ... the Son of Man was not crucified once for all,
> The blood of the martyrs not shed once for all,
> The lives of the Saints not given once for all:
> But the Son of Man is crucified always
> And there shall be Martyrs and Saints.[1]

The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party are, like Murder in the Cathedral, concerned with sin and expiation, and the Christian doctrine of Atonement underlies them all. In the three plays, Eliot asserts the validity of sacrifice, and the belief that

> By intercession
> By pilgrimage
> By those who depart
> In several directions
> For their own redemption
> And that of the departed[2]

the crossed may be uncrossed and the crooked made straight.

The statement of this theme in a plot depicting the martyrdom of Thomas Becket was relatively easy. Eliot had an historical fact as the crisis of his play and in interpreting it in the light of Christian thought he was giving it a traditional interpretation. In the two later plays he undertook the far more formidable task of working out the same concept in terms of modern life and of making the agents of suffering people like ourselves. In The Family Reunion he succeeded not only in doing that, but in stating his theme with far greater consideration for the demands of his form than he had previously shewn. The

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1. The Rock, p.42.
2. The Family Reunion, London, 1939, Part 2, Sc. 3, p.136.

dramatic weakness of Murder in the Cathedral, we decided, was two-fold: the experience of the protagonists lacked immediacy, and it was not the chief subject of the action. The burden fell upon the chorus. In the later play, the dramatic and emotional intensity is concentrated in the experience of the hero, and the theme of sin and expiation is fully worked out in his dilemma and its resolution.

The business of the action in The Family Reunion is to explore Harry's spiritual dilemma and to reveal the evil which lies at the root of it. In Part One, he comes home to Wishwood thinking to escape the Furies who have pursued him since he murdered his wife; but, instead, they become visible for the first time, and he recognises that the instinct to return to the point of departure and start again as if nothing had happened is 'all folly'. Another way of escape presents itself in his meeting with Mary, escape through loving her:

> You bring me news
> Of a door that opens at the end of a corridor,
> Sunlight and singing[1].

but the Eumenides appear again to warn him that there is no escape that way. Part One establishes the reality of his suffering and the ineluctable nature of the fate which has overtaken him. In Part Two Eliot shews him, in retrospective conversations with Warburton and Agatha, discovering the 'origin of wretchedness'. He learns that there was no love between his parents, that his father loved Agatha and contemplated murdering

1. Part 1, Sc. 2, p.60.

Amy, that this evil lies concealed at Wishwood, and so he comes to understand the sense of guilt which obsesses him, and which he had supposed derived from his own conduct. Now he admits that he had perhaps only assumed responsibility for his wife's death -

Perhaps
I only dreamt I pushed her.[1]

and he knows what sin he must expiate, and whose, and why. In a moment of clarity he realises that he must leave Wishwood to lead a life of deprivation. Now he sees the Eumenides as messengers of light, and he knows that he must 'follow the bright angels'.

Harry's progress into understanding is the significant action and it is depicted in close relation to the incidents which make up the plot. Harry's homecoming is the climax of the outer action in Part One - it is the event for which the family has assembled at Amy's command - and it precipitates the spiritual crisis which the inner action is gradually to resolve. The scenes with Mary, Warburton and Agatha in which he realises that the evil cannot be evaded, and discovers its nature, occur naturally in the course of events which follow upon his return. And his departure, the immediate consequence of his decision taken in that moment of clarity which is the climax of Part Two, precipitates his mother's death and so concludes the events which began with her preparation for his return.

This delicate balance of inner and outer action reveals a greater mastery of form than Eliot had shewn in <u>Murder in the</u>

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1. Part 2, Sc. 2, p.104.

Cathedral, and although he used again the device of a Chorus he lent on it less heavily, and curtailed its importance. The chorus here is composed of four of the characters of the play who have their part in the action, and merely break away from it intermittently to voice their unspoken thoughts. The choral passages are closely related to the action, and their presence is justified by their dramatic value. In Part One, it is the primary function of the chorus to anticipate disaster, and as in Murder in the Cathedral, the anticipation increases the dramatic tension. Their apprehension of an unforeseen consequence to Harry's arrival prepares for the shock of his first speeches, but it also provides an element of suspense by which their impact is heightened. The choral passages of Part Two express a sense of the evil that lies concealed at Wishwood, of the weight of the past pressing on the future, and contribute to both the mood and meaning of the play. And the desperate efforts of these four people to ignore the 'admonitions of the world around the corner', make it more real.[1.]

The introduction of the Eumenides into a modern play was a more daring innovation, justified, similarly, by its value. Their function as hounds of heaven preventing Harry from escaping his guilt is perfectly clear, as is their conversion into 'bright angels' when he recognises their meaning. Nor is

1. In 1944 Eliot claimed that verse drama 'may use any device to show (the characters) real feelings and volitions, instead of what in actual life they would normally profess or be conscious of.' (S.L. Bethell, Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition, London, 1944, Introduction, p.9.)

there any anachronism in the juxtaposition of the ancient symbol and the modern scene. What happens to Harry is not appropriate only to one time and to one place: it has an eternal truth in human experience which the presence of the old and the new underlines. What Harry suffers in The Family Reunion is essentially what Orestes suffered in Aeschylus' Eumenides and this implicit allusion to the Greek play widens the significance of the modern one.

In characterisation, as in dramatic method, The Family Reunion is superior to Murder in the Cathedral. The situation offers greater opportunities for the delineation of character and most of them are well taken. Amy is finely drawn, the aunts and uncles are all individuals, and in the chauffeur Downing, Eliot has created a richly human figure. Agatha and Harry are less real than any of these, however, and the explanation lies in their greater spiritual awareness. A speech of Harry's implies the problem:

> It's only when they see nothing
> That people can always show the suitable emotions-
> And so far as they feel at all, their emotions are suitable.
> They don't understand what it is to be awake,
> To be living on several planes at once
> Though one cannot speak with several voices at once.
> I have all the rightminded feeling about John
> That you consider appropriate. Only, that's not the language
> That I choose to be talking. I will not talk yours.[1]

It is because Harry and Agatha live 'on several planes at once' that they cannot be fully realised as ordinary human beings

1. Part 2, Sc. 1, pp.87-8.

A hint of Harry's personality appears in the sardonic humour of his observations about his brothers, but for the most part that is not the language that he chooses to be talking. He is shewn living through the dark night of the soul and his personality is submerged in his soul's sickness. Agatha, likewise, is more concerned with the underlying realities than she is with the ordinary business of living, and it is therefore difficult to see in her 'the efficient principal of a women's college.' The problem is one peculiar to religious drama, as we remarked above: the personality of the protagonist is of less account than his soul. But where his subject permits delineation of character and the clash of character, Eliot has succeeded in presenting it. The relationships within the family are etched in, and the deep antagonism between Amy and Agatha, apparent throughout, works up to a powerful climax in the last scene.

In The Family Reunion, Eliot paid greater attention to character and situation than he did in Murder in the Cathedral, but without any sacrifice of poetic intensity.

> Nothing grips one so much in these plays (a critic has observed) as the compelling sense of spiritual powers that have a real operation above life and in it, transcending human experience but working through it; and the vividness of the communication is a mark of spiritual conviction and poetic imagination in the closest union.[1]

In both plays, this sense is induced by the evocative power of poetry, and by the presence of characters who see beyond the world of appearances and communicate their vision. In the earlier

1. Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre, ~~op. cit.~~, p.3.

play, Becket, and to a lesser degree the Third Priest, shared this kind of awareness. In The Family Reunion it is Agatha who, like the Rock in the pageant-play,

> has seen what has happened
> And who sees what is to happen.

Here it is she who is

> The Witness. The Critic. The Stranger.
> The God-shaken, in whom is the truth inborn.[1]

Through Agatha, Eliot interprets Harry's experience, and conveys that it has its place in some pattern of action and suffering that is part of an eternal design.

It is from what Agatha says in the first scene that we begin to realise on what plane of reality the action is to take place. She is contemptuous of the practical preparations for Harry's home-coming, made by her more obtuse relations, who neglect

> all the admonitions
> From the world around the corner
> The wind's talk in the dry holly-tree
> The inclination of the moon
> The attraction of the dark passage
> The paw under the door.[2]

She anticipates Harry's experience on his return, knowing something of what awaits him

> When the loop in time comes - and it does not come for everybody -
> The hidden is revealed and the spectres show themselves.[3]

It is Agatha who first implies the operation of spiritual powers. She says to Mary

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1. The Rock, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.8.
2. Part 1, Sc. 1, pp.21-2.
3. Part 1, Sc. 1, p.18.

