



Drama, history and tradition in popular culture in Guatemala

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To understand and evaluate the drama that the friars brought to Guatemala, what they wrote here, it is necessary and indispensable to examine in some detail one of its great antecedents: the medieval theater, that was developed in Europe at the time of the conquest and colonization of the New World by Spain (XIV and XV).

Therefore, we will briefly address in the document these European antecedents of Guatemalan medieval theater.

LITURGICAL THEATER IN THE MIDDLE AGE:

By the year 900 almost all memory of Greco-Roman drama in Western Europe had been erased. Christianity had opposed it and had achieved its disappearance along with that of many other pagan elements. Classical drama was not revived until the Renaissance. Medieval theater, therefore, would have to be something new, not a revival of the old. It is ironic that Christianity, which had fought against a whole dramatic school, was destined, through its liturgy, to engender a new theatrical form from which, by the way, our modern drama descends.

In the 10th century, when rudimentary theater was beginning to emerge in other parts of

Europe, the Iberian Peninsula was almost totally dominated by the Muslims. Only a few small northern kingdoms were battling for the reconquest. It should not be surprising, therefore, that data on the origins of liturgical drama in the Franco-German region are more abundant than those from Spain.

It is a dramatic show, with antiphonal singing or dialogue. Usually the dialogue is simple: Priest: Dominus Vobiscum. Acolyte: Et cum spiritu tuo. The liturgy, however, sometimes includes more elaborate pieces, such as the gospel that was sung in Latin until a few years ago in the Good Friday services. The priests and the choir replied to each other by singing four parts in different tones: 1) Jesus Christ, 2) Pilate, 3) The Jews and, 4) The Evangelist (narrator).

Medieval drama was born as a trope or interpolation in the mass, which, by the 10th century, began to be interrupted from time to time by short dialogues sung in Latin and without action. Medieval drama was born as a trope or interpolation in the mass, which, by the 10th century, began to be interrupted from time to time by short dialogues sung in Latin and without action. They were totally rudimentary but in them were the seeds that would germinate to give as fruit the medieval, renaissance and modern theater and among all these, the one that is the subject of the essay.

In the Benedictine abbey of Gallus, in Switzerland, a manuscript from before the 11th century is preserved containing a text that has been called the *Quem quaeritis?* O *visitario sepulchri*, a trope or interpolation on Easter. It is a short dialogue between the Three Marys and the angels they find seated in the empty tomb.

Let us imagine that we are in the church of St. Gallus Abbey on Easter Sunday in the year

950. The mass has not yet begun. The congregation is waiting to hear a short dialogue chant announcing the theme of the day, before the introit is sung.

In this dialogue the people did not take part: it was sung by the priests, acolytes and the choir. It was still far from the time when action, dramatic attitudes, special costumes and scenery were introduced. The "drama" of the *Quem quaeritis?* was integrated into the mass and it would take many generations to detach itself from it.

During the 11th century the *Quem quaeritis?* evolved. Proof of its popularity is the fact that there are deposited in European archives at least 400 ancient manuscripts. The exchange between the Angels and the Three Marys (originally 22 words in Latin), acquired an original scene and more characters: the apostles. By the 13th century a dialogue between the Three Marys and a seller of spices had been added. Special costumes began to be introduced for the Three Marys, the angels wore wings and palms, and a special box was used for the spices with which the women intended to anoint the body of Jesus Christ. (This whole series of additions foretells the future separation of the drama from the religious liturgy). Still the scene was expressed in a series of Latin antiphons, sung from the church and incorporated into the church text. In the earliest forms of this liturgical drama there was never any movement or action.

By the 12th-13th centuries new dialogues appeared in Europe, new improvisations to biblical texts and some of these, at least in part, were recited in the vernacular language. In France, around 1100, the *Sonus* (a dialogue between the wise and foolish virgins of the Gospel) appears, almost half of its verses are already in French. By 1150 *The Prodigal Son*

and the *Jeu d'Adam* were written, the latter almost entirely in French.

It is also important to note that by the 12th century the "actors" or singers were no longer static; the singing was accompanied by gestures and movements.

