A CULTURAL HISTORY OF
TRAGEDY

IN THE
MIDDLE AGES

VOLUME 2

*Edited by Jody Enders, Theresa Coletti,
John T. Sebastian, and Carol Symes*

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CHAPTER TWO

Sites of Performance and Circulation

CHRISTOPHER SWIFT

As the saying goes (and as evoked by Jody Enders in her Introduction), “humor is tragedy plus time.” We instinctively understand the formula—loss and misfortune have the potential for ironic retelling only once the memory of trauma fades to nostalgia. But in another sense, the opposite is also true; humor is tragedy *minus* time. Staged tragic dramas are longer plays, even when playwrights adhered to the neoclassical Unity of Time, which restricted dramatic time to a 24-hour period. Pierre Corneille’s most celebrated tragic play, *Le Cid* (1636), exceeds this rule and is also his longest in performance. A number of other examples bear out the point. During the Dionysian festival in Ancient Greece, trilogies of full-length tragedies were performed on a single day; the median length of a Shakespeare tragedy is 3,244 lines, while his comedies are nearly one thousand lines less; and in the twentieth century, the tragedies of Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neill regularly run over three hours in performance. While tragic dramaturgies and subjects are unique to every culture, it is often the case that the cruel machinery of tragedy requires narrative complexity and chronological intensity to allow protagonists to undergo a complete cycle of crisis and ruination. In cultures across the world, the falls of deities that foreshadow the eventual dissolution of humankind (as in the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* and the Passion and *descensus* of Christ) occur at a deliberate pace so that the weight of spiritual agony is fully experienced by its witnesses. As Terry Eagleton explains, “tragic art highlights what is perishable, constricted, fragile and slow-moving about us. . . . It stresses how we are acted upon rather than robustly enterprising.”¹

In the theater arts, deliberativeness is expressed spatio-temporally: place and time function symbiotically to elevate tragic stories beyond the mundane world and into cosmic domains. Epic tragedies occur across epic distances. One manner by which a theater audience may experience a sense of transcendental time is through the depiction of capacious space: distant regions of the world and supernatural regions where threats are encountered and truths are revealed. The histories and tragedies of Shakespeare—which owe a large debt to the poetics and staging of medieval drama—are exemplary. King Lear’s madness is presented on the open, disorienting primeval heath. The errors in communication that propel Juliet and Romeo towards their ends occur outside Verona, in plague-ridden Mantua, and by the fifth act, liminal spaces (monastery and graveyard) command the stage.

The same crises of dislocation are evident in dramatic representations produced prior to the Reformation and the classical revival. A number of medieval morality and Passion

dramas follow the trials, sorrows, and existential terrors of protagonists on their paths towards death, and similar to the examples of Western tragedies mentioned above, they embrace cosmic time and space. The form of staging most frequently mentioned in medieval texts is *locus* and *platea* staging, which uses an open, undifferentiated playing area surrounded by scaffolds. Unlike the proscenium arrangement of space that dominated theater in the West from the seventeenth century, audience space and performance space were not clearly delimited in the medieval outdoor theater. Onlookers could potentially move between various *loca* across the *platea*, as evidenced in the mention of “styteles”—stage assistants who helped corral and reorient the attention of audiences—in the fifteenth-century *Castle of Perseverance*. *Perseverance* and the contemporary East Anglian *Mary Magdalene* were spectacles of great physical size that reflected a Christian worldview in staging practices. In *Perseverance*, Humanus Genus (Mankind) risks spiritual corruption and damnation by journeying away from his immutable castle at the center of the *platea* and onto the five scaffolds at the margins (World, Devil, Flesh, Covetousness, and God), “So that I be lord of toure and toun, / Be buskys and bankys broun. / . . . I wyl folow thee / Be dale and every towne” (lines 569–74).² The position of God is in the east, not unlike the typical position of the chancel of medieval churches that oriented the gaze of parishioners in the direction of Jerusalem. As Alexandra Johnston writes, the “frenetic activity by the wicked” at the margins of the world was contrasted thematically with the “calm stillness of good” in the center in art and literature in the late Middle Ages, providing “English playwrights the underlying theological principle around which to build their dramaturgy.”³ Additionally, theatrical intermingling of spiritual and pedestrian realms would have enhanced the experience of the otherworldliness for performers and audiences alike.

