

A Timeline of Drama to the Middle Ages

Classical civilization Antiquity

Egypt

massive "play" on death and resurrection of Osiris 2500 to 550 BC (no text remains)

Greece

plays honoring Dionysus

500s BC, Thespis first playwright

400s BC, Athens, State of Attica—flowering of drama, tragedy

Aeschylus born 525

Sophocles born 496 *Oedipus* 430

Euripides born 480 *Medea* 431

Aristophanes born 445 *Lysistrata* 411, Old Comedy

after 400, more burlesque drama, everyday life—none survive. Middle Comedy

330s BC: Menander, *Dyskolos* (*The Curmudgeon*) 317, New Comedy, Athenian middle class

decline of Greek city-state

Rome

First stone theater, based on Greeks', first century BC.

Plautus 254 BC

Terrence 186 BC

(Golden age of Roman literature: between Virgil's birth 70 BC, death of Ovid 17 AD)

Seneca 4 BC (adapted Greek stories, tragedies; inspired Elizabethans) – not performed?

last known performance in Rome – 533 AD

European Middle Ages

begins with fall of Western Roman Empire 400s (Odoacer 476)

Dark Ages – 450 to 750

the mass as drama? early church: dialogue between choristers, solo voice

900s to 1200s:

900s clerics performed *Quem quaeritis?*

1100s rediscovery of Greek and Roman learning/scholarship → Renaissance

1200 performed outdoors

Feast of Corpus Christi 1246 – mystery, miracle cycles

Three principal kinds of vernacular drama

1 **miracle plays** or saint's play - lives of saints

- real or fictitious life, miracles, martyrdom of a saint
- genre evolved from liturgical offices developed during 900s, 1000s for calendar festivals
- by the 1200s were in vernacular, with unecclesiastical elements, no longer in church; now at public festivals
- most surviving miracle plays concern either the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas, 300s bishop of Myra, Asia Minor. Both had active cults during Middle Ages
- Mary is usually *deus ex machina*, saving eg "a priest who has sold his soul to the devil, a woman falsely accused of murdering her own child, a pregnant abbess."

- Typical example: *St. John the Hairy*. "He seduces and murders a princess. Upon capture, he is proclaimed a saint by an infant. He confesses his crime, whereupon God and Mary appear and aid John in reviving the princess, then the murderer saint is made a bishop." (!)
- Nicholas plays like Mary plays, an example: Jean Bodel's *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas* (circa 1200): the deliverance of a crusader and the conversion of a Saracen king
- Few English miracle plays extant; banned by Henry VIII in mid-1500s, most subsequently destroyed or lost

2 **mystery plays** or *cycles* (from guilds) - biblical dramas, dramatized scripture

- developed from plays presented in Latin by churchmen at church depicting eg the Creation, Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, the Last Judgment
- not a large, communal religious experience, as with Greek drama, but instead many intimate dramatizations
- 1200s, craft guilds began producing the plays in the vernacular outside church
- Bible divided into many short plays, each played on its own stage
- religious nature of the plays changed; alterations, entertaining enhancements made
- new satire mocking physicians, soldiers, judges, monks, priests
- In England over decades, groups of 25 to 50 plays were organized into cycles; timespan is all of biblical history, from Creation, to the Fall (apple in the Garden of Eden), Noah's Flood, the Incarnation of Christ, the Passion and Resurrection, to the Last Judgment
- Example: *The Wakefield Cycle*, the history of the world from Creation to Judgment Day in 32 short plays
- In France: *The Acts of the Apostles* by Arnoul and Simon Gréban; 494 speaking parts; 61908 lines of rhymed verse; 40 days to perform.
- at end of 1500s, church support dropped; uninteresting in the Renaissance; considered too Catholic in England

3 **morality plays** 1400s and 1500s, dramatized allegory, spiritual lessons, anonymous *Everyman* (1500) best known

- conflict between Vice and Virtue (represented by actors) for a human soul, struggle called *psychomachia* (Greek, "war over [or in] the soul"); central figure is Man
- performed by small quasi-professional companies in banquet halls, etc., relying on public support
- intermediate/combined step between earlier religious/liturgical drama and professional secular drama of the Renaissance
- plays usually short; serious themes with some farce
- spoke to medieval man's anxiety about preparing for death, "dying well"; offer *ars moriendi* (Latin, "the art of dying")
- TS Eliot: "*Everyman* is on the one hand the human soul in extremity, and on the other any man in any dangerous position from which we wonder how he is going to escape with as keen interest as that with which we wait for the escape of the film hero, bound and helpless in a hut to which his enemies are about to set fire."

