

# The fall of man, york mystery cycle (play 5)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

S1151541/B020117

3rd April 2014

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The Fall of Man

York Mystery Cycle (Play 5)

Medieval Theatre Conventions

Language and Staging

The Fall of Man was traditionally performed as part of a larger series of plays known as The York Mystery Cycle. The Mystery Plays were a great medieval tradition and they were primarily used to bring religious messages to the commonfolk of York in the form of a religious festival. These plays were written in vernacular, usually having been translated from Latin, to allow for the easy understanding of illiterate audiences of the time. The most unique feature of these plays was the way they were staged. All the 47 plays in the York Cycle would have been performed on their own individual, moveable pageant wagons. These wagons would move processionally to each designated stop of the cycle (for example, in front of churches or marketplaces) and the plays would be performed. In short, the play would move toward the audience, unlike many of the stationary fixed-set morality plays of the time.

John Wesley Harris, author of *Medieval Theatre in Context: An Introduction*, introduces the structure of the pageant wagons as something the audience would have to look up to (Harris 1992: 126). The wagons would have two levels, the stage itself and the lower level where the actors would change costumes and store their props. Thus, when parked at street level, the audience would have to look up to these actors who are imparting religious lessons to them, almost as though receiving a divine message from God. Moreover, Harris states that actors would hang cloths around the wagon so that the audience could only view the play from the front, closing off the rest of the world and drawing the audience into the tight space where the play was being acted out.

## Guilds

The York Cycle plays arose as an expensive display of craftsmanship manned by the various guilds in the city. The guilds were enthusiastic about the pageants but over their heads was the threat of a hefty fine if they did not contribute or perform. (Davidson 2011) The pageant wagons were maintained by the city guilds. Each wagon would be given to a guild that best suited the play they were representing and thus they would be able to show off their wares in their plays. For example, according to Harris, the Goldsmiths of the city would be in charge of *The Magi* to show off their goldsmithing skills. The York Mystery Cycle, despite being part of a religious festival, would also be a showcase of the city's wealth and craftsmanship.

## The Intent of Medieval Theatre

“ Medieval drama took many forms, but the most spectacular of all was the civic religious drama of towns such as York...the whole history of the universe from the creation of Heaven and Earth to Doomsday (was presented).” Greg Walker, *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*. As the quote subtly suggests, the intent of a medieval play like *The Fall of Man* was simply to educate the masses about Biblical lessons. The York plays, unlike most morality plays, were written in vernacular to be accessible to the illiterate general public. The sequential 48 plays condensed all the lessons in the Bible into short acts that the public could ‘ digest’ quickly and effectively. The lessons were usually the same: do not give into the seven sins. For example, in *The Fall of Man*, the original sin is portrayed as Adam and Eve betraying God’s word. The story then continues to show how God punishes any man with a sinful nature. The lesson or moral of this story – God will punish a man if he sins – is then evidenced in the long sequence of plays, including *The Last Supper*, enabling the audience to cross-reference and corroborate the divine message amongst 46 other biblical stories.

The staging of the play is also crucial to its educational impact on the audience. As aforementioned, the pageant wagon comprises of an elevated platform for the scenes, causing the audience to look upwards, as though in prayer. The biblical messages are then physically delivered to the audience from a higher source, subconsciously creating the illusion that the messages are from God himself. This was another way to ensure the attention of the public so that the message in each play could get across.

Epic Theatre

## Conventions

Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre estranges the audience from the play on stage. (Brooker 1994: 191) This estrangement works in the audience's favor as it enables them to think to take a step back and think critically about the social, political and economic circumstances of the staged narrative and/or their respective realities. In short, the audience becomes a critical observer.

One of the characteristics of epic theatre is the *Verfrumdungseffekt* or V-effect, a theory that encapsulates Brecht's idea of audience estrangement. According to Drama Professor Olga Taxidou, the V-effect can be achieved through different avenues such as theatrically explicit narrators, masks and music. These serve to disengage the audience from the play on stage. This disengagement forces the audience to experience an empathetic distance between the spectator and stage, enabling them to judge the characters objectively. The V-effect draws the critical spectator's attention to the performance's explicit theatricality, dropping all pretense of realism and training the spectator to approach the play critically.

Epic theatre was traditionally performed indoors with a proscenium stage. This allowed for an element of physical separation between cast and spectators. The V-effect, in my opinion, is most effective within a conventional performance space, such as the proscenium stage in epic theatre productions. This staging allows for the V-effect to defamiliarize the audience from the play at hand, hence creating room for the audience to objectively think and reflect about the issues being raised in the play with reference to their world at large.

## The Intent of Epic Theatre

Epic theatre uses the stage as a place for instruction and education. It has an intellectual base and is concerned with treating social or political issues of the time. Epic plays are designed to shock and inspire thought. The ultimate goal of epic theatre is to make the audience aware of their social surroundings and encourage them to act to change their society.

Furthermore, epic theatre employs the V-effect to isolate the audience in order to trigger their critical thinking skills. In the case of *The Fall of Man*, performed in the epic tradition, the audience is forced to engage critically, examining and questioning the moral of the play. Instead of accepting the biblical tale as an explanation for man's separation from God, the epic audience would instead question the tale. Why was man punished for falling for Satan's plan? Why did God not shield man from Satan? How did Satan get into Eden? Where is Eden? These critical questions, though natural for the epic audience, undermines the purpose of the play. The moral of the play is simple: do not question God's will. Unfortunately, due to the critical nature of the epic audience, God's will will indeed be questioned.

On the other hand, the medieval audience's duty is only to listen and be entertained. Morals are handed to the audience who will then accept them without question. As the purpose of a mystery play is to simply impart religious morals and not to question them, the medieval tradition would be better suited to portray a mystery play.

## A Comparison of Medieval and Epic Theatre

Perhaps the biggest difference between the medieval and epic theaters is the stage itself. Medieval plays like *The Fall of Man* were set on small pageant wagons that the audience could crowd around. Epic plays were usually set in a theater where there was a clear line of separation between audience and actors. Surprisingly, I feel that the change from medieval to epic stage makes the theatre experience for the reader much more shallow. While the medieval audience, as a collective of individuals, was shown their place in a great religious order, the epic spectator remains isolated and insulated, tangled in an endless array of questions. Although epic theatre audiences are consequently supposed to later start a social change, their actual engagement with the play is still predicated on individual experience. This individuality of the engagement is what makes the experience seem shallow, compared to the enlightening religious experience that medieval theatre provides.

Additionally, the move from medieval to epic removes *The Fall of Man* from the rest of the mystery cycle as the play will be performed in isolation. Hence, the play is de-contextualized, losing its original sense of ritual meaning. Even setting the play within a theatre implies fictionality, which neutralizes its authority as it is no longer being presented as biblical truth, losing the play's original purpose.

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