> At this moment, there is no decision to be made:
> The decision will be made by powers beyond us
> Which now and then emerge. You and I, Mary,
> Are only watchers and waiters: not the easiest rôle.[1]

When Harry discovers from her the truth of his parents' relationship the evil at Wishwood, the 'origin of wretchedness', she interprets his experience to him - and to us:

> It is possible that you have not known what sin
> You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain
> That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation.
> It is possible that sin may strain and struggle
> In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness
> And so find expurgation. It is possible
> You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,
> Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.
> Indeed it is possible.[2]

And when Harry has made his decision, has realised that there is only one way out of defilement which leads in the end to reconciliation, it is Agatha who makes its meaning clear:

> Here the danger, here the death, here, not elsewhere;
> Elsewhere no doubt is agony, renunciation,
> But birth and life.[3]

Agatha shews us the meaning of Harry's experience in relation to the spiritual universe. Harry inhabits that universe. Until his moment of illumination in the scene with Agatha, he

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1. Part 1, Sc. 2, p.50. The idea of powers shaping Harry's destiny is developed in the incantatory passages spoken by Agatha at the end of each Part; in Harry's lines, spoken after his moment of illumination:

> Why I have this election
> I do not understand. It must have been preparing always...
> (Part 2, Sc.2, p.115).

And in Agatha's emphatic denial of responsibility in the last scene:

> He is going
> But that is not my spell, it is none of my doing:
> I have only watched and waited.
> (Part 2, Sc.3, p.120).

2. Part 2, Sc.2, pp.104-5.
3. Part 2, Sc.3, p.120.

knows only one aspect of it, but for him it is the 'real reality'. The shapes of evil which beset him are real and the world is unreal, and Eliot communicates this peculiar consciousness of Harry's solely through the language of poetry. His sense of sin and desolation is expressed in images. Attempting to describe 'the nightmare' to which he has woken to his uncles and aunts, he gives them 'comparisons in a more familiar medium':

> The noxious smell untraceable in the drains ...
> The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom.[1]

Urged by Agatha to talk in his 'own language', he describes his sense of isolation in the suffocating presence of evil:

> The sudden solitude in a crowded desert
> In a thick smoke, many creatures moving
> Without direction, for no direction
> Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour -
> Without purpose, and without principle of conduct
> In flickering intervals of light and darkness;
> The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling
> And partial observation of one's own automatism
> While the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin
> Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone -
> This is what matters, but it is unspeakable,
> Untranslateable: I talk in general terms
> Because the particular has no language. One thinks to escape
> By violence, but one is still alone
> In an over-crowded desert, jostled by ghosts.[2]

Harry's nightmare of suffering is unspeakable, except in the

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1. Part 1, Sc.1, p.29.
2. Ibid., pp.29-30. The desert image recurs in a later recapitulation of this sensation in the scene with Agatha, and here the verse has a more insistent rhythm which heightens the intensity:

> In and out, in an endless drift
> Of shrieking forms in a circular desert
> Weaving with contagion of putrescent embraces
> On dissolving bone. In and out, the movement
> Until the chain broke, and I was left
> Under the single eye above the desert.
> (Pt.2, Sc.2, p.107).

language of poetry.

At its moments of greatest intensity, dramatic poetry can express a ' peculiar range of sensibility', as Eliot has remarked[1], and magnificently demonstrated in this play. It can, also - and he claims this as the function of art - bring us to 'a condition of serenity, stillness and reconciliation.'[2]. A single phrase in one of Harry's speeches has this magical power:

> Everything tends towards reconciliation
> As the stone falls, as the tree falls.[3].

And the whole of the resolution confirms his statement. Harry's certainty that he has found the way out of defilement, and that

> Strength demanded
> That seems too much, is just strength enough given.[4].

Agatha's conviction that

> Harry has crossed the frontier
> Beyond which safety and danger have a different meaning.
> And he cannot return.[5].

and the last passage of the final incantation, induce just such a condition of 'serenity, stillness and reconciliation'. We 'rest in peace'.

Looking back, in 1950, on his dramatic method in this play, Eliot objected to the choruses, to the two lyrical passages interpolated into the dialogue, and to the introduction of the Eumenides, largely because of the technical problems they raise in performance.[6]. These problems are not insurmountable, and

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1. Poetry and Drama, p.34.
2. Ibid., p.35.
3. Part 2, Sc.2, p.104.
4. Ibid., p.115.
5. Part 2, Sc.3, pp.120-121.
6. Poetry and Drama, pp.28-30.

although it is perhaps true of this play, as it was of Murder in the Cathedral, that Eliot had evolved a formula he could use once only, he used it to fine effect in this play. The Family Reunion communicates, dramatically, an intense and a sustained religious experience. It has no equal in modern religious drama.

In The Cocktail Party, Eliot at once widened and narrowed his range. Here the drama of sin and expiation is accompanied by a sub-plot. The play is concerned not only with the experience of Celia who, as the agent of suffering, is the counterpart of Becket and Harry, but with a domestic relationship between two other characters - Lavinia and Edward Chamberlayne. The interest is divided between these two subjects, inner and outer action proceed in alternate stages rather than in close conjunction, and the essential experienee, Celia 's election to her destiny, is relegated to one of three acts.

In examining Celia's state of mind, Eliot depicts a very real and very moving dilemma. Celia is obsessed with the futility of her life, with her failure to find meaning and fulfilment. She has glimpsed a meaning in moments of intense feeling, and then doubted its validity,

> For what happened is remembered like a dream
> In which one is exalted by intensity of loving
> In the spirit, a vibration of delight
> Without desire, for desire is fulfilled
> In the delight of loving. A state one does not know
> When awake.[1]

The vision is momentary but it leaves her

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1. The Cocktail Party, London,1950, Act 2, p.123.

> With the inconsolable memory
> Of the treasure I went into the forest to find
> And never found, and which was not there
> And perhaps is not anywhere? But if not anywhere,
> Why do I feel guilty at not having found it?[1].

For Celia, with her heightened awareness, the common routine of the human condition brings no satisfaction. For her, as for Harry, there is no way back, and she chooses a path which leads to martyrdom, though at the moment of choice she is aware only of the danger, not of the destination. She accepts Reilly's assurance that there is a way which leads towards possession of what she has sought for in the wrong place, and though it is 'a terrifying journey', she chooses that way.

Celia's moment of choice is the climax of this play as Harry's moment of clarity is the climax of the earlier one[2]., but where Harry's spiritual progress occupied almost the whole of the action, Celia's is concentrated into this one brief sequence. The significant action begins and ends in Act Two. The whole of Act One, Scene One, is devoted to establishing the situation and depicting Celia's social environment, which it does clearly but not economically: that Lavinia has left Edward and that Peter Quilpe is in love with Celia are the only facts which emerge from the scene, and the inanities of cocktail party conversation become wearisome because they are inanities. The two subsequent

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1. Ibid., p.122.
2. cf. Eliot's Four Quartets, which are concerned with the 'timeless moment', the sudden illumination. M.C.Bradbrook points out that the plays 'reflect the same experience as the Four Quartets, scored for brass rather thanstrings'. (T.S.Eliot, London,1950, p.39).

scenes of Act One establish equally clearly, but with equally tedious interruption, the break-up of a relationship between Edward and Celia, and the fact that Edward and Lavinia (mysteriously brought back by an Unidentified Guest) lead what is popularly called a 'cat-and-dog life'. It is only in the scene between Edward and Celia that there is any real development. In Act Two Eliot examines the two problems which compose his subject: the inability of two people to adjust themselves to living happily together, and the failure of another to find satisfaction in the ordinary business of living. Act Three is concerned with what has happened and has the function of an epilogue. Celia's death is described and commented upon, and the Chamberlaynes are shewn to have adjusted their lives and achieved happiness.

The sub-plot is closely related to the main one, the life the Chamberlaynes lead is the alternative to Celia's 'terrifying journey', but it lacks conviction. Eliot's treatment of Edward and Lavinia is inconsistent, his solution of their problem too summary to convince. Their domestic strife in Act One, Scene Three is almost Strindbergian in its bitterness, and the analysis of their characters and conduct, made by the psychiatrist in Act Two, is shrewd and penetrating: their apparent incompatibility is attributed to selfishness, and the pre-occupation with self. Their decision at the end of this exposure to go home and 'make the best of a bad job', even to 'share a taxi and be economical', is less cogent. To state a condition is not to cure it, and they have been analysed, not changed. Similarly, their happiness in

the last Act follows most unnaturally upon their incapacity for happiness in the first; and Eliot does not attempt to shew the process of readjustment, he merely states it as a fact. We are left with the impression that the Chamberlaynes are puppets arbitrarily manipulated to demonstrate an argument: in order to live happily together, human beings must

> Maintain themselves by the common routine,
> Learn to avoid excessive expectation
> Become tolerant of themselves and others,
> Giving and taking, in the usual actions
> What there is to give and take.[1]

Celia, on the other hand, is real and her predicament is real. Here, Eliot has shewn the sympathy essential to dramatic portraiture, and we believe entirely in her dilemma in the Second Act. It is Celia's experience which interests Eliot, ~~Celia~~ Celia's moment of illumination which is the dramatic centre of his play, but it is overlaid by the preparation of Act One, the commentary of Act Three, and the working out of the relationship between the Chamberlaynes.

