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Were There Theatres in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries?: Commentary

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COMMENTARY

By GUSTAVE COHEN

It seems beyond question that the documents collected by Professor Laura Hibbard Loomis and Professor Roger Loomis invite the historian of the mediaeval stage to revise a current opinion founded on an incomplete citation of texts and many preconceptions.

It has, of course, been recognized that scholars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had some knowledge of the classical drama. In the introduction to *La 'Comédie' latine en France au XIIème siècle*,¹ in the title of which I carefully printed the word 'Comédie' between quotation marks, I drew attention to an overlooked sentence in John of Salisbury's *Polycraticus sive de Nugis Curialium*, completed in 1159:² 'Et quidem histriones erant qui gestu corporis atque verborum et modulatione vocis factas et fictas historias sub abspectu publico referebant, quos apud Plautum invenis et Menandrum et quibus ars nostri Terentii innotescit.' There can be no doubt that this sentence of the great bishop reveals a correct knowledge of the *realia* of Latin comedy, though the word *theatrum* is not used. Another commentary on a *Ludus Prophetarum*, played in Riga in 1204, is to be found in Creizenach's *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*.³ The commentator explains: 'ludus quem Latini comoediam vocant.' Doubtless the same association must have been made in the schools of Orléans or at Fleury-sur-Loire, centre of early medieval humanism, between the *Versus et Ludi* of Hilarius⁴ and the ancient Roman comedy.

Because of this attested acquaintance of mediaeval scholars with Latin drama and because of the prevailing conceptions among literary historians of today, we must treat the newly provided texts in a sharply critical spirit, even in a spirit of diffidence and skepticism, suspecting in these references to the theatre evidences of classical scholarship rather than familiarity with any corresponding realities in contemporary life. Following these principles let us subject one text after the other to a critical examination.

1. The passage from St Bernard (about 1126) is too vague to justify any assured inferences, and only if a realistic interpretation of the other twelfth century texts proves correct, can it be accepted as evidence for an actual playhouse.

2. Ailred (1141-1142) in his first passage describes priests and monks whose attitudes and gestures in the performance of the liturgy remind him of *histrionicis gestibus* and provoke laughter among the congregated laity as if they were attending (*ad spectandum*) a performance in a theatre (*ad theatrum*). This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the second passage, which, however, is not so plain in its reference to theatrical *nugae*.

3. Gerhoh von Reichersberg's *De Investigatione Antichristi* (about 1161) refers to religious plays performed in the church as 'spectaculis theatricis in ecclesia Dei exhibitis,' and this association of the word *theatricus* with religious plays removes

¹ G. Cohen, *op. cit.* (Paris, 1931), I, p. ix.

² Ed. C. C. J. Webb (Oxford, 1909), I, 46.

³ I, 7, 70. Cf. also what Creizenach says on p. 408 on the English *Interludium de Clerico et Puella*.

⁴ Ed. J. B. Fuller (New York, 1929).

many of our doubts in interpreting *theatrum* in Ailred as a theatre in the classical sense of the word, that is to say, *amphitheatrum*, — a term which, curiously enough, does not appear in these texts. Furthermore, Gerhoh vigorously censures priests who convert churches into *theatra*, filling them with ‘*mimicis ludorum spectaculis*,’ some sort of mimetic performances in which men take the parts of women, clerics appear as soldiers, and men as devils. This could apply to a drama of the *Resurrection* (such as the Anglo-Norman one, of which I found a second manuscript in the British Museum). The same may be said of Gerhoh’s *Commentarius in Psalmos*, which contains a scornful reference to an Epiphany play of the Innocents, and a more obscure allusion to other plays (*ludis aliis*) and nearly theatrical shows (*spectaculis quasi theatralibus*), as a prelude to a banquet in the otherwise empty refectory. I know of a *Condamnation de Banquet*, a fifteenth century morality, but Gerhoh may simply refer to a kind of symbolic show or revel, and no definite conclusions can be drawn as to its nature.

