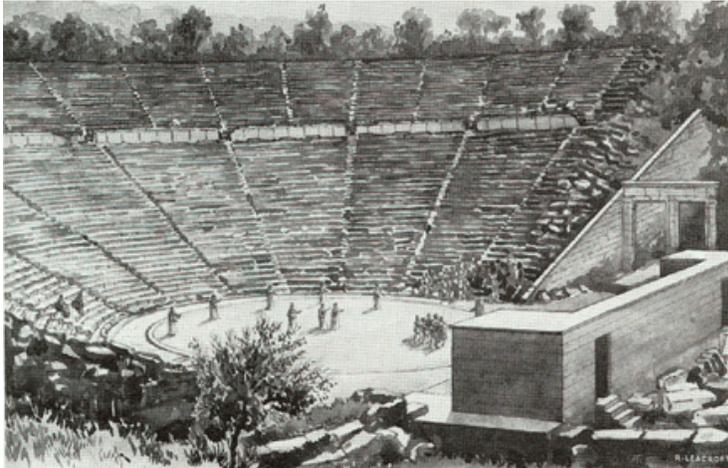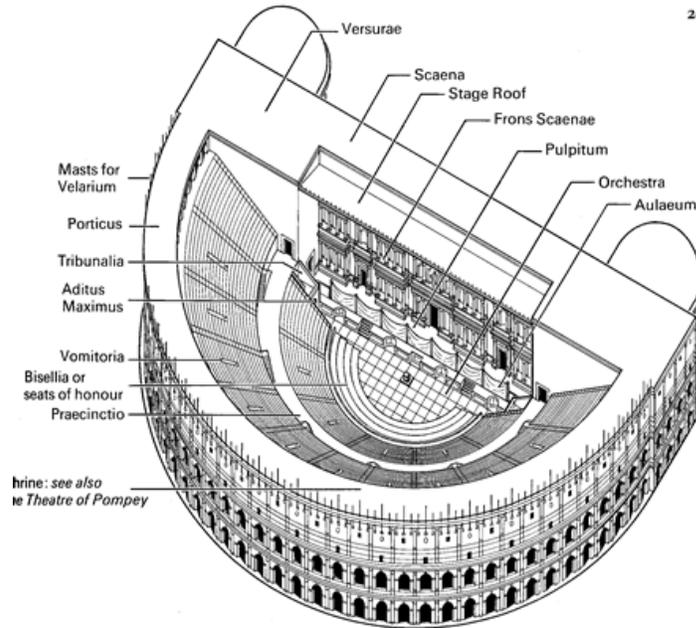# DRAMA -- FROM ORIGINS TO RENAISSANCE

Theatre at Epidaurus, Greece --5th century B.C.

Theater of Marcellus, Rome 1st century B.C.

500A.D.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Church banned theatrical performances, mostly as an attempt to curb the excesses of the Roman theatre. The Roman theatre was in decline because the economic and political conditions could not support the vast entertainment industry that had grown up in the empire and included circuses, horse races, gladiatorial combat, and the Roman comedies that are still sometimes performed today.

Very little is known about secular drama during the early medieval time. There certainly existed some performances that were not fully fledged theatre; they may have been carryovers from the original pagan cultures (as is known from records written by the clergy disapproving of such festivals). It is also known that mimes, minstrels, bards, storytellers, and jugglers traveled in search of new audiences and financial support. Not much is known about these performers' repertoire and no written texts survive.

Liturgical Drama 900-1300 A.D.

In the Middle Ages, the Church had to deal mostly with illiterate peasants who could only speak their local dialect. Drama was therefore used to give them a religious education in the mysteries of faith and the Bible. At first liturgical drama was used, in the form of a sung dialogue between the celebrants, to involve the congregation in choral celebration of religious mysteries. By the 13th century the whole church was used as a stage with the actors (clergy) mixing with the public.

In the tenth century the liturgical drama was born in the *Quem Quaeritis?* This Latin kernal is based on the story from the New Testament in which Mary Magdalene and her companions discover Christ's empty tomb was performed in the church or cathedral at Easter time. Eventually liturgical drama would encompass many stories from many parts of the Bible and be performed at diverse times of the year, according to local custom.

By about 1250, however, the plays would move outdoors into the churchyard and into open fields, town squares, or the city streets. As geographically further from the church, the clergy had less control over the content. The plays were also presented in the local vernacular languages, instead of in Latin, as was the mass. This allowed the message of the Bible to be more accessible to the illiterate

audience--who wanted to have it but who were also unable to speak Latin--

Engraving of a performance from the Chester mystery play cycle.

Mystery plays (end of 1300 A.D.)

At the beginning of the 14th century, religious performances moved out of the Church on occasion of processions. These developed into a new form of drama and consisted in a number of plays dealing with stories of the Old and New Testament. These were called **Mystery (or Miracle) Plays**. A similar kind of performance also developed in Europe, and in Italy it became known as Sacra Rappresentazione. The Mystery Plays were single episodes strung together in a **Mystery Cycle.** They were written in the English spoken by local people and included episodes in which certain human types appeared who could be immediately recognized by the spectators: for example, Noah's wife was an impudent English woman, the shepherds worshipping Christ at his birth were the poor English people of the time. Similarly, the setting was not Egypt or Palestine, where the biblical story was set, but York or some other English town. In this way religious themes were mingled with human themes in order to appeal to the widest audience.

