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DRAMA AND RELIGION: The Search For A New Paradigm

by

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The origin of drama in the West has been fertile ground for investigation and speculation during the past century of theatre scholarship. Generally, there have been two approaches toward suggesting how the origins of theatre are connected or not related to established patterns of religious ceremony and celebration. It is those two entrenched approaches which Professor Wayne Rood questioned and, simultaneously, provided an alternative paradigm for the reflection on the connections between theatre and religion. A brief examination of the two primary paradigms will enable the reader to understand the unique contribution made by Wayne Rood.

Karl Young¹ articulated one of the most pervasive theories about the origins of drama. He proposed the theory that individuals involved with planning religious liturgy made a conscious choice to develop characters, costumes, dialogue and stage directions to “perform” the most perplexing element of Christian doctrine: the resurrection implied by the empty tomb on Easter Sunday. Young’s thesis, that drama emerged from religious liturgy, has been influential for many approaches to the origins of theatre. T. S. Eliot stated that “drama arose out of religious liturgy and dare not depart too far from it.” Generally, contemporary histories of theatre make the same assumption and the reader is encouraged to read *Theories of the Theatre* by Marvin Carlson and *The Theatre in its Time* by Peter Arnott.

E. K. Chambers² provided an alternative perspective. Drama, according to his hypothesis, emerged, not from religious liturgy, but from folk festivals. According to this

¹ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

paradigm, the ancient and medieval cultures developed highly significant folk festivals to celebrate meaningful events. May Day festivals and games eventually developed into dramas and dramatic structure, being more sophisticated, found a larger and larger audience. This point of view has been repeated by many scholars including Jerry Pickering's ATHE lecture on the development of medieval drama.³ This view essentially excludes the possibility that drama emerged from religious liturgy just as Young's hypothesis excluded the possibility of a drama which emerged from folk festival.

Both of these approaches have certain weaknesses which subsequent scholars have attempted to explain away or circumvent. Also, both have continuing advocates who seek to maintain the viability of each hypothesis. The theory advocated by Karl Young makes the assumption that all forms of theatre had completely disappeared from the medieval scene. This then explains how in the context of the liturgy, drama was "re-invented" by monks who had not seen other forms of dramatic performance. Neither had these monks known of earlier theatre traditions. While this is not totally impossible, it seems implausible. At the same time, the thesis that drama emerged from folk festivals fails to explain how a festival would develop characters with dialogue, plot lines, characters and forms of drama which were not celebratory in nature.

The advocates for Young's or Chambers' paradigms continue to pursue research which seems to validate each point of view. Theatre texts continue to be published assuming one or the other as its primary hypothesis for interpreting the origins of theatre. Historians who follow the Young hypothesis often seem too eager to demonstrate the developmental connection between religious ritual and the origins of drama.⁴ Yet, it is important to note that these two views are efforts to maintain exclusive points of view. Therefore, the field of "ur-drama"

² E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford: University Press, 1903).

³ Association for Theatre in Higher Education Convention, Chicago, August 1989. Also, examine his *Theatre: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: West Publishing Co., 1981) pp. 1-10, the Prologue.

scholarship appears loaded with this hidden imperative: choose which theory seems to have the greatest veracity and continue to defend and build on that scholarly tradition. The one argument tended toward evolutionary foundations: religion mutated with the development of character to develop a new life form, theatre. The other approach assumed little connection between the origin of theatre and religion but postulated extensive religious “borrowing” of folk celebrations which lead to religious drama.

There are, of course, those scholars who pay little attention to the “theories of origin” for theatre in the West. For example, Wilson and Goldfarb, in *The Living Stage*, avoid making a decision on the “theories of origin” in theatre. These historians focus on the “story” of the development of theatre without examining the ontological implications and transcendent questions inherent in empirical observation and reasoning. While this is a distinct option for all, it is an unsatisfactory solution to this centuries-old question first posed by Aristotle, namely, from where did tragedy and comedy arise. Aristotle’s solution that tragedy arose from the dithyramb (ceremonial dancers) and comedy arose “elsewhere” appears to turn the attention to the rise of theatre from religious ceremony. Any reader of theatre in the west has thus experienced the three major approaches: drama arising from religious ritual, drama arising from folk celebration or the position which avoids exploring the question. That is the area in which Professor Wayne Rood began to test, explore and discover the basis for a new hypothesis.

Theatre as a laboratory, as Rood claimed it should be in a theological school, was examined under his thoughtful and intense eye. Following a series of significant productions, developing student actors, directors, playwrights and scholars, a new hypothesis was carefully proposed and tested with students, theatre professionals and theologians. Tentatively, of course, this dramatic activity within the context of a theological setting resulted in finding a direction toward a new paradigm.

⁴ See O. B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1965).

The students of Wayne Rood will all remember the beginning of the course “Theatre and Theology” which is chapter 1 in *Scenes From the Bridge*.⁵ My lecture notes from the 1980 course probably differ little from other students who enrolled in this course. Surely all remember the opening lecture on the origins of theatre. “Somewhere,” the students were told, “a human in the ancient, pre-historical world arose, went to the mouth of the cave, faced the rising sun and exclaimed a sense of “awe” at the beauty of nature, the mystery of life, and the joy of human experience.” That utterance, that vocalization of human mystery and delight became the foundation for further, more ritualized and formal, expressions of awe and joy. The deeper this expression went toward ritual, the more it took on the accouterments of religion. When the sense of “awe and mystery” centered on expressing human feeling, theatre emerged. Thus theatre and religion both emerged from the same root instead of one evolving from the other (Karl Young) and, simultaneously, it avoids the elusive approach that theatre emerged from folk celebrations and then was “borrowed” by the church.