Here are the most important themes, known today through fragments and quotations in medieval Latin. Taken from the Old Testament we have the following:

Adam and Eve

The universal flood

The sacrifice of Isaac

Joseph and his brothers

Balam and the donkey

The story of Rebecca

The prophet Daniel

The three young men in the furnace

Several scenes from the New Testament were already beginning to be represented:

The story of St. John the Baptist

The Annunciation

The birth of Christ in Bethlehem

The adoration of the kings

Herod and the innocent children

The Resurrection of Lazarus

The wise virgins and the foolish virgins

The temptations of Christ

Palm Sunday

The Passion

The three Marys and the
Resurrection

The meeting at Meaux

The Conversion of St. Paul

The Last Judgment

The last one, The Last Judgment, was a favorite theme of medieval theater. Evidence of its popularity can be seen carved in stone on several of the portals of European cathedrals. By the year 1160, the **Antichristus** was performed in Latin in Germany. It required the collaboration of numerous actors and could only be staged in a large space, probably in the presbytery of a church.

By the 14th century, drama was becoming secularized in Europe. It moved from the church to the public square, with the consequent decline of Latin and the emergence of vernacular languages.

When referring to the changes that the liturgical drama underwent in the Middle Age, we must comment, following Gonzalo Mejía, that "we are far from the simplicity of the Angel and the Three Marys and it is easy to suspect that the improvised actors of the previous period had been reinforced by others for whom the theater was not a novelty, nor part of the religious offices, but a way of earning a living. ..." what can be stated with certainty is that liturgical drama, having evolved from the antiphons of Easter and Christmas, was fully formed by the end of the 13th century, and that in its later development it ceased, of necessity, to be liturgical. Comedies continued to be presented within churches, often in vernacular languages, until the end of the 15th century, and in some isolated cases even in later times. But they were mixed and influenced by the secular comedies of the public square to such a degree that it was

almost impossible to call them "liturgical," even in part.

THE ORIGINS OF SPANISH THEATER

Having finished this summary of the origins of theater in medieval Europe in general, let us return to the case of the Iberian Peninsula, and see what was happening there.

Between the 11th and 14th centuries, the Christian kingdoms spread southward in their crusade to conquer the Islamic lordships. New opulent towns and cities arose, guilds and commerce flourished, convents, colleges and universities were founded, the great Gothic cathedrals were built, and the incipient Castilian liturgy was strengthened by a vigorous breath of life that came from the northeast of the Peninsula and beyond: from Provence and Gascony.

The rudiments of medieval theater existed in Spain from very early times. There are several Latin texts of liturgical drama. One of them is the **Quem quaeritis?** or **Visitatio sepulchri**, an 11th century manuscript preserved in the National Library of Madrid. In this text we again find the brief dialogue between the Three Marys and the angels at the tomb of Jesus Christ. Attached to the manuscript is the sequence *Victimae paschali* from the Mass of the Resurrection, in which the voice of the Virgin is altered with those of the choir.

In the east of the Peninsula there was a great dramatic movement during the Middle Ages. We have data on a tragedy **L'hom enamorat y la fembra satisfeta** and there is the text of the *Representación de la asumpcion de madona Santa María* that is still staged in Elche. In Alicante, Valencia and Catalonia flourished cycles of dramas similar to the German and English ones. It is important to consider that part of this area is contiguous to the **langue doc** (but all this region and its theatrical performances are

of less interest to us for the theater in Mesoamerica, since most of the conquerors and friars who came to New Spain and Guatemala came mainly from Extremadura, Andalusia and Castilla de la Nueva).

Undoubtedly, medieval dramatic production in Eastern Iberia was abundant. When we study, however, the origins of drama in the Castilian language, we find a mystery: the almost total absence of texts and even of citations of specific plays. There is one exception: the *Auto* of the Three Wise Men.

The fragment of the Three Wise Men (12th Century?) is a polymetric piece of 147 lines or verses. The Three Kings are undecided as to the meaning of the star that has just appeared before them. They decide to bring gifts of gold, myrrh and incense to the Infant Jesus to learn his true nature. If he accepts the gold, it means he is king of the world, if he accepts the myrrh, he is a mortal being, and if he accepts the incense, he is king of heaven. It is believed that in the final scene the Child accepts the three gifts, but this scene is missing in the manuscript. The fragment of the Three Wise Men is probably a translation into Spanish of some French version, possibly derived from Gascony.

After the *Auto* of the Three Wise Men, there is an almost unbelievable gap in the trajectory of Castilian theater. Assuming that the *Auto* was written between 1150 and 1200, there are three centuries from which no popular religious text has survived. Through historical quotations, however, it is clear that the theater existed and evolved. These historical references are usually prohibitions and laws, such as those of Alfonso X the Wise (1222-1284) who, in **Las Siete Partidas**, forbids the clergy to perform vulgar performances inside temples. The clergymen had been accused of coming down from the altar after saying mass and entertaining

the faithful with farces, charades and “games of mockery”, disguising themselves as ruffians and clowns. On the other hand Alfonso the Wise authorized the representation of dramas in the Epiphany, Easter and Christmas, but only in the cathedrals and major churches, not in the towns. The Council of Valladolid (1228) also prohibited mockery plays and recommended the presentation of plays that dealt with pious themes. Innocent III (1198-1216) also censured clergymen who presented vulgar dramas inside churches. All these royal, paper and ecclesiastical prohibitions, however, do not seem to have had much effect.