As a number of scholars have written, the unique stage plan for *Perseverance* (Figure 2.1) re-inscribes the orientation of *mappae mundi*—an ideological schematization of the world—onto the page and into social space.⁴ Medieval Christian and Muslim astronomers and philosophers based their mathematical calculations on the distances and orbital relationships of heavenly bodies on Ptolemy’s planetary model, and mapmakers illustrated this arrangement by positioning the earth at the center of embedded concentric spheres. The outermost circle provided a dwelling place for God. Bede’s *Mappa Mundi* incorporates the standard ideological model of a tripartite Christian world (the T-O map) into this quasi-scientific system of spheres (Figure 2.2). From 1250 through the Renaissance, most educated Europeans were familiar with this model.⁵ More detailed renderings of T-O maps depicted images of headless men and fantastical monsters at the periphery of the world. *Locus* and *platea* staging cohered to this general ideology of space: the phantasmagoric and extraterrestrial characters (God, ghosts, vice characters, and demons) occupied platforms on the outer scaffolds, while the earthbound home of the protagonist (in life and death) was staged at the central focal point of the *platea*. In T-O maps, Jerusalem sat at the nexus of the three continents, the axial position of the world.

It is likely that this configuration informed the staging of burial sites at the center of the action in medieval ritual and theater. The first liturgical enactments in medieval churches in the tenth century—the *visitatio sepulchri*—were performed at the main altar, where the Three Marys encountered an angel at the mouth of Jesus’ now empty tomb. The miraculous raising of Lazarus from the dead, the central event in the vita of Mary Magdalene, was another opportunity from the Bible for theatrical lamentation. The scene accrues special significance in the staging of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. The sprawling *Magdalene* encompasses the saint’s *vitae eremitica*, *apostolica*, and *evangelica* in thirty-

FIGURE 2.1: *The Castle of Perseverance* stage plan (c. 1440), V.a.354, 191v. Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

seven real and allegorical locations, from Hell to Jerusalem and nearly everything in between, a geographical/ideological admixture that expands imaginative space beyond the known world.⁶ In the play, Mary's journeying away from her father's home in Jerusalem symbolically underscores her downfall into a state of lechery. Two burials bookend Magdalene's fall, her father's and her brother's, the second of which localizes her first meeting with Jesus and the beginning of her rise to sainthood. Given the theological and emotional weight of Lazarus' burial and resurrection, the tomb of Lazarus (which presumably doubled as the tomb of her father and of Christ) was likely positioned next to Mary's castle in the middle of the *platea*. Beginning with Greek tragedy, the theatrical primacy of tombs highlights the moment of anagnorisis in the plot, a geographical sign expressing liminality, danger, and madness, as epitomized in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Creon—the symbolic embodiment of Theban polity—encounters the unburied bodies of his niece and son in a tomb-like cave in the wilderness, an inversion of civilization and

FIGURE 2.2: Mappa Mundi. *De natura rerum* (c. 1055–74), MS. Canon. Misc. 560, 23r. Used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

harmony in spatial terms. What occurs on the edges of civil society in the dramatic narrative gets primary focal attention on the Greek stage.

Tragic protagonists transgress social norms by reifying the value of peripheral spaces (Hamlet in Yorick's grave, for instance) or by violating central, hegemonic places (Hamlet at court). The irrational, antisocial impulses that propel the protagonist into distant realms at the periphery (where one might encounter vice) are the same impulses that create irreconcilable conflicts at home. If we concur with scholars of medieval theater that the *platea* mirrors the metaphysics of the Christian universe, with the space of peaceful domesticity at the center, then the dramaturgical logic of staging the threshold moment between life and death at the center of the world is clear. Within this semiotic system, tragic themes were mapped theatrically onto a specifically medieval concept of space.