Apart from Dr. Rood’s course, the full implications of this new paradigm have never been explored in great depth. In general, the majority of writers seem content with either Young’s or Chambers’ hypothesis. Few have sought to test, further, these hypotheses from the standpoint of contemporary theological significance or theatrical plausibility.

Young’s paradigm assumes that theatre emerged from religious rituals and, by implication, seems to contend that in order to be significant, it needs to remain close to its root. Chambers’ paradigm assumes that the connection between theatre and the religious is only a vague one because there may not be a significant connection between folk festivals and religious liturgy. Rood’s “third paradigm” avoids these two weaknesses and proposes another and stronger dialectic.

⁵ Wayne Rood, Unpublished MSS, 1980.

This “third paradigm” avoids the weakness of both earlier hypotheses. Namely, it does not view theatre as “derivative” from religion nor does it view it as so loosely connected that interdisciplinary studies are viewed as suspect because they seem to force an unnatural integration of theatre and religion. Both of these theories, in the end, seem to diminish the possible exploration of theatre’s connections with religion: one too restrictive to reducing theatre’s significance to the continued “presence” of religious elements⁶ or the examination of “paratheatrical” dimensions such as the significance of folk ritual, gestures, and celebrations. Considerable work has been done, recently, on how social celebrations have been borrowed by religious theatre or how the dynamics of folk society contains metaphors which form the root of theatrical play.⁷

Because religion and theatre originate from the same root, then the possibility for connections between the two is promising indeed. Do they both celebrate the same human experience? Do they fulfill the same human need for fulfillment and pleasure? Are they two sides of the same coin - one looking heavenward in a Platonic fashion while the other gazes on human existence with an Aristotelian eye?

Exploring the common root for theatre and religion allows for a number of new directions for theatre. Namely, instead of examining the evolutionary development or the vague folk connections, this new paradigm is instead a Hegelian dialectic: two forces composed of opposites and similarities which emerged from a common source through synthesis. The study of theatre and theology then opens up the questions of the relationship, not of origins or vague ritual and gesture connections, but the examination of fully mature forms of theatre and developed approaches to theology. The paradigm examines theatrical styles, forms, themes and

⁶ M. W. Merchant, *Creed and Drama* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961).

⁷ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982).

texts and compares them with theological systems and approaches and in that manner it suggests a study of fully developed expressions of each.

The course in theatre and theology was an intertextual course (long before this term became degraded by fad and fashion) because it forced the student to examine, side by side, texts from theatre and theology. Comparisons and contrasts were made between theatrical realism and historical higher criticism, liberation theology and epic theatre, medieval “ransom” theology and “mystery” plays, and so forth, through the course. Students with a strong background in theological/historical method were startled by the sophistication of the method and the profound discoveries which were explored in the course.

Critics, even then, noted that not all theology, and surely not every dramatic text, would fit neatly into a study which compared forms, themes, structures and styles. With the recent development of examining micro-issues rather than “systems” it would appear to move beyond, or at least step aside from, the dialectical method of Rood’s intertextual study. Those observations, however, would not be dismissed by this new methodology. As a matter of fact, the examining an intertextual dialectic seems to encourage these additional interdisciplinary areas of examination. While encouraging new areas of investigation (for example theatre and economics or theatre and society) these investigations have a distinct limitation, namely, they do not share the same “origin” as do theatre and religion. This dialectic can be explored on another level: the connection between a central motif in religion and how that finds expression in theatre.

With the same point of origin, the connections and differences between theatre and religion can be examined with greater scrutiny. For example, one of the central tenets of religion is the principle of imitation. For Christians, when Jesus said “This do in remembrance of me” he was making a statement for all time. He was inviting his followers to participate in a

central action.⁸ It is a mimetic principle. Theatre, according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, also is rooted in mimesis. By sharing the same root and developing theories on how humans have learned and expressed their theatrical need and religious impulse through mimesis, a scholar is provided a treasure chest available for examination. These are the theoretical roots for theatre and religion, the basis for the practice of each, and, to a large extent, the goal for each. The *Imitation of Christ*, for Christians, is more than the title of a book by Thomas a Kempis. It is rooted in a call for mimesis. The same observation can be made concerning theatre, namely that it too is rooted in mimesis. At the same time, it is more than imitation.

Theatre and religion rely on symbols for significance. While the length of this paper does not allow for an extensive examination of symbolic theory, Susanne K. Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* still holds promise for theatre and religion research. At the center of Christian religious practice, symbols give meaning to human thought and action. Symbols are employed by the faithful for the expression of meaning in faith: baptism as an expression of commitment, and communion as a ritual of renewal and unity. Symbols also function in theatre as it seeks to provide expression or meaning for performer and viewer. The symbols may provide means of reference rather than clear statements of meaning or belief. Symbols in theatre and religion are infused with meaning by those who experience the symbolic action, object or image. While theatre is generally focused on human expression and construction of meaning, religion frequently explores the human response to divine presence and action. Symbols function to provide immediacy to the emotion, thought and experience. This new paradigm, that religion and theatre emerged from the same "impulse of origin," will have continuing significance for both areas, in action, expression, and reflection.

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⁸ For a recent study on mimesis, see Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art and Society*, trans. Don Reneau (London: University of California Press, 1992). Especially Part IV: From Imitation to the Constitution of the Creative Subject.