

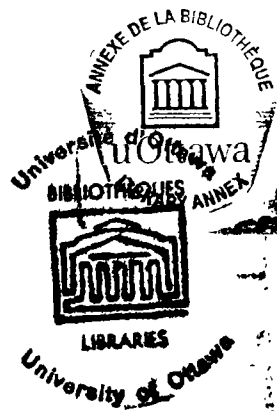
THE NATURE AND VALIDITY OF CONTEMPORARY COMPLAINT
AGAINST MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS PLAYS

by

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Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts
of the University of Ottawa through the
Department of English in partial fulfil-
ment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts.



*Degree granted
May 20 - 1966
M. Schuchart - m
Secretary*

Ottawa, Canada, 1966

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To Dr. A. P. Campbell, under whose direction this thesis was prepared, for his interest, assistance, and encouragement, the writer's gratitude is here expressed.

To the Sisters of her Congregation, whose charity and prayers sustained the writer during her years of study, especially the final one, this thesis is humbly dedicated.

CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Sister Claudia (Helen Popowich) was born in Sudbury, Ontario, on February 20, 1928.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the scholarly works dealing with medieval religious drama during the past hundred or more years, it seems that there have existed two differing viewpoints. One outlook, prevalent especially in the nineteenth century, is colored by an attitude exemplified in a number of critics who emphasize the profane elements of the plays to the overshadowing of their spiritual or devotional aspects. Other writers are rather puritanically inclined to feel that these plays which mingled profane with religious matters are better dead and forgotten. Such a position can be illustrated through the following passage by T. Warton:

. . . to those who are accustomed to contemplate the great picture of human follies which the unpolished ages of Europe hold up to our view, it will not appear surprising that a people who were forbidden to read the events of the sacred history of the Bible, in which they were faithfully and beautifully related, should at the same time be permitted to see them represented on the stage, disgraced with the grossest improprieties, corrupted with inventions and additions of the most ridiculous kind, sullied with impurities, and expressed in the language and gesticulations of the lowest farce.¹

A second outlook, prominent in recent years, tends toward an appreciation of the good qualities of medieval

¹ The History of English Poetry (London, 1840), II, 520.

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drama, asserting that these plays, strongly religious in tone, maintained a devotional heart and soul until they disappeared rather suddenly in the sixteenth century. Such, for instance, is the vein in which H. Craig states that "The Mystery plays were not theological or propagandistic; they were religious. They sought from the beginning to tell the truth as they believed it to be" ² And F. M. Salter writes:

When the scales have fallen from our eyes we shall see at once that the mystery plays had the advantage over all other drama and over all literature except the Bible, Dante, Milton, and a few minor authors of the grandest, most sublime, and most powerfully moving of all themes What we need is a faith that our ancestors were not silly; we need also the auditory and visual imagination that will enable us to attend a performance, sitting cheek by jowl with dignitaries of the Church or officials of the city, or rubbing shoulders in the streets with men and women who had the same appreciation of art in all its forms that we have--or perhaps an appreciation not quite so dulled as ours has been by the clanking machinery of modern life, or left so uncultivated as ours by the absence of artistic objects around us. ³

Nevertheless, whatever their differing viewpoints on this subject, and regardless of what blame or praise they may heap upon the liturgical, mystery, miracle, or morality plays, both groups through their study of this area of

² English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1960), p. 363.

³ Mediaeval Drama in Chester (Toronto, 1955), pp. 83-4.

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dramatic art seem to have become aware of the fact that there existed together with a commendatory attitude toward the plays, a certain amount of complaint. While scholars have generally stated this fact in passing, nobody seems to have studied seriously the source and nature of the sporadic yet prevalent rumblings and objections from pope, or bishop, or preacher, or government official, or layman, which were heard in Europe, England and Scotland between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Even among those few who have looked at the criticism more intently, there exists a diversity of conclusions. For example, the eminent dramatic scholar, E. K. Chambers, concludes that "such opposition as can be traced after the thirteenth century came not from the heads of Church but from its heretics."⁴ G. R. Owst, on the other hand, points out that after the thirteenth century, a tone of mingled ridicule and hostility came not only from the heretical preachers but from orthodox preachers as well.⁵

In this study an attempt will be made to search out every criticism, prohibition, and complaint which can be discovered in England, Scotland, or on the continent, whether justified or not, and whether in the form of ridicule, threats, censorship, or direct prohibition against the

⁴ The Mediaeval Stage (London, 1903), I, 102.

⁵ See Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (New York, 1961), pp. 479-80.

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liturgical, miracle, mystery, or morality plays as well as complaint against any concomitant circumstances surrounding the performance of this drama. An effort will be made to see what prompted such reactions from those charged with the intimate guidance of the faithful, from the authorities responsible for general Church government, from local or national officials acting in the name of the crown, and from the layman. This examination will endeavour to discover the seriousness of the criticism, the validity of the complaint, and the possible influence which this negative attitude might have exerted to bring about an end to the medieval religious plays.

CHAPTER II

AN EXAMINATION OF OFFICIAL COMPLAINTS

A. Complaints of the Roman Church

Any complaints which were made against medieval drama cannot be separated from the people who made them, from the society in which these men lived, and from the ideas which they imbibed from the power of the moment. Therefore, before examining, in this chapter, the available body of criticism which came from the Roman Church and that put forth by reformers, individually or in council, it might prove helpful to recall briefly some aspects of medieval religious drama as well as to consider the attitude of men in the Middle Ages towards the making and acting of plays.

Scholars today generally concede the fact that an exalted intention gave birth and subsequent growth to the medieval religious drama. The tropes or literary embellishments which were inserted into the liturgy for the serious purpose of adornment and exposition formed the nucleus of the first dramatic religious representations. Thus, "whatever the Middle Ages knew or did not know about the comedies and tragedies of antiquity, they fashioned their own serious drama, not from the ashes of the past, but from the warmth

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of their faith and a desire to give it a visible, dynamic expression."⁶ The tone of the plays, which at first was stately and impersonal, gradually became colored with the heightened emotions of a Magdalen, a Herod, or a Rachel. The obvious result was a kind of drama that must have been as stimulating emotionally as any modern opera. This might be difficult to accept unless it is recalled that "To the colour, stirring action, and musical evocation of our contemporary stage were added 'plots' and persons associated with the deepest experiences of a medieval audience and a sense of religious participation that made attendance at these liturgical plays an act of worship as well as a source of exciting entertainment."⁷ That the details of the Passion or the Resurrection or indeed of the whole story from the Creation to the Last Judgment could and did stimulate the multitude to devotion is borne out by a declaration accompanying the text of an Easter play of the fourteenth century. The devout motive of the abbess, Katherine of Sutton, in arranging for the performance of a play at this time is explained thus: "Quoniam populorum concursus temporibus illis videbatur deuocione frigessere, et torpor humanus maxime accrescens, venerabilis Domina Katerina de Suttone, tunc pastoralis

⁶ G. Frank, The Medieval French Drama (Oxford, 1954), p. 17.

⁷ Ibid., p. 73.

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cure gerens vicem, desiderans dictum torporem penitus extirpare et fidelium deuocionem ad tam celeb/r/em celebracionem magis excitare, vnanimi consororum consensu instituit ut statim post tertium responsorium Matutinarum die Pasche fieret Dominice Resur/r/exionis celebracio."⁸ In this instance, the abbess, with the approval of her Sisters in Christ, decreed that a play depicting the Resurrection of our Lord should be performed after the third responsory of Matins. Apparently she felt that, at this time, the play was the thing as far as the well-being of souls was concerned. An interesting point to notice here is that the passage does not say that the abbess wanted the play to teach or instruct those to whom some writers have alluded as the "ignorant medieval folk;" rather, the words seem to indicate that she hoped the play would do what perhaps even the Easter sermon might not be able to accomplish: extirpate completely the coldness or indifference in the people's religious attitude and enkindle within them a deep devotion to the celebration of the great Feast. The appeal here is to the heart as well as to the head.

It is likely that, initially, similar devout motives prompted clerics to write religious plays as well as to participate in the performances. W. Creizenach makes reference

⁸ K. Young, ed., The Drama of the Medieval Church (Oxford, 1933), II, 410-11.

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to the contemporary idea that this participation of priest, helping to fortify the unlearned people in their faith, was a very commendable practice; he sees in this the original purpose of Christian drama: ". . . it was to be a sort of living picture-book; the people, ignorant of Latin, were to perceive by sight what was inaccessible to the ear."⁹ And this religious drama was the only serious dramatic art of the Western World from the tenth century to the advent of modern drama in the sixteenth. It should be remembered that in the countries of Europe, in Scotland, and in England, what formed the substratum of the religious drama was the body of identical dogmas of the Christian faith. As H. C. Gardiner notes, it was "the same legends and histories, the same portions of the liturgy,"¹⁰ that were presented in dramatic form. Without doubt, the cultural influence of such a truly international drama must have been immense. Nevertheless, it does not necessarily follow that ecclesiastical authority would inevitably sanction dramatic compositions or performances without question even when written by clerics and even though churchmen might be the actors, since these plays were not a project of the church hierarchy as a whole but were

⁹ "The Early Religious Drama: Miracle Plays and Moralities," The Cambridge History of English Literature, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (Cambridge, 1950), V, 37.

¹⁰ Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage (New Haven, 1946), p. ix.

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a gradual and irregular achievement of various separate communities which probably took into consideration local desires and resources.¹¹ H. Craig believes that "since the laity had been taken more and more into partnership with the clergy, the plays had become so secularized that they were no longer in any true sense ecclesiastical."¹² Craig, however, is not saying that the plays ceased to be essentially religious. D. J. McGuinty shows the close relationship between art and religion in the medieval period, especially in relation to the society of the time:

In that society, art was normally not an autonomous activity but sprang incidentally from an intense interest in religion. The plays reflect a society with a sense of the significance of the Incarnation as the perfect atonement for all the sins of all men. This sense enabled the audience to view evil in its proper light, to view sin in relation to redemption, to reconcile the divine attributes of justice and mercy, to conceive of knowledge as a grasp of the Divine Law, which alone makes men's actions understandable, to perceive faith as a gift of God.¹³

Nevertheless, with greater lay participation in the making and acting of plays, some realistic and humourous elements did creep into the drama; therefore, it is not surprising that Church or State authorities--the accredited moralists

¹¹ See Young, op. cit., II, 411.

¹² English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1960), p. 88.

¹³ Christianity and Western Culture; The Christian Tradition in English Literature (Ottawa, 1964), p. 126.

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and disciplinarians of the time--might express a variety of judgments about these plays. Nor is it unusual that the Church and her zealous representatives should have "a desire and will to exercise a careful control of dramatic representations that touched on the truths of Christian revelation, especially when her ministers mingled with the actors."¹⁴

While local desires and resources involved in the process of writing and presenting the plays would surely have had some bearing upon the statements issued by various individuals and groups, it seems likely that the current outlook toward fictional representation would also have coloured such comments. In medieval times there seems to have existed, on the part of some people, an antipathy toward made-up stories about Christ and his saints--a fear of fiction because it did not express literal truths. Through a number of remarks which he makes in his works, especially in Troilus and Criseyde and the prologue to the Parson's Tale, Chaucer makes us aware of the fact that this attitude existed in his time. In the closing lines of Troilus and Criseyde, for instance, Chaucer, commenting upon Troilus' futile romance, says: "What nedeth feigned loves for to seke?"¹⁵ And in the

¹⁴ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁵ The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. W. W. Skeat, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1900), Vol. Boethius and Troilus, 416, line 1848.

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prologue to the Parson's Tale, through the puritan¹⁶ parson's immediate reaction to the host's seemingly innocent speech in which he has requested the parson: "Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bone!"¹⁷ Chaucer emphasizes the current dislike for fabling in the parson's indignant reply which is worth noting:

Thou getest fable noon y-told for me
 For Paul, that wryteth unto Timothee,
 Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,
 And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.
 Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
 Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest?¹⁸

The parson points out a rather strong text from St. Paul which appears in an epistle to Timothy and in which the Apostle seems to place fables opposite to truth.¹⁹ Two clear-cut texts are involved, for in no uncertain terms Paul exhorts Timothy "not to study fables and endless genealogies which beget controversies rather than godly edification,"²⁰ and in a later chapter he repeats his admonition; Timothy should "avoid foolish fables and old wives' tales" and train himself "in godliness."²¹ This is the spirit which triggered

¹⁶ A. P. Campbell, "Chaucer's 'Retraction': Who Retracted What?" in La Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa (Jan. - March, 1965), p. 50.

¹⁷ Skeat, loc. cit., Vol. Canterbury Tales: Text, 568, line 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., lines 31-36.

¹⁹ Campbell, loc. cit., p. 51.

²⁰ 1 Tim. 1:4.

²¹ 1 Tim. 4:7.

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the parson's retort and it very easily could be behind some of the complaints against the religious plays. T. R. Lounsbury contends that representatives of all classes of society in Chaucer's day including ecclesiastics, state officials and laymen did exhibit a severe attitude toward the realistic side of Chaucer's writings:

There is evidence, indeed, that Chaucer's writings were looked upon coldly by men of that class to whom all efforts of the creative imagination lack what they are pleased to call truth. So wide was his popularity, so universal was the acquaintance with his writings, that his greatest work came early to be almost a synonym for fictitious narrative of any sort. As such it would naturally fall under the ban of that somewhat dreary body of men, in whom the Anglo-Saxon race has always abounded, who look askance upon all literature which deals with matters outside of the region of figures and facts. This class, often composed of good men, invariably of prosaic men, did not escape the observation of Chaucer. He represents as belonging to it his parson, a man morally of a lofty type of character, but plainly marked in certain respects by intellectual narrowness.²²

It is easier to understand this kind of thinking in medieval men when a parallel situation to modern man's "intellectual narrowness" in regard to dramatizations depicting Christ other than He literally appears in the scriptures is pointed out. The following example illustrates rather well that the kind of dreary seekers after truth about whom Lounsbury speaks were not the treasure merely of the Middle Ages. In April, 1964, when preparations for the opening of the

²² Studies in Chaucer (New York, 1962), III, 40.

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World's Fair in New York were in their final stages, the President of the Fair, Mr. Robert Moses, caused a sudden furor when he attacked the film, Parable, which the Protestant Council of New York City had had especially written and produced for showing in the Protestant and Orthodox Center at the Fair. Mr. Moses (without having seen the film), asked that it be withdrawn, saying that he and his staff had grave doubts about the propriety, good taste and validity of the film portraying Jesus as a clown. The cry was taken up by Rev. Dr. Charles Graf, rector of St. John's-in-the-Village Episcopal Church who agreed with Mr. Moses that if the movie had been designed to shock and disgust, it would do so. Then, two members of the Protestant Pavilion's steering committee resigned in protest over what they called sacrilegious and improper portrayal. Parable, the cause of all this commotion, was a colour film lasting twenty-two wordless minutes in which ". . . the Mime is dressed in a flowing white robe. White grease paint covers his body except for black lines--suggesting a cross--on his eyelids and eyebrows. He follows a circus and performs a succession of selfless deeds for the sorely tried members of the troupe. In his last scene, after voluntarily taking the place of human puppets in a grisly marionette show, he is beaten to death by three bullies. Arms outstretched in death, the Mime suggests Christ or a Christ figure."²³

²³ "Jesus as a Clown," Newsweek, April 27, 1964, p. 96.

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The symbolism was clear for those who wished to experience it, but for those whose eyes seemed to be on every sparrow of impropriety there was only a clown-Christ who was offensive; nevertheless, the film was shown to the public.²⁴

As in our own time, so in the Middle Ages, the complaints against the current religious drama could have echoed the voices of narrow-minded individuals or groups; on the other hand the voice which was raised in protest could have been prompted by sincere individuals or groups seeking only to maintain the purity of Christian dogma enshrined in the drama.

This chapter will consider, first of all, those complaints made by ecclesiastics personally, or in council. The question which immediately arises is: Did the genuine plays of the medieval Church ever elicit an official utterance against themselves from the Roman See?

One communication which was incorporated among the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX (1227-41), is a letter written by Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) on January 8, 1207,²⁵ to Henry, Archbishop of Gnesen in Poland, as well as to the

²⁴ "Christ in Grease Paint," Time, April 24, 1964, p. 58.

²⁵ A. D'Ancona, Origini del teatro Italiano, 2d ed. (Turin, 1891), 53, gives the date as 1210: "Vediamo allora Innocenzo III condonnare severamente nel 1210 i ludi teatrali nelle chiese . . ."; but see Chambers, op. cit., II, 99, n. 2, where he refers to certain misinterpretations involving this date.

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bishops of this ecclesiastical province; the relevant part of it stands as follows:

Interdum ludi fiunt in eisdem ecclesiis theatrales, et non solum ad ludibriorum spectacula introducuntur in eis monstra larvarum, verum etiam in aliquibus anni festivitibus, quae continue natalem Christi sequuntur, diaconi, presbyteri ac subdiaconi vicissim insaniae suae ludibria exercere praesumunt, per gesticulationum suarum debacchationes obscenas in conspectu populi decus faciunt clericale vilescere, quem potius illo tempore verbi Dei deberent praedicatione mulcere. Quia igitur ex officio nobis iniuncto zelus domus Dei nos comedit, et opprobria exprobrantium ei super nos cadere dignoscuntur, Fraternitati vestrae per apostolica scripta mandamus, quatenus, ne per huiusmodi turpitudinem ecclesiae inquinetur honestas, . . . praelibatam vero ludibriorum consuetudinem vel potius corruptelam curetis a vestris ecclesiis taliter extirpare, quod vos divini cultus et sacri comprobetis ordinis zelatores.²⁶

It is necessary, first, to determine against what kind of dramatic presentation this prohibition is levelled, as well as just what is condemned. A. W. Ward states that the Pope ordered plays ^{not} to be represented outside of the church as well as inside."²⁷ Chambers says that "literary historians occasionally commit themselves to the statement that Innocent III forbade the clergy to participate in miracle plays."²⁸ His own conclusion which coincides with that

²⁶ Compilatio Decretalium Domini Gregorii Pape Noni (Nuremberg, 1482), sig. t 10 verso; quoted in Young, op. cit. II, 416-17.

²⁷ A History of English Dramatic Literature to the Death of Queen Anne, 2d ed. (London, 1899), I, 43.

²⁸ Op. cit., II, 99.

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of Gardiner²⁹ is that "the ludi teatrales which Innocent barred from the churches were primarily the Feasts of Fools, and the like."³⁰

The introductory sentence of the text contains a number of terms which, according to the way they are interpreted, would cause varied conclusions to be drawn about the meaning of the prohibition. This perhaps explains the reason for the existing diverse explanations concerning this decree. The first important expression used is ludi teatrales. Taken literally, ludi can denote public games, shows, plays or spectacles; teatrales refers to a thing of or belonging to the theatre, therefore, taken literally, ludi teatrales can mean a dramatic performance. Hence the expression could have been used to describe those plays up to the early thirteenth century which were considered to be dramatic performances, namely, the liturgical, mystery or miracle plays. The introductory sentence, however, contains two other terms--ludibriorum spectacula and monstra larvarum--which must be considered in relation to the first expression already discussed. The dictionary definition of ludibria is "a mockery, derision, wantonness, a laughing stock, butt, jest or sport." Spectacula when associated with ludibriorum as it is in this case, seems to suggest a spectacle,

²⁹ See op. cit., p. 8.