Example: In Dutch play *Het esbatement den appelboom* (*The Miraculous Apple Tree*), "a pious couple, Staunch Goodfellow and Steadfast Faith, are rewarded when God creates for them an everbearing apple tree with the property that whoever touches it without permission becomes stuck fast. This leads to predictable and humorous consequences."

Performance:

In England, performed on a wheeled platform, a **pageant wagon**. A hut on top contained scenery backdrop, acting space, a kind of dressing room. Pageant wagons moved through town and stopped for performances at designated places.

In France and Italy, 100-foot-wide stages were used, with paradise and hell at either end and Earth in between.

Special effects: Mechanical devices, trapdoors, flying angels, fire-breathing beasts, miraculous transformation, violently graphic martyrdom

other non-religious plays of the day were farces, funny, with fairy tales

Modern Period

starting with **Renaissance** (begins with monarchies/exploration/printing/renaissance humanism)

begins 1400s Italy, 1500s Northern Europe (1517 Protestant Reformation)

Humanist movement begins mid 1400s, reawakening of classical scholarship

Machiavelli early 1500s, Jonson, Bacon, da Vinci, Copernicus, Galileo, Brahe, Kepler

Marlowe's work 1564 and Thomas Kyd's 1580s

James Burbage 1576 London - The Theater (built on triangular patch between Curtain Lane, Holywell Road, Great Eastern Street, near Shoreditch Old Street Tube Station)

Shakespeare's plays—primarily first decade 1600s

The evolution of stage presentation

Arena performance, the basis for all theatre:

- Druid ceremonies at Stonehenge
- probably early Greek ritual dancing in the orchestra
- medieval rounds in 1300s England, France
- medieval street plays on pageant wagons
- also the circus, the bullring, boxing, wrestling

in common: bringing together entire communities for ritual, pageantry

next: for more narrative performance, performers needed to control attention more effectively

solution: the open, thrust, or platform stage, with the audience on three sides

earlier intimate, ritualistic qualities now could be combined with an enhanced concentration on individuals

used by:

- national theatres, particularly China and Japan
 - booths of the Italian commedia
 - Elizabethan public and private playhouses (Shakespeare)
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From the dictionary:

al-le-go-ry

1.
 - a. The representation of abstract ideas or principles by characters, figures, or events in narrative, dramatic, or pictorial form.
 - b. A story, picture, or play employing such representation. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* are allegories.
2. A symbolic representation: *The blindfolded figure with scales is an allegory of justice.*

[Middle English allegorie, from Latin allēgoria, from Greek, from allēgorein, to interpret allegorically : allos, other; see al-¹ in Indo-European Roots + agoreuein, to speak publicly (from agora, marketplace. See ger- in Indo-European Roots).]

mys-ter-y¹

1. One that is not fully understood or that baffles or eludes the understanding; an enigma: *How he got in is a mystery.*
2. The skills, lore, or practices that are peculiar to a particular activity or group and are regarded as the special province of initiates. Often used in the plural: *the mysteries of Freemasonry; the mysteries of cooking game.*
3. A religious truth that is incomprehensible to reason and knowable only through divine revelation.
4.
 - a. An incident from the life of Jesus, especially the Incarnation, Passion, Crucifixion, or Resurrection, of particular importance for redemption.
 - b. One of the 15 incidents from the lives of Jesus or the Blessed Virgin Mary, such as the Annunciation or the Ascension, serving in Roman Catholicism as the subject of meditation during recitation of the rosary.
5.
 - a. also **Mystery** One of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.
 - b. **mysteries** The consecrated elements of the Eucharist.
6.
 - a. A religious cult practicing secret rites to which only initiates are admitted.
 - b. A secret rite of such a cult.

[Middle English misterie, from Latin mysterium, from Greek mustērion, secret rite, from mustēs, an initiate, from mūein, to close the eyes, initiate.]

mys-ter-y²

1. Archaic. A trade or an occupation.
2. Archaic. A guild, as of merchants or artisans.
3. A mystery play.

[Middle English misterie, service, craft, from Medieval Latin misterium, craft-guild, from Late Latin, alteration of Latin ministerium, occupation, from minister, assistant, servant. See mei-² in Indo-European Roots.]