Miracle plays

The **miracle play**, was a French genre which dominated the 14th c. These plays, usually between 1, 000 and 3,000 lines long, dramatize some of the vast quantity of narrative literature based on miracles attributed to the Virgin Mary or the saints; though clearly religious in inspiration, the plots of miracle plays are set in the real world.

Performances often took place indoors, in a guild-hall, with a system of staging, now called décor simultané, which was used in all religious drama from the 12th to the 16th c.: all the sets required by a play were placed in the playing area at the beginning of the performance; there was no curtain, no scene changes. This system greatly influenced not only the shape of medieval theaters (never permanent, but always constructed ad hoc), but also dramaturgical writing.

Morality Play (1360 A.D.)

Mysteries were not the only plays to hold the stage in England; there were others, called **Morality Plays,** which reached the peak of their popularity in the second half of the 14th century (1360 A.D.). At first they were performed by traveling professional companies on a platform build in an open space. Later they moved indoors into the banquet halls of noblemen or into the common rooms of universities.

These plays usually told an allegorical tale, not a biblical one, with the aim of making a moral point. Their characters were allegorical personifications of abstractions from theology or symbols of various aspects of the human condition, as their names revealed: The Seven Deadly Sins (pride, envy,lust, greed and so on), The Seven Graces, Mankind, etc. They were also a step in the direction of characterization which was to be later developed in Elizabethan Drama.

The finest Morality play which has come down to us is *Everyman*. Its hero is a character representing mankind. The story offers a moral lesson for the salvation of man's soul; but the appeal of the play lies in the quality of its characters who express themselves with such vivid individuality that the audience forgets their allegorical significance.
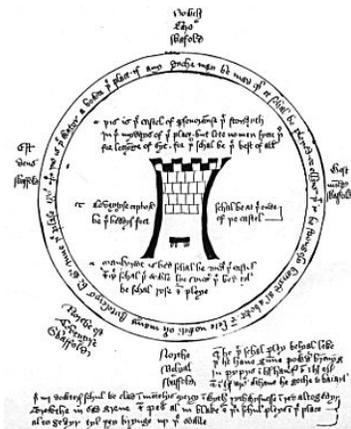
Stage drawing from *The Castle of Perseverance*, a 15th century vernacular morality play.

Medieval Drama was important in the development of the genre for three reasons:

- it added a human element to the religious themes of the Mysteries and created characters corresponding to English social types.

- it took the first tentative steps towards a psychological observation of characters in the Moralities,

- - it appealed strongly to people of all social classes.

Secular Drama

Secular plays in this period existed, although documentation is not as extensive. Farces were popular, and the earliest known vernacular farce was the French *Le garcon et l'aveugle* ("The Boy and the Blind Man"), dating from the thirteenth century. The play was probably performed by a professional traveling actor and his young apprentice. In England Robin Hood plays were popular, and all over Europe interludes with simple plotlines were performed at various social functions. Secular dramas were usually performed in winter indoors, and were often associated with schools, universities, and nobility, who would have the resources, time, and space to perform organized plays.

However, it is not possible to make a distinction between religious and secular theatre during the medieval era. The church dominated life for almost every citizen of Europe, and the boundary between secular and sacred was blurred daily. In mystery plays, for example, nonreligious plotlines and noncanonical characters were frequently interwoven with the religious story being told. An especially notable example of this is the The Second Shepherds' Play, in which the majority of the story focuses on a comic character trying to hide a sheep he has stolen from the other shepherds on the night of the birth of Christ.

Decline and Change

Like any long-lasting art form, the medieval theatre could not continue in a static state forever. Its death (or evolution, depending on the viewpoint) was due mostly to changing political and economic factors. First, the Protestant Reformation targeted the theatre, especially in England, in an effort to stamp out allegiance to Rome. In Wakefield, for example, the local mystery cycle text shows signs of Protestant editing, with references to the pope crossed out and two plays completely eliminated because they were too Catholic. However, it was not just the

Protestants who attacked the theatre of the time. The Council of Trent banned religious plays in an attempt to reign in the extrabiblical material that the Protestants frequently lampooned.

A revival of interest in ancient Roman and Greek culture changed the tastes of the learned classes in the performing arts. Greek and Roman plays were performed and new plays were written that were heavily influenced by the classical style. This led to the creation of Commedia dell'arte and other forms of Renaissance theatre.

A change of patronage also caused drastic changes to the theatre. In England the monarch and nobility started to support professional theatre troupes (including Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain's Men and King's Men), which catered to their upper class patron's tastes. These patrons desired to be entertained, not preached to, and as time passed the plays became more secular and refined. In time these same tastes would filter down to the lower classes.

Finally, the construction of permanent theaters, such as the Blackfriars Theatre signaled a major turning point from reliance on church facilities, touring groups, and inns as stages. Permanent theaters allowed for more sophisticated staging and storytelling. Moreover, professional troupes that owned their own theatre had more resources with which to prepare their productions, which changed the theatre from a mostly amateur or traveling art form to a professional one with different practices and standards.