³⁰ Op. cit., II, 100.

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play or show which contains the element of a jest or sport, so that what is shown is to be considered ridiculous rather than sublime. The subsequent expression in the statement, monstra larvarum, casts additional light upon the way in which both ludi teatrales and ludibriorum spectacula are to be understood in this context. Larvae are masks, but together with monstra, the term takes on the stronger meaning of a monstrosity of masks which connotes a mockery. In this statement, Pope Innocent uses climactic structure, and as he piles one disdainful term upon the other, the meaning of ludi teatrales changes from simply a theatrical performance to a contemptible spectacle; his scornful tone reinforces this interpretation of his terms. To climax his views on the subject about which he is writing, he uses the expression insaniae suae ludibria which might, perhaps, best be translated by the colloquial "their crazy plays." Thus if the ludi teatrales to which Pope Innocent is referring are ludicrous spectacles involving that which can be considered a mockery and which he considers insane jesting, there seems to be no indication that his subject in this decree is the religious drama. His manner of referring to the ludi seems to suggest that, in themselves, they are without merit. The remainder of the sentence is devoted to the participants in these spectacles, as well as how and when the plays are performed. According to the Pontiff, deacons, priests, and sub-deacons put

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these performances on during certain feasts of the year, particularly those which follow the birth of Christ. The Pope emphasizes the fact that what he calls gesticulationem suarum debaccationes obscoenas--their obscene gestures--serve to bring clerical propriety into contempt. His words suggest that edification rather than this kind of scandal would be the result if these churchmen used their time preaching the word of God instead of involving themselves in these ludi. It is noteworthy that Pope Innocent does not ask the Archbishop and other bishops to whom his letter is directed to try to improve these performances; rather, he commands them through apostolic ordinance to exemplify their zeal for their Father's house by preserving the Church from this kind of turpitude. He orders them to take appropriate steps to extirpate the aforementioned corrupt custom from their churches; in this, he relies on their zeal for all that is sacred. Once again, in the concluding sentence of this passage, he refers, not to the obscene gestures, but to the ludibria which he finds essentially odious. This seems to support the contention that the Pontiff is not attacking the liturgical or sacred drama. First of all, it is hardly likely that the pope would consider religious drama as being essentially evil; secondly, he does not use any of the contemporary terms associated with the liturgical drama such as Processio, Officium, or Ordo, nor does he use the term miraculum which

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which made its appearance in the twelfth century, and which might at least suggest the miracle or mystery plays.³¹

It might be well, at this point, to recall the date of this letter. The year is 1207. It is approximately three centuries after the birth of liturgical drama from the significant Quem quaeritis trope³² and about half a century before the complete evolution of the liturgic play which, according to Chambers, "may be fairly held to have been complete about the middle of the thirteenth century."³³ This indicates that at the time Pope Innocent III wrote his letter, liturgical drama was well developed, while the plays referred to as miracles were still in the process of evolution. Hence, if Pope Innocent, in his prohibition, were referring to religious plays, it would probably be to the well-established liturgical drama including such plays as Ordo Processionis Asinorum, Festum Asinorum, Ordo ad Peregrinum, Ordo Rachelis, Ordo ad visitandum Sepulchrum, and Ordo Stellae. The very titles of these plays are liturgical expressions in themselves. Of these, Ordo Processionis Asinorum, and Festum Asinorum, or even Ordo Prophetarum, calling

³¹ Chambers, op. cit., II, 103-4.

³² Ibid., p. 9.

³³ Ibid., p. 69.

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as they do for an ass, are the most likely to contain a certain amount of buffoonery which, it might be felt, would detract from the basic religious spirit of the play and thus rob it of any spiritual influence. In this connection, Young observes that "it may be difficult for us to believe that the long ears and restive movements of Balaam's ass in the Ordo Prophetarum failed to arouse merriment, and yet the texts of the play and the ecclesiastical tradition associated with this animal give no encouragement to this interpretation;"³⁴ nevertheless, Young does add that such figures as Herod in the plays of Epiphany or the soldiers of the Easter plays were treated with levity in the later religious drama in the vernacular.³⁵ The question is: Was the comic element in the liturgical drama so crude as to prompt Pope Innocent III to refer to it as insaniae suae ludibria and monstra larvarum and to the gestures of its clerical actors as debacchationes obscenas? Even granting that this were so, would the Church authorities, having received so strong a Papal denunciation of this drama,³⁶ tolerate these religious plays and permit them to be transferred to Corpus Christi Day? It should be remembered that this Feast was

³⁴ Op. cit., II, 407.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ This decretal was included as part of canon law in the Decretales of Pope Gregory IX; see Chambers, op. cit., I, 279.

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not designed a universal festival until 1264 by Pope Urban IV and, due to his death in the same year, did not become operative until it was confirmed by Clement V at the Council of Vienne in 1311. Not only were the plays held on this great Church Feast, but there was such a complete merging of the plays with the Corpus Christi procession that the performance of each play was repeated at the various stations made by the Host.³⁷ This would hardly have been possible if this most unqualified condemnation from a Pope had been directed against the liturgical drama as early as 1207. It would seem that Gardiner comes close to the truth when, commenting on this decree, he states that "it cannot be concluded either that liturgical plays were banned from church buildings, or, on the other hand, that miracula held outside church buildings were looked at askance, or even, at this date, that clerics were forbidden to act in all kinds of sacred plays."³⁸ Gardiner,³⁹ Chambers,⁴⁰ and Young,⁴¹ for instance, believe that the Pontiff is directing his attack against the celebration of the Feast of Fools. This was the

³⁷ Chambers, op. cit., II, 95-6.

³⁸ Op. cit., p. 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., II, 100.

⁴¹ Op. cit., II, 416.

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name given to the somewhat startling revels held by the inferior clergy in medieval cathedrals and collegiate churches on Innocents' day, on St. Stephen's, on the Circumcision, or on other dates during the Christmas season. Chambers translates and quotes the portion of a letter issued by the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris on March 12, 1445, through its dean, Eustace de Mesnil,⁴² which provides a clear picture of the Feast of Fools as it was celebrated:

'Bishops' or 'archbishops' of Fools are chosen, who wear mitres and pastoral staffs, and have crosses borne before them, as if they were on visitation. They take the Office, and give Benedictions to the readers of the lessons at Matins, and to the congregations. In exempt churches, subject only to the Holy See, a 'pope' of Fools is naturally chosen instead of a 'bishop' or an 'archbishop.' The clergy wear the garments of the laity or of fools, and the laity put on priestly or monastic robes. Ludi theatrales and personagiorum ludi are performed.⁴³

The following is a more detailed description of the customs related to the Feast:

'Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of office. They dance in the choir dressed as women, panders or minstrels. They sing wanton songs. They eat black puddings at the horn of the altar while the celebrant is saying mass. They play at dice there. They cense with stinking smoke from the soles of

⁴² See op. cit., I, 293.

⁴³ H. Denifle, Chartularium, Univ. Paris, IV, 652; P.L. ccvii, 1169; translated by and quoted in Chambers, op. cit., I, 295.

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old shoes. They run and leap through the church, without a blush at their own shame. Finally they drive about the town and its theatres in shabby traps and carts; and rouse the laughter of their fellows and the bystanders in infamous performances, with indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste.⁴⁴

This letter was issued in France where the Feast of Fools was condemned by the Council of Paris in 1212⁴⁵ only five years after Pope Innocent III's decree; both Church and Royal authority made attempts to abolish it up until the middle of the fifteenth century, but their attempts evidently proved futile.⁴⁶ It is interesting to note how closely the descriptions of this spectacle parallel Pope Innocent's observations.

Perhaps the strongest evidence which can be given to support the contention that the 1207 decree probably does not refer to the liturgical plays is the glossa ordinaria which was attached to the decretal about 1236 and is attributed to Bernard de Bottone:⁴⁷

Non tamen hoc prohibetur representare presepe Domini, Herodem, Magos et qualiter Rachel plorat filios suos, et cetera, que tangunt festiuitates illas de quibus hic fit mentio, cum talia potius inducant homines ad compunctionem quam ad lasciuam vel voluptatem, sicut in Pasca sepulchrum Domini et alia representantur ad deuotionem excitandam.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Denifle, loc. cit., in Chambers, op. cit., I, 294.

⁴⁵ Chambers, op. cit., I, 279.

⁴⁶ Ibid., I, 292-3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., II, 100.

⁴⁸ Compilatio Decretalium, in Young, op. cit., II,

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This annotation removes from condemnation such plays as the Officium Pastorum, Officium Stellae, Ordo Rachelis and Visitatio Sepulchri, commending them as aids to religion because just as on Easter the sepulchre of our Lord and other exhibitions are shown for the purpose of exciting devotion, so also these plays induce men to compunction rather than to lasciviousness.

However, it seems that if there were a need for the gloss to be written, it is possible that contrary interpretation of the decree was current. One example of the kind of confusion in interpretation which seems to have existed is found in a passage in the Manuel des Pechiez. This work was originally written in Norman-French about the end of the thirteenth century⁴⁹ and translated in 1303 by Robert Mannyng of Brun, a Gilbertine canon of Sempringham in Lincolnshire. The following is the passage which has prompted a number of distinct interpretations by some writers:

A clerk of order pat hap þe name,
 Zyf he iuste, he ys to blame,
 Hyt were wurpy þat had þe gre,
 Brokyn þe arme, legge, or thee;
 Hyt ys forsobe, zyf he so werche,
 Azens þe state of holy cherche.
 Hyt is forbode hym, yn þe decre,
 Myracles for to make or se;
 For, myracles zyf þou bygynne,
 Hyt ys a gaderyng, a syght of synne,

⁴⁹ See A. W. Pollard, ed., English Miracle Plays Moralities and Interludes (Oxford, 1954), pp. xxiv-xxv.

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He may yn þe cherche þurgh þys resun
 Pley þe resurreccyun,--
 þat ys to seyë, how God ros,
 God and man yn myzt and los,--
 To make men be yn beleuë gode
 þat he ros with flesshe and blode;
 And he may pleye withoutyn plyght
 Howe God was bore yn zolë nyght,
 To make men to beleue stedfastly
 þat he lyght yn þe vergyne Mary.
 zif þou do hyt yn weyys or greuys,
 A syght of synne truly hyt semys.⁵⁰ (ll. 4631-4652)

Mannyng begins this passage by singling out one person, namely "a clerk of order" to whom it seems that he will direct his statements. His first reference to plays is found in lines 4637-8, in which he states that it is forbidden "hym yn þe decree/Myracles for to make or se." Here there is a definite reference to a decree, but there is no elaboration, explanation, or clarification of just which decree is being discussed. It is difficult, therefore, to understand why some scholars seem to be quite certain that the writer is referring to the decree of Innocent III. Young, for example, says that the decree mentioned "seems pretty clearly to be the letter of Innocent III as embodied in the Georgian Decretals with its accompanying gloss."⁵¹ If this is the case, then it is clear that the Pope's words are being stretched

⁵⁰ F. J. Furnivall, ed., Robert of Brunne's "Handlyng Synne", A.D. 1303, Part I, E.E.T.S., Original Series (London, 1901), Vol. 119, 154-5.

⁵¹ Op. cit., II, 418.

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beyond what they will reasonably bear for, in his letter of 1207, the Pontiff does not use the word miracula or any other expression which might conceivably refer to this kind of drama. Certainly there is a discrepancy here between what the Pope actually does say and what Mannyng thought he said. This can be illustrated from the remainder of the passage. After his initial declaration that the clerk has been forbidden by the decree to make or see miracles, Mannyng becomes muddled even as to whom he is addressing this message. His pronoun changes from the third person to the second; he now says that if "þou" take up miracles, they are sinful gatherings and a sinful sight. Lumping together the spectators who form the "gaderyng" to watch the performance, and the plays themselves which become the "syght" that they watch, he labels them both "synne." Following this dogmatic declaration is a return to the pronoun "he" and a statement that in the church "he" may reasonably play the resurrection and also, without jeopardy, how God was born on Christmas night. According to this, Mannyng does not consider the Resurrection and Nativity plays as falling into his category of "myracles;" but if they are not miracle plays, then what are they? The only other group they could be associated with would be the devout liturgical plays. The consequent implication is that miracle plays are sinful while liturgical plays make men "beleue stedfastly." Changing his personal

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pronoun for the third time, he says: "Zif þou do hyt yn weyys or greuys," that is, if you take "hyt" (these same plays) into the streets or cemeteries, a transformation takes place; these plays are no longer an inspiration, rather, they become a "syght of synne." His thinking is befuddled, to say the least. When the plays are acted or seen in the church they are not sinful miracles; they are edifying performances. When these same plays are taken out of the church they are no longer edifying performances; they seem somehow to have become the "myracles" prohibited by "þe decree." Certainly Mannyng is less than clear when he endeavours to determine the kinds of performances that, in his estimation, are licit and those that are illicit. The most that this poem does is to illustrate that some misunderstanding of the term "miracle" when used in reference to drama might have existed. This passage, however, has proved to be a controversial one. Gardiner points out that it is "commonly quoted as carrying on the repressive policy of the Church toward miracula."⁵² While it might be true that a number of scholars have used this poem to illustrate such a point, for the most part they have drawn diverse conclusions concerning Handlyng Synne. For instance, Pollard feels that the poem "well" sums up contemporary "Church feeling" on the

⁵² Op. cit., p. 11.

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subject of participation of the clergy in plays.⁵³ This author also concludes that the lines of the poem represent a "compromise"⁵⁴ although he does not state exactly what kind of a compromise he has discovered in this context. Craig, on the other hand, believes that Mannyng's position is not quite clear "although it seems certain that he merely wishes to warn the clergy against public performances."⁵⁵ Owst thinks that Mannyng is simply voicing his "disdain"⁵⁶ of miracle plays. Chambers says that the poem is objecting "to miracles even out of doors;"⁵⁷ the word "even" in Chambers' statement seems to imply that miracles in the church are also being censured. It is evident that one definite conclusion is difficult to reach. Perhaps the most that can be said is that one cannot get very far if he comes to this source to find out what fourteenth century Englishmen thought miracle plays were or what they understood to be the Church's position regarding this drama. Still less can one draw a realistic conclusion from this passage about any kind of Church policy regarding the religious plays.

⁵³ See op. cit., p. xxiv.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. xxv.

⁵⁵ Op. cit., p. 91.

⁵⁶ Op. cit., p. 485

⁵⁷ Op. cit., II, 101.

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One of the passages in Handlyng Synne facilitates a transition to Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (1235 - 53), "one of the most learned men of the Middle Ages,"⁵⁸ a noted theologian and, at one time, Chancellor of the University of Oxford,⁵⁹ whose disciplinary pronouncements issued in 1236 and 1244 deserve consideration. This ecclesiastic seems to have been a rather controversial figure. His character, for instance, is presented by scholars in two contrasting ways: one group depicts him as so severe a reformer that the "rigour with which he visited the monasteries and nunneries under his rule led the St. Alban's chronicler, Matthew Paris, to call him a 'persecutor of monks;' and it is probable that at times he was unnecessarily severe;"⁶⁰ another class agrees with the following excerpt from Mannyng's poem which emphasizes a light, human side of the Bishop:

Y shall zow telle, as y haue herd,
 Of þe bysshope Seynt Roberd;
 Hys toname ys 'Grorest
 Of Lynkolne,' so seyþ þe gest.
 he loued moche to here þe harpe,
 For mannys wytte hyt makyþ sharpe;
 Next hys chaumbre, besyde hys stody,
 Hys harpers chaumbre was fast þerby.
 Many tymes, be nyztys and dayys,
 He had solace of notes and layys.

⁵⁸ F. F. Urquhart, "Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln," Catholic Encyclopedia, VII, 37.

⁵⁹ See Craig, op. cit., p. 89.

⁶⁰ Urquhart, loc. cit.

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One asked hym onys, resun why
 he hadde delyte yn mynstralsy:
 he answerede hym on pys manere,
 why he helde þe harper so dere,
 'þe vertu of þe harpe, þurgh skylle & ryzt,
 wyl destroye þe fendës myzt,
 And to þe croys by godë skylle
 Ys þe harpë lykened weyle.⁶¹ (ll. 4739-4756)

This second group contends that the passage quoted above presents the true distinguishing qualities of Bishop Grosseteste who was "a patron of the minstrels' art and had composed an allegorical religious romance, the Chateau d'amour."⁶² It is possible, therefore, that the strong opinions held by critics concerning the character of this Bishop might influence their decisions in regard to his various prohibitions. Some might be tempted to view them as the outcome of an overly severe and perhaps somewhat soured outlook upon life, while others would support their position by referring to the fact that a man who is fond of minstrels and who writes religious romances would naturally be more likely to condone rather than condemn the actions of others unless circumstances would dictate otherwise. Hence, even after carefully reading his letters, some might be prompted to applaud or denounce them simply on the basis of a biased or unbiased attitude toward the man himself. Such partiality or impartiality could well be responsible for the existing conflicting

⁶¹ Furnival, op. cit., p. 158.

⁶² Gardiner, op. cit., p. 11.

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attitudes toward Grosseteste's numerous works; on the other hand, it is possible that the kind of structure and diction used in the documents could frustrate attempts to obtain a clear understanding of the text.

The following examination will consider three of the Bishop's epistles written to members of the clergy. Although only the third one seems to be directly relevant to the subject of religious drama, the first two are valuable from the point of view of the kinds of abuses which the Bishop felt compelled to condemn at this time as well as the terminology which he used in order to single them out.

The first letter, dated 1236, was written to the Archdeacons of his diocese. His introduction reflects a Bishop who is very watchful of the flock committed to his care and who, as he himself says, is desirous to correct those in error "in the flock committed to us, although we are unworthy."⁶³ The entire epistle is an injunction against scandalous goings-on in the diocese; in one passage, for instance, he orders certain drinking parties which, he says, are vulgarly called scotales, to be prohibited by the Archdeacons in their synods and chapters and churches of their archdeaconate.⁶⁴ In another passage he censures other

⁶³ ". . . et his qui in grege nobis licet indignis, Domino disponente, commisso . . ." in Roberti Grosseteste Episcopi Quondam Lincolnensis Epistolae, ed. H. R. Luard (London, 1861), p. 72.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

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defamations: ". . . arietum supra ligna et rotas elevationes, caeterosque ludos consimiles, in quibus decertatur pro bravio; cum hujusmodi ludorum tam actores quam spectatores, . . . immolent daemonibus, . . . et cum etiam hujusmodi ludi frequenter occasiones irae, odii, pugnae, et homicidii."⁶⁵

Here, he first voices his displeasure at ram-raising and other contests of athletic prowess, but some of the words used might prompt one to think that he is also speaking about plays and actors. In this context, for example, he mentions ludos and actores, but these terms must be seen in relation to the rest of the passage. To begin with, the Bishop places the phrase caeterosque ludos consimiles side by side with the expression "ram-raising." Thus, from their position in this sentence, both caeterosque and consimiles refer to this preceding term. Consequently, "plays" would not be the connotation necessary to complete the phrase "and other such" Therefore, the meaning of ludos in this case must be such that could be categorized with an athletic feat such as ram-raising. The concluding portion of the sentence clarifies ludos as "games" since the Bishop clearly states that these are struggles for reward. Such activity seems definitely to rule out religious drama. As a result,

⁶⁵ Luard, loc. cit.

the phrase actores quam spectatores refers to the participants in these games and to the observers of this kind of activity, rather than to actors in and spectators of theatrical performances. The Bishop contends that these ludos give worship to the demons for they frequently are the occasion for fighting, anger and homicide. If such were the side effects of these ludi, then the prohibition with which Bishop Grosseteste ends his letter is not only expedient but commendable. It is important to note that in this epistle his accusations are not directed against either the laity or the clergy but against the wrong-doers to whom he refers as populo ignoranti.