Uncommonly capacious in spatio-temporal terms, performances of East Anglian morality plays and saint's plays accrued a sense of the tragic from Christian metaphysics of sin, death, and resurrection, but also from the monumental, emblematic performance

conditions. Lengthy extravaganzas like *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mary Magdalene*, and the Cornish *Ordinalia* were anomalies in medieval English theater, since they required extensive work and resources to mount and were likely preserved in manuscripts because the productions themselves were so lavish. Shorter plays were far more commonly performed.⁷ The circular arena stages of East Anglia and Cornwall, and others on the continent, exemplify Henri Lefebvre's sociological concept of *absolute space*: "mythical and proximate, it generates times. . . . It has no place because it embodies all places, and has a strictly symbolic existence. . . . It consecrates, and consecration metaphysically identifies any space with fundamentally holy space: the space of sanctuary *is* absolute space."⁸ Here, the tragic aspects of medieval performance flow from the sense of sacred space projected onto theatrical place, embracing and implicating the audience into the world and grand design of the plot. *Locus* and *platea* arrangements provided sites that could accommodate the breadth of biblical and hagiographic histories, as well as the large crowds that undoubtedly attended.

As explained by Carol Symes, the word "tragedy" was most often, but not exclusively, used to describe ancient pagan practices through the medieval period.⁹ Augustine (c. 354–430) wrote of the "pernicious pleasure" he felt when "beholding doleful and tragical things" in Roman amphitheaters, which led him away from true Christian compassion.¹⁰ Isidore of Seville's (560–636) widely read *Etymologies* contained descriptions of theaters from the Roman past, which, according to him, accommodated a wide range of performance forms: dance, mime, juggling, and comic and tragic poems and songs.¹¹ Although medieval drama is distinctly non-generic—gamboling among comic, tragic, pastoral, spectacular, didactic, and festive modes—strains of tragic themes were expressed in textual, architectural, and choreographic forms. Passion plays, allegorical drama, and the Dance of Death (and the theatrical spaces in which they were performed) are embodied actions that exhibit these qualities. These spectacles cannot be abstractly conflated into a broad category of "tragedy," of course. However, they do share narrative and thematic elements common to tragic drama in the West: judgment, decline, reversal of fortune, bodily mortifications, and the supernatural. Significantly, these forms also stage microcosmic space in dynamic ways, suggesting a spatio-temporal link between the semi-sacred spaces of ancient Dionysian tragedy and the "unworthy scaffolds" (Prologue, *Henry V*, Shakespeare) that projected entire worlds into the confining platforms of Elizabethan public theaters.

The case studies in this essay include dance-music dramas about the dissolution and the inevitability of death from the late medieval period. On the Iberian Peninsula, the *Song of Sybil* was uniquely staged around the choir in the nave. Songs from the *Llibre Vermell* manuscript from Montserrat and the widely practiced Dance of Death demonstrate embodied encounters with the specter of death. In East Anglia, *The Castle of Perseverance* engaged a poetics of tragedy, spatially and ritually. Finally, the *Passio Christi* play from the Cornish *Ordinalia* is a single example of a Passion play among a multitude that contemplate the affective life of the tragic protagonist. Before discussing the stagings of these performances, I propose a provisional poetics of medieval tragedy, explicating the links between tragic misfortune, scapegoating, and death, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Judeo-Christian conception of sin and redemption. In order to highlight the "lively discourse surrounding modes of performance"¹² of tragedy, I trace the dissemination of tragic themes and stories in manuscript drawings, frescos, and ritual architecture. Two graphic configurations that were common among the staging practices of each of the examples emerge: the circle and the threshold.

TOWARDS A POETICS OF MEDIEVAL TRAGIC PLACE

In *De spectaculis*, written around the turn of the third century, Tertullian (155–240) railed against the polluting influences of the theatrical tradition in the Roman city of Carthage.¹³ In the treatise, the Church Father most well-known for his condemnations of Roman games and drama directed Christians to turn away from theatrical contests and focus their attention on the conflicts between moral forces.

Would you have fighting and wrestling? Here they are—things of no small account and plenty of them. See impurity overthrown by chastity, perfidy slain by faith, cruelty crushed by pity, impudence thrown into the shade by modesty; and such are the contests among us and in them we are crowned.¹⁴

Tertullian contemplates the allegorized figures of impurity, chastity, perfidy, and faith as antidotes to pagan spectacle, foreshadowing theatrical presentation of allegories a millennium later in works such as Hildegard von Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum* (1151) and three centuries after that in English morality plays. In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville used the word *theatron* ("seeing place") to describe theatrical architecture, recalling a performance tradition that had long since ended. Isidore described the Roman theater as semicircular with standing room for spectators and containing a "scene":