The Cocktail Party represents a more meticulous effort to state a theme in contemporary terms than was evident in The Family Reunion. Harry's dilemma belonged to no particular period of time. It was as relevant to life in ancient Greece, as to life in the north of England at the present time. Celia's sense of emptiness and failure is partly a result of her environment. It is not occasioned solely by her social background, but in presenting her against such a background, Eliot

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1. Act 2, p.123.

suggests that it is a contributory factor. The tedious cocktail party of the first scene has that function.[1] Furthermore, she is helped towards a solution by a psychiatrist, and psychiatry is a specifically modern science. The treatment is more narrowly contemporary.

In <u>The Family Reunion</u> Eliot used Agatha as his interpreter. In the later play, it is Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly who 'has seen what has happened and who sees what is to happen.' Reilly's profession is not wholly appropriate to his function, but it is largely so.[2] The psychiatrist has in some degree taken the place of the priest as confessor in our time, and it is plausible that Celia should go to him and that he should analyse her state of mind. It is true that he over-reaches himself in sending her on the 'terrifying journey' by which 'the human is transhumanised', but we are prepared to accept his cure for Celia's condition, after his diagnosis of it. The chief disadvantage in Eliot's translation of the priest-penitent relationship into one between a psychiatrist and his patient lies in the language in which the resolution must be couched. Harry, for whom Agatha served as

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1. The cocktail party of the last scene, having no such function, is an unsatisfactory conclusion. It emphasises the futility of the Chamberlaynes' lives, ~~and~~ coming after their 'conversion', ~~the emphasis which interests Eliot, Celia's moment of illumination which is the dramatic centre of his play~~, is out of place.
2. An observation made by Eliot in 1932 is interesting in this connection. 'Psychology has very great utility in two ways. It can revive, and has already to some extent revived, truths long since known to Christianity but mostly forgotten and ignored, and it can put them in a form and a language understandable by modern people to whom the language of Christianity is not only dead but undecipherable.' (<u>Listener</u>, March 30th,1932, p.446).

priest and seer, went from a world of insanity to

> Somewhere on the other side of despair.[1]

Celia goes to a sanatorium. Spiritual re-birth was poetically imaged in The Family Reunion:

> The cold spring now is the time
> For the ache in the moving root
> The agony in the dark
> The slow flow throbbing the trunk
> The pain of the breaking bud ...[2]

It is poorly suggested in the dialogue between Reilly and Celia:

> Reilly. You will go to the sanatorium.
> Celia. Oh, what an anti-climax! I have known people
> Who have been to your sanatorium, and come back again -
> I don't mean to say they weren't much better for it -
> That's why I came to you. But they returned as.. normal people.
> Reilly. True. But the friends you have in mind
> Cannot have been to this sanatorium.
> I am very careful whom I send there:
> Those who go do not come back as these did.
> Celia. It sounds like a prison. But they can't all stay there!
> I mean, it would make the place so overcrowded.
> Reilly. Not very many go ...[3]

The substitution of this situation and this language for that of the earlier play, results in a loss of emotional intensity.

In treating the doctrine of atonement in terms of modern life Eliot was confronted by one obstacle which he has not wholly succeeded in surmounting in either play: that of making a Christian solution acceptable to a largely infidel audience. In Murder in the Cathedral there was no problem. The fate of Becket had already been determined by history, and in accepting

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1. Part 2, Sc. 3, p.114.
2. Part 1, Sc. 2, p. 59.
3. Act 2, pp. 126-7.

his martyrdom an audience had only to accept an historical fact. Harry's conviction that he must seek

> A stony sanctuary and a primitive altar,
> The heat of the sun and the icy vigil,
> A care over lives of humble people
> The lesson of ignorance, of incurable diseases...[1]

puzzles many members of an audience as much as Celia's death outrages them.[2] The difficulty here is partly one of imperfect sympathy between dramatist and audience - there is no common ground of Christian faith - but it is due also to the fact that Eliot has failed to make Harry's departure and Celia's death inevitable on the level of the plot. With this omission - and it is difficult to see how it could have been rectified, save by the kind of skill Ibsen evinced in Rosmersholm[3]. -there is nothing that an audience can do except suspend, more literally than usual, its disbelief. We can only accept Harry's statement that what he is doing is

> .. at once the hardest thing, and the only thing possible.[4]

Celia's assertion, when she makes her choice,

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1. Part 2, Sc. 2, p.115.
2. Both these reactions are common. The plausibility of Harry's decision has also been questioned. 'By no suspension of disbelief can we conceive how Harry, whose life seems to have been passed mainly in resorts and luxury hotels can undergo the discipline of suffering in any broadly meaningful sense.' (Matthiesson, The Achievement of T.S.Eliot, p.170.) As Harry's life in the play is lived on quite another level, this objection seems totally irrelevant.
3. Here, the necessity for the suicide of Rebecca and Rosmer is worked out with mathematical precision, and cannot be questioned. Ibsen, with his mastery of technique, achieved a perfect balance of inner and outer action.
4. Part 2, Sc. 2, p.113.

> I don't in the least know what I am doing
> Or why I am doing it. There is nothing else to do:
> That is the only reason.[1]

And the assurance of the oracular Agatha

> In this world
> It is inexplicable, the resolution is in another.[2]

In The Family Reunion, acceptance of the validity of Harry's decision is made easier by the fact that the reality of this other world in which his action has its meaning is vividly suggested. The Cocktail Party, being less rich in poetry, evokes less powerfully the sense of spiritual reality. And for this play, Eliot has devised a less effective way of implying the working out of an eternal design.

In the earlier play there were two characters, Agatha and Mary, who were involved in Harry's salvation. A similar rôle is played in The Cocktail Party by Reilly, Julia and Alex, the 'Guardians'. But whereas Agatha and Mary were 'watchers and waiters',[3] the Guardians take an active part in guiding the destiny of the Chamberlaynes and Celia. Their significance is never explained and Eliot goes to some lengths to surround them with mystery.

In the first scene, Reilly is an 'Unidentified Guest' taking little part in the conversation, and Julia and Alex are frivolous members of the Chamberlaynes' social circle. In the duologue between Edward and the Unidentified Guest which follows the party,

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1. Act 2, p.128.
2. Part 2, Sc.3, p.120.
3. cf. Murder in the Cathedral, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.13.
   For us, the poor, there is no action,
   But only to wait and to witness.

the plot is made to thicken: the Guest reveals that he knows where Lavinia is, and can bring her back, and promises to do so; and Julia, who returns and interrupts their conversation, appears not to know who he is. In the second scene, the word 'Guardian' is introduced, first by Edward, to describe 'the obstinate, the tougher self', and then by Celia, who humorously proposes a toast to 'The Guardians':

> Edward. To the Guardians?
> Celia. To the Guardians. It was you who spoke of the guardians.
> It may be that even Julia is a guardian.
> Perhaps she is _my_ guardian.[1]

In the third scene, Julia and Alex are shewn playing as mysterious a part in the proceedings as the Unidentified Guest. The latter brings Lavinia back; Celia and Peter arrive, sent on ahead by Julia and Alex, respectively, who claim to have had telegrams from Lavinia asking them to come; and it becomes evident that the telegrams were a fabrication, made up by Julia and Alex for a reason which, when questioned by Lavinia, they will not divulge.