A second letter written to the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln in the same year, 1236, strongly condemns the practice of profaning the sacred solemnity of the Circumcision of our Lord with a licentious festum stultorum --Feast of Fools.⁶⁶ Here there is no obscurity or ambiguity in regard to what is being censured. Expressions such as voluptatum sordibus prophanare or vanitate plenum or voluptatibus spurcum reveal the Bishop's scorn and disdain for this frivolity which is carried on in the "house of prayer."⁶⁷ As in the previous epistle, he does not single out any

⁶⁶ Luard, loc. cit., p. 118.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

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particular individual or group as being the guilty party either in introducing or in prolonging this scandalous practice. In neither of the two epistles of 1236 has Bishop Grosseteste referred to the religious drama either directly or indirectly.

It is his epistle of 1244 which has elicited statements such as this: "In 1244 Robert Grosseteste, of Lincoln, had ordered his archdeacons to end the production of miracle plays;"⁶⁸ or, "In 1244 when a religious drama had come into being, Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln wanted it suppressed."⁶⁹ His letter, as is evident from the above pronouncements, is directed to the archdeacons of the Lincoln diocese. It begins:

Ex relatu fide digno audivimus, quod plurimi sacerdotes archidiaconatus vestri, Deum non timentes nec homines reverentes, horas cononicas aut non dicunt, aut corrupte dicunt, et id quod dicunt, sine omni devotione aut devotionis signo, imo magis cum evidenti ostensione animi indevoti dicunt; nec horam observant in decendo, quae commodior sit parochianis ad audiendum divina, sed quae eorum plus consonat libidinosae desidiaae. Habent insuper suas focarias, quod etsi nos et nostros lateat cum inquisitionem super hujusmodi fieri facimus, his, per quos fiunt inquisitiones, perjuriam non timentibus, non debet tamen vos sic latere, qui praesentialiter super eos tam per vos quam per decanos et bedellos vestros continue vigilare tenemini.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ D. P. Blatherwick, "Religion and Drama," LQR, CLXIV (1939), 517.

⁶⁹ A. P. Rossiter, English Drama: From Early Times to the Elizabethans (London, 1950), p. 39.

⁷⁰ Luard, loc. cit., pp. 317-18.

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The bishop wastes absolutely no time in preliminaries but delves immediately into his subject. From reliable sources he has heard that several priests of their deaconate, fearing neither God nor man, either do not recite the canonical hours or do so corruptly, unwillingly, and without any sign of devotion. It has also been brought to his attention that they do not observe the hours which are more convenient for their parishioners to hear divine services but rather observe those hours which best suit their own libidinous desires. But what is worse, they have concubines. Since this necessitates an inquiry, the Bishop hopes that those who must make the investigation will not perjure themselves through fear. He states that such things must not be permitted to remain concealed; it is up to the archdeacons to maintain a diligent watch through their deacons and beadles. Up to this point in his letter, the Bishop has been concerned, not with the laity of his diocese, but with the spiritual and moral standards of the clergy; this was not only his prerogative but also his obligation. Perhaps the only comment that can be made about the accusations contained in this part of his epistle is that "Such prohibitions only witness to the prevalence of the evils they denounce,"⁷¹--in

⁷¹ C. Van der Spek, The Church and the Churchman in English Dramatic Literature Before 1642 (Amsterdam, 1930), pp. 18-19.

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this case, a weakening of prayer life, neglect of spiritual service to parishioners, and possible violation of a vow of chastity.

The subsequent portion of the letter is of more direct concern in this study: "Faciunt etiam, ut audivimus, clerici ludos quos vocant miracula; et alios ludos quos vocant Inductionem Maii, sive Autumni; et laici scotales; quod nullo modo vos latere posset, si vestra prudentia super his diligenter inquireret."⁷² Here, Bishop Grosseteste states that he has also heard that priests perform ludos which they call miracula, and other ludos which they call the bringing in of May or of Autumn. They also participate in lay scotales. The Bishop believes that a careful inquiry by the archdeacons will show that these abuses actually exist.

After a discussion of a number of other scandalous practices such as that of excluding friars of both Orders from preaching and hearing confessions but admitting hired preachers into their pulpits who care only for extracting money by their preaching, the Bishop ends the epistle with the following order: ". . . miracula etiam et ludos supra nominatos et scotales, quod est in vestra potestate facili, omnino exterminetis."⁷³

⁷² Luard, loc. cit.

⁷³ Ibid.

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For the first time in the three letters which have been under consideration, Bishop Grosseteste speaks about a particular group in his diocese, namely, priests. For the first time, too, he uses the word miracula, and this in relation to his injunction against the priests. He had, in the first epistle of 1236, used the term ludos to refer to athletic games. Here again, he speaks about ludos but adds a somewhat confusing clause: "which they call miracula;" he then augments the ambiguity by associating these miracula with "other ludos which they call the bringing in of May or of Autumn." Chambers has referred to these latter ludos as "May-games" and "harvest-Mays"⁷⁴ which, he states, "were accepted, and even to some extent directed, by the Church. They became part of the parochial organization, and were conducted through the parochial machinery,"⁷⁵ even though "the comparative study of religions proves . . . that the traditional beliefs and customs of the mediaeval or modern peasant are in nine cases out of ten the detritus of heathen mythology and heathen worship."⁷⁶ To the medieval peasant these festivals were simply practices "sanctioned by tradition and the rare amusement of a strenuous life: it was not,

⁷⁴ Op. cit., II, 100.

⁷⁵ Ibid., I, 93.

⁷⁶ Ibid., I, 94.

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save perhaps in some unplumbed recesses of his being, anything more definitely sacred."⁷⁷ But, without doubt, they were popular and were permitted in various dioceses throughout the land even though they were, at times, disgraced by "the drunkenness, the quarrels, the wantonings,"⁷⁸ of some of the folk. Perhaps this was the reason for Bishop Grosse-teste's desire to withdraw his priests from participation in these village festivals. Nevertheless, this must be regarded as the individual pronouncement of a man who did possess a strong reforming temper as is evident in his attitude toward this custom which most of his fellow Bishops declined to touch. It must, however, be stressed that he is not prohibiting the layman from such activity; he is interested primarily in throwing "special safeguards around the lives of a class which had dedicated itself to a manner of life distinctly at variance with the type of existence favored by the world."⁷⁹ It hardly seems fair to condemn a Bishop for this. But the question arises: Why is he so indefinite about these ludos? There seems to be a great deal of dis-

⁷⁷ Chambers, op. cit., I, 94.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 93.

⁷⁹ M. A. Coyle, "The Opinion of the Church on Drama" (unpublished Master's dissertation, Yale University, 1928), p. 74.

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dain in his clause "which they call" Surely he knew what these festivals were called, and what they implied; if he did, why, then, does he write as if he didn't? And if he did not know much about them, then he is wrong in accusing his priests of taking part in something he knows nothing about.

The crux of the matter revolves about the words ludos and miracula of the preceding clause. Bishop Grosse-teste seems to equate these with the "other" May-games and harvest-Mays and, what is still baser, with the lay scotales --the drinking bouts. Since in his former epistles the Bishop does not mention miracula at any time in his condemnation of the ludos, it seems that, in this instance, he is using both of these words together to refer to miracle plays. Chambers states that the word miraculum made its appearance in the twelfth century and came, especially in England, to stand for "religious play" in general.⁸⁰ Hence it seems unlikely that the Bishop would be unfamiliar with this term by the middle of the thirteenth century, at which time he is writing. In this censure of miracula there is a suggestion of a desire to dissociate himself entirely from even any knowledge of them by using the expression "which they call" --in much the same way as he does with regard to the village

⁸⁰ See op. cit., II, 104.

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festivals. In speaking about the drinking banquets, he does not use this clause; his direct approach when mentioning them gives the impression that he knows what he is talking about. It seems hardly possible that a man of his learning and in his position would be ignorant of the drama that had had its birth in the Church and which, at the time this letter was written, was evolving so steadily and gaining such popularity that almost immediately after the establishment of the Corpus Christi festival in 1311, it reached its full development in the great processional cycles.⁸¹ If, possibly, he is not concerned with miracle plays as such, but only with the abolition of abuses which he might feel are associated with the miracula, it seems probable that he would have mentioned these abuses in the direct manner which he used in his epistles of 1236. However, he mentions them neither directly nor indirectly; he does not speak about abuses at all. It is clear that there is little internal evidence upon which to base any conclusive judgment as to the exact meaning and scope of his injunction, nevertheless, it does seem that because of his association of the miracula with the village festivals and drinking banquets he has confounded the miracle plays with these less spiritual amusements and, in a sense, has classified them as "morally

⁸¹ Chambers, op. cit., II, 108.

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objectionable for priests."

In the light of this discussion, statements which dogmatically rule that, in this letter, Bishop Grosseteste orders the archdeacons to end the production of miracle plays in the diocese, or to suppress completely the religious drama, appear to be rather far-fetched--the result of reading more into the lines than what is actually there. That the Bishop did want to exclude the clergy from participation in the plays in order that they might perform their personal and parochial spiritual obligations in a way befitting their sacerdotal office seems possible, probable, and the only conclusion that the blunt statement contained in this letter tends to support. It is true that, removed from its context, the sentence could be considered as an attack by a prominent ecclesiastic upon the religious drama--especially by those who consider Bishop Grosseteste as a harsh reformer in his diocese. But the statement does not stand alone in its original source; hence this kind of uprooting serves only to distort an originally obscure pronouncement.

Regardless of how vague this prohibition may be, the fact remains that it was made, and that it came from an ecclesiastic who wielded no little authority in the English Church of his day. How significant was it? Did it have the effect of dealing a death blow to, or even a crip-

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pling stroke upon religious drama--at least in Lincoln? Available evidence indicates that "during Grosseteste's time and long afterwards, religious plays were being performed regularly in the Cathedral at Lincoln."⁸² V. Shull declares that the cathedral records in Lincoln "enable us to push back the horizons of Lincoln drama a whole century before 1406,"⁸³ and Gardiner remarks that a play on the Coronation of our Lady was steadily acted by the Cathedral clergy at that time.⁸⁴ On the basis of this evidence the inference that seems plausible is that Bishop Grosseteste's prohibition was negligible in its effects upon the production of religious plays as well as upon participation in them of the diocesan clergy.

In 1348, just over a hundred years after Bishop Grosseteste's injunction, a prohibition against plays was issued in Hereford, presumably by its Bishop, John de Trilleck, and entered in the Cathedral Register. It reads:

Whereas according to the word of the prophet, holiness becometh the house of the Lord, it is not convenient that anything should be done (exerceri) therein which is alien to true religion (a cultu). Since then in the plays that take place at times in churches there are ribaldry and obscenity which are ever forbidden by the Apostle, especially in

⁸² Craig, op. cit., p. 89.

⁸³ "Clerical Drama in Lincoln Cathedral, 1318-1561," PMLA, LII (Dec., 1937), 946.

⁸⁴ See op. cit., p. 16.

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the temple of the Lord which, as the Saviour says, should be called the house of prayer, and other things tending to jesting by which the minds of the faithful, who ought to be intent on solemnities and devout prayers, are drawn towards inanities and deprived of devotion, to the wronging of God's Name and perilous example to those present (assistencium et spectancium); WE, being desirous, as we are bound, to root out from our diocese such abuses, lest the honour of the Church should be stained by such turpitude, straitly bid you by virtue of holy obedience to study to prevent such exhibitions or plays in L. church under threat of anathema, and to excommunicate transgressors or rebels, &c.⁸⁵

On the basis of context, it is possible to divide this directive into two sections in order to facilitate analysis.

The first part contains a statement of the abuses which are considered to stem from the plays; the second half outlines the steps which should be taken to eliminate such scandal.

To begin with, no clarification by name or any other means is given concerning the kinds of plays against which three chief grievances are voiced, except that if the phrase "in the plays" is taken literally, each of "ribaldry," "obscenity," "other things tending to jesting," would seem to arise either from the acting and/or the content of dramatic performances rather than from any circumstances surrounding their production. According to this prohibition, the effect of the plays upon "the faithful" is fourfold: men are drawn

⁸⁵ Extracts from the Cathedral Registers, A.D. 1275-1535, trans. E. N. Dew (Hereford, 1932), p. 66.

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toward inanities, deprived of devotion, given "perilous" example, and witness the "wronging" of God's name. In order to preserve the "honour" of the Church, the Bishop desires that these "exhibitions or plays" be rooted out from "our diocese."

A first reading of this prohibition conveys the impression that the ecclesiastic is demanding decisive action in immediate abolition of religious plays "under threat of anathema," and excommunication of the "transgressors or rebels." On the surface, this seems to be quite a straightforward injunction against religious drama. Closer examination, however, reveals that a certain degree of indefiniteness manifests itself. For, while in the first part of his statement Bishop de Trilleck has spoken simply of "plays," in the second half he incorporates the expression "exhibitions or plays." The use of the conjunction "or" here makes a great deal of difference in the meaning since, instead of an explicit distinction which the word "and" would have established, the conjunction "or" denotes an interchangeability between these "exhibitions" and "plays." Certainly, there seems to be no way of being positive about whether or not the use of the word is due to a looseness in grammatical structure, but if, as seems likely, it is not, then the prohibition becomes somewhat more comprehensible. Since an "exhibition" can be defined as "a showing or presenting to

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view," the emphasis in an exhibition of any kind is, therefore, upon public display. Consequently, the aspect of dramatization is a non-essential element which, even if present, must bow before spectacle. Exhibition, then, when associated with plays, qualifies the original connotation of dramatic representation which seems to be explicit in "plays" as the word is first used by the writer at the beginning of the injunction. The dramatic note becomes less important as action is overshadowed by display; therefore, dallying, trifling, toying, thoughtlessness, or even wantonness in movement or behaviour, as well as "tending to jesting" are more readily associated with such show than with religious plays; it is, therefore, easier to understand how these kinds of performances could become ribald, obscene, scandalous even, and "alien to true religion." This is not to deny the fact that the medieval populace was entertained by religious plays or to suggest that only weeping or edification were the only effects expected or permitted. The truth remains, as K. Pearson shows, that when such an element as comedy, for example, manifested itself in "the greater passion plays, as well as in the shorter religious plays, and invaded even the scenic representation of the most sacred portion of the Passion, there still remained a simplicity and earnestness about the action and words of the central figure which could not fail to impress both sturdy burgher and rougher

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peasant."⁸⁶ It is precisely this kind of "simplicity and earnestness" that seems to be missing from the performances which Bishop de Trilleck so vehemently opposes; instead of religious plays such as Pearson describes, there has been a deviation to a show that is considered to be spiritually "perilous" for "those present."

In addition to the kind of indefiniteness just discussed, there also exists a question regarding the place or places wherein these scandals occur. Is this prohibition intended for the whole diocese or only for one church? The Bishop's comment in the first half of the document in which he speaks about these abuses as prevailing "in churches," discloses no specific geographical location of these same churches; it would, therefore, be assumed that he is speaking generally either about those houses "of the Lord" scattered throughout the land, or about those within the boundaries of his own ecclesiastical province. His statement, "WE . . . straitly bid you . . . to prevent such exhibitions or plays in L. church," however, refers the problem not only to one geographic area but to one specific church. Whether Dew's assumption that "L. church" is "probably Leominster"⁸⁷

⁸⁶ The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution (London, 1897), II, 272.

⁸⁷ See loc. cit., n. 2.

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is correct, cannot be infallibly verified on the basis of context and, indeed, it need not be. The important point is that the issuer of the prohibition has moved, in his discussion, from general disapproval in regard to rather lax play-like exhibitions taking place in churches to a condemnation of these in one particular church. The natural response to this evidence is the question: Why? It would seem more logical for him to have issued an injunction against all such performances enacted in any church of the diocese. While, again, no definite answer is possible, it is probable that "L. church" might have been the centre of more frequent ribald spectacle than others, hence the Bishop might have hoped that an example of complete extinction of such productions, together with the immediate punishment of those responsible for them, might prove to be a restraining influence upon those persons in various parts of the diocese who were involved in similar activity.

The above examination provides no definite conclusions but does suggest, on the one hand, that religious plays, as such, are not the source of the abuses cited in the document, and, on the other hand, that, at this time, churches in England were being used for the production of spectacles against which the Bishop of the Hereford diocese was violently reacting. This order could have had a mitigating influence on these latter exhibitions but since it does not seem

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to be concerned with religious dramatic representation, it would have had no effect upon these plays.

An interesting decree was issued in France in 1460 by the Provincial Council of Sens. Since this injunction and two others to be examined originated with similar ecclesiastical bodies, an understanding of their nature and jurisdiction seems necessary.

By definition, "Councils are legally convened assemblies of ecclesiastical dignitaries and theological experts for the purpose of discussing and regulating matters of Church doctrine and discipline."⁸⁸ More particularly, "Provincial Councils bring together the suffragan bishops of the metropolitan of an ecclesiastical province and other dignitaries entitled to participate."⁸⁹ In regard to its jurisdiction, the enactments of such Councils "do not represent an ex cathedra opinion of the Church itself,"⁹⁰ and in relation to drama, "To speak . . . of an ex cathedra statement of matters relating to the theatre is almost ludicrous. Should abuses in the theatre and surrounding dramatic art itself become so dangerous and prominent as to be almost

⁸⁸ J. Wilhelm, "Councils," Cath. Encyc., IV.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Coyle, op. cit., p. 82.

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universal, then an ex cathedra statement is conceivable, but it would be not . . . on the theatre or any form of art but the occasions of sin which each furnished."⁹¹ Such Councils, therefore, in matters purely disciplinary would not represent the Church "except in that general, all-embracing and ultimate view which would claim that the Church stands for order and decorum in the Churches."⁹² Hence it is clear that Provincial Councils are generally limited in scope and influence.

The decree issued by the Council of Sens is different from others which have been examined in that it not only contains an order against church performances but also makes a distinction between forbidden revels and approved dramatic representations. The relevant section of the decree begins: "Item cum per choreas, et ludos theatrales, ludificationes, et insolentias, soleant templa Domini profanari, et sacra in vilipendium deduci, in virisque ecclesiasticis talibus se immiscentibus scandala et opprobria generari, ludos, et choreas, et tales insolentias, in sacris ecclesiis et locis de caetero fieri prohibemus."⁹³ This passage lists activities such as dancing, theatrical performances, games, and other

⁹¹ Coyle, op. cit., pp. 82-3.