The scene was a place within the theater built like a house with a stage, and the stage was called the orchestra. . . . The orchestra was the platform of the scene, where the dancer could act, or where two persons could hold a disputation. For it was the orchestra that the comedic and tragic poets ascended for their competitions, and while they were singing, others made gestures.¹⁵

It is not clear from Isidore's description if he was working from an understanding of Roman theater alone or Greek performance practices as well. He may have been relying on the Greek for his definition of orchestra ("dancing-place") or perhaps from Livy's account of the origins of Roman theater. Henry Ansgar Kelly points out that Isidore's use of the term *scena* (*scaena*, in Old Latin) to refer to the large, roofed structure behind the platform stage (*pulpitam*) was accurate.¹⁶ It is also very likely that the seventh-century encyclopedist encountered Roman theaters in the provinces around Seville, and this may have informed his descriptions.¹⁷ Similar to early folk performance practices that the Church translated into liturgical festivals of the Christian calendar, memories of ancient games and tragic drama endured in the writings of reforming bishops and in the ancient spaces of performances left in the footprint of the Roman Empire. These material presences facilitated associations between pre-Christian violence and sacrifice and the theater of Christ's Passion.

Despite the fact that the Roman tragic performance tradition was feeble by the third century and only an artifact of history after the fifth, Roman theaters and amphitheaters populated the geography of medieval Western Europe, Byzantium, and the Ottoman empire. The remains of hundreds of Roman theaters in Christian and Islamic kingdoms—from England to Alexandria, Cádiz to Palestine—were in better condition than they are today, existed in greater numbers, and, like Roman basilicas, aqueducts, and roads, constituted a material presence in the daily life of medieval people. It is not clear to what extant Roman theaters in Western Christendom, or Greek amphitheaters in the east, were repurposed in the medieval period for new forms of religious plays or secular spectacle, dance, and disputation. It seems quite possible they were used for oratory, poetic

recitation, and song since the raked, cave-shaped architecture of the amphitheater offered excellent acoustical environments, sight lines, and ample seating. William Tydeman suggests that a number of medieval towns on the continent—Bourges, Saumur, Orange, Nîmes, and Arles—used the remnants of their local Roman amphitheaters for performances.¹⁸ In a document from 1497 there is record of religious plays being staged in the ruins of the Colosseum in Rome.¹⁹ Although it might seem improbable that a structure once used for the public persecution of early Christians would be repurposed for performances of plays based on Bible stories, it should be remembered that when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century, Constantine initiated the construction of churches modeled on Roman civic architecture.

In the Middle Ages, elements of Roman architecture accrued symbolic meanings specific to medieval structures of belief, related to original Roman architectural semiotics but reformulated allegorically for Christianity. For instance, the Roman triumphal arch was formally incorporated into the design of church entrances, legible to devotional communities as the triumphal second entry into paradise. The Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns that suggested trees in Roman society were resignified as human bodies in churches and cathedrals: two rows of twelve columns supporting church choirs represented the twelve apostles and twelve prophets upon which the “universal church” was carried.²⁰ Likewise, the remains of imperial Roman amphitheaters documented a history of pre-Christian games, dances, and tragic and comic song that could be repurposed for medieval performance. In Cornwall, two open-air amphitheaters, or rounds (in Cornish, *plen an gwary*), survive, one at St. Just-in-Penwith and the other near Perranporth (the Perran Round), each approximately 120 feet in diameter. Archeological evidence suggests the existence of sixteen others, some of which may have been adapted from pre-historical earthworks. An engraving from the eighteenth century shows Perran Round with raised earth banks, *vomitoria*, and a *platea* encircled with a trench. The extant Roman amphitheaters in western England may have inspired the designs of *plen an gwary*.²¹