> Julia. Alex, do you think we could explain _anything_?
> Alex. I think not Julia. She must find out for herself.[2]

In Act Two, it becomes apparent that Reilly, Julia and Alex are not only well acquainted, but are collaborating to influence the lives of the other characters - the Chamberlaynes and Celia consult Reilly at the instigation of Alex and Julia - and with the drinking of the libation at the end of the Act, intercession is added to their other functions. They appear now to be tutelar beings, instruments of providence, guardian

1. Act 1, Sc.2, pp.60-1.
2. Act 1, Sc.3, p.77.

angels in fact; and the impression is underlined by the brief interchange between Alex and Reilly when Lavinia introduces them to each other in the last Act:

> Lavinia. I rather assumed that you knew each other -
> I don't know why I should. Mr. MacColgie Gibbs.
> Alex. Indeed, yes, we have met.
> Reilly. On several commissions.[1]

It is by no means clear what concept underlies the Guardians. Edward's description of the inner self as a guardian seems to have little bearing on the behaviour of Alex, Julia and Reilly. Is Eliot implying, in his treatment of these three characters, that there are tutelar spirits in the world, who, under the guise of ordinary human beings, guide our separate destinies? Is he insisting that the supernatural can break through the natural order[2], and so taking his stand against humanism? Or is he merely using the traditional idea of guardian angels, without intending any precise interpretation of it, because it happens to suit his play? One is tempted to the last conclusion by the use which he makes of it.

The mystery surrounding the Guardians provides that element of suspense which Eliot was anxious to supply:

> ... I tried to keep in mind that in a play, from time to time, something should happen, and that the audience should be kept in the constant expectation that something is going to happen; and that, when it does happen, it should be different, but not too different, from what the audience had been led to suspect.[3]

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1. Act 3, p.152.
2. cf. Charles Williams' novel, The Place of the Lion (1931).
3. Poetry and Drama, ~~op. cit.~~, p.32. cf. Eliot's earlier recognition of a dramatist's 'obligation to keep for a definite length of time the sustained interest of a large and unprepared and not wholly perceptive group of people.' (The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, London, 1933, p.154.)

Perhaps the mystery is a concession to the audience, a trick for holding their interest, and the Guardians' manipulation of the fate of the central characters, only a way of suggesting a pre-arranged pattern, the 'eternal design' of the earlier plays. But neither the trick for sustaining interest, nor the more frivolous treatment of the latter theme is wholly justified, for the mystifications of the first Act are never resolved - they lead nowhere - and the equation of social parasites with tutelar beings produces confusion and inconsistency.[1] Julia's vapid conversation, and the incident of Alex's cooking are not easily reconciled with their behaviour in the second Act, and serve no good dramatic purpose. They only indulge the craving for comic relief, which at an earlier time Eliot deplored.

> ... the desire for 'comic relief' on the part of an audience is, I believe, a permanent craving of human nature; but that does not mean that it is a craving that ought to be gratified. It springs from a lack of the capacity for concentration.[2]

There are too many concessions made in The Cocktail Party to that 'lack of the capacity for concentration', and they rob it of the deep visionary seriousness of the earlier plays.

Against the general artistic inferiority of The Cocktail Party must be set its technical superiority in the eyes of its

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1. Some of the minor mystifications can be accounted for by Eliot's use of Euripides' Alcestis as the source of his story. As Heracles brings Alcestis back to Admetus, so Reilly returns Lavinia to Edward; and Reilly's 'potations of gin' and his 'abstrusely comic little song' derive from Heracles, as David Paul has pointed out. (The Twentieth Century, Aug. 1952, pp.174-80; 'Euripides and Mr. Eliot'.) Comparison of the two plays is not otherwise illuminating.
2. The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, ~~op. cit.,~~ p.41.

author. It represents a further stage along the road which, as a dramatist, Eliot has set himself to travel. Murder in the Cathedral, with its reliance on the chorus, was not properly dramatic. In The Family Reunion he achieved a greater mastery of form but he still made use of the extra-dramatic device of a chorus, and he interpolated two passages of poetry, not arising out of the dialogue, which he subsequently objected to as resembling operatic arias. In writing The Cocktail Party, he laid down for himself 'the ascetic rule to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility', and made no use of extra-dramatic devices. Whatever cannot be disclosed in the course of the dialogue is not disclosed. In these three stages Eliot has gradually and deliberately submitted himself to the limitations of his medium, and having so submitted himself perhaps he will now proceed to transcend them. The submission is in itself an achievement.

It must be admitted, moreover, that although The Cocktail Party is poorer in content than Eliot's other plays, it proves gripping and stimulating in the theatre. It is difficult to account for this, but there are, I think, two possible explanations. One lies in the 'exciting effect of verse rhythms operating on the mind of the listener without his being conscious of it.'[1]. Eliot has solved his problem of versification so successfully that it is only in certain passages that the audience becomes aware that it is hearing poetry; but although

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1. Eliot cites this as one of the privileges of verse drama. (Adam, Nov. 1949, p.15).

the imagery of the earlier poetry has been stripped away, the rhythm, the poetic impulse is still strong. Verse rhythm makes for intensity,and that is its effect here. Secondly, the analysi of human motive is acutely accurate, and while the Chamberlaynes themselves are not wholly real, their habits of mind are. Thus, we recognise truth not only in Celia's experience, but in the analysis of the Chamberlaynes' dilemma, and we are gripped by that recognition.

To its psychological penetration and its hidden poetic power, the impact of the play in performance is perhaps to be attributed. At all events, it is an indication that one of the Church poets has gone some way towards mastering the art of writing for the secular theatre.

Turning from Eliot's two plays to the others of this group, we find ourselves on a very different level of artistic achievement. Only one of these plays - Christopher Fry's _A Sleep of Prisoners_ - is wholly satisfactory as drama, and none of them communicates that sense of 'spiritual powers ... transcending human experience but working through it', which is so compelling in _The Family Reunion_. _The Shadow Factory_ depicts a conversion, _The Old Man of the Mountains_ is concerned with religious faith, but in neither play are spiritual conviction and dramatic imagination in the closest union; and neither _Prophesy to the Wind_ nor _Stratton_ is primarily concerned with religious experience.

In The Shadow Factory, Anne Ridler treats two subjects: the modern tendency to regimentation, and the possibility of spiritual regeneration by way of increased perception. The action takes place in a factory which is a robot state in miniature, and the Director of the factory passes from self-satisfaction to humility, from a false notion of himself to a true one.

The weakness of the play lies in its construction. The two themes are treated in succession, and the action has two separate focal points. Act One develops the first theme, Act Two the second. The first climax comes in Act Two, Scene One, when the Director is made to recognise the 'Superman-among-the-guinea-pigs' state of his factory; the second in Act Two, Scene Two, when the Director and some of his employees join in performing a Nativity play, and through it achieve some understanding of the meaning of the birth of Christ. Act Two, Scene Three explores the effect of this moment of vision on all who experienced it, and the author's final comment is delivered by the Caretaker, who reassures the humiliated and perplexed Director that he will no longer 'look such a fool in the sight of the Lord.'[1]

Anne Ridler has called The Shadow Factory a Nativity play, but that incident is only one of the play's focal points, the illumination which it brings, only one of its subjects. The experience of the Director links the two, but not sufficiently strongly, and the play falls apart. It is chiefly effective,

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1. The Shadow Factory, London, 1946, Act 2, Sc. 3, p.66.

not in demonstrating the humiliation of the Director, who is not convincingly drawn, but in conveying in one short passage the serenity of faith. One of the girls, reflecting on the moment of vision, says

> Perhaps we never extend our boundaries,
> But at some point they cease to seem important.
> Instead we discover a certainty of good,
> Quite impassable, quite inexpressible,
> Offering neither sweetness nor solace -
> No profit for us; and yet, strangely,
> This is joy, this is peace.1.

The Shadow Factory is not wholly unsuccessful. In it, Anne Ridler has come to terms with the secular theatre, expressing her vision of truth by means of a naturalistic plot, through 'characters of our own time living in our own world', and in language that is plain and incisive. But that her interest does not lie in this sphere is apparent in the direction taken by her later work. Neither The Mask, The Missing Bridegroom, nor Henry Bly has a plot that is intrinsically interesting, characters who are fully realised, or dialogue that is easily digested in the theatre. The communication of Christian thought and feeling is made through the language of poetry, not in the manner of drama, and none of these three plays is capable of keeping 'the sustained interest of a large and unprepared and not wholly perceptive group of people.' They make no contribution to the creation of a living religious drama.

Norman Nicholson's The Old Man of the Mountains is a re-telling of the Old Testament story of Elijah, set in modern

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1. Ibid., p.61.

Cumberland. The story is a good vehicle for Nicholson's thought and the play makes its points plainly.

In his treatment of biblical incidents Nicholson demonstrates the instability of faith. The widow whose son is healed alternately trusts and distrusts Elijah; the people who recognise the existence of God in the contest on Carmel Fell doubt the revelation immediately afterwards; and they rejoice when the rain comes, because of their back gardens:

> Ten rows of cabbages and a run for the chickens
> Mean more to them than the covenants of the bright fells.[1]

Through the Raven of the biblical narrative, whom he introduces to fill the rôle of chorus, Nicholson reprimands the audience for their neglect of the 'covenants of the bright fells', for being 'a greedy and a godless people.'[2]. And through Elijah he expresses his own love of the fells, where

> ... the shafts of eternity strike to the bone.[3].