⁹² "Decree of the Provincial Council of Sens," in Sacrosancta Concilia, ed. P. Labbe, xiii (Paris, 1672), col. 1728, quoted in Young, op. cit., II, 418-9.

⁹³ Ibid.

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novelties, as acts of profanation in the churches and sees clerical participation in them as a source of scandal; these, therefore, are forbidden in churches and sacred places.

In a second passage, the Council explains the kinds of performances which, in its opinion, are commendable:

"Quod si ad memoriam festivitatum, et venerationem Dei ac sanctorum, aliquid juxta consuetudines ecclesiae, in Nativitate Domini, vel Resurrectione, videantur faciendum, hoc fiat cum honestate et pace, absque prolongatione, impedimento, vel diminutione servitii, larvatione, et sordidatione faciei, ex speciali permissione Ordinarij, et beneplacito ministro-
rum ipsius ecclesiae."⁹⁴

This reveals the Council's belief that performances which are becoming and quiet venerate God and the saints, especially upon feasts such as the Nativity and the Resurrection. Here, in a sense, is a relatively direct sanction of such plays. In contrast to these, the Council voices its abhorrence of spectacles which affect church services by prolonging, impeding, or shortening them. In addition, it emphatically forbids the use of masks or make-up in the plays, except with approbation by the church authorities concerned. This dislike of masking seems to be quite general among churchmen of the time, judging from the

⁹⁴ Labbe, loc. cit., quoted in Young, loc. cit.

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numerous references to masks in various prohibitions.⁹⁵ In this instance, the Council associates masking with the Feast of the Innocents and the Feast of Fools, stating that these have been continually prohibited "in aliis nostris provincialibus statutis,"⁹⁶ which prohibition "iterum renovamus."⁹⁷ Apparently decrees of these Councils were not immediately or completely implemented by local Church authorities.

This injunction reveals that, once again, even during the latter half of the fifteenth century, bishops were still finding it necessary, as did Pope Innocent III in 1207, to speak out against ribald and frivolous spectacles which were being presented in churches under the guise of religious plays. In this document, however, there is a definite acknowledgement by the bishops that, in their estimation, these are not religious plays at all; hence, without reservation, they condemn such scandalous abuses of a good thing. On the other hand, this decree incorporates a definite expression of respect toward suitable representation of the Nativity or Resurrection, together with an implicit request that these performances replace those displays which the

⁹⁵ The prohibitions, when speaking about religious plays, refer to masking in the sense of general disguise; for a study on face masks as sometimes used in the plays see A. Nicoll's Masks Mimes and Miracles (New York, 1963), p. 164.

⁹⁶ Labbe, loc. cit., quoted in Young, loc. cit.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

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Council abhors, censures, and hopes to extirminate completely

Through the following decree, issued in 1512, the Council of Seville drew the attention of the Spanish clergy and laity to similar problems concerning religious plays:

Sumus informati, quod in quibusdam ecclesiis nostri Archiepiscopatus, et Provinciae permittitur fieri nonnullas repraesentationes Passionis Domini nostri Jesu Christi, et alios actus, et memoriam Resurrectionis, Nativitatis Salvatoris nostri, vel orta sunt, et oriuntur plura absurda, et saepe saepius scandala in cordibus illorum, qui non sunt bene confirmati in nostra sancta Fide Catholica, videntes confusiones, et excessus, qui in hoc committuntur; propterea, sacro Concilio approbante, statuimus, et mandamus omnibus Parochis nostri Archiepiscopatus, et Provinciae, omnibusque aliis Presbyteris, et Regularibus personis, ut non faciant, nec dent locum, ut in suis ecclesiis, et Monasteriis fiant dictae repraesentationes, nec aliquae illarum absque nostra speciali facultate, et mandato, sub poena unius floreni applicandi modo supradicto, Presbyteris contrafacientibus, et laicis, ut sint excommunicati.⁹⁸

The Council, then, states that it has learned that some of the churches in the Archdiocese and Province permit representations of Our Lord's Passion, Resurrection, Nativity, and other events. Since many foolish things are found in these plays, they have become a source of scandal to those hearts not yet well-grounded in the Catholic Faith, and which have been exposed to the confusion and excesses involved. The

⁹⁸ "Decree of the Council of Seville," in Collectio Maxima Conciliorum Omnium Hispaniae et Novi Orbis, ed. J. Saenz de Aguirre (Rome, 1775), V, 370, quoted in Young, op. cit., II, 420.

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Council's decision is that members of the clergy may not participate in such plays or allow others to do so, either in their churches or monasteries. Disregard of this regulation will make offenders liable to a fine, and further disobedience will result in excommunication.

Although no specific details are given in regard to the foolish things found in the plays, the implication of this regulation seems to be that the plays depicting the Nativity or Resurrection are not evil in themselves but that they are often accompanied by disorder. This idea is supported by the fact that the existing confusiones and excessus surrounding the performances scandalize those not yet well confirmed in the Faith. If the Council had believed that the plays were essentially evil, it would certainly have stated that they were a scandal to everyone. Since, however, precautions must be taken where the spiritual welfare of even one soul is concerned, the Council forbids the ministers of these souls, priests and monks, to participate in the plays or to provide a site for such productions.

A later decree was issued in Spain by the Council of Compostella in 1565. This document exemplifies the continuing struggle of the bishops against disorders resulting from the practice of permitting various kinds of performances, including religious plays, fullscope in the churches.

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Relevant excerpts from this prohibition read as follows:

Missarum proinde solennia, aliaque Divina Officia graviter, ac devote peragantur; nulli actus, sive repraesentationes, nec tripudia, aut choreae in ecclesia fieri permittantur, dum Sacra peraguntur, quae perturbari, aut interpellari nefas est, sed aut ante, aut post illud tempus, secundum quod Episcopo loci, aut ejus Vicario visum fuerit; nulli etiam actus, sive sacrae historiae, sive profanae in his, aut aliis solennitatibus admittantur, nisi mense uno antequam agantur, ab Episcopo, vel ejus Vicario lecti fuerint, gratisque approbati

Cum hebdomadae sanctae tempore Dominicae Passionis memoriam Ecclesia recolat, et Unigeniti mortem lugeat, nulli actus, aut repraesentationes illis diebus permittantur, nisi talia sint, quae aguntur, ut devotionem potius, quam tumultum excitare possint.⁹⁹

These passages show that this Council is primarily interested in maintaining decorum, dignity and devotion in church services, especially in the Mass and Divine Offices. It forbids, therefore, actus and repraesentationes during such services but permits these to take place before or after them if permission from the bishop or his vicar has been obtained. Its declaration that no plays or narratives, sacred or profane, may be permitted unless approval has been obtained from the local Ordinary one month before they are enacted, suggests a more cautious approach than was exemplified by either of the two preceding Councils. The emphasis

⁹⁹ Aguirre, loc. cit., 450, 560, quoted in Young, loc. cit., 420-21.

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in this decree is not so much upon outright prohibition of plays as upon a more direct control of them by ecclesiastical authority. It seems that the bishops are endeavouring to root out any existing abuses which might serve to mar the original purity and beauty of the plays. This is borne out by the permission granted by the Council for the actus or repraesentationes to be performed even during Holy Week if they promote devotion rather than disorder.

In the same year, 1565, a diocesan Council was held in Milan, headed by St. Charles Borromeo, then Archbishop. This prelate was instrumental in having a most severe section on sacred performances and representations included among the Council's Acts. Part of it runs as follows:

Quoniam pie introducta consuetudo repraesentandi populo venerandam Christi domini Passionem et gloriosa Martyrum certamina aliorumque Sanctorum res gestas, hominum perversitate eo deducta est, ut multis offensioni, multis etiam risui et despectui sit, ideo statuimus ut deinceps Salvatoris Passio, nec in sacro nec in profano loco agatur, sed docte et graviter eatenus a concionatoribus exonatur, ut, qui sunt uberes concionum fructus, pietatem et lacrymas commoveat auditoribus, quod adjuvabit proposita crucifixi Salvatoris imago, caeterique pii actus externi, quos Ecclesiae probatos esse Episcopus iudicabit. Item, SS. martyria et actiones ne agantur, sed ita pie narrentur, ut auditores ad eorum imitationem, venerationem et invocationem excitentur.¹⁰⁰

According to this statement, human perversity has degraded

¹⁰⁰ D'Ancona, op. cit., II, 179.

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the pious custom of re-enacting the Passion of Christ, the glorious deeds of the martyrs, and events in the lives of the saints so that these have become offensive and an object of scorn and derision to many. The Council ordains that in the future, no performances of the Sacred Passion are to take place either in sacred or profane places. This means that the plays are being completely prohibited, for they can no longer be performed within or without the churches. The Council also desires that preachers, by means of learned and serious sermons, replace dramatic performances by moving their hearers to piety and tears through the spoken word alone. Likewise, the lives and deeds of the martyrs are not to be re-enacted, but may be piously narrated so that the hearers may be moved to invoke, imitate, and venerate them.

It seems that this Council sees religious plays primarily as a teaching instrument to be replaced by preaching, when it seems to have strayed from this didactic purpose. Although it is likely that many of the plays, reduced to ignoble proportions and therefore resulting in laughter and derision rather than edification, needed to be censured, it seems difficult, at first, to reconcile the intransigent approach adopted here. This injunction leaves little room for any modification for, if the letter of the rule were observed, no religious plays would have any possibility of

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being performed, since they are being prohibited both within and without churches. Severity of this kind may be attributed to Archbishop Borromeo's desire "to ban 'all carnival ribaldry' and allow no other solemnities than those of religious nature without any admixture of the profane."¹⁰¹

But the answer seems to lie deeper than this. It is impossible to understand the spirit in which this decree and similar prohibitions were promulgated in the latter half of the sixteenth century, unless one remembers that, at this time, the Reformation was making headway in most European countries. This is true even of Italy, the land of predominantly Catholic culture and tradition, especially northern Italy, "where intercourse with Germany and Switzerland was incessant."¹⁰² Gardiner believes that "most of the agitation against plays and players which included religious plays, centered in the north of Italy when Reformers were causing trouble there."¹⁰³ Against this background of time and place, it is easier to comprehend the anxiety which aroused in ecclesiastics the desire to eliminate those abuses which might be seized upon by Reformers as a means

¹⁰¹ D'Ancona, loc. cit., "Voleva egli che dimenticato 'il ribaldo carnivale,' non si facessero altre pompe che quelle religiose, e queste senza mescolanza alcuna di profano."

¹⁰² Gardiner, op. cit., p. 107.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 108.

to ridicule the Church or clergy. It must, nevertheless, be acknowledged that "it is not the normal course in church policy to sweep away laudable institutions because of defects and abuses not inherent. Rather are the abuses gradually eradicated, unless the element of time becomes important and the approvable and approved institution must be sacrificed to a higher good, which must be won quickly, if ever."¹⁰⁴ In this case, with Milan in a geographic position to be more rapidly impregnated with Reformation doctrine through its Calvinistic neighbours, time was of the essence. Prevailing circumstances, then, seem to have forced Archbishop Borromeo to use radical means by which to preserve the Faith from ridicule. If the period had been a less troublesome one, it is quite probable that, instead of sacrificing an "age-old tradition,"¹⁰⁵ as seems to have been the case in this instance, this Council would have proposed gentler and more gradual measures to eliminate any existing defects and abuses in religious plays.

It is significant that there are no decrees relating to the medieval religious stage from Ecumenical Councils; that is, Councils convened by the Pope or his Legates, and whose decrees, after papal confirmation, bind all Catholics.

¹⁰⁴ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 109.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

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There are, however, a number of critics who have, in passing mentioned that the Council of Trent condemned the religious stage.¹⁰⁶ If there had been any need for legislation against the plays, this Council certainly had ample opportunity and time in which to do so: It began in 1545 under Julius III and concluded in 1563 under Pius IV.

An examination of the decrees issued by this Council has failed to reveal any direct criticism of religious drama. There is, however, one passage from the deliberations of the Fourth Session which might, perhaps, have given rise to the idea that reference to the plays is implicitly stated; it reads:

Furthermore, wishing to repress the boldness whereby the words and sentences of the Holy Scriptures are turned and twisted to all kinds of profane usages, namely, to things scurrilous, fabulous, vain, to flatteries, detractions, superstitions, godless and diabolical incantations, divinations, the casting of lots and defamatory libels, to put an end to such irreverence and contempt, and that no one may in the future dare use in any manner the words of Holy Scripture for these and similar purposes, it is commanded and enjoined that all people of this kind be

¹⁰⁶ See Coyle, *op. cit.*, p. 83, where he quotes T. Lodge: "Again in stage plaies to make use of Hystoricall Scripture, I hold it with the Legists odious, and as the Council of Trent did Sess. 4. Fin. I condemn it." Coyle's answer is that this remark "cannot be substantiated by the documents on the Council of Trent. I have gone to some lengths to ascertain what this great Council of reform has enacted by way of legislation against stage plays or the theatre and have found literally nothing."

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restrained by the bishops as violators and profaners of the word of God, with the penalties of the law and other penalties that they may deem fit to impose.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps the word "fabulous" and the directive not to use the words of Scripture in a trifling or irreverent manner, convinced some persons that the Council Fathers were including the plays in this prohibition. Since there is no explicit evidence here that drama is being censured, such a conclusion is without foundation. Hence Coyle seems to be correct when he says that the Council of Trent could have legislated against the plays "if it saw fit, but it did not."¹⁰⁸

B. Proclamations of Reformers

The decrees issued during the second half of the sixteenth century have revealed that a more cautious approach toward religious drama was assumed by ecclesiastics of the Roman Church. Both content and historical facts suggest that the preservation of the Church from attack by reformers is one of the reasons for the restriction, or, in some cases, complete prohibition of the performances of these plays within churches, monasteries, or at other sites.

What, however, was the attitude toward religious drama after the Reformation? Did the reformers actually reform

¹⁰⁷ "Decree Concerning the Edition and Use of the Sacred Books," Sess. 4, in Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, ed. J. J. Schroeder (St. Louis, 1941), p. 20.

¹⁰⁸ Coyle, loc. cit.

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the plays--perhaps by removing defects or abuses in order to return religious representations to their pristine purity and simplicity? Did they, in fact, strengthen and build, or did they, instead, weaken and destroy? In his discussion of the Wyclifite movement in England, G. M. Trevelyan maintains that "lollardy offered a new religious basis to all."¹⁰⁹ If Trevelyan's statement is accepted literally, then such a "religious basis" which, one would presume, would reinvigorate and revivify, must also have been offered to the drama. Was this the case? The few available proclamations by reformers concerning the plays shed light on some of these questions.

An insight into the reforming spirit animating some of the persons who were in a good position to influence various governmental decrees, is provided by a draft of an address to Henry VIII from the House of Commons. J. P. Collier states that he found this letter "among the papers of Cromwell, in the Chapter-House, Westminster;"¹¹⁰ the following paragraph pertains to the stage:

And also where a great number of holye dayes, which now at this present tyme with very small devocion is solemnised and kept throughout this your realme, upon the which many grete abhomynable and execrable vices, ydle and wanton sportes, and plaies of the staige ben used and exercised, which holye dayes, if it may stonde with your gracious pleasure, and specially suche as fall in the harvest, might by

¹⁰⁹ England in the Age of Wycliffe (London, 1948), p. 352.

¹¹⁰ The History of English Dramatic Poetry (London, 1831), I, 126-7.

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your Majestie, by the advice of your most honorable Counsell, Prelats and Ordynaries, be made fewer in nombre; and those that shall be hereafter ordyned to stonde and continew might and may be more devoutly, religiously, and reverently observyd, to the lawde of almighty god, and to the encrease of your high honor and fame.^{lll}

The complaints and recommendation contained herein are stated in very general terms. It would be interesting, for instance, to know exactly what comprised the "many grete abhomynable and execrable vices," the "ydle and wonton sportes," and the evil "plaies of the staige." In these sweeping generalities most areas which provided entertainment for medieval folk are attacked. It seems, according to the draftees of this letter, that the solution to these problems lies in reducing the number of holy days, "specially suche as fall in the harvest." Somehow the above-enumerated vices would automatically disappear since holy days, when "fewer in nombre," would be more "devoutly, religiously, and reverently observyd." The suggestion that holidays falling during the harvest should be cut, introduces the rather disturbing implication that, at this busy season, men do not have time to waste upon observation of holy days. This, in turn, suggests that perhaps not only religious zeal motivated reformers to

^{lll} Collier, op. cit., I, 126-27.

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advocate fewer holidays and prohibit sports and plays at such times, but also a very real economic fervor as well. This might explain why E. N. S. Thompson was convinced that economic factors played a part in influencing "the growth of hostility to plays in England."¹¹² Such a conclusion, however, cannot be drawn on the basis of this letter. Nevertheless, the content does exemplify the attitude of dislike and tone of contempt which some persons maintained even from the beginning of the Reformation, especially in relation to many traditional customs and pastimes.

Against the background of such feeling, Henry VIII's Act 34 and 35 appeared in 1543;¹¹³ this "first Act of Parliament was passed for the control and regulation of the stage and dramatic representations."¹¹⁴ The bishops, in 1542, had petitioned the king to "correct the acting of plays 'to the contempt of God's Word,'"¹¹⁵ and their desire was met in the following year when the document entitled, "Act for the Advancement of true Religion and for the Abolishment of the

¹¹² The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage (New York, 1903), p. 36.

¹¹³ W. C. Hazlitt, English Drama and Stage under the Tudor and Stuart Princes (Roxburghe Library, 1869), pp. 5-6.

¹¹⁴ Collier, loc. cit.

¹¹⁵ Chambers, op. cit., II, 221.

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Contrary,¹¹⁶ was passed. Paragraph nine of this proclamation states:

Prouyded always, and be it enacted by the auctoritee aforesayd, that it shall be lafull to all and euery persone and personnes, to sette forth songes playes and enterludes, to be vsed and exercised within this realme, & other the kynges dominions, for the rebukyng and reproching of vices, & the setting forth of vertue: So alwayes the saide songes playes or enterludes medle not with interpretaciouns of scripture, contrary to the doctryne set forth or to be set forth by the kynges maiestie, our saide soueraygne lorde that now is, kyng Henry the eight in fourme aforesayd.¹¹⁷

This Act permits plays and interludes which rebuke vices and set forth virtue, but those which meddle with interpretations of scripture contrary to "the doctryne set forth or to be set forth by the kynges maiestie" are forbidden. Many Protestants considered this to be a law against anti-Catholic plays, hence it was not a Catholic element in the population which evinced dissatisfaction with this order;¹¹⁸ rather, it was from Protestants such as John Bale¹¹⁹ that a vigorous protest came. Under the pseudonym of Henry Stalbridge, in his

¹¹⁶ Hazlitt, loc. cit.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ See Thompson, op. cit., p. 49.

¹¹⁹ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 53; Bale was the most industrious of a band of 'sundry and divers fresh and quick wits' who helped Cromwell to vocalize Henry's policy of discrediting the papacy and Cranmer's proselytizing zeal, both of which acted as a twofold force early in the Tudor reign to undermine the old Catholic stage.