Evidence of the significance of Roman theatrical architecture and drama in medieval culture is also preserved in the visual arts. Literary scholar Rosa María Rodríguez Porto claims that the iconography of the Greco-Roman tragic repertoire arose in the absence of classical texts in the medieval period, undergoing “a process of Christianization and medievalization which brought new layers of meaning to Greek sources.”²² The image of a semicircular stage occupied by actors and a chorus serves as the frontispiece illustration to a manuscript containing Nicholas Trevet’s gloss upon Seneca’s *Hercules furens* (c. 1330s). The image demonstrates that the fourteenth-century illustrator was aware of some elements of classical iconography, depicting Hercules wearing a lion skin and the Furies seated in the midst of flames.²³ The tenth-century ivory carving on the Veroli casket (held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London) depicts Bellerophon and Iphigenia at Aulis and is attributed to a Constantinopolitan workshop. It includes figures from classical mythology and history, such as the sacrifice of Iphigenia and a Dionysian procession. The popular medieval romance *Roman de Troie* and a Castilian translation of the work commissioned by Alfonso XI in the fourteenth century, the *Cronica Troyana*, were both presented in richly illustrated manuscripts offering oral and visual means for the transmission of classical mythology. The images of extreme violence and matricide in *Cronica Troyana* and the sacrifice of Iphigenia on the Veroli casket attest to the fact that the medieval notion of the tragic was informed by classical mythology, and representations of sacrifice and death in Christian contexts invite us to consider “the obstinate presence

of ancient tragedy in the folds of medieval culture.”²⁴ It is quite possible that a hybrid concept of Christian tragedy developed through citations to ancient culture in sacred spaces and associations between death, violence, and sacrifice in Christ’s Passion and various forms *ars moriendi*.

Parallel to the active assimilation of classical stories, images, and ideas—and quite distinct from their Roman and Greek forebears—medieval theater practitioners physicalized stories of decline and death in the naves, aisles, and altars of churches, the squares and streets of towns, graveyards, and the outdoor play spaces. In some cases, these spaces were inscribed with specific emblematic representations of the cosmos, biblical history and revelation, and death. In other cases, the sense of spiritual decay and rejuvenation was accessed through the gestural movement of performers in places containing little symbolic information—such as the *platea*—where audiences might experience affective transcendence in empty space. The twentieth-century theater director and theorist Peter Brook elucidates such an abstract, otherworldly space in his definition of “Holy Theatre”:

it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts. We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses: a most powerful explanation of the various arts is that they talk of patterns which we can only begin to recognize when they manifest themselves as rhythms or shapes.²⁵

In her performative reading of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* (1461), Donnalee Dox applies Brook’s idea to medieval playing, writing that the “space of imagination offers a conception of space that links performance space directly with belief in God in a way that two-dimensional iconography, nonmimetic performance (such as public preaching), statuary, and even liturgy could not.”²⁶ What Brook and Dox are suggesting is that figural representations of theological and ethical concepts are phenomenologically potent when explored in nonfigurative, nondescript spaces. When theatrical action is framed in abstract space, the audience is encouraged to engage their imaginations to envision a realm beyond the pedestrian. For example, the monumental spaces of gothic cathedrals offer evocative environments that produce affective awe for worshipers. Although Christian emblems populate cathedral niches, tympana, lintels, aisles, shrines, and choir stalls, the sense of enormity of God’s creation and the heavens could be accessed by communities of faith in vast vacancies above naves, where the exterior immensity of place is coextensive with the internal experience of universality. Like-minded devotees participating in prayer and ritual would have enhanced this affective engagement with space. As Gaston Bachelard explains, the phenomenology of space is linked to human occupation: “[i]n the dynamic rivalry between house and universe, we are far removed from any reference to simple geometrical forms. A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.”²⁷

Locus and *platea* staging provided devotional communities with opportunities to explore the Christian universe; nowhere in particular and everywhere at once. The voided central performance area was defined simply by the action that took place there, and the co-presence of empty space was a meaningful frame for exploring metaphysical concepts and allegories. In the Croxton *Play*, themes of materialism, Jewish doubt, and the commodification of the Eucharist were projected against the empty space of the *platea*. Despite the presence of spectacular and grisly effects, the theme of absence weaves together the text and play space of the drama: absence of belief, a disembodied hand, the substitution of Eucharistic bread for a bleeding Jesus, and the eradication of Jewishness in

the converted Jew. Catherine Belsey illuminates this point: “[i]n the symbolic order being implies the possibility of non-being, presence and the possibility of absence. Not to know difference is not to know God: but to know God is to know separation from the world.”²⁸ The *platea* staged an experience of the universe beyond the physical senses of sight and sound. Props, set pieces, and costumes, recognizable as everyday and earthbound, were allegorized to the status of ubiquity. In the Croxton *Play*, the image of the bleeding child is a phantasmagoric analogy for the Eucharist. The castle in *Perseverance* is an analogy for “safety” during the battle for the soul: a fortress for the army of virtues, the sacred center of the world. The castle, with a bed upon which Mankind is born and returns to die, also symbolizes a threshold for the movement of the soul away from the body and into the regions beyond.

