

Ritual and the Theatre

Any book that deals with the history of the theatre must begin with a reference to ritual. This is because ritual of one sort or another forms the basis of all popular theatrical entertainment and the root from which the dramatic art itself has grown. How this is so, and how it applies to the theatre and drama of Mediaeval Europe, I shall try to explain in this chapter: and because it is always better when we are thinking about the past to clarify our ideas about the present, let us start with an examination of a highly popular modern ritual which bears a strong relationship to theatrical entertainment.

Consider, then, the sort of happening that can be seen taking place on the terraces of any of the major football grounds while a match is in progress. Grouped together in order that their voices may be heard in concert we find a number of spectators, usually members of a 'supporters' club', who chant, clap their hands, display coloured scarves, and sometimes even dance in their efforts to urge or 'will' their favoured football side on to victory. Their club, it is important to remember, is engaged in a conflict in which *Chance* in the shape of the current form of the opposing teams, the weather conditions, which may be more suitable to one side than the other, and even the decisions of the referee and the two linesmen, plays a very important part. What is also significant is the fact that these same supporters associate themselves so closely with their football club that they tend to think of the team selected by the club manager not so much in terms of 'them' as of 'us'.

Now let us consider, in a perfectly detached way, the behaviour of these groups of supporters. This is always more or less of a pattern, so that were it not for the words chanted, and the colours

or 'favours' worn by the members of each group, it would be difficult to distinguish one from another. In the first place, they all chant together, which means that they form a chorus. Secondly, their chant is rhythmical and frequently preceded by the clapping of hands, with the rhythm of the latter anticipating the rhythm of the chant itself. Here is a typical example which any football enthusiast will recognize:

<i>Clapping</i>	u – u – –
<i>Chant</i>	We are the champions.

Besides this, in moments of joy, usually when their side scores a goal, they dance vigorously while those of their group who carry coloured scarves hold them stretched above their heads to signify their triumph.

We call this behaviour a ritual because it takes place on a special occasion and because it conforms to a pattern which is regulated and accepted by common consent of all who take part in it. Not all rituals are the same, however, and we have to explain why it is that our chosen example is of special importance to us in this book. To begin the process, it will be helpful to make a list of the major points already noted. These are as follows:

1. The groups are gathered together to witness a *Conflict* between two teams of footballers in which *Chance* as well as human skill plays a part.
2. It is the desire of each group to urge or '*Will*' one of the teams to victory.
3. Each group forms a chanting, clapping and gesticulating *Chorus*.
4. In giving form and rhythm to their chanting they fashion a primitive kind of *Art*.
5. So closely personal is their association with their favourite club that victory or defeat for the club's chosen team means victory or defeat for '*Us*'.

Now, all these points add up to what is frequently described as tribal behaviour. This is not to suggest that there is anything wrong about such behaviour—quite the contrary, as a matter of fact. People come from their homes, their factories and offices to 'take

time off from the pressures and very frequently from the boredom imposed by modern society, to find release through the exercise of their basic instincts. They like the skilful conflict of football; they like the partisanship it excites; and they like the sense of 'belonging' which comes with the declared support of a football club. They are 'the faithful', and many of them are religiously so. Nevertheless, the fact remains that every one of these urges or instincts is a reminder of the far-distant past when our forefathers gathered together in communal or tribal groups to express their urgent desire for survival in what was to them the grimly *dramatic* conflict between the powers of life and death. This was a conflict in which primitive man regarded himself very much as a spectator since he had neither the skill nor the understanding to master the warring elements about him. He could do no more than urge or *Will* the outcome in his favour, and this he did by employing the same ritualistic means as those which we see in action on the terraces of the football grounds. Men gathered themselves into groups or choruses and communicated their collective will through the media of song and dance.

Now, ritual, whenever it is associated with the life and death conflict of a community, inevitably tends to become a sacred act or office. This is largely because of the need in Man to address his desires, his hopes and his fears to an intelligible being rather than to blind chance. Such a being is dignified with the name of god or goddess because he or she exercises a remote power over human destiny. Thus, as soon as men become conscious of the association of the sun's heat with the fertility of the soil, they tend to imagine the sun as a glorious male god and the earth as a mother goddess. When gods and goddesses are conceived in this way as a direct result of Man's consciousness of his absolute dependence upon the forces of nature, we say that they are pagan. This is a matter which we shall need to bear in mind, especially during the early stages of our study.