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Epistel Exhortatorye of an Inglyshe Christian,¹²⁰ he wrote:

"So long as they (players) played lyes, and sange baudy songes, blasphemed God, and corrupted mens consciences, ye never blamed them, but were verye well contented. But sens they persuaded the people to worship theyr Lorde God aryght, . . . without your lowsie legerdemains, ye never were pleased with them."¹²¹ Why were reformers such as Bale so highly incensed at the content of this Act?

In the first place, Catholics were not affected by the restriction in the same way as were the Protestants, because they were already forbidden by their Church to interpret the scripture according to their own fancy. The reformers, however, felt that they had been deprived of a valuable weapon in the war to suppress the older religious drama.¹²² In this Act, Henry had not unduly favoured either side, at least in purely dogmatic matters. But this statute did restrict Protestant authors such as Bale who could, in their plays, no longer freely interpret scripture without their "theology" being found to be seditious.¹²³ It is not at all surprising, then, that the repeal of this Act was one of the

¹²⁰ Chambers, op. cit., II, 222.

¹²¹ Thompson, loc. cit.

¹²² See Gardiner, op. cit., p. 59.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 60.

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first measures passed under Edward VI.¹²⁴

Very rapidly, however, in fact by Edward's time, a matter of "sedition" came to include not the new scriptural interpretations, but any of the old observances such as the Mass, the Eucharist, the Pope, and the veneration of images --all of which were ordinarily found in the religious plays.¹²⁵ But just at the time that sentiment against the religious stage was gathering for definite expression, Puritanism began to use the stage as its own tool. Many miracle and morality plays were written solely to support the Reformation; this continued even into Elizabeth's reign.¹²⁶

With the accession of Mary, a Catholic ruler, there was no tranquillity in matters concerning the stage, for, as in Edward's reign, steps were taken to control the stage --with different motives, of course. Mary immediately set about to check plays written to support Protestant doctrines and attack the forms of the Church of Rome.¹²⁷ Therefore, in 1553, she issued a Proclamation which stated that:

Her highnes therefore strayghtly chargeth and commaundeth all and euery her sayde subiectes, of what soeuer state, condition, or degree they be, that none of them presume from henceforth to preache, or by waye of readyng in Churches, or other publique

¹²⁴ See Chambers, loc. cit.

¹²⁵ Gardiner, loc. cit.

¹²⁶ See Thompson, op. cit., p. 48.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

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or pryuate places (excepte in the scholes of the vniuersities) to interprete or teache any scriptures, or any maner payntes of dectryne concernynge religion. Neyther also to prynte any bookes, matter, ballet ryme, interlude, processe or treatyse, nor to playe any interlude, except they haue her graces speciall licence in writynge for the same, vpon payne to incurre her highnesse indignation and displeasure.¹²⁸

The chief restriction being imposed in this proclamation is that no interludes are to be played unless they have the Queen's "speciall licence in writynge for the same." According to Collier, this regulation "was strictly enforced and effective for two years, after which date plays were attempted to be resumed, not in London, but in the country."¹²⁹

"Presumably this means that they were attempted to be resumed without license,"¹³⁰ since there is nothing in the Act to indicate that Mary was ordering a total suppression of the plays. In fact, the first years of Mary's reign mark a notable resurgence in the popularity of the cycles.¹³¹ At York, for instance, "the people returned with renewed eagerness to the enjoyment of their ancient diversions and ceremonies."¹³²

But there is no doubt that a strict censorship, especially

¹²⁸ Hazlitt, op. cit., p. 17.

¹²⁹ Op. cit., I, 158-9.

¹³⁰ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 63, n. 73.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 62.

¹³² Ibid., p. 61, n. 70.

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in London, where it could be maintained, was successful in repressing controversial plays--those attacking Mary's religious views or political position.¹³³

In the shift from Protestant king to Catholic queen and back again to a Protestant ruler with Elizabeth's accession to the throne, the stage becomes less a source of edification and delight, than an instrument to serve religious and political interests.

Elizabeth's "Proclamation against Plays" was issued on May 16, 1559:

Forasmuch as the tyme wherin common Interludes in the Englishe tongue are wont vsually to be played, is now past vntyll All Halloutyde, and that also some that haue ben of late vsed, are not conuenient in any good ordred Christian Common weale to be suffred. The Quenes Maiestie doth straightly forbyd al maner Interludes to be playde, eyther openly or priuately, except the same be notified before hande, and licenced within any citie or towne coporate by the Maior or other chiefe officers of the same, and within any shyre, by suche as shalbe Lieuetenaunts for the Queenes Maiestie in the same shyre, or by two of the Justices of Peax inhabyting within that part of the shire where any shalbe played.

And for instruction to euery of the sayde officers, her maiestie doth likewise charge euery of them as they will aunswere: that they permyt none to be played, wherin either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the common weale shalbe handled, or treated; All which partes of this proclamation her majestie chargeth to be inuiolably kepte.¹³⁴

¹³³ See Thompson, op. cit., p. 50.

¹³⁴ Hazlitt, op. cit., p. 19.

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The Act forbids the performance of "al maner" of Interludes, both private and public, without license, in city, town, or shire. Such a license is not to be given if the plays touch matters of religion or of the "governance of the estate of the common weale." The reference to plays that "haue ben of late vsed," and are "not conuenient in any good ordred Christian Common Weale to be suffred," gives the impression that the government is making an attempt "to stamp out a license that had grown intolerable."¹³⁵ Elizabeth probably realized that some of the religious and political elements in the plays were offensive to many a foreign ambassador, especially if he represented a country such as Spain. According to the Venetian ambassador, writing on May 4,¹³⁶ 1559, these plays were so "vituperative and abominable that it was marvellous that they should have been so long tolerated for they brought upon the stage all personages whom they wished to revile, however exalted their position, and among the rest, in one play, King Philip, the late Queen and Cardinal Pole"¹³⁷ The most that the passage of such a law as is found in this Act did was to convey the impression

¹³⁵ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 67.

¹³⁶ This was just 12 days before the Act of 1559 was passed.

¹³⁷ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 66, quoting from Brown and Brown, Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Relating to English Affairs, VII, 80-1.

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that the Crown was disowning an activity which it could, in reality, be favouring. What is particularly evident is that the plays referred to in the Act are not the traditional religious plays which Shakespeare refers to as "our pageants of delight."¹³⁸ It seems, therefore, that these Acts passed by Henry VIII, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth were not intended to regenerate the religious stage but rather to consolidate the religious and political position of each reigning sovereign. The result was inevitable: a slow but certain decline. Increasingly, the plays came to be regarded by the Protestants "as smacking of popery and as a rallying point for disaffection toward the Established Church."¹³⁹ It was merely a question of time before the authorities of Church and State would, by coordinating their efforts, sweep away the age-old spectacles of the pageants.

The final English document to be examined is one which was discovered by Gardiner in the Diocesan Registry at York among documents titled Liber actorum coram commiſſarijs regis. According to Gardiner, this title indicates that this is a record of the Diocesan Court of High Commission, which was simply an arm of the Privy Council in the North

¹³⁸ The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, ed. P. Alexander (London, 1965), The Two Gentlemen of Verona, IV.iv.155.

¹³⁹ Gardiner, op. cit., p. 71.

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for the settlement of ecclesiastical matters.¹⁴⁰ The document, dated 1576, concerns the Corpus Christi plays at Wakefield; the following is the excerpt printed by Gardiner:

This daie upon intelligence geven to the saide Commission that it is meant and purposed that in the towne of Wakefeld shalbe plaid this yere in Whitsonweke next or thereabouts a plaie commonlie called Corpus Christi plaie which hath bene heretofore used there, wherein they are done t' understand that there be many thinges used which tende to the derogation of the Majestie and glorie of God, the prophanation of the sacramentes and the maunteynaunce of superstition and idolatrie, the said Commissioners decreed a lettre to be written and sent to the baylyffe, burgesses and other the inhabitantes of the said towne of Wakefeld that in the said playe no pageant be used or set furthe wherin the Ma^tye of God the Father, God the Sonne, or God the Holie Ghoste or the administration of either the Sacramentes of baptisme or of the Lordes Supper be counterfeyted or represented, or anythinge plaied which tende to the maintenaunce of superstition and idolatrie or which be contrarie to the lawes of God and¹⁴¹ or of the realme.¹⁴²

The content of this prohibition differs considerably from those governmental Acts previously examined, for the concern here is the old religious drama rather than the newer interludes.

First of all, a number of charges are laid against the Wakefield plays: they derogate God's glory, profane the

¹⁴⁰ See Gardiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78, n. 68; Gardiner states that the "and" is so crossed out in the manuscript and "or" substituted.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

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Sacraments, and help maintain superstition and idolatry. Apparently all of these evils arise from the "counterfeiting" or representing falsely the Persons of the Trinity, and the sacraments of baptism or the eucharist. Therefore, municipal officials and other important Wakefield residents have been informed by letter that any pageants that promote these sinful representations are expressly forbidden. In fact, "anything plaied" which tends to maintain superstition and idolatry or which are "contrarie to the lawes of God and or of the realme" is prohibited.

Each sentence of this injunction sheds light upon the belligerent attitude of the state toward the religious stage at the time, but it is the corrected concluding statement which best indicates this. The laws "of the realme" seem to have been predicated the same position as the "lawes of God." This leads one to believe that much of the censorship against the plays either by Church or local governmental officers originated in and was stimulated by the position of these officials in relation to their superiors. In this case, this Ecclesiastical Commission was subject to "the close scrutiny and control of the Privy Council, which expected of them 'expedition in execution, a prompt and full report and an awaiting of further orders.'"¹⁴³ It is easy

¹⁴³ Gardiner, op. cit., pp. 76-77.

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to see that if these local officials harped, long enough, upon the "superstition and idolatry" supposedly found in the old traditional customs such as the religious plays, they would be able to coerce the population into ultimately relinquishing them. In fact, four years later, in 1580, at the annual election of the mayor at York on the feast of St. Blaze, "the commons did earnestly request of my Lord Mayor and others the worshipful assemblee that Corpus Xpi play might be played this yere.' To this appeal the Lord Mayor coldly answered, 'that he and his brethrn would consider their request.' This was a last attempt. From henceforth all notices of Corpus Christi play, as well as the Credo and Pater Noster Plays, disappear from the minutes."¹⁴⁴ This was the situation not only in York but in cities and towns throughout the land; it was, unquestionably, a protracted but losing struggle. Those citizens who might have hoped that the pageants with which so many of their joyous recollections were associated would survive the Reformation, saw the wishes of the state supersede their own desires.

The attitude of Church and State in Scotland toward the religious stage seems to be a heightened copy of that in England. There is, however, one big difference between

¹⁴⁴ Extracts from the Municipal Records of the City of York in the Reigns of Edward IV, Edward V, and Richard III, ed. R. Davies (York, 1843), pp. 271-72.

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the Reformation in England and Scotland which affects any prohibitions which were issued, namely, that "In Scotland the Reformation was a middle-class movement; and, generally speaking, these acts were imposed not from above by a tyrannical minority, but with the sanction of the main body of the nation."¹⁴⁵

One of the earliest official statements discoverable is dated 1575, and was issued by the General Assembly of the Church, which proclaimed:

Forasmuche as it is considered that the playing of clerk-playes, comedeis, or tragedeis, upon the canonicall parts of the Scriptures, induceth and bringeth with it a contempt and profanatioun of the same, it is thought meete and concluded, that no clerk-playes, comedeis, or tragedeis, be made upon the canonicall Scriptures, ather New or Old, in time comming, ather upon the Lord's Day, or upon a worke day: That the contraveeners, if they be ministers, be secluded from their functioun, and that others be corrected by the discipline of the kirk.¹⁴⁶

The complaint made by the Assembly is that plays based upon either the Old or New Testaments bring forth only contempt and profanation of sacred scripture. In the future, therefore, no such plays may be performed at any time. Participants in such unlawful performances will be punished: ministers by being deprived of their clerical rights and the

¹⁴⁵ A. J. Mill, Mediaeval Plays in Scotland (London, 1927), p. 105.

¹⁴⁶ "An Act of the General Assembly," quoted in D. Calderwood, The History of the Kirk of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1843), III, 345.

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laity by discipline administered through the kirk. In diction which is strong and decisive, the declaration unmistakably conveys the idea that the religious stage is irreverent and idolatrous, hence totally and irrevocably unacceptable to the kirk. This document illustrates the zealous effort on the part of forthright Puritans in Scotland to root out of the drama any remnants of the old Faith.

Even though "an act of Parliament or even an edict of the Assembly might have been disregarded: it was less easy to defy the 'visitations' of the presbyteries and the inquisitorial methods of the local kirk sessions."¹⁴⁷ The next few excerpts to be examined have been taken from the Minute Books of just such kirk sessions.

The first of these is from Perth, dated July 1, 1577:

Becaws certane inhabitantis of yis town alsweill aganis ye expres commandement of ye ciuill magistratts in cownsaill as aganis ye Ministeris prohibitioun in pulp(itt) hes playit corpus christeis play vpon thursday ye vj of Junij last quhilk day ves vovnt to be callit corpus christeis day to ye great sklender of ye kirk of god and dishonour to yis haill toun and becaws ye said play is idolatrous superstitiows and also sclanderows alsweill be ressoun of ye Idell day¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Mill, op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 275; this entry breaks off at the foot of the manuscript page.

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In an effort to stamp out the devotion to the old pageants, the Kirk Session has met to take action because certain inhabitants had disobeyed the express orders of the magistrates and the minister not to participate in a religious play on the day called "corpus christeis." This, of course, has resulted in great scandal to the church and dishonour to the whole town since the play is idolatrous, superstitious and scandalous. Since the entry is incomplete in the manuscript page, it is only subsequent entries that throw light upon the nature of the action taken against these culprits by the kirk. Thus, an entry of the following month, August, 1577, states that:

Quhilk day compeirit Thomas thorskaill quha desyring to (haif) his bairn baptisit and confest him to be ane of ye nwmer of y(aim) of corpus christeis playaris quha bwir ye ansenze of ye samyn off ye quhilk sklender he offeris and submittis him self to ye discipl(ine) of ye kirk with my Lordis adwyfs And promisfs in tyme cuming (ne)uir to mell with sik thingis again onder ye pain of ye censures (of) ye kirk In respect quhairoff and of his obediens of ye kirk ye elderis presentlie convenit viz (seven names) thinkis expedient yat ye said Thomas thorskailis barn be baptis(it) becaws he hes offerit him self obedient to ye kirk according to ye act maid yairvpon149

From this it is evident that the players were so stubborn in their devotion to the Corpus Christi plays that it was necessary to threaten a refusal of baptism to their children in order to obtain a promise not to meddle with such things

¹⁴⁹ Mill, op. cit., p. 275.

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again. Similar entries are found for September 1, 2, and 16, in which a total of 12 men appear before the Kirk Session to make similar confessions.¹⁵⁰

In general, one can say that in Scotland the injunctions against the religious stage stem from a hatred of the old Faith. This feeling is strong in these prohibitions and permeates entries such as this one taken from the Register of the Privy Council of Aberdeen for the year 1574: "That thay sulk inhibite and expreslie punishe the superstitious keeping of festual dayis usit of befoir in tyme of ignorance and papistrie, and all playis and feisting at thay tymes."¹⁵¹

Through examination of the decrees issued by members of the Roman Church and those by Reformers, it has been possible to follow the change in sentiment toward the religious stage. In pre-Reformation times, the aim of the injunctions seems to have been a spiritual one: to protect the religious nucleus of the plays by extirminating completely those abuses which arose from concomitant circumstances surrounding the performances. During the Reformation, however, both Catholic and Protestant legislated against the plays, not in an effort to purify the drama, but primarily to further their own purposes.

¹⁵⁰ See Mill, op. cit., pp. 275-6.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 160.

CHAPTER III

UNFAVOURABLE COMMENT BY OTHERS

Complaints against the plays were made not only by officials of Church and state, but also by men and women who voiced personal opinions about them. The writings of three such persons will be examined in this chapter.

The first of these is Gerhoh of Reichersberg (1093 - 1169), "one of the most distinguished theologians of Germany in the twelfth century."¹⁵² He was apparently very interested in reforming the members of the clergy who, he believed, had become lax in their common life within monasteries. Reform would be possible, he was certain, only if "community life was generally adopted."¹⁵³ His writings tend to indicate that his initial clash with the religious stage resulted from this conviction.

The following excerpt from one of his works is pertinent: "Cohaerebat ipsi ecclesiae claustrum satis honestum, sed a claustrali religione omnino vacuum, cum neque in dormitorio fratres dormirent, neque in refectorio comederent, exceptis rarissimis festis, maxime, in quibus Herodem

¹⁵² F. Lauchert, "Gerhoh of Reichersberg," Cath. Encyc., VI.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

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repraesentarent Christi persecutorem, parvulorum interfec-
torem seu ludis aliis aut spectaculis quasi theatralibus ex-
hibendis comportaretur symbolum ad faciendum convivium in
refectorio, aliis pene omnibus temporibus vacuo."¹⁵⁴

In this paragraph, Gerhoh describes certain abuses which he is supposed to have observed at the monastery in Augsburg while he was magister scholae there about the year 1122.¹⁵⁵ His words express an intense dislike resulting from the monks' habit of neither sleeping in their dormitory quarters nor dining in the refectory; for him, this is adequate proof of laxity in monastic discipline and community spirit. But his disgust is deepened by the knowledge that the only exceptions to this violation of the rule occur whenever religious plays, such as those depicting Herod's persecution of Christ, the slaughter of the Innocents, or other theatrical spectacles are performed in the church adjoining the monastery. On such occasions the refectory is used for convivial banquets; at other times it remains empty.

If the scorn expressed in this excerpt is aimed at the plays, it is clearly misdirected, since Gerhoh does not

¹⁵⁴ Gerhohi Praepositi Reicherspergensis Commentarium in Psalmos, in Migne, Patrologia Latina, CXCIV, 890; quoted in Young, op. cit., II, 411.

¹⁵⁵ See Chambers, op. cit., II, 98.

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even mention any abuses essentially related to the religious performances. Instead, religious drama is used as an excuse to vent his wrath upon the laxity in monastic discipline at Augsburg. The fact that the plays are followed by a feast in the refectory is irrelevant to the plays as such; neither can they be blamed for a general absence of religious discipline.

Gerhoh's later writings, however, indicate that he maintained a life-long hostility toward church drama. Only about eight years before his death in 1169, he wrote a treatise entitled De Investigatione Antichristi in which he had a chapter, "De spectaculis theatricis in ecclesia Dei exhibitis." In it he argues against permitting religious plays to be performed in the churches. For instance, he asks: "Quid ergo mirum si et isti nunc Antichristum vel Herodem in suis ludis simulantes eosdem non, ut eis intentioni est, ludicro mentiuntur sed in veritate exhibent, utpote quorum vita ab Antichristi laxa conversatione non longe abest?"¹⁵⁶ He does not find it at all surprising that those who use the church to represent Herod or Antichrist show by their own conversation that they are themselves guilty of the vices of the Antichrist they portray. It is, therefore, Gerhoh's view

¹⁵⁶ Gerhohi Reichersbergensis Praepositi opera hactenus inedita, ed. F. Scheibelberger (Linz, 1875), i, pp. 25-8; quoted in Young, op. cit., II, 524-5.