In addition to providing a neutral space for the engagement of the imagination, the outdoor playing space of sacred, didactic theater also performed a countervailing role in a cast of allegorical figures. Several medieval theater scholars have taken note of the effective juxtaposition of the unmarked *platea* with the rich imagery and emblematic language of allegorical drama: “large-scale plays with numerous *loca* (scaffolds or raised stages) are conducive to multiple presentations of time and place, thereby reminding the audience of the universality of the themes on display and of God’s unique, eternal perspective on them.”²⁹ The morality play *Everyman* (c. 1510–25) explores the subject of avarice (represented by the character Goods) in narrative and thematic depth, where the conflict between material and spiritual realms is heightened in performance. God and Death compel the protagonist to commence a pilgrimage, rendered in performance as “walking and wending” through the diverse scaffold locations. Meanwhile, the withdrawal of *Everyman*’s companions Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin from the playing area emphasize the void. In their absence, *Everyman* seeks out an old comfort, Goods, who because of *Everyman*’s haste, cannot be seen:

Who calleth me? Everyman? What, hast thou haste?
 I lye here in corners trussed and pyled so hye,
 And in chestes I am locked full fast,
 Also sacked in bagges, thou mayste se with thyne eye.
 I cannot stere, in packes low I lye.
 What wolde ye have? Lyghtly me saye.

—lines 393–8³⁰

While the description of Goods’ stuffed bags and money chests could serve as internal instructions for the pageant-master to supply properties, it is more likely that Goods’ elaborate narration about the objects obviates the need for real props. Goods invites the audience to produce the images of excess in their minds: “thou mayste se with thyne eye.” The message carried in the *mise en scène* is clear: *Everyman*’s search for worldly plentitude is futile since, in fact, riches are not there. Where he seeks goods for his accounting, he finds only their absence. For Walter Benjamin, allegorical performance was the paradigm of existence-in-absence “bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas” and elevated the tragic arts in particular to sublime knowledge and experience. In Benjamin’s estimation, allegories derive their power “from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them.”³¹

Pre-modern philosophers recognized the symbolic link between the worldly stage and tragic theater. John of Salisbury crafted the topos *theatrum mundi* in *Policraticus* (1159) long before Shakespeare allegorized the Globe theater and Caldaron composed *Gran*

Teatro del Mundo. Salisbury wrote that “[a]lmost the entire world, according to the opinion of our friend Petronius, is seen to play the part of actor to perfection. . . . It is surprising how nearly coextensive with the world is the stage on which this endless, marvelous, incomparable tragedy, or if you will comedy, can be played: its area is in fact that of the whole world.”³² For medieval spectators, the metaphor functioned in the opposite direction as well—the stage as cosmos in the figure of Fortune’s Wheel, one of the most popular literary and artistic topoi of the Middle Ages. In the narrative, poetic, visual, and dramatic arts, humans were carried in a circular manner on the path to inevitable doom. The genealogy of Fortune’s Wheel can be traced to Boethius’ widely read *Consolation of Philosophy* (524), which itself was based on classical philosophy and formative concepts of Revelation during the early patristic period.³³ Fortune’s Wheel and the related allegories of Vice and Virtue bound together religious doctrine, popular belief, and the machinery of tragic inevitability and were widely disseminated in the visual and performing arts, poetry, and exegesis. Based on the extant evidence, Fortune’s Wheel first appeared as a stage object in a *ludus* about St. Catherine at Dustable, Bedfordshire (c. 1110). As an allegorical stage persona, Fortune appeared in the thirteenth century in Adam de la Halle’s *Jeu de la Feuillée*.