The next thing that we have to consider is the way in which the acted play or drama develops from ritual. There must, of course, always be an element of drama in ritual itself: because drama is conflict and ritual evolves as a result of Man's experience of the conflict of life. The art of making a play, however, seems usually to begin as soon as it becomes necessary to *demonstrate* the way in which a god, or even blind chance, acts in directing the lives of

men and women. For this reason the earlier and sometimes the greatest plays of a particular culture or civilization are concerned with legends which surround divine or god-like images. The ancient Greek drama ranks among these, and if you are a student of Greek as well as mediaeval theatre you will know that the art of Greek tragedy developed from the ritual dance of the *dithyramb* which was performed in honour of the god Dionysus, or Bacchus as he is often called. Nowadays we are inclined to think of Dionysus as a god of wine, but to the ancient Greeks he was much more than that. He was an agricultural god associated with the fertility of crops, and especially with the fertility of trees.

The stem from which the mediaeval theatre grew was the Christian ritual of the Mass. We shall, of course, have to consider certain details of this ritual, but before doing so it will be necessary to give some attention to the conditions surrounding the lives of mediaeval people because, as has already been pointed out, the approach of a community or a people to its religious ritual is very closely related to the conflicts involved in its struggle for survival.

Let us begin with the description given by the great Hugh Latimer of the circumstances of his boyhood, which would have been towards the end of the fifteenth century. Hugh Latimer, who was burned at the stake during the reign of Mary Tudor, gave his description in the course of a sermon which he delivered in the presence of Edward VI, and it is worth noting that he drew his picture with more than a little regret, as though he were looking back to 'better times'. This is what he had to say:

My father was a yeoman, and he had no lands of his own, only he had a farm of three or four pound by the year at the uttermost, and hereupon he tilled so much as kept half a dozen men [*in work*]. He had walk [*pasture*] for a hundred sheep; and my mother milked thirty kine. He was able, and did, find the king a harness, with himself and his horse [*could equip himself with armour, weapons and a horse, if called upon to go to war*]....

I can remember that I buckled his harness when he went unto Blackheath field [*where the Cornish rebels were defeated by Henry VIII's army in 1497*]. He kept me to school, or else I had not been able to preach before the king's majesty now. He married [*found husbands for*] my sisters with five pound or twenty nobles apiece [*and provided them with satisfactory dowries*] so that he brought them up in godliness and fear of God. He kept hospitality for his poor neighbours, and some alms he gave to the poor. . . .

Now, this description is exceedingly interesting, not only because of what it says, but also because of what it neglects to say. It gives us a picture of a moderately well-off yeoman or tenant farmer of the period who was not only common to the age but also the backbone of the country. Superficially it is an ideal picture—one, indeed, which might easily represent a modern countrylover's dream with its impression of a tough, tightly-knit, selfreliant household, sufficiently prosperous to be generous in sharing with others. Evidently, a household worthy of respect in its day. But now let us fill in some of the details which Latimer left out, not, let it be said, because he wished to present a distorted picture, but because to him and his audience such details would have been so commonplace and self-evident that to have named them would have been superfluous.

First, there is the matter of the armour and weapons carried by Latimer senior in the service of his king. These implements of war would not have been kept in a state of readiness simply so that they could be placed at the king's disposal. This was a brutal and savage age in which every man had to be ready either to kill or be killed in the protection of his own. Latimer's father would have needed to go armed and in company, probably even when travelling to his local town of Leicester. For all roads were dangerous and a man might easily be struck down, not necessarily by thieves and outlaws, though of these there were plenty, but in equal likelihood by enemies with a sense of personal grievance. This points to weakness in the enforcement of the law: for Latimer's father would have known his entitlement to protection from the king whom he served. But enforcement of the law was all too often in the hands of officers whose honesty and sense of duty could not be relied upon. Much would have depended upon the favour of the lord of the manor who could, and frequently did, countenance the acts of murderous ruffians who might well be in his pay.