How to explain this huge gap in medieval manuscripts of Castilian theater? Between the *Auto* of the Three Wise Men and the Renaissance theater at the end of the 15th century there is almost no written page of a theater that surely existed, and that would serve as a basis for the Mesoamerican representations. It is difficult to arrive at a solution to the problem, but it seems probable that the texts were not written but memorized and transmitted orally from generation to generation, something that would happen again in colonial Guatemala and that also explains our lack of texts.

We have news of dramas in Castilian that date from the 14th century, and one from the 15th century, but they are not of the type that the Franciscans would bring to New Spain and Guatemala. They are works of courtly type, most of them not anonymous. Let's see some examples taken from the list provided by the master Gonzalo Mejía:

Year 1356. Anonymous. General dance in which all the states of the people enter.

Year 1414. The Marquis of Villena. Allegorical comedy performed to King don Fernando of Aragon.

Year of 1469. Anonymous. Comedy performed in the house of the Count of Ureña.

Year 1470. Rodrigo de Costa. Dialogue between love and an old man.

Year 1492. Juan de la Encina. Eclogue represented in the night of Christmas.

Year 1494. Juan de la Encina. Representation to the very blessed passion and death of our precious Redeemer, where two hermits are introduced, the one old and the other young.

Year 1495. Juan de la Encina. Eclogue represented in response to some lovers, where a shepherdess named Pascuala is introduced.

It would be useless to reproduce the list. Let's just say that the Castilian drama was entering a new stage. Having detached itself first from the mass and then from the new popular medieval representations, the classical Spanish theater was born. It would not take long for Lope, Calderón, Tirso and Ruiz de Alarcón to bear fruit of universal value. And at this point we say goodbye to it according to Gonzalo Mejía, since it is only a distant relative of the representations that the Franciscans would bring to Guatemala.

COMMON THEMES OF SPANISH AND GUATEMALAN THEATER OF THE 16TH CENTURY

As it will be seen, several themes appear in the lauds: the sacrifice of Abraham, the conversion of St. Paul, the Assumption, the finding of the Holy Cross and the *Auto* of Adam. They would soon be incorporated into the world of Indigenous colonial literature.

Some of the friars who introduced Christian drama in Guatemala had studied in colleges and universities where they had surely attended novel, courtly and Renaissance performances. But these were not the ones they

would transplant to New Spain and Guatemala. They would have to bring a theater that, in essence, is popular, religious, and medieval.

Late medieval drama and its successor, indigenous drama, can be divided into five categories. The names used here do not appear in the chronicles of the *Archivo General de Centroamérica* since historians refer to all representation as “auto” or “aucto”.

- 1) The liturgical drama was sung as part of a mass inside the church on the saint's feast day or on the date the event was supposed to have taken place. This primitive form no longer existed in the second half of the 16th century when the Franciscans arrived in Guatemala, but closely allied to the liturgical drama are Christmas, St. Paul the Baptist, The Annunciation, and the Assumption, all performed in the city of Santiago de Guatemala.
- 2) The mystery, or representation taken from Sacred History, evidently connects with the liturgical drama. The common field between this and the liturgical one is very wide. But the latter is not always integrated into a Mass, nor, by its nature, is it celebrated on a special feast. Examples include the Auto of the Fall of our First Fathers and the Sacrifice of Isaac.
- 3) Allegorical drama is distinguished from other genres. In it, symbolic figures such as Faith, Remorse or Patience are personified. It is typical of the Late Middle Age, but we do not have any complete examples in Indigenous languages. Allegorical characters appear very rarely, for

example, in the Last Judgment: Death, Penance, Time, the Holy Church and Confection; and in the Education of the Children, the Death.

- 4) The moral or didactic drama is not taken from the Holy Scriptures. It deals with the good or bad conduct of fictitious characters and the consequences of their actions. Guatemalan examples are the market, the education of children and las *danzas de diablos* (dances of devils).
- 5) The profane drama is a non-religious type of representation. There are few examples of this genre in Guatemala, both ancient colonial and modern.

These are, then, in brief synthesis, the historical, liturgical antecedents of our current popular Guatemalan theater, which consists of the loa, the dance-dramas and the neighborhood street theater, genres to which we will refer on another occasion.

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