In the same tradition, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De casibus virorum illustrium* (c. 1355–60) collects stories told in the first person about victims of disaster. *De casibus* influenced Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Monk’s Tale* and set the pattern for a form of literary tragedy into the early modern humanist period. Instances of creative amalgamation between Fortune’s Wheel and Christian theology appear in religious sermons, as both subject matter and rhetorical strategy. In a thirteenth-century miniature in a Carmina Burana manuscript, Lady Fortune is replaced by the figure of Christ at the center of the wheel, sitting in judgment of the humans that roll past (Figure 2.3). The miniature contains essential characters of the Fortune’s Wheel motif: an image of a king at the top of the wheel followed by, in clockwise direction, stages of his fall from greatness. As art historian Mitchell Merback has convincingly argued, in addition to cosmological meaning and religious symbolism of Fortune’s Wheel and the Crucifix in this and other iconographic images, the wheel and the cross suggested punitive justice to the medieval spectator.³⁴ The “breaking wheel” was the instrument of St. Catherine’s martyrdom (which, legendarily, broke when she touched it) and was used as a method for punishing criminals in spectacular and painful fashion throughout the medieval and early modern periods. The victim was strapped to the turning wheel and beaten, the weight of his shifting, stretched body causing bones to crack between the spokes. The graphic semiotics of sin and punishment in the Wheel corresponded to the circular staging of allegorical drama, where themes of vice and damnation spun out actions and events.

As an instrument for Christian instruction, the leitmotif of Fortune’s Wheel added a layer of ethical didacticism to the medieval construction of tragic plot, particularly in morality plays. The allegorical wheel mechanically turning its victims towards death brings *every man* into the centripetal force of its rotation. In morality plays, the pivotal event for post-performance introspection is the moment Mankind crosses the threshold between death and judgment. Having witnessed correct and incorrect choices, spectators leave the performance contemplating their positions on the cosmic wheel and, perhaps, the means for their salvation.

What is notable about the various literary and artistic iterations of Fortune’s Wheel, in the late medieval period especially, is that unlike the cause-and-effect dramaturgy prescribed by Aristotle and exemplified in Oedipus’ *hamartia* of pride and willful blindness, reversal of fortune of the lives of medieval souls has a sense of inevitability.

FIGURE 2.3: Wheel of Fortune with Christ Enthroned in Judgment. *Codex Buranus*, 1230. BSM, Clm 4660, 1r. Used by permission of the Bavarian State Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Embodied by the female figure of Fortuna, the force of (mis)fortune is indifferent and relentless as she churns her victims under the wheel. The lack of retributive justice in the medieval tragic arts may also relate to the construction of Jesus as a scapegoat in various literary texts and in Passion theater. For Terry Eagleton, to have a socially ameliorative effect, a scapegoat's death must be a wasteful act, without culpability or reason:

Jesus was left only with a forlorn faith in what he called his Father, despite the fact that this power seemed now to have abandoned him. But it is precisely this bereftness, savoured to the last bitter drop, which in a classically tragic rhythm could then become the source of renewed life. . . . Only by being 'made sin' in the Pauline phrase, turned into some monstrous, outcast symbol of inhumanity, can the scapegoat go all the way through that condition to emerge somewhere on the other side.³⁵

The often spectacular violence rendered on the body of Christ during his trial, tortures, and crucifixion provided spectators with a compelling reminder of their own mortality, both theatrically and *actually*, as in self-mortification rituals imitating the Passion of Christ or the many real episodes of pain suffered by actors playing the role of Jesus in Passion dramas.³⁶

In his monograph on mythopoetics and ritual structure in medieval religious drama, Rainer Warning elaborates on the archetype of the scapegoat embodied in the sacrifice of Jesus in Passion plays. Warning argues that Christ's passivity in the face of ferocious cruelty in the French Arras Passion, Arnould Greban's Passion play, and scenes of torment in episodes from English plays, adds a dimension of pagan ritualism to religious theater. The stoic resignation of Christ recalls certain ancient rites of sacrifice where the victim (or god) is masked and immobile: "in the Adam play the Christian tradition is not represented purely. The Christian-figural level of what takes place in the *loca* is associated with a pre-Christian ritualistic element on the level of what takes place in the *platea*."³⁷ While Warning does not attribute archetypal figures to an unmediated folkloric substratum in the plays, his argument that the emotional and symbolic investments in violence exhibit an "epochal longing for scapegoats" is convincing, and links *imitatio Christi* to the social function of ancient drama.³⁸ The connection between ancient ritual affect and Christ's Passion was observed by medieval writers themselves, Remigius in the tenth