It is in this light that we need to interpret the impression of self-reliance and close neighbourliness given by Latimer's account. Men and women were vividly conscious of living in a hostile world: and this explains one of the many sharp contrasts that exist between mediaeval life and our own. Mediaeval people were far more insular in their outlook than we, with the worldwide view of things given to us by newspapers and radio and

television. Throughout the mediaeval period people remained locally attached, no matter whether they lived within town or village. A London merchant, for example, travelling, say, to Norwich, could expect to be treated as a foreigner on reaching his destination, just as if he had come from Amsterdam or Cologne or Venice. In other words, and this applied throughout Europe, people were conscious of themselves and others as belonging to a certain city or town or village rather than to a country. We, as students of theatre, need to bear this 'sense of belonging' clearly in mind when we are considering the mediaeval reaction to ritual. It is of vital importance, as every football fan knows.

But the difficulties attendant upon living in a violent world would by no means have been the greatest of the Latimers' problems. Here at least the hazards would have been known and prepared for. Far more to be feared were the totally unpredictable hazards of famine and disease. And this brings us to the major feature of mediaeval life which every person interested in the theatre and drama of the period needs to understand.

First of all we have to consider the complete vulnerability of mediaeval people to the natural elements. The fruits of the earth were the hard-earned reward of sheer physical labour. People, therefore, lived very close to the soil and were in consequence intensely aware of the seasonal changes or rhythm of the year. Spring to them meant the awakening of the earth under the life-giving warmth of the sun: and its occurrence was seen as no less than a mystery and a miracle, for there was no science to interpret the universe for them as a machine. Summer, of course, was a time of plenty, while winter was a period of dearth when earth and its vegetation died, so that flocks of sheep and herds of cattle had to be killed off because there was insufficient pasture to support them. This consciousness of a majestic though terrifying rhythm was just as sharp in the towns as it was in the countryside, for there was no clear distinction between urban life and country life as there is today. A town or even a city was a small place, the population of which rarely exceeded a few thousands, and it was not uncommon at harvest-time for the apprentices to be turned out to help in the fields which surrounded the town walls.

But there were times, as now, when the rhythm failed. Spring might be late in coming after an exceptionally bitter winter; the summer might bring continuous heavy rains; or, which would be

infinitely worse, there might be a cycle of unseasonable weather lasting for perhaps two or three years. The effects of such happenings would be immediate, and they would be disastrous. We know that they occurred, and we know that famine followed swiftly in their wake.

Death from disease was common: but it was epidemic disease which was most to be feared. In Hugh Latimer's time the sweating sickness seemed to be the most serious cause of terror. We do not ourselves know precisely what the sweating sickness was, though modern medical men seem to think that it was a particularly vicious and deadly kind of influenza. Even more deadly, however, was the plague which has come to be known as the Black Death. This terrible scourge struck Europe in the year 1348 and in the course of two years is thought to have reduced the population by between one-third and one-half.

It is when we think of the Black Death and its consequences that we are able to appreciate most strongly the helplessness of mediaeval people in the face of infectious disease. Plague is of two kinds, which are known as pneumonic and bubonic plague. The former, which attacks the lungs, is spread by the breath, while the latter is accompanied by painful swellings, or buboes, in the groin and beneath the armpits. The medical men of the day were not fools and they did their best: in fact one of their number, Guy de Chauliac, was able to deduce the difference between the two types. What they failed to discover, however, was that bubonic plague was spread by the bite of the flea which initially lived off the body of the plague rat, which meant that the doctors were tragically ignorant of the fact that the problem was largely one of sanitation. For, both in town and village, the plague rat lived freely off the stinking filth that was left rotting in the streets. Mediaeval towns and villages may have been romantically beautiful: but they were reeking death traps nevertheless.

It is hardly surprising, in view of what has been said, that mediaeval people should have shown themselves to have been obsessed with the idea of death, or that they should consistently have thought of death as a horrid skeletal figure who stalked from place to place, striking down men and women suddenly and without discrimination between rich and poor. Death was the great equalizer whom no man could escape (Plate 8, between pages 64 and 65, *Death and the Cardinal*). In considering the