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that those who permit churches to be turned into theatres are doing the work of the very Antichrist whose story they are wont to act.

In a later passage, he discusses drama more directly:

Exhibent praeterea imaginaliter et Salvatoris infantiae cunabula, parvuli vagitum, puerperae Virginis matronalem habitum, stellae quasi sidus flammigerum, infantum necem, maternum Rachelis ploratum. Sed divinitas insuper et matura facies ecclesiae abhorret spectacula theatralia, non respicit in vanitates et insanias falsas, immo non falsas sed jam veras insanias, in quibus viri totos se frangunt in feminas quasi pudeat eos, quod viri sunt, clerici in milites, homines se in daemonum larvas transfigurant.¹⁵⁷

The plays involve actors who represent the crib of the Saviour, the wailing Infant, the lying-in of the Virgin, the flaming star of the Magi, the slaughter of the Innocents, and the lament of Rachel. Such feigning is a scandal to the Church which, Gerhoh says, abhors such theatrical spectacles. It should be noted that since he is not speaking for the Church in any official capacity, his statement that the Church abhors these plays can be accepted simply as a personal opinion.

Gerhoh, endeavouring to depict the representations as worthless spectacles, reveals what he considers to be the "vanities" and "insanities" found in them. These include men shamelessly transformed into women, clerics into soldiers and men into the likeness of demons. He seems to be complain-

¹⁵⁷ Young, op. cit., II, 524-5.

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ing primarily about disguise which presents a man as someone other than himself. Young believes that Gerhoh is condemning the dramatization of all sacred events, "in which clerics undertake such impersonation."¹⁵⁸ Since the words used in reference to those who assume the disguises are viri, clerici, and homines respectively, it seems that Gerhoh is referring not only to clerics but to any men who participate in the plays as actors. His condemnation, therefore, is broad in scope for it includes clerics as well as any others who, as actors, degrade themselves through disguises which present them as women, soldiers, or demons.

Undoubtedly, in each of the excerpts examined, Gerhoh's tone is harsh and his attitude hostile toward religious drama. Each passage, however, is more an expression of a personal rather than general point of view. The only complaint which he has made is against disguising, an idea that has appeared in some of the decrees previously studied.

A milder tone "and one more expressive of what we may believe was the more general view"¹⁵⁹ is from the pen of Herrad von Landsberg,¹⁶⁰ who is considered to have been "a

¹⁵⁸ Op. cit., II, 412.

¹⁵⁹ Craig, op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁶⁰ W. Turner, "Herrad of Landsberg," Cath. Encyc., VII, 294: ". . . a twelfth century abbess, author of Hortus Deliciarum, born about 1130, at the castle of Landsberg, the seat of a noble Alsatian Family; d. 1195."

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writer of much insight."¹⁶¹ There is an apparently neglected passage in her work, the Hortus Deliciarum,¹⁶² relating to religious drama, which runs thus:

The old Fathers of the Church, in order to strengthen the belief of the faithful and to attract the unbeliever by this manner of religious service, rightly instituted at the Feast of Epiphany or the Octave religious performances of such a kind as the star guiding the Magi to the new-born Christ, the cruelty of Herod, the dispatch of the soldiers, the lying-in of the Blessed Virgin, the angel warning the Magi not to return to Herod, and other events of the birth of Christ. But what nowadays happens in many churches? Not a customary ritual, not an act of reverence, but one of irreligion and extravagance conducted with all the license of youth. The priests having changed their clothes go forth as a troop of warriors; there is no distinction between priest and warrior to be marked. At an unfitting gathering of priests and laymen the church is desecrated by feasting and drinking, buffoonery, unbecoming jokes, play, the clang of weapons, the presence of shameless wenches, the vanities of the world, and all sorts of disorder. Rarely does such a gathering break up without quarrelling.¹⁶³

The abbess first states what, according to her way of thinking,

¹⁶¹ Pearson, op. cit., II, 284.

¹⁶² Turner, loc. cit.: "The text is a compendium of all the sciences studied at that time, including theology . . . intended for the use of novices at her monastery . . . The fate of Herrad's manuscript is well-known. After having been preserved for centuries at her own monastery it passed about the time of the French Revolution into the municipal library at Strasburg. There the miniatures were copied by Engelhardt in 1818. The text was copied and published by Straub and Keller, 1879-1899. Thus, although the original perished in the burning of the library of Strasburg during the siege of 1870, we can still form an estimate of the artistic and literary value of Herrad's work."

¹⁶³ Pearson, op. cit., II, 285-6; This is Pearson's translation.

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were the reasons why the "old Fathers of the Church" instituted religious plays in the churches of twelfth century Germany. Referring specifically to the drama connected with the Nativity, Herrad claims that the aims were twofold: to strengthen the belief of the faithful, and to convince the sceptical. She next presents a revealing catalogue of the types of performances which were held in the churches. The list shows that there already was an evident advance, even at this early date, beyond "the customary ritual,"¹⁶⁴ to a greater fulness of dramatic detail. This dramatic aspect is implicit in the expressions: the "cruelty" of Herod; the angel "warning" the Magi; the "dispatch" of the soldiers. Nevertheless, in her insistence that these plays were "rightly instituted," she reveals her strong conviction that the life-blood of this drama was religion and "its success depended on its awakening and releasing a pent-up body of religious knowledge and religious feeling."¹⁶⁵ Herrad sees religious drama as existing "for itself and for the discharge of a religious purpose and not as an early stage of secular drama."¹⁶⁶ In fact, it is just this secularization which she dislikes for, with her question, "But what nowadays happens in many churches?", a noticeable note of regret enters into her exposition. Her deep concern, arising from the loss of a good thing, is evident in her answer to this question: the

¹⁶⁴ Pearson, *op. cit.*, II, 285-6.

¹⁶⁵ Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁶ UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA - SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
Ibid., p. 6.

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the plays which had formerly been "an act of reverence" have now degenerated into acts of "irreligion" and "extravagance." The abbess then enumerates the abuses which have led to the decay of the religious stage; these include: clerks disguising themselves as soldiers: clergy and laity indulging in riotous drinking banquets; the church being desecrated by unseemly jokes, shameless wenches, and clanging weapons. Rossiter believes that this kind of fooling is the same as that found in the celebration of the Feast of Fools.¹⁶⁷ Perhaps this is true, but what seems to be of greater importance as far as this passage is concerned, is that the abbess has distinguished between "religious drama reverently performed, and the riotous concourse of people who flocked into churches to watch a good show"¹⁶⁸ regardless of whether this were in celebration of the Feast of Fools or any other such spectacle. In drawing this distinction, Herrad has underscored the idea that the success of each play came from the "impact of its message or from the moving quality of some particular story it had to tell"¹⁶⁹ and not from the addition of conscious dramatic effects such as realism or humour. Since, in her opinion, the plays have degenerated into occasions of

¹⁶⁷ See op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁶⁸ A. Nicoll, Masks Mimes and Miracles (New York, 1963), p. 36.

¹⁶⁹ Craig, op. cit., p. 9.

buffoonery and general disorder, she believes that the substitution of Gospel readings for the drama would better recall to mind the Nativity. The abbess concludes her discussion by stating that those in spiritual authority are well-advised in their effort to prohibit the plays even though these may be admirable in themselves.¹⁷⁰

The last complaint to be studied in this chapter is by a fourteenth century English Dominican, John Bromyard.¹⁷¹ This highly-placed preacher and theologian¹⁷² voiced his dislike and contempt of the religious stage through his homilies in some of which he championed preaching and belittled religious plays.

It was Wyclife who, in fourteenth century England, chose the pulpit as the natural instrument of the Reformation "because it was at once the freeest, and, with the possible exception of the confessional, the most potent religious influence."¹⁷³ He, therefore, laid great stress "on the

¹⁷⁰ "Beatos igitur ecclesiae principes spirituales dixerim qui talia prohibenda malunt evangelica lectione quae in ortu Christi gesta sunt ad memoriam revocare quam huiusmodi spectaculis fundamenta fidei resolvere." Quoted in Young, *op. cit.*, II, 412-14. Pearson's translation ends before this sentence.

¹⁷¹ "Bromyarde is the author of a work entitled Summa Praedicantium, printed at Nuremburg by A. Koberger in 1485, and reprinted several times, the last edition having appeared at Venice in 1586." in DNB s.v. "Bromyarde, John de (fl.1390)."

¹⁷² See Owst, *op. cit.*, p. 480.

¹⁷³ Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-8.

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necessity for more preaching, and again more preaching."¹⁷⁴ The Church, for the most part, "both theoretically and for practical purposes of self-defence, laid more stress on the Sacraments which she administered, and regarded preaching with more and more coolness as it became the special weapon of the reformer."¹⁷⁵ The fact that Bromyard was more inclined to emphasize the value of preaching indicates that there did not necessarily exist a complacent uniformity in the attitude of orthodox churchmen toward questions of the time. In Herrad von Landsberg's writings as well as in St. Charles Borromeo's prohibition, emphasis is placed upon the reading of the Gospel and preaching. Both abbess and Archbishop, however, advocated these as replacements for religious plays only after they were convinced that abuses had caused irreparable damage to religious drama. Bromyard, on the other hand, seems to have been led to elevate preaching and belittle miracle plays through his somewhat stern, pessimistic outlook upon the world, which distrusted lighthearted frivolity and the religious stage by seeing them as the means which often led men to carelessness in their spiritual duties.

The following excerpt from one of his sermons introduces both his idea and strong feeling on the subject of the

¹⁷⁴ Trevelyan, loc. cit.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

value of preaching in relation to miracle plays:

Et heu longum videtur multis, et grave audire verbum salutis, sed audiendo verba dissolutionis, et hystri-
onum videtur eis tempus breve, quod ex tentatione ac-
cidit diaboli, vel quia habent palatum cordis spiri-
tuali febre infectum, febricitantes enim libentius bi-
bunt aquam, et comedunt vilia, et novica, quam utilia.
Sic tales a veritate quidem auditum avertant ad fab-
ulas autem convertentur. 2. Thim. 4. Illi videlicet,
qui habent naturam amaram, et infirmam, sed non sic,
qui habent cor bene dispositum, et sanum, illi audiunt,
laetanter, et gaudenter, dicentes, illud, Psal. 50.
Auditui meo dabis gaudium, et laeticiam.¹⁷⁶

Bromyard begins by claiming that many people find that time spent in listening to the word of salvation is long and tiresome, but discover that time passes quickly for them when they listen to dissolute words and the words of actors. In his judgment, there are two possible causes for such folly: the first is a possible temptation of the devil, and the second might be an infected heart which prefers to feed upon vile and harmful things. But whatever the reason, Bromyard believes that such people turn away from the truth as found in the word of God, to fabling, which, he feels, characterizes dramatic representation. In his notion of fabling, Bromyard seems to have shared the belief of many Lollards "that these unrealities led men into actual idolatry."¹⁷⁷ He

¹⁷⁶ Ioanne Bromiardo, Summa Praedicatorum (London, 1586), Pars. 1, "Audire (Verbum Dei)," Cap. XXVI, Art. 4, 73 r. & v.

¹⁷⁷ Coulton, op. cit., p. 403.

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concludes his passage by rounding out his earlier metaphor of an infected heart with the statement that only men with a poisonous and weak nature would be inclined to turn away from Truth; those with healthy hearts listen to the word of God with rejoicing and joy.

In this part of his sermon, he has not referred to any particular plays in which the ludentes participate, but he becomes more specific and even somewhat ironical in this later passage:

Sic exeant invitati ad convivium amicorum et pauci sunt, quos occupatio impedit a novis spectaculis sicut in ludis, quos miracula vocant, quare ergo impediuntur ab audientia miracolorum clericorum fatuorum. Tales reprehendit Christostomus super Iohannem, Homel. 9. Propter negocia (inquit) se excusant ab audientio sermonum, et in theatris, et cursibus equorum, integrum impendunt diem in cursibus equorum, sicut in hostiludiis, et huiusmodi, quos revocat Deus, dicens. Venite filii audite me, Psal. 33.¹⁷⁸

In the lines preceding this passage, Bromyard has been discussing the many worldly preoccupations which some people offer as excuse for non-attendance at sermons. There are few, he claims, who would be hindered even in the autumn, when everyone is busy with the harvest, from leaving home to dine at a friend's house when invited. Elaborating upon this idea in the above passage, Bromyard states that there are few

¹⁷⁸ Bromiardo, loc. cit., Art. 28, 77 r.

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whose business keeps them from new shows, novis spectaculis, as in the plays which they call miracles, and concludes this sentence by ironically claiming that these same people find themselves impeded from hearing of the miracles of the foolish clerks. He then quotes St. John Chrysostom who, he says, rebukes those who excuse themselves from the hearing of sermons on account of business, yet spend their whole day at theatres and horse races.

Although there is no actual prohibition of the miracle plays in Bromyard's comments, Owst, for instance, believes that "the tone of contempt and the significance of those other amusements with which the plays are linked are quite unmistakable."¹⁷⁹ While this statement can be readily endorsed, there is something of greater significance in the two passages examined than simply Bromyard's tone and his linking of the plays with horse races; this is his concept of truth versus fabling. It is this which is central in the passage, since what he essentially says is that sermons are quite adequate for the presentation of truth, but plays, which are only fables because they merely represent the truth, draw men from what is genuine to that which is counterfeit. Such being the case, the implicit conclusion is that they should be "shunned and suppressed."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Op. cit., p. 481.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 482.

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Bromyard's concept of fabling is further clarified in a paragraph from another sermon¹⁸¹ in which he deals with the notion of disguise: "For two kinds of men use masks, to wit, those who play and those who rob. For players in the play which is commonly called a Miracle use masks, beneath which the persons of the actors are concealed. Thus do the demons, whose game is to destroy souls and lure them by sin: in which game they make use of masks, that is, the fashionably attired and those who dance, 'whose feet run to evil' (Prov. i)"182

Here, the preacher places actors and robbers in the same category, because both mask themselves to conceal their true identity for the purpose of deceiving others. His linking of miracle playing with robbery, certainly emphasizes the contempt with which he regards these plays, but his disgust does not stem from the fact that some people prefer drama to preaching; rather, his disdain seems to grow out of the conviction that disguise is deceit. The mask assumed by the robber enables him to deprive others of material goods, while the false front of an actor permits him to perpetrate spiritual crimes by leading people away from truth through fictitious representation. In this, both proceed in much the

¹⁸¹ "Corea," in Bromiardo, loc. cit., Cap. XV, Art. 3, 152 v.

¹⁸² Owst, op. cit., p. 395; this is Owst's translation.

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same manner as the devil who uses fashionably-disguised persons to act as his decoys to ensnare unwary men and women.

This examination of the personal comments of Gerhoh, Herrad, and Bromyard, has, in addition to showing their diverse opinions about the plays, also revealed that throughout the medieval period there existed a keen interest in and awareness of the contemporary religious stage even among persons who held no prominent Church or State position.

CHAPTER IV

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Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge

One of the most interesting, as well as most familiar, complaints against medieval religious drama is the Tretise of miraclis pleyinge¹⁸³ which, according to Young, dates from the end of the fourteenth century and, although anonymous, may be referred to a Wyclifite origin.¹⁸⁴ Young believes that this homily is "the most careful and energetic challenge to the religious drama uttered during the Middle Ages."¹⁸⁵ Chambers, on the other hand, states that "The opinions expressed do not appear to have had any weight either of popular or of ecclesiastical sentiment behind them; but they curiously antedate the histriomastic tracts of many a sixteenth and seventeenth-century Puritan."¹⁸⁶ From these two judgments, it is evident that the opinion regarding the significance of the document is divided, but it is noteworthy that many scholars who have discussed the Tretise at all,

¹⁸³ Printed in Altenglische Sprachproben, ed. Eduard Mätzner (Berlin, 1867), I, Part 2, 222-242--hereafter cited as Tretise.

¹⁸⁴ See op. cit., p. 414.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 415

¹⁸⁶ Op. cit., II, 103.

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have tended to limit their comments to the first half of the work; that any consideration was given to the latter part of the sermon is not evident from their remarks.¹⁸⁷ Perhaps it is just this kind of incomplete analysis that is the reason why this homily has been considered by many critics to contain an important complaint against the religious plays; for while, in the first half of the work, the unknown reformer attacks the six reasons which he says others present in defense of miracle playing, in the latter section he offers what he thinks is additional proof for his argument. It is only by careful analysis of the complete document that one can hope to gain significant insights into the intellectual attitude which prompted this outburst. This would, in turn, aid in determining the ultimate significance of the work. In order, therefore, to carry out such a complete study, this chapter will deal exclusively with the Tretise.

It has already been shown that in all times and in all places--whether in fourteenth century England or in twentieth century New York--there have been some persons who have held stricter notions of what is right or wrong, proper or improper, than their contemporaries. Many of these severe

¹⁸⁷ See Chambers, op. cit., II, 102-3; Creizenach, op. cit., p. 51; Owst, op. cit., p. 481; Young, op. cit., II, 414-15; Coyle, op. cit., p. 66.

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moralists have, through the centuries, evinced particular antagonism toward dramatic representation of religious themes. Such men, including those opposed to dramatic representation generally, are usually in the minority and, as W. Ringler states, even in Elizabethan times "the negligible number of expressions of opinion against the stage is obviously not enough to indicate any considerable spirit of opposition, especially as other evidence shows, . . . the persons who voiced such sentiments were marked by their contemporaries as singular and opposed to the common view."¹⁸⁸ The author of the Tretise seems to fit into this "singular" group; the content of his sermon speaks eloquently of his Puritan attitude toward what he calls "miraclis pleyinge."¹⁸⁹ It must be kept in mind that if the Tretise belongs to fourteenth century England as is generally accepted, and its author a Wyclifite, he was of a minority and spoke only for a small group scattered among a predominantly Catholic population. This sect, however, gained adherents rapidly; perhaps this is why Craig is convinced that it is the point of view held by this reformer that "would ultimately be fatal to medieval religious plays."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ "The First Phase of the Elizabethan Attack on the Stage, 1558-1579," HLQ, V (1942), 405.

¹⁸⁹ Tretise, p. 226.

¹⁹⁰ Op. cit., p. 92.

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The Tretise is written in a simple, free style. In general organization the writer is fairly clear, but in details he is often confused, vague, and even contradictory. He gives the impression of being a loose-thinking reformer, whose appeal is to an even more uncritical and loose-thinking group of followers. His disjointed thinking is exemplified in his rather monotonous repetition of ideas, excessively long, rambling sentences, and, especially, in his confused state of mind with regard to the use of such an important term as the word "playing." These factors make it difficult to follow his train of argument as well as to obtain any lucid idea of what exactly he means by the term "miraclis pleyinge" which he constantly uses.