The point at issue between Elijah, here a God-fearing farmer, and Ahab, a progressive land-owner, is the exploitation of the land. The contest on Carmel Fell is to decide the supremacy of God or gold, and Elijah's victory turns the people to the Lord, but Nicholson's Elijah recognises the possibility of a compromise between his way and Ahab's:

> The children of the world are wise in the ways of the world, and we
> Must not despise their wisdom. Now the people are turned to the Lord,

1. The Old Man of the Mountains, London, 1946, Part 3, p.75.
2. Part 1, p.12.
3. Part 3, p.74.

Perhaps your plans and projects may be pleasing in His sight.
The Lord can use the skill and ambition of men,
Even as He uses the thunder and the clouds.[1]

The translation of the biblical story is ingeniously contrived, but The Old Man of the Mountains has the faults of a poet's first play. The essential feeling is not conveyed dramatically, but in the verse passages spoken by the Raven; the dialogue lacks conviction and the characters are not roundly drawn. In attempting to write realistic dialogue, Nicholson produces an artificial banality: Elijah asks Ruth for water, saying

I'm feeling as dry as a haddock.[2]

Ruth prays that her son may remain

On the outskirts of the town of death,
Like the cabbages in the allotments.[3]

The characters do not live. They are the poet's puppets, and though he has managed to move them about, he has yet to learn how to make them talk.

Norman Nicholson's second play, Prophesy to the Wind, is technically an advance on his first: the theme - a discussion of the relative value and danger of science to society - is treated without resort to extra-dramatic devices. The characters and dialogue are no more convincing than those of the earlier play, however, and Nicholson is so ill at ease in dramatic dialogue, and so little able to create character, that one suspects that he has mistaken his medium.

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1. Ibid., p.73.
2. Part 1, p.28.
3. Ibid., p.35.

A similar suspicion is aroused by Stratton, in which Ronald Duncan shews as great an indifference to the demands of the theatre, as Anne Ridler evinced in her later plays. A symbolic melodrama on the theme of the wickedness of man, it is shapeless and confused; neither the experience it depicts nor the plot which cloaks it is cogently developed. The ideas are best expressed in the concluding stanzas:

> What a thing is man,
> Blessed with a spirit
> Damned with a nature
> His eyes seeking heaven
> Whilst his hands construct hell.
>
> What a thing is man
> He is both crucified
> And crucifier
> Oh, Christ, may Thy Mercy
> Rain compassion on this desert that is man.[1]

Their treatment is no more dramatic than that of This Way to the Tomb, and much less diverting.[2]

Christopher Fry's A Sleep of Prisoners is a more considerable achievement than any of these. In this play form and content are fused.

The theme is one of contemporary urgency: Fry is concerned with the dilemma of the modern world, and with the possibility of survival. The situation of his play has a double significance: the four prisoners-of-war shut up in a church represent mankind

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1. Stratton, London, 1950, p.160.
2. Duncan's most recent play, Our Lady's Tumbler (1951) is clearer than Stratton in the development of its argument, but the central experience is conveyed in soliloquy, as in Part One of This Way to the Tomb. It is dramatically weak.

caught in 'humanity's nightmare'.

The action of the play grows naturally and inevitably out of the situation. The four men get on each other's nerves; two of them fight and are parted; they fall asleep and dream. Being in a church, for the first time in years, the biblical stories they were told as children recur to their sleeping minds, and in their dreams they see themselves as figures of the Old Testament. Being involved in violence - in war and in their private quarrels - the stories they dream are stories of violence: Cain's murder of Abel, the conflict between David and Absalom, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. And what happens when they are asleep closely resembles what happened when they were awake, because they fell asleep with it on their minds. David as Cain attacks Peter as Abel; David as King David is at enmity with Peter as Absalom; David as Abraham makes to sacrifice Peter as Isaac, and Adams, who parted David and Peter when they fought, is the angel who intervenes to prevent the slaughter.

By means of their dreams Fry explores the relationship between the four men more thoroughly than a naturalistic action would have permitted.[1] In the opening sequence he depicts them as outwardly they are; in Meadows' dream he shews them as they actually are; in the dreams of David and Peter he shews them as they are in each other's eyes, and so not only completes the

1. And we recall Eliot's observation: 'a verse play .. may use any device to shew (the characters') real feelings and volitions, instead of just what in actual life, they would normally profess or be conscious of.' (See above, p.177)

picture, but explains their mutual antipathy. David sees Peter as a feckless irresponsible boy, condoning everything and anything:

> What is
> A little evil here and there between friends?[1]

Peter sees David as one opposing his love of life with a demand for death. Meadows, because he is the simplest, least prejudiced of the four men, sees them most truly: Peter humble before the mystery of life which he does not pretend to understand; David forcing a meaning and finding it in his own proud strength.

The opening sequence and the first three dreams explore the differences between the men. The fourth shews their common plight. The dream of Corporal Joe Adams changes

> to a state of thought entered into by all the sleeping men, as though, sharing their prison life, they shared, for a few moments of the night, their sleeping life also.[2]

In this last dream they are Shadrach, Meshac and Abednego bound in the fiery furnace, and the question of their survival usurps the place of their private quarrels.

The structure of the play is complex, but logically worked out to the last detail, and there is not a superfluous word. In contrast to his usual practice, Fry has composed this action with the barest economy, subordinating his exuberant eloquence to the simple statement of his theme. Even the verbal wit is strictly functional, having a meaning beneath its surface

1. A Sleep of Prisoners, London, 1951, p. 22. (The play has no act or scene divisions.)
2. Ibid., Prefatory letter.

humour:

Adams. I am a father unequipped to save...
Old Joe Adam, all sin and bone.[1]

Each episode adds to our knowledge and understanding of the men, the last leads them into the crisis which is the crux of the action, and the crisis is sustained for just long enough to hold our concentrated attention. Throughout, the rhythm of the action is skilfully controlled. Each dream has its own shape, its own climax, its own tension, which is relaxed by the fragments of ordinary conversation with which the dreams are interspersed. The snatches of conversation and the verbal wit provide only momentary relief, however. The lowering of the tension nowhere dissipates the dramatic impact but, as in all great drama, increases it.

The characters are fully realised, and the dialogue true. In their dreams, the men interpret the biblical stories not only in terms of their own experience, but in their own language: Fry uses military jargon sparingly and with great skill. Adams, as Adam, reports for duty to Meadows as God, Adam having 'fallen out':

Meadows. As you were, Adam.
Adams. No chance of that, sir.
Meadows. As you were, as you were.
Adams. Lost all track of it now, sir.
Meadows. How far back was it, Adam?
Adams. Down the road. Too dark to see.
Meadows. Were you alone?
Adams. A woman with me, sir...[2]

The use of this language lends a superficial veracity to Fry's

1. p.18.
2. p.10.

treatment of the men, and beneath it there is a deeper truth. They are conceived in the round. David and Peter have a deep affection for each other in spite of the fact that their temperaments are diametrically opposite; Adams, the one with the greatest authority, is also the most perplexed, as the dreams shew; Meadows is simple, humorous, good. 'The truth of the human creature' is in these portraits.

Their situation has, moreover, several layers of meaning, and is capable of containing them all. The men are in fact prisoners-of-war. They are also prisoners to their own natures, as their behaviour at the opening and in each dream illustrates. And they are prisoners in the contemporary dilemma, 'shut up ... in what other men do.'[1] The fiery furnace of the last dream is a peculiarly apt image of that dilemma, and the note of hope on which the episode ends is cleverly echoed in Meadows' final words, which are equally appropriate on the level of the plot.

> Adams. Well, sleep, I suppose.
> David. Yeh. God bless.
> Peter. Rest you merry.
> Meadows. Hope so. Hope so.[2]

The one weakness of the play - and it is not a fatal one - is the slightly sermonising tone of Meadows' pronouncements in the last dream. He meets the men's questions about survival with answers about the power of good, and as the climax to the whole action, the interchange is a little lacking in dramatic force. It has cogency, however - Meadows, with his message of

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1. p.41.
2. p.51.

hope, is the fourth figure of the biblical story, by whose presence Shadrac, Meshac and Abednego are saved - and it underlines the argument.

Meadows. Good is itself, what ever comes.
It grows, and makes, and bravely
Persuades, beyond all tilt of wrong:
Stronger than anger, wiser than strategy,
Enough to subdue cities and men
If we believe it with a long courage of truth.