4. Fitzstephen’s *Vita Sancti Thomae* (about 1182) compresses into four lines much valuable information about the drama of his time. He confirms the early existence of plays devoted to the lives of saints, of which the earliest known was a ‘*ludus de S. Katerina*,’ composed by a certain Geoffrey and performed at Dunstable some years before 1119.¹ There does not seem to have been any essential difference between the representations concerned with the miracles of the saints and those concerned with the passions of the martyrs, though Fitzstephen mentions them separately. Again and again, in later records, they are contrasted with the ‘*spectaculis theatralibus*’ and ‘*ludis scenicis*’ which lent gaiety to London’s social life.

5. Richard of Devizes (about 1193), far from contradicting this view, brings to it fresh support. A Christian boy is warned against the temptations of the metropolis, *theatrum, taberna, histriones, scurrae, mimi, balatrones*. There must have been entertainments by mimes (*histriones, mimi*), jugglers (*joculatores*) and jesters (*balatrones*) in a *theatrum*. Let me point out that the word *scena*, of which the Old French equivalent is *houert*, is never applied to the sacred stage.

6. Giraldus Cambrensis (Gérard le Gallois) in his *De Rebus a Se Gestis* and *Speculum Ecclesiae* (1200–1216) furnishes another reference to those *histriones* and to the *ludos scenicos* in which they took part.

7. Roger of Wendover in his *Flores Historiarum* gives a description, not only of a performance but also of a theatre, in the form of a vision of the torments of hell, ‘*de ludibus theatralibus daemonum*.’ As I have pointed out in my *Histoire de la mise en scène dans le théâtre religieux français du Moyen-Age*,² the shape of the antique circus seems to have been preserved, as may be seen in Fouquet’s miniature of the *Jeu de Sainte Apolline* (about 1450). *Domus* very likely refers to the theatre, though this word is not used by the writer, and means, I think, a kind of colosseum. The word *plateae*, which is also to be found about the same time in the rubrics of the Anglo-Norman *Jeu d’Adam*,³ which speak of the devils

¹ Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, II, 366. C. B. C. Thomas, ‘Miracle Play at Dunstable,’ *MLN*, xxxii (1917), 337. ² Second edition (Paris, 1926).

³ *Le Mystère d’Adam*, ed. P. Studer (Manchester, 1928), p. 7.

as running about 'per plateas,' seems to designate the middle, the bottom of the circus, let us say the pit. The *plateae* are surrounded by black iron walls (*in circuitu platearum*), with seats (*sedes juxta muros*) for the devils who attend the comic and tragic performance and give full vent to their enjoyment. But other *sedes* (let us think again of Fouquet's miniature) on a higher or a lower level (*superius et inferius*) on the right and the left seem to have occupied a large part of the circus in front opposite the spectators. These *sedes*, where numerous future actors are sitting, correspond to the 'lieux et mansions'¹ mentioned in the Prologue of *La Resurrection du Sauveur*,² or to the *estages* mentioned in the same Prologue and elsewhere, of which Fouquet's *Passion of Saint Apolline* gives an adequate picture. As we see in this miniature, some scenes, especially those in which a character appears on horseback surrounded by armed men, were played in the middle (*in medium*) of the circus-shaped theatre.

To conclude: from all these quotations, gathered together for the first time, it seems sound and conservative to infer that, so far as theatrical art is concerned, the state of things in the thirteenth century was already about the same as in the fifteenth. Perhaps there was no permanent theatre, even in London, in the sense that the Swan Theatre of Shakespeare's day was permanent, but there were some play-houses in the form of a circus, often in the ruins of a Roman amphitheatre (as at Douai and Bourges).³ A part of the structure was reserved for spectators, another part for the 'localities' and the actors sitting in front of them and waiting for the moment to appear before an applauding public. These men played in their 'localities,' as well as in the middle of the circus. They were recruited, especially in the acting of comedies and satirical plays, not only from amateurs but also from professional mimes, survivors of the antique *mimi*, as one may perceive from the common identification of *mimi* and *joglars*.

These discoveries of unknown or misunderstood texts invite us to a permanent revision of our theories and a more thorough search through the clerical Latin records and literature, from which we have still so much to learn in every branch of mediaeval studies.

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¹ Cf. G. Cohen, 'Ancien français *Mansion*,' in *Mélanges Huguet* (Paris, 1940?).

² Ed. J. G. Wright (Paris, 1931).

³ The Colosseum at Rome during the Renaissance and recently the Arènes in Paris have been so used.