In a direct introduction, the author states his thesis: "The myraclis therfore that Crist dude heere in erthe outhur in hymself outhur in his syntis, weren so efectuel . . . no man shulde usen in bourde and pleye the myraclis and workis that Crist so ernystfully wrouzte to oure helthe."¹⁹¹ The tone which colours the entire Tretise and which blends with his basic theme is established in this passage through such words as "efectuel," "ernest," and "ernystfully." These expressions give evidence to the fact that as far as this preacher is concerned, getting to heaven is a serious propo-

¹⁹¹ Tretise, p. 225.

sition with "bourde" or "playe" not only worldly or disrespectful or unworthy, but it even "takith away oure bileve and so oure moste helpe of oure salvacioun."¹⁹² There is no mistaking his meaning even from the very beginning of his work: the miracles and works of Christ and his saints were effectual because they were true, real, actual; the playing of miracles, that is, the very act of religious dramatic presentation which depicts spiritual things in a human way is a violation of truth, hence a desecration of holiness, and is, therefore, essentially sinful. Once again, there is manifested here a distrust of that which is fabled or "made-up," just as was noted in the attitude of Chaucer's parson toward fabling.¹⁹³ The author reinforces this idea by presenting a number of examples. These show a most earnest endeavour on his part to convince others that he who "takith the most precious werkis of God in pley and bourde, . . . so takith his name in idil, and so mysusith oure bileve."¹⁹⁴ The first of his examples concerns a servant's relationship to his lord; the author knows that every reader will be able to appreciate the fact that no servant would "taken in pley"¹⁹⁵

192 Tretise, p. 226.

193 See supra, pp. 10-11.

194 Tretise, p. 225

195 Ibid.

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that which his lord would take "in earnest."¹⁹⁶ The man of the time would be well aware of the consequences of such folly, hence the author takes this first opportunity to warn his reader that "God takith more venjaunce . . . than a lord that sodaynly sleeth his servaunt"¹⁹⁷ upon those who "playin his myraclis as men don nowe on dayes."¹⁹⁸ The latter part of this sentence seems to suggest that at the time that this is being written the playing of miracles, as understood by the writer, is quite popular; the very fact also that he feels compelled to voice his protest in so long a tract seems to support this idea. One notices, after reading only a few paragraphs, that not only are the same ideas repeated, but also the very same words and phrases are used over and over again. This aspect of his style suggests either a rather weak writer, which would, in turn, imply a not-too-well-educated preacher; or else this might be a device he is using intentionally in order to drive home the point he is trying so "ernestfully" to make. This kind of repetition, which is found throughout the work, serves to reinforce his grave, sober tone, thus stressing the idea that the matter under discussion is a solemn, weighty one, and one which is

196 Tretise, p. 225.

197 Ibid., p. 226.

198 Ibid.

pressing for an immediate solution in order that far-reaching and dire consequences may be avoided. Therefore, in addition to the expressions already mentioned, he adds the following: "teris,"¹⁹⁹ "penaunce,"²⁰⁰ "disciplynyng of oure fleysch,"²⁰¹ "wrathe of God,"²⁰² finally summing this up in his biblical quotation: "hydous and ferful it is to fallen into the hon-dis of God on lyve."²⁰³ There is little doubt that the writer is endeavouring to awaken in his reader a vivid impression of the immediacy of brimstone and hell-fire which, according to him, can be avoided only by fearing the Lord, and by concentration upon penance and mortification; this salutary disposition can be obtained only by avoiding miracle playing which "reversen penaunce doying."²⁰⁴

This Wyclifite is true to his sect in his stern religious outlook. Not once has he mentioned the word "love" in the relationship of God and men; rather, he has emphasized Christ's "penaunce, teris, and schedyng of blod,"²⁰⁵ reminding

¹⁹⁹ Tretise, p. 226

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid., pp. 226-7.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 226

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

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his reader that "of Cristis lawzyng we reden never in Holy Writt."²⁰⁶ God is a Lord of vengeance, for man sees the rod of God "in the hond of Crist"²⁰⁷ and trembles as a child who sees the rod of his master. The implicit conclusion is that in order to be exalted by Christ "in tyme of his graceous visityng"²⁰⁸ men must avoid miracle playing, which is "of the lustis of the fleyssh and myrthe of the body."²⁰⁹

Concentration up to this point has centered upon arousing the emotion of fear in regard to the hell into which a vengeful God is ready to fling those who look favourably upon miracle playing. Rather suddenly shifting his trend of thought, the writer reiterates his central complaint about the falsity of this kind of playing by mentioning that "si-then it makith to se veyne siztis of degyse, . . . it suf-frith not a man to beholden enterly the zerde of God."²¹⁰ He sees disguise as a method of deceit which, in this case, prevents men from perceiving the word of God completely and truly. Rather than introduce a new concept, the author has

²⁰⁶ Tretise, p. 226.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 227.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 228.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

merely repeated his original idea. The discussion continues in this vein; he speaks about the Jews who mocked Christ and laughed at his Passion. The central point of this passage seems to be that the Jews were unable to understand and know the real person of Christ because they were convinced of the truth of their own false concepts regarding Him; hence they misapprehended the whole meaning of his life and mission. The author sees this same kind of blindness characterizing those who favor miracle playing for, in their false presentation of these miracles, they are actually joking about the true miracles of God.

It is significant that the reformer has kept his remarks quite general, nor has he singled out either actors or audience in any specific way. But he does so at this point in his Tretise, referring to "these myraclis pleyeris and mayntenours,"²¹¹ who, in his estimation, are the cause of much grief to the souls of men. They easily ignore that which God bids them to do; they fail to "hallowyn his name"²¹² because they play God's miracles for the fun of it, thus "thei scornen his name and so scornyn hym."²¹³ Since he does not elaborate, there is no way of being certain about who

²¹¹ Tretise, p. 228.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 229.

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these "pleyeris and mayntenours" were, but his context seems to suggest those citizens who periodically assumed the role of a scriptural character in a religious play produced by the guilds, rather than a professional troupe of actors. This, however, is mere speculation since nowhere does he clarify the term "miraclis pleyinge." The matter presented thus far might be termed the author's introduction, for in this section of the tract he has stated his thesis, established his tone, and indicated the seriousness of the problem. Having built this kind of a foundation, he is able to move to a more specific type of discussion.

His purpose in the next few paragraphs is to set forth six reasons which he takes as given by supporters of miracle plays. The first of these is that the plays are part of man's worship of God. Although the writer does not present his arguments against these reasons as he introduces each one, he can't resist adding here that the Jews who mocked Christ excused themselves in this same manner. Creizenach's statement: "that the production of mysteries was a pious and godly work so long as humour did not enter into them too largely, seems in the period during which this species of plays flourished, to have been as little doubted in England as in other countries,"²¹⁴ bears out the fact that the

²¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 50.

the religious aspect of the plays was of great significance to medieval men. This further suggests that the antithetical viewpoint which the Wyclifite later presents is not a popular one in the sense that it is probably shared chiefly by his fellow Lollards.

The second reason he mentions is that the plays often convert men to good living for, when they see how easily the devil brings many to hell, men decide to abjure their pride, accepting instead "the meke conversacioun of Crist and of his syntis."²¹⁵ This, too, seems to have been an accepted opinion concerning the plays, for Creizenach mentions that "It was believed that men were effectually deterred from sin if the punishment of it by the devil was shown forth in a play."²¹⁶

A third point is that by the sight of the sufferings of Christ and the saints men are moved to tears which indicate their reverence rather than scorn for God. This probably refers to the idea of gratia lacrimarum to which medieval ascetics attached a great value; thus, if by the representation of the sufferings of Christ and the saints, spectators could be moved to tears of pity, these representations were commendable channels through which men could possess

²¹⁵ Tretise, p. 229.

²¹⁶ See loc. cit.

this saving grace.

The following two reasons convey the notion that, since there are men who can be reached only by "gamen and pley,"²¹⁷ it is timely and reasonable to endeavour to convert these through miracle plays and similar entertainment rather than have them find their enjoyment "bi pleyinge of other japis."²¹⁸ This is the same outlook as that which Creizenach finds to be true of the period, for he states that these people "thought that it was very useful for common folk to see the events of sacred history thus bodily and visually presented before them and that, since occasional relaxation was a common need, religious plays were indisputably better than many other diversions."²¹⁹

The final reason cited is that since the miracles of Christ and the saints may be "peynted,"²²⁰ there is no reason why they could not also be imitated in action. Having presented these ideas, the author attempts to answer them one by one, leaving his "proof" for the final section of the work.

First, he believes that instead of seeking the worship of God, the participants in the plays are more interested

²¹⁷ Tretise, p. 229.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Loc. cit.

²²⁰ Tretise, p. 229.

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"to ben seen of the world and to plesyn to the world than to ben seen of God or to plesyn hym."²²¹ He compares such men to heathens who say, in much the same way, that by worshipping their idols they are worshipping God. The author then makes a rather important statement which, once again, introduces his idea that dramatic representation is essentially false: those who support the representation of the miracle plays "lieth to hemself, whanne thei seyn that suche miracles pleiynge is to the worschip of God,"²²² especially since these plays are "onely synngnis of love withoute dede,"²²³ while the true worship of God consists "bothe in signe and in dede."²²⁴ Through his separation of the words "signe" and "dede" he infers a distinction which serves to emphasize his conviction that a sign or symbol or representation of another thing--in this instance, of the miracles and works of Christ and his saints--is a lie, a falsity, which, he goes on to explain, is the surest means the devil has "to drawen men to the byleve of Anti-Crist."²²⁵ He adds that not he who "pleyith the wille of God"²²⁶ worships Him, but only he who does his will.

221 Tretise, p. 230.

222 Ibid.

223 Ibid.

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid.

226 Ibid.

He concludes this argument with the statement that through such "feyned"²²⁷ miracles, men beguile themselves and despise God as did the tormentors who mocked Christ. In rebutting the first reason, the only thing the preacher has done has been to re-state his position toward miracle playing by using such words as "signe" and "feyned;" for they serve to remind the reader that what is made-up serves only to deceive men, and to pervert their true faith.

His second step attempts to refute the popular notion that the plays often convert men to good living. In a medley of ideas rather loosely worked into two lengthy sentences, he tries to explain, on the one hand, how the Passion of Christ became an occasion of sin to the Jews, hence how a virtue can become a sin, while on the other hand, how the sin of Adam, resulting in the coming of Christ, illustrates evil becoming an occasion of good. The point which he seems to be attempting to make in a somewhat round-about way, is that miracle plays, which he has maintained from the beginning to be sinful, may, at times, be an occasion of converting men, but because they are essentially sinful, they far more often pervert men--not only "oon synguler persone but an hool comynte."²²⁸

²²⁷ Tretise, p. 231.

²²⁸ Ibid.

He says that the plays pervert Christian belief because they take the name of God in vain. Lest his reader might not quite understand his meaning, he resorts to another of his favourite "hellish" illustrations for clarification of his argument. He contends that because hell is presented symbolically in the plays many men suppose that "ther is no helle of everlastynge peyne,"²²⁹ and that God merely threatens to punish men for their evil but will not really "do it in dede."²³⁰ In this instance, taking God's name in vain means, according to this preacher, not believing that God will keep his word but, instead, giving credence to an untrue symbolical representation. Once the author's mind has reverted to hell and punishment, he seems to be reminded of the need for mortification and penance, therefore, he feels compelled to elaborate a bit. Consequently, he reminds his reader that since plays pervert man's hope in God, it is the writer's belief that the saints hoped that the more they abstained from such plays "the more mede thei shuld then have of God."²³¹

To help those of his readers who might be unable to recall a saint who abstained in such a manner, the writer cites the first of his "proofs" from the Old Testament. The

²²⁹ Tretise, p. 231.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

interesting aspect of this and subsequent illustrations from the bible is that he chooses episodes which contain the word "play" or "playing" without regard to the connotation of the word in its biblical context. At times, one cannot help but feel that he fits the example into a particular mould of ideas, thus making the illustration convey something which it does not say in the original.

In the first example, he refers to the prayer of Sara, the daughter of Raguel, the biblical text of which runs as follows: "Tu scis, Domine, quia nunquam concupivi virum, et mundam servavi animam meam ab omni concupiscentia. Nunquam cum ludentibus miscui me, neque cum his qui in levitate ambulant participem me praebui."²³² The author cites her as praying: "Lord, thou woost that nevere y coveytide man, and clene y have kept myselfe fro all lustis, nevere with pleyeris y myngid me mysilfe."²³³ The first part of his quotation carries the same meaning as the biblical text but the latter section bears a shift in meaning from the original. The bible conveys the idea that Sara is speaking of non-association cum ludentibus and cum his qui in levitate ambulant in the sense that these are men for whom dalliance and

²³² Tob. 3:16.

²³³ Tretise, pp. 231-32.

loose moral living are an integral part of their lives. The reformer, however, by using the term "pleyers" in his context immediately evokes in the reader's mind the association with drama--more specifically, with the miracle playing with which his Tretise is dealing--even before he makes that connection directly in the sentences which follow; this bears out our previous charge of loose and inexact usage of important terms.²³⁴ He has, in this instance, been inaccurate either unintentionally, by misunderstanding the original text, or intentionally by forcing his own interpretation upon it. His subsequent statements build on this interpretation as he singles out priests for a blistering attack; he contrasts Sara who abstained "fro al cumpany of idil pleyeris"²³⁵ with the priests of the New Testament who administer the sacraments yet "zyvyng hem to pleyes;"²³⁶ these ought to "abstene hym fro al ydil pleying both of myraclys and ellis"²³⁷ for otherwise they will be damned by "this holy womman Sara at the day of dom."²³⁸

²³⁴ See supra, p. 95.

²³⁵ Tretise, p. 232.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

Having thus assailed priests for giving themselves to plays, and having mentioned the sacraments generally, the writer chooses the sacrament of the Eucharist as a point of further elaboration. He says that the "body of Crist that thei treytyn in ther hondis, never zaf hym to pley but to alle sicke thing as is most contrarious to pley, as is penance and suffryng of persecution."²³⁹ He seems to use the word "pley" in this context to mean any frivolous involvement in that which would be pleasurable to one's senses. This whole passage is illustrative of the amazing manner in which he can move from one connotation of the word to another. His next statement beginning "And so this myraclis pleyinge . . ." ²⁴⁰ returns the reader to the concept of dramatic performances; the sentence concludes with a warning reminder that through these plays not only faith and hope are lost but true charity as well, because men, instead of weeping for their own sins as well as those of their neighbours, are drawn from deeds of charity and penance into "dedis of lustis and lik thingis, and of fedying of . . . wittis."²⁴¹ With a kind of climactic force he states that those who say "Pley we a pley of Anti-Crist and of the day of dome that sum man may be convertid

²³⁹ Tretise, p. 232.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

therby,"²⁴² are deliberately choosing to do evil things believing that good will ensue; he agrees with St. Paul that for these, "dampnyng is riztwise."²⁴³

His third argument, through which he attempts to refute the belief that the plays move men to tears and compunction, is surprisingly brief. As far as he is concerned, the weeping of men and women at plays is not for their sins but merely the effect upon the people of the moving story represented; besides, Christ reproved even the women who wept over his Passion bidding them "to wepen for the synnes of hemsilf and of theire chyldren."²⁴⁴ Without any use of either Old Testament allusions or homely similes for further proof or clarification, the author immediately moves, in the same paragraph, to the fourth argument in an endeavour to disprove the idea that men can be reached spiritually only by games and plays. His basic answer is that men who are not converted by the real thing, God's sacraments, will not be truly converted by "veyn pleying"²⁴⁵ which "is of no vertue but ful of defaute."²⁴⁶ He somewhat monotonously reiterates this

²⁴² Tretise, p. 232.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

central idea of hidden deceit falsifying truth, sprinkling the passage with expressions such as "feynyd holyness,"²⁴⁷ "vanyte,"²⁴⁸ "ypocritis,"²⁴⁹ and "lyeris."²⁵⁰ A man who "is occupied in seyng of pleyis"²⁵¹ will, in the estimation of the preacher, forfeit the blessings "of swetnesse"²⁵² while priests "that seyn hemsilf holy"²⁵³ but "bysien hem aboute siche pleyis"²⁵⁴ are the true hypocrites and liars. This second reference to priests' participation in the plays suggests that their association with the religious plays was commonly accepted.

In answer to the fifth reason, which claims that human nature requires recreation, the writer becomes more involved with the idea that neither "siche myraclis pleyinge

²⁴⁷ Tretise, p. 233.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

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ne the sizte of hem"²⁵⁵ is true recreation but rather "fals and wordly."²⁵⁶ In an effort to prove that the followers of such plays "gon fro lust into lust"²⁵⁷ he again directly refers to the drama as "feynyd recreacioun"²⁵⁸ and "fals conceite,"²⁵⁹ therefore, "a double shrewidness,"²⁶⁰ far worse than if "thei pleyiden pure vaniteis."²⁶¹ According to the reformer, people are easily deceived by these "mengid trewthys,"²⁶² supposing that to be good which is really "ful yvel."²⁶³ Because of this kind of deception he suggests that it would be "lasse yvel"²⁶⁴ for people "to pleyin rebaudye, than to pleyin such myraclis,"²⁶⁵ since ribaldry would be recognized for what it is, and therefore would not be as deceptive. There is absolutely no clarification given as to exactly what specific kind of evil is found in the plays for here, as elsewhere in his text, the evil lies in the fact

255 Tretise, p. 233.

256 Ibid.

257 Ibid.

258 Ibid.

259 Ibid.

260 Ibid.

261 Ibid.

262 Ibid.

263 Ibid.

264 Ibid.

265 Ibid.

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that the plays are feigned performances. In a gesture typical of reformers, he posits an alternative as a form of recreation to the miracle plays. His substitution, he seems to feel, is much more in keeping with the kind of recreation which should follow a man's "holy contemplacioun in the chirche"²⁶⁶ "on the haliday."²⁶⁷ Before he tells his reader of what this recreation would consist, he endeavours to evoke a sense of shame in him by means of a reminder that if "he hadde veryly ocupiede hym in contemplacioun"²⁶⁸ while in church, he would have no need to ask "what recreacion men shulden have on the haliday"²⁶⁹ nor desire to behold such vanity as is found in the plays. At least one reference to the plays in this context tells us something about them--his statement of their being played on holidays after church. Finally, the author directly states that which he has said his reader should already know, namely, that "his recreacioun shulde ben in the werkis of mercy to his neyebore and in dilityng hym in the good comunicacioun with his neyebore, as biforn he dilited hym in God, and in alle othere nedeful werkis that reson and kynde axen."²⁷⁰ It hardly seems likely

²⁶⁶ Tretise, p. 233.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 234.

that his form of recreation would attract an enthusiastic following.

The last reason, that since the miracles of Christ and the saints may be delineated in painting they may also appropriately be imitated in action, is dealt with at greater length. The writer's main contention is that painted pictures have religious value only when they tell the plain truth, as books do, whereas the plays are made to delight men's senses thus blinding men to truth and goodness and leading them to wickedness. Nowhere in his Tretise does he even imply that the senses can help man to know God, to love Him more, and to serve Him better. For this preacher, anything pleasurable is antithetical to penance, hence draws one away from "the blisse of hevене."²⁷¹ In this extensive paragraph the writer expounds the theory that the miracle plays violate the second commandment of God, "Thou schalt not take Goddis name in idil."²⁷² In a style unusually repetitious and tedious, he exhibits anything but the "thoughtful precision" with which Young credits him.²⁷³ Expressions such as: "is forbeden to takun the mervelouse werkis of God in idil,"²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Tretise, p. 234

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ See op. cit., p. 415.

²⁷⁴ Tretise, p. 234.