David. Corporal, the crowing son of heaven
Thinks we can make a morning.

Meadows. Not
By old measures. Expedience and self-preservation
Can rot as they will ...[1]

The play was written in the belief that

> progress is the growth of vision: the increased perception of what makes for life and what makes for death.[2]

And, at the crisis, the men achieve that perception. David, the man of action, sees in the stresses of the furnace that

> To be strong beyond all action is the strength
> To have.[3]

Peter, the indifferent, recognises that

> There's no way out. We can only stay and alter.[4]

And the possibility of alteration is asserted by Meadows -

> O God, the fabulous wings unused
> Folded in the heart.[5]

Fry's statement of his theme is made concisely, and if the resolution lacks excitement, the dilemma itself is vividly real. Adam's agony as, powerless to intervene, he watches Cain murder

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1. p.48.
2. Prefatory letter.
3. p.47.
4. p.48.
5. p.47.

Abel, David's grief at the death of Absalom, and the suffering of the men in the flames of the furnace are intensely moving. In no other play has Fry achieved this degree of immediacy. And he has not only succeeded in fusing form and content, but in making effective use of the resources provided by the circumstances of the play's production. It was written for performance in church. The action takes place in a church. Peter infuriates David at the beginning by strumming on the organ. The idea of the Old Testament stories is introduced by his casually reading from a bible left open on the lectern. His mocking disapproval of David is delivered from the pulpit:

> We have here on my left
> An example of the bestial passions that beset mankind..[1]

And the setting gives rise to the action: the dreams of the men are induced by their situation.

A Sleep of Prisoners is Fry's best play, and a fine achievement by any standards. It communicates a vision of life, and to see it is to enjoy an emotional experience of the kind which only drama can give. It is not religious in the way that Eliot's plays are, for it does not evoke the same sense of the reality of the spiritual universe. But it is religious in that it identifies God with good, and shews man acquiring a knowledge of good. The soldiers know nothing of religious ecstasy, but in their increased awareness of good and evil, they have the 'first requisite of spiritual life.'[2]

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1. p.5.
2. '... the perception of Good and Evil, -whatever choice we may make - is the first requisite of spiritual life.' (T.S.Eliot, After Strange Gods, ~~op.cit.~~, p.53.)

A Sleep of Prisoners is, in a very true sense, a play of modern life, for the predicament of the soldiers is the human predicament at its present stage of crisis. In this play Fry has interpreted life for his generation, expressing 'the giant agony of the world' in terms of contemporary experience.

Eliot, Anne Ridler, Nicholson, Duncan, Fry have this in common: they are poets writing for the theatre. For some of them the medium is uncongenial. Anne Ridler's later work shews that she feels it to be so, and is no longer making any real attempt to meet the demands of the theatre; and Norman Nicholson's failure in characterisation and dialogue points to a similar incompatibility between artist and form. Ronald Duncan is at ease in dramatic dialogue, but he has not yet achieved a mastery of technique, and Stratton gives no indication that he is moving in that direction. Only Eliot and Fry, of this group of poet-playwrights, have succeeded in creating drama, and only The Family Reunion and A Sleep of Prisoners are genuine religious drama; but each of these two plays is a major work of art, and a fitting crown to this body of endeavour.

The Family Reunion and A Sleep of Prisoners have, moreover, a special place in modern religious drama.

> It is in the nature of the poet's vocation (a poet has written) that he should ... take upon himself the imaginative burden of his tribe.[1]

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1. Kathleen Raine, 'The Poet of our Time', T.S.Eliot: A Symposium, ed. March and Tambimuttu, London, 1948, p.79.

In these plays of modern life, Eliot and Fry have in some part taken upon themselves the imaginative burden of our time. Fry has given artistic expression to the 'giant agony of the world', Eliot to the giant evil. Fry finds a solution in man's potentiality:

> ... the fabulous wings unused,
> Folded in the heart.

For Eliot, the ultimate answer is not in this world,

> ... the resolution is in another.

And as Eliot's experience appears to be the more intense, so his play is the more profound. A Sleep of Prisoners ends on an affirmative note of hope for mankind; but The Family Reunion brings us to a condition of 'serenity, stillness, and reconciliation', and then leaves us 'as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther."

SECTION IV

An Assessment.

uniquely in making religious drama out of the material of modern life. And in Eliot's two plays, the 'sense of spiritual powers that have a real operation above life and in it, transcending human experience but working through it' is strangely compelling, and has seldom been equalled in drama. Only the closing scene of Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus occurs to me as a possible parallel.

The work which fails to reach this standard of artistic excellence is by no means without value. At the lowest estimate, it is valuable as the soil out of which these plays sprang. If it had not been for the work of the pioneers and the progress made by their successors, our four plays might well not have come into existence at all. Many of the plays are individually valuable despite imperfections, as we have seen, and Charles Williams' presentation of Christian doctrine in Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury and The House of the Octopus is remarkable for its originality and power. Considering the work chronologically, we noted, too, a steady progress. In New Testament drama there has been a gradual development from the timidly pious to the freely direct treatment of the Gospel, from Bethlehem to The Man Born to be King; in Old Testament drama, from the too faithful transposition of the narrative in such plays as Louis N. Parker's Joseph and His Brethren and Lawrence's David to a recreation of it in The Firstborn; and in saint-plays, from the conscientious presentation of historical fact in The Conversion of England to the imaginative interpretation of Thor, with

Angels. The early work had a conspicuous absence of theme, the later plays are urgently topical: The Just Vengeance, Thor, with Angels and The Makers of Violence are concerned with the modern predicament, with evil and pain, with calling 'an end to killing', and the use of the material of modern life in recent work is evidence of a further determination to relate religious drama to contemporary experience. Our four plays came into being amid, and helped to advance, this distinct and important development.

With these changes in choice and treatment of subject matter went experiments in technique, attempts to break away from the convention of naturalism. Bottomley introduced a chorus, in The Acts of St. Peter, to link the action. Eliot gave to the chorus in Murder in the Cathedral the important place that it occupied in the early plays of Aeschylus, and in The Family Reunion he used it in a manner comparable to that of Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude, to reveal unspoken thought, and a deeper level of consciousness. In The Zeal of Thy House, Dorothy Sayers gave to four archangels the choral function of commenting upon and interpreting the action, a method adopted by Anne Ridler in Cain; and for Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury and The House of the Octopus, Charles Williams devised the ingenious idea of making a figure with this function of interpreter, also the protagonist of the action. R.H. Ward went further, in Holy Family and The Figure on the Cross, making the members of his chorus the only dramatis personae. In addition

to these modified uses of the Greek chorus, there has been, in some few plays, an adherence to the Greek unities of time, place and action. Eliot preserved them in Murder in the Cathedral and The Family Reunion; Christopher Fry in Thor, with Angels and A Sleep of Prisoners; and Charles Williams achieved a unity of action in Seed of Adam and Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, by abolishing Time and Space. From mediaeval drama, the allegorical convention of the morality play has been borrowed, as well as the habit of dramatising the Gospel. Eliot depicted an inner conflict by means of Four Tempters in Murder in the Cathedral, Ronald Duncan by means of personified temptations in This Way to the Tomb, and Charles Williams used allegorical figures in The House by the Stable, and its sequel Grab and Grace. These writers of religious drama have rejected the naturalistic convention and made use of 'suggestions from remote drama ... such as Everyman and the late mediaeval morality and mystery plays, and the great Greek dramatists.'[1] Few of their experiments have been wholly successful. These attempts to overcome or circumvent the limitations of drama are not a positive contribution to dramatic technique, but they are a sign of vitality.[2]

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1. Eliot advocated this practice, in a talk on 'The Need for Poetic Drama', as a method of breaking away from the Elizabethan tradition of versification. (The Listener, Nov. 25th, 1936, pp.994-5.)
2. In making these experiments, religious drama is in line with much of the secular drama of the modern period. Strindberg and Pirandello attempted to break down conventional form, and to abolish our usual sense of time. Eugene O'Neill and Thornton Wilder have rejected naturalism in many of their plays and attempted to establish a closer relation between actors and

Modern religious drama has this achievement to its credit: it has succeeded in restoring verse as a medium for dramatic speech. It has, in fact, succeeded in creating a living poetic drama. The movement to revive verse drama in the early years of this century did not prosper. Its exponents - Stephen Phillips, Lascelles Abercrombie, Gordon Bottomley, John Masefield - failed to adjust their versification to the rhythms of contemporary speech, and did not express their thought and feeling with true ~~and~~ dramatic intensity. The secular verse drama of the thirties, the work of Auden, Isherwood, Spender and Macneice, was more successful in its versification, more ardent in its themes, but it failed to adjust content with form. It was Murder in the Cathedral which first realised the possibility of a living verse drama, The Family Reunion and The Cocktail Party, together with the plays of Christopher Fry, which established it. Eliot evolved a form of versification by stages in his three plays, adapting it to the rhythms of modern speech so successfully that many people consider the verse of The Cocktail Party to be indistinguishable from prose - an untenable view in the face of its strong rhythm, but one which testifies to his skill in making dramatic verse sound natural. Stimulated no doubt by Eliot's example, and concerned also with religious themes, Christopher Hassall, Ronald Duncan, Norman Nicholson and Anne

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audience. Of many experiments with a chorus, Hardy's in The Dynasts is notable, and, more recently, that of Auden and Isherwood in The Ascent of F.6. and Ghéon's in Le Chemin de la Croix.

Ridler used the medium of verse drama as a vehicle for their thought, and though none of them has evolved a style as adaptable as Eliot's, they have all contributed to the reinstatement of poetry in the theatre.

For the use of verse in religious drama there are good reasons. Poetry can penetrate beneath the surface of life to the reality which underlies it, the spiritual reality.[1] It can express a 'peculiar range of sensibility.' It can communicate, by means of imagery, experience which is otherwise incommunicable: the experience which forms the subject of The Family Reunion could not be conveyed in any other way. And as 'the human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse',[2] verse is the fittest medium for the communication of religious emotion, whether that communication be made in a poem or in a play. It is not surprising that modern religious drama is verse drama; but it is greatly to the credit of its finest exponent that he has made it acceptable by a modern audience in a secular theatre. The achievement of Eliot's The Cocktail Party is supreme in this respect. A living verse

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1. It is interesting to find that Abercrombie stressed this point in an apology for poetic drama in 1912. He claimed that it could explore 'the innermost reality, the one with which art is most dearly concerned... the spiritual reality' and that 'the preference for prose plays over poetic plays is a preference for ordinary appearance over spiritual reality.' (The Poetry Review, March 1912, reprinted in English Critical Essays, ed. Phyllis M. Jones, London 1933.) His plays are not religious in our sense, they do not treat man in relation to God or an unseen order, but his dramatic poem The Sale of St. Thomas (1930) is a profound and moving study of religious experience.
2. Eliot, Selected Essays, p. 46.

drama has been created and sustained by the religious impulse which gave it birth.

From the evidence of the last seventy years, certain conclusions about religious drama may be drawn, and our earlier assumptions substantiated. The huge output, and minute achievement in work of outstanding quality, is evidence of the difficulty of reconciling religious subject matter with dramatic form. The range of subject matter is limited. The subjects treated in the four plays in which form and content are fused are all aspects of the relationship between God and man, between man and the spiritual universe, in one or other of its active phases. Seed of Adam treats the phase of revelation; conversion, in the sense of increased perception, is the subject of A Sleep of Prisoners; reconciliation is the substance of Murder in the Cathedral and The Family Reunion. That a more static phase, contemplation, does not lend itself to dramatic treatment is apparent in Part One of This Way to the Tomb. That tragedy is impossible in Christian drama, we discover in the various studies of martyrdom, where physical death coincides with spiritual victory, and as in Samson Agonistes, 'nothing is here for tears.'

In the work of Eliot and Charles Williams we discovered a further limitation, not inherent in religious drama but often to be found in it: a weakness in characterisation. To the religious mind character is of less account than the soul. Williams was capable of analysing character but he was not

interested in creating it. Eliot recognises the need for character in drama,[1] but he has not yet wholly succeeded in meeting it. The fact that the characters are not fully realised in Seed of Adam and Murder in the Cathedral is not a serious defect, for the theme of each play does not require that they should be; and in The Family Reunion, the reality of Harry's experience compensates for the fact that he is not highly individualised. But Eliot's failure in The Cocktail Party to make the Chamberlaynes wholly convincing matters more; they exist only on the level of everyday experience and they should be consistently credible on that level, because they are not, the resolution of their dilemma carries little conviction. In Charles Williams' plays, neither the characters nor their experiences are sympathetically conceived. Williams does not identify himself with his characters, he sees them as they might be seen by God, and he is unmoved by their suffering because he knows it to be the means of their salvation. He thus forfeits dramatic sympathy, for we are equally unmoved. A Sleep of Prisoners does not share the limitation that we find in the plays of Eliot and Charles Williams, but neither is it so powerful in religious emotion. English religious drama has no play to equal Claudel's L'Annonce faite à Marie in

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1. 'It seems to me that we should turn away from the Theatre of Ideas to the Theatre of Character. The essential poetic play should be made with human beings rather than with ideas. It is not for the dramatist to produce an analysed character, but for the audience to analyse the character.' (World Review, Nov. 1949, p.22).

communicating religious emotion of the first intensity, without any sacrifice of the ordinary attributes of drama.

In addition to the incompatibility of certain kinds of religious experience and drama, we notice this partial incompatibility between the chief of these dramatists and their medium. Why then, in the face of these difficulties, have our poets and religious thinkers chosen drama as a means of expression? Why, after an interval of several hundred years, has there been this sudden revival of religious drama?

Various answers present themselves. The original inspiration of the movement was evangelistic, and that impulse is still strong. It is evident in much of the amateur drama, in the work of Dorothy Sayers, and, less obviously because less dogmatically, in that of Charles Williams. Eliot's assertion that 'a poet naturally prefers to write for as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible,'[1] provides another explanation. Poetry finds its largest audience to-day in the theatre. But there is, I think, a more fundamental reason. Many of these poets are concerned with spiritual and moral crisis, with the human predicament, with the problem of good and evil as it confronts us at the present time: drama is peculiarly able to express dilemma, conflict and crisis. It is in the nature of the artist's vocation that he should express the consciousness of his time, and, in giving expression to the dilemma of modern life, religious drama is fulfilling one of the

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1. The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism, p.152.

most valued functions of art. We can justly point to it and say, 'here is the form and body of the time.'

In 1922, Granville Barker observed:

> There are occasional signs that the Church in England is now bethinking her of what a weapon she threw away when she gave the theatre the go-by. She will not capture it again; it has a salvation of its own to pursue. But the drama may still offer her service.[1]

She will not capture it again; but the drama has done the Church good service since then and has in turn been well served by her. In her patronage of drama, the Church has stimulated the writing of plays, and provided a stage for their performance. She has been directly responsible for the first plays of our leading dramatists, Eliot and Fry, and instrumental, therefore, in the creation of modern poetic drama.

The greatest vitality in the drama of recent years resides in this body of work. We find here a vigour and depth of thought, a readiness to experiment with form, and the richness of poetic language; and it is to the Church poets that we look now for significant work. Contemporary secular drama does not shew equal promise. ~~O'Casey and~~ Bridie ~~are~~ is dead; St. John Ervine has long ceased to write plays; Priestley's later plays lack the freshness and imaginative quality of his earlier ones; Noel Coward's talent appears to be exhausted; and such popular playwrights as Emlyn Williams and William Douglas Home do not set a very high artistic standard. Peter Ustinov continues to

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1. <u>Little Plays of St. Francis</u>, 1st series, p. xv.

experiment, with varying degrees of success, but has so far not succeeded in disciplining the fertility of his invention to the demands of dramatic form. Terence Rattigan's latest play, The Deep Blue Sea, is a more sensitive study of human emotion than he has produced before, but in plays of this quality the prose drama of the present day is not rich. The most notable new play of recent months, Charles Morgan's The River Line, derives what power it has from its underlying thought, and it is interesting to see that in the final scene Morgan gropes towards a religious solution of the dilemma which he has posed. In this, the play is typical of much modern writing which rejects as insufficient social and political solutions to the human predicament, and so casts a sidelight on our main theme. Morgan's view of life is a highly personal one, however, and for this reason The River Line is unlikely to be imitated. Orthodox belef unites our Church poets, despite the diversity of their work.

We cannot claim that modern religious drama is moving inexorably forward, enriching world drama at every stage of its progress, but it is vigorous, and it is moving forward. Towards its achievement and its potential achievement, the work of the past seventy years has variously but progressively led.

> The creation of any form cannot be the work of one man or one generation of men working together, but has to evolve by the small contributions of a number of people in succession, each contributing a little.[1]

1. Eliot 'The Need for Poetic Drama', Listener, Nov.25th, 1936, p.994.

APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF PLAYS DISCUSSED IN SECTION THREE, WITH DATE AND PLACE OF FIRST PERFORMANCE AND DATE OF PUBLICATION.