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"how mowen thei be more takyn in idil,"²⁷⁵ "ellis forsothe we taken hem in veyn,"²⁷⁶ "pleyinge is verre takyng of Goddis name in ydil,"²⁷⁷ illustrate the manner which causes his work to become monotonous; he simply repeats one concept a tiring number of times. Rather than "thoughtful precision," one finds confusingly lengthy sentences which tend to suggest that this author has not carefully thought out the problem or his answers to it. One feels that he keeps adding a remark here and there as he argues along, without much attention being paid to whether or not he is unnecessarily repeating himself; but though this passage is long, not much that is fresh is presented. This can be exemplified by a portion of the concluding sentence: ". . . God and alle his seyntis demyen alle tho cristen men unkynde that pleyen or favouren the pley of the deth or of the myracles of the most kynde fadir Crist, that dyede and wrouzte myraclis to bryngen men to the evere-lastande heretage of hevne."²⁷⁸ This notion has been repeatedly expressed in the Tretise thus far; consequently the reformer has failed to provide his reader with fresh food for thought.

²⁷⁵ Tretise, p. 234

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 235.

In the next paragraph, the author moves into a new kind of presentation with emphasis on Old Testament scriptural passages. These are his additional "proofs" for all the arguments he has presented thus far in the Tretise and they are directed to those men for whom those arguments do "not suffise."²⁷⁹

He intends, first of all, to prove his former assertion that miracle playing is sinful, but he does not agree with some who claim that it is merely a "litol synne."²⁸⁰ His basis for this disagreement is that each sin, be it ever so little, if it is maintained and preached "as gode and profitable"²⁸¹ becomes a "deadely synne"²⁸² for although it is human to fall, "develiche it is to abyden styлле thereinne."²⁸³ He continues: "sithen thes myraclis pleyinge is synne . . . and is stedefastly meyntenyd, . . . no dowte but that it is deadly synne."²⁸⁴ Having said this, one would expect that the author would proceed with his exposition, but the following sentences indicate a recapitulation of

²⁷⁹ Tretise, p. 235.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

thoughts resulting, perhaps, from an intense desire to make certain that his readers do not leave the Tretise without this notion of sin firmly embedded in their minds and hearts; he states ". . . myche more pleying of myraclis not onely excusid but stedefastly meytenyd is dampnable and deadly, namely sythen it not onely pervertith oon man but al a puple, that thei seien good, yvel, and yvel, gode."²⁸⁵

This matter is not new because it was discussed in previous sections of the tract. The author, perhaps forgetting that by this time his reader is familiar with these ideas, states that the explanation given should suffice "eche cristen man"²⁸⁶ but for those who need more proof the reformer refers to Ishmael's playing with Isaac and his subsequent exile in the desert. The relevant biblical verses concerning the Ishmael-Isaac episode are as follows: "Cumque vidisset Sara filium Agar aegiptiae ludentem cum Isaac filio suo, dixit ad Abraham: Ejice ancillam hanc, et filium ejus; non enim erit heres filius ancillae cum filio meo Isaac."²⁸⁷ The author elaborates upon the expression ludentem cum Isaac endeavouring to show that this kind of playing was wrong for three reasons. The first is that "bi siche pleyinge Ismael,

²⁸⁵ Tretise, p. 235.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Gen. 21:9

that was the sone of the servant, myzte han begilid Isaac of his heretage;"²⁸⁸ the second is that since "Ismael was born after the fleysh, and Isaac after the spirit,"²⁸⁹ the episode shows men that "pley of the fleysh is not covenable ne helpely to the spirit,"²⁹⁰ but rather it divests the spirit of its "heretage;"²⁹¹ while the third reason is that this episode illustrates the concept that "the olde testament, that is the testament of the fleysh, may nat ben holden with the newe testament that is testament of the spirit,"²⁹² because it deprives one of "verre fredom"²⁹³ and the "heretage of hevne."²⁹⁴ In his three reasons the author concentrates on the dichotomy found in each of rank, birth, Old and New Testaments. He believes that it is such dichotomy that is capable of severing a man from his spiritual heritage.

The question arising in one's mind as a result of this discussion is: What relevance is there between these conclusions and miracle playing? Certainly the word ludentem

288 Tretise, p. 235.

289 Ibid.

290 Ibid.

291 Ibid.

292 Ibid.

293 Ibid.

294 Ibid.

is found in the biblical text and has been used as "pleying" and "pley" by the author in the excerpts quoted above, but he has not, in his three conclusions, related the terms to drama. It does seem that to associate these with dramatic presentations would be stretching the original meaning beyond logical limits. This, nevertheless, is exactly what the author does, and it is interesting to note how he weds these two meanings. He first concludes that the playing of Ishmael with Isaac "was not lefevful;"²⁹⁵ then, from this position, he takes one more step which brings him to the concept of dramatic performances. This he accomplishes by arguing that so much more "fleyshly play is not lefevful with the gostly werkis of Crist and of his syntis as ben his myraclis to convertin men to the bileve."²⁹⁶ The reason that he posits for this conclusion which, as has been noted, he has been weaving into the fabric of the Tretise from its very beginning, is that since there is an irreconcilable dichotomy between the sign, or representation, or figure of the real life, or miracles, or suffering of Christ or his saints, these cannot be reconciled; the fleshly and spiritual are in perpetual enmity, therefore that which is made-up by human beings to represent God's deeds is essentially false, hence worthy of universal condemnation.

295 Tretise, p. 236.

296 Ibid.

In the following statement, the author proceeds to contradict himself: "And as in good thingis the figuride is evermore bettere than that is figure; so in yvel thingis that that is figurid is fer werse than the figure; than sythen the pleyinge of Ismael with Isaac is figure of the pleyinge of the fleysh with the spirit, and the ton is yvel, thanne fer werse is the tother."²⁹⁷ What he is saying is that if good things are imitated, the imitation is better than the original, but if evil things are imitated, the imitation is worse than the original. The reasoning here is far from intelligible. For instance, his statement that the playing of Ishmael with Isaac, which is an imitation of the playing of the flesh with the spirit, is evil, can be reconciled with his former assertion that the imitation of evil is worse than the original; but when he says "the tother," that is, the imitation of Christ and the saints, is "fer werse," this contradicts his statement that the imitation of a good thing is better than what is imitated, since from this it logically follows that the imitation of the "gostly werkis of Crist and of his seyntis" should be better than the original, hence commendable rather than damnable. Actually, this argument would refute the central thesis of his sermon. One can only conclude that this reformer meant something different, but conclusions can be made only on the basis of what he did, in

²⁹⁷ Tretise, p. 236.

fact, write.

From this, it can be seen that this Wyclifite reasons in circles but seems to be blissfully unaware that his argument does not hold together. Subsequent statements bear this out: "Pleyinge with the myraclis of God makith hem dispisid, sythen pleyinge to comparisoun of the mervelouse werkis of God is fer more cherl than ony man may ben cherl of a lord;"²⁹⁸ "mennus pley with the mervelouse werkis of God is reprov-able;"²⁹⁹ "this is a verre lesynge to seyen that for the love of God he wil ben a good felowe with the devil, so it is a werry lesyng to seyen that for the love of God he wil pleyen his myraclis: for in neyther is the love of God schewid, but his hestis tobrokun;"³⁰⁰ "pleyinge of myraclis benemeth men ther bileve in Crist, and is verre goynge backward fro dedis of the spirit to onely sygnes don after lustis of the fleysh, that ben azenus alle the deedis of Crist;"³⁰¹ "myraclis is verre apostasye fro Crist, and therefore we schal nevere fyn-dyn that myraclis pleying was usid among cristene men."³⁰²

²⁹⁸ Tretise, p. 236.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 237.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

In this last clause the reformer has implied that all those who are in any way involved with "myraclis pleyinge" are to be considered non-Christians. This is undoubtedly a sweeping condemnation because it would include anyone in any diocese of the land: members of the Church hierarchy, priests, religious men and women, and the laity who supported, in any way, the production of religious dramatic representations. Ending the discussion in his characteristic manner of berating priests, he reproaches those of them showing their priesthood "onely in synghes and for money . . . and not in dedis;"³⁰³ this he considers to be an "apostasye"³⁰⁴ which parallels the "apostasyie of Lucifer"³⁰⁵ that drew much of heaven into hell, for priests also "drawith myche of the puple after hem,"³⁰⁶ by their example of "shewiden ther religioun"³⁰⁷ only "in tokenes."³⁰⁸

In an effort to reinforce these ideas, the author introduces another Old Testament episode, that concerning

303 Tretise, p. 237.

304 Ibid.

305 Ibid.

306 Ibid.

307 Ibid.

308 Ibid.

"the pleyinge of the childre of Abner and of the childre of Joab."³⁰⁹ The following are the relevant biblical verses: "Dixitque Abner ad Joab: Surgant pueri, et ludant coram nobis. Et respondit Joab: Surgant. Surrexerunt ergo, et transierunt numero duodecim de Benjamin, et parte Isboseth, filii Saul, et duodecim de pueris David. Apprehensoque unusquisque capite comparis sui, defixit gladium in latus contrarii, et ceciderunt simul; vocatumque est nomen loci illius Ager robustorum in Gabaon."³¹⁰ This example is used to illustrate "how the pleyinge of two contrari partis togidere, as of the pleyinge of the childre of Abner and the childre of Joab"³¹¹ through which so many men were slain is not as bad as the "pleyinge of gostly werkis, after lustus of the fleysh;"³¹² these are worse enemies since they use the word of God as "but a mene to ther avauntage,"³¹³ delighting in the personal pleasure they receive from the plays rather than taking delight "in the myraclis silf."³¹⁴ As in previous biblical illustrations, so also in this instance, the author utilizes the term ludant for his purpose of condemning plays. In his estimation, a field littered with

³⁰⁹ Tretise, p. 237.

³¹⁰ 2 Kings 2:14.

³¹¹ Tretise, p. 237.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 238

human corpses is a far lesser calamity than the personal delight experienced from participation in religious dramatic representation. This is understandable from his viewpoint since, as he has repeatedly professed, such men already have one foot in hell. His next illustration re-emphasizes this belief; he states that "God is more jelous over his puple"³¹⁵ than a husband who sees his wife loving "another man more than hym."³¹⁶ This is practically the only time that he has explicitly spoken about the love of God for man, but even here the jealousy of this love is brought forth, rather than perhaps its mercy. This is especially evident when the writer says that just as a husband would take vengeance quickly upon an unfaithful wife, so does God "sende sone venjaunse therafter"³¹⁷ when He sees "the kyndnessis of his myraclis put byhynde and mennus lustis befor."³¹⁸ Within the context of this Tretise the preacher has, a number of times, referred to the Old Testament as being based upon "fleyshly lyvyng"³¹⁹ and the New Testament as being built upon "gostly lyvyng."³²⁰ From these remarks it would seem that he is attempting to

³¹⁵ Tretise, p. 238.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 237.

³²⁰ Ibid.

bring forth the New Testament into greater respect and prominence, but the fact is that whether he was conscious of it or not, his emphasis in tone and thought upon the dour, the mirthless, the stern, the punishable, and the hellish, is essentially Old Testament-like. This is further exemplified in his following list showing the ways in which God's vengeance would visit those who disregarded the author's admonition: "outher of pestilence, outher of debate, outher of flodis, outher of derthe, and of many othere."³²¹ The last phrase "and of many othere" surprisingly suggests that he can't think of any further specific examples of this kind; one has to credit him, nevertheless, with having done quite well so far in this regard.

The remainder of the work is composed of three other biblical examples³²² which add little or nothing to the arguments already advanced in the Tretise. In fact, the writer, by using these illustrations, moves away from the subject of miracle plays and discusses, instead, such matters as idolatry,³²³ or avarice,³²⁴ or men's Christian duties.³²⁵ There seems, therefore, to be no reason to expound this section of

³²¹ Tretise, p. 238.

³²² The biblical texts involved here include: Exodus 32:6; 4 Kings 2:23; and 2 Kings 6:21.

³²³ Tretise, p. 239.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 242.

the homily any further.

From among the numerous repetitions, irrelevancies, inconsistencies, and contradictions, it has been rather difficult to weed out the reformer's main arguments against miracle playing. It does, nevertheless, seem quite evident that the chief contention of the entire work, one which has already been pointed out in the course of this study, is the condemnation of made-up performances which in their very act of portraying the truth are essentially false. Since this idea forms the basis for the various aspects of his discussion, the author has not only incessantly returned to it, but has also perseveringly re-stressed it without indicating anywhere in the document that his unrelenting antagonism toward religious dramatization would or could ever be even slightly modified.

That his complaint would have been readily endorsed by certain men of the time, especially those of the same mind-set as Chaucer's parson, can be generally conceded, but because, as has been previously noted, the historical period in which it is considered to have been written is the fourteenth century--a time when the Wiclifite heresy had not yet gained much momentum--it is unlikely that his thesis would have received a wide-spread acceptance. While some, today, might agree with Coulton that the author of the tract "may

or may not have been a Lollard,"³²⁶ the preceding examination of this sermon's text tends to substantiate Gardiner's belief that "every phrase of the sermon is eloquent with the narrow zeal of those fanatics, and to mistake it for the reforming voice of a Catholic preacher is singularly to misread it."³²⁷ As a result, one is inclined to conclude that neither in content nor in tone does the Tretise express either popular or ecclesiastical sentiment. This, in turn, leads to a belief that its influence either upon the curbing or elimination of religious dramatic presentation was relatively insignificant.

³²⁶ Op. cit., p. 392.

³²⁷ Op. cit., p. 15.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This examination, incorporating a cross-section of complaint from the geographical, political, religious, and social points of view, has established, first, that the volume of criticism levelled against medieval religious drama was pseudo-philosophic and external in nature; and, second, that such opposition as can be discovered came from orthodox and heretic alike.

It has become evident that, regardless of where or by whom the complaints were made, there existed a remarkable correspondence among them. In twelfth century Germany, for example, Gerhoh of Reichersberg and Herrad von Landsberg complained about disguisings and other external abuses surrounding the dramatic performances. In England during the fourteenth century, the Dominican, John Bromyard, and the Wyclifite author of the Tretise of miracilis pleyinge evinced a puritanical squeamishness at the fabling involved in the plays. In the sixteenth century, Ecclesiastical Councils in France, and Spain, and Italy, echoed this kind of criticism in an effort to purify the plays of external abuses which they feared might become a source of ridicule against the Faith. Hence, the similarity characterizing official decrees

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and personal writings alike, seems to stem from the fact that there were these two chief targets for the attacks; fabling, and the abuses and disorders connected with the performing of the plays, neither of which is an essential element of the religious drama.

A study of the various letters and prohibitions by bishops who would not allow miracle plays in their dioceses has revealed that, in every case, the complaints originated either because some disorders had accompanied the performances, or because the members of the clergy, who liked the plays, neglected their spiritual obligations as a result of their direct involvement in the drama. Such complaint, however, cannot be considered as criticism of the plays themselves.

This investigation has also shown that the prohibitions issued during the Reformation assumed a personal and not-disinterested character; the governmental regulations of the drama tend to support the idea that during that turbulent period the plays became a tool in the hands of opposed political and religious factions.

Our conclusion, that the complaints were pseudo-philosophic and external, is best strengthened by the discovery that the documents examined contained no criticism of the plays as such. Consequently, it seems that the oft-promoted assumption that religious drama was criticized

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because it was essentially ribald or scurrilous is without foundation. Current studies of medieval drama corroborate this because they, too, have failed to uncover any internal proof that the plays, especially those characterized by a greater realism and humour, contained matter which could easily have aroused the anger of the more scrupulous.³²⁸

In recent years the mystery cycles have been justly and enthusiastically appraised as works of art by outstanding critics. There was, however, always this nagging suggestion that their contemporaries often found the plays distasteful or unprofitable spiritually. This, unfortunately, tended to cause some good Christians to hesitate in their approval of these plays. We hope that our discovery of the true nature of the medieval complaint against the prohibition of a medieval play will help to remove any moral burden from the conscience of our contemporaries and permit them to enjoy these plays and profit from them as did the overwhelming majority of our medieval ancestors.

³²⁸ See M. M. Foley, "The Chester Cycle of Mystery Plays Considered As an Epic" (unpublished Master's dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1963), pp. 68-88.

CHAPTER VI

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis has been to examine all available medieval complaints relating to the nature and the performances of the medieval religious drama.

Under "official complaints," a decree of Pope Innocent III in 1207, and proclamations of various Bishops have been studied. The problem in connection with all of these was to discover exactly what was being condemned or restricted. In the case of Pope Innocent's decree, the condemnation extended only to the Feast of Fools and other similar spectacles; in the past, a number of zealous people have interpreted his decree much more severely and extended it to include any kind of religious playing. Such an explanation seems to have grown out of a misunderstanding of the word ludos; in the prohibitions it often meant games, not plays, and certainly not religious plays. Other ordinances, such as those of Bishop Grosseteste, were aimed at preventing the clergy from participating in the performances. Still other injunctions, including that of Bishop de Trilleck of Hereford, and those of Continental Provincial Councils, were levelled against external abuses accompanying the performances and not against the plays themselves. The cautious mood characterizing all of these churchmen was exemplified in the action of Saint Charles Borromeo, the great counter-reformer who, fearing

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that the playing of religious drama in churches and sites adjacent to them might give the Reforming clergy ammunition for complaint against the Roman Church, forbade, in his Archdiocese, the playing of religious plays both inside and outside the churches. This examination, then, has revealed that there was no real official prohibition of the religious stage on the part of the Roman Church or her Bishops.

Under the heading of "proclamations of reformers," the various laws and restrictions issued in the political and religious contentions in England, both by reforming Henry VIII and Catholic Mary Tudor, as well as those proclamations issued by the reforming Scottish Kirk, were examined. In every instance, the condemnation was in no way connected with the nature of the play; it sprang from both political and religious rivalry, the religious play being regarded as part of the old religion or part of the old political regime.

A more direct attack, however, was made upon these plays by rigorous and puritanical-minded writers and preachers who, just as the parson in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, considered all form of "fabling" or masking illicit and sinful; when this had to do with the life of Christ, it was the more damnable. A careful examination of the Tretise of miraculis pleyinge indicated that the homilist is attacking the plays from this theoretical, pseudo-philosophical direction, desiring to sweep them all away. The great Dominican preacher,

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John Bromyard, has been cited by critics as a witness against medieval religious plays: he argues in the same vein against the "sin of masking," by which he means any kind of disguising. Although he is more ordered, he is really closely related to the author of the Wyclifite Tretise. Echoing this same concept, Gerhoh of Reichersberg and Herrad von Landsberg criticized disguising as well as the external abuses which became associated with the performances. None of these complaints, however, are directed against the plays as such.

Our conclusion is that the greater bulk of criticism against the medieval religious drama was extraneous to the plays themselves, deriving from various sources: one, a conviction that presentation of sacred matter upon the stage was wrong in itself; two, a sensitivity to certain disorders in some dioceses that had accompanied the performances of some of the plays; three, a conviction on the part of some Bishops that the clergy were better employed praying than playing--even in the best of plays; four, in England and Scotland particularly, political and religious contentions in which the religious play became a kind of football; and five, on the part of some Catholic Bishops, an extreme sensitivity to criticism of the Reforming Clergy.