(I have confined this list to plays discussed in Section Three because that section includes all the important new religious plays. Details of performance of less important work, mentioned in Section Two, will be found there in the text or in footnotes. It has not been possible in every case to ascertain the precise date of production, and month, season or year only is given, where only so much is known.)

1888?		Cresswell	Conversion of England Parish of St.Peter's Vauxhall.	1885
1901	Sept.	Downton	St.Augustine of Canterbury St.Michael's Mission Torquay.	1902
1902	Dec.17	Housman	Bethlehem Imperial Institute, Univ. of London.	1902
1904	Dec.7	Buckton	Eagerheart Lincoln's Inn.	1904
1907	Jan.14	D'Arcy	St.Aidan, Apostle of England St.Patrick's Schools, Birmingham.	1906
1911	Dec.1	Dearmer	The Soul of the World Imperial Institute.	1911
1917	Feb.25	Masefield	Good Friday Garrick Theatre (Stage Society).	1917
1919	Dec.20	Fr. Andrew	The Hope of the World Old Vic.	1920
		Yeats	Calvary (privately performed in a drawing-room. Date not known to me)	1920
1921		Housman	Little Plays of St. Francis (one play performed) Glastonbury Festival.	1922

(Jan. 1925 first performance of a group of Little Plays at University College London.)

Year	Date	Author	Play	Published
1923	May 25	Masefield	A King's Daughter	1923
		Oxford Playhouse.		
1925	May 9	Masefield	The Trial of Jesus	1925
		Music Room, Boar's Hill.		
1927	May 22	Lawrence	David	1926
		Regent Theatre (300 Club production).		
1924	April 14	Gregory	The Story Brought by Brigit	1924
		Abbey Theatre, Dublin.		
1928	May 28	Masefield	The Coming of Christ	1928
		Canterbury Cathedral.		
1929	Good Friday	Williams	The Rite of the Passion	1931
		St.Martin's, Kensal Rise.		
1930	Nov.20	Bridie	Tobias and the Angel	1931
		Festival Theatre, Cambridge.		
1932	Dec.12	Bridie	Jonah and the Whale	1932
		Westminster Theatre.		
1933	March 26	Dixon-Morrah	Caesar's Friend	1933
		Westminster Theatre (Catholic Stage Guild).		
	June 27	Bottomley	The Acts of St.Peter	1933
		Exeter Cathedral.		
1934	May 28	Eliot	The Rock	1934
		Sadler's Wells Theatre.		
	July 23	Drinkwater	A Man's House	1934
		Malvern Festival.		
	July 30	Yeats	The Resurrection	1934
		Abbey Theatre, Dublin.		
1935	June 15	Eliot	Murder in the Cathedral	1935
		Chapter House, Canterbury.		
1936	June 20	Williams	Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury	1936
		Chapter House, Canterbury.		
	December	Williams	Seed of Adam	1937[1]
		Hornchurch, Essex. Chelmsford Diocesan Religious Drama Guild.		

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1. Seed of Adam was published in Christendom, Sept.1937; in Seed of Adam and other plays, London 1948.

	Dec. 14	Barrie	The Boy David His Majesty's Theatre.	1938
1937	June 12	Sayers	The Zeal of Thy House Chapter House, Canterbury.	1937
	Oct. 31	Bridie	Susannah and the Elders Duke of York's Theatre (Sunday performance).	1940
1938	Easter	Young	Nicodemus In several church halls and theological colleges	1937
	June 25	Hassall	Christ's Comet Chapter House, Canterbury.	1937
	Summer	Fry	The Boy with a Cart Coleman's Hatch, Sussex.	1939
	Dec. 25	Sayers	He That Should Come Broadcast.	1939
1939	March 21	Eliot	The Family Reunion Westminster Theatre.	1939
	June 10	Sayers	The Devil to Pay Chapter House, Canterbury.	1939
	Autumn	Williams	The House by the Stable The Death of Good Fortune Oxford Pilgrim Players.	1948
1941	Nov. 16	Ward	Holy Family Parish Church, Stoke-by-Nayland.	1942
		Housman	Abraham and Isaac On tour, Adelphi Players.	1942
	Dec. - Oct. 1942	Sayers	The Man Born to Be King Broadcast.	1943
1944		Ridler	Cain St. Christopher's School, Letchworth.	1943
1945	Easter	Ward	The Figure on the Cross College Hall, Worcester Cathedral.	1947
	Sept. 13	Nicholson	The Old Man of the Mountains Mercury Theatre.	1946
	Sept. 29	Williams	The House of the Octopus Rudolph Steiner Hall.	1945
	Oct. 11	Duncan	This Way to the Tomb Mercury Theatre.	1946

	Dec. 19	Ridler	The Shadow Factory Mercury Theatre.	1946
1946	Feb.	Duncan	Ora Pro Nobis St. Thomas's, Regent Street.	1940
	June 15	Sayers	The Just Vengeance Lichfield Cathedral.	1946
1947	June 14	Williams	Judgment at Chelmsford Scala Theatre.	1939
	June 21	Lee	Peasants' Priest Chapter House, Canterbury.	1947
	Nov. 11	Daviot	The Little Dry Thorn Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.	Not pub.
		Ridler	Henry Bly A rehearsed reading, Mercury Theatre.	1950
1948	June 19	Fry	Thor, with Angels Chapter House, Canterbury.	1949
	Sept. 6	Fry	The Firstborn (1st version) Gateway Theatre, Edinburgh.	1946
1949	Jan.	Nicholson	Prophesy to the Wind Newcastle People's Theatre.	1950
	Aug. 10	Daviot	The Stars Bow Down Malvern Festival.	1939
	Aug. 22	Eliot	The Cocktail Party Edinburgh Festival.	1950
	Oct. 31	Duncan	Stratton Theatre Royal, Brighton.	1950
1950		Ridler	The Missing Bridegroom Unnamed Society, Manchester.	1950
1951		Ridler	The ~~Missing Bridegroom~~ Mask Questors' Theatre, Ealing.	1950
	April 23	Fry	A Sleep of Prisoners University Church, Oxford.	1951
	June 5	Duncan	Our Lady's Tumbler Salisbury Cathedral.	1951
	July 2	Sayers	The Emperor Constantine Playhouse Theatre, Colchester.	1951

	July 18	Gittings Chapter House, Canterbury.	<u>The Makers of Violence</u>	1951
1952	Jan. 29	Fry Wintergarden Theatre.	<u>The Firstborn</u> (2nd version)	1952

A SELECT BOOK-LIST

(Very few of the books on modern drama contain much first hand material about or discussion of the revival of religious drama, although most of them mention it. I include in this list those works which I have found relevant and useful in placing modern religious drama in its context, some critical studies of the work of individual dramatists, and various essays in dramatic theory, relating to modern religions and modern poetic drama.)

General Surveys.

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F. W. Chandler, *Aspects of Modern Drama*, London, 1914.

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Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre*, London, 1946.

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Ronald Peacock, The Poet in the Theatre, London, 1946.
(Ch. 1, 'T. S. Eliot'.)

F. O. Matthiesson, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot, revised ed., London, 1947.
(Ch. 7, 'The Plays'.)

Helen Gardner, The Art of T. S. Eliot, London, 1949.
(Ch. 6, 'The Language of Drama'.)

M. C. Bradbrook, T. S. Eliot, London, 1950.
(Ch. IV, 'The Dramatist'.)

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(a comparative study of Aeschylus' Eumenides and Eliot's Family Reunion.)

John Peter, 'The Cocktail Party'; Scrutiny, Spring, 1950.

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Richard Findlater, The Unholy Trade, London, 1952.
(Ch. 9, 'The Drama: A Hope for Poetry' includes discussion of Eliot, Fry, Duncan, Nicholson.)

Dramatic Theory

U. Ellis-Fermor, The Frontiers of Drama, London, 1945.

Lascelles Abercrombie, 'The Function of Poetry in Drama' (1912), English Critical Essays, ed. Phyllis M. Jones, London, 1933.

Gordon Bottomley, 'Poetry and the Contemporary Theatre', Essays and Studies, Vol. XIX for 1934.

A Stage for Poetry, Kendal, 1948.

H. Granville-Barker, On Poetry in Drama, London, 1937.

Christopher Hassall, Notes on the Verse Drama, London, 1948. (The Masque, No 6.)

T. S. Eliot, '"Rhetoric" and Poetic Drama' (1919) amd 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' (1928), Selected Essays, enlarged ed., London, 195 1.

'Apology for the Countess of Pembroke' and 'Conclusions', The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, London, 1933.

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An Experience of Critics, London, 1952, pp. 11-32. (includes observations on The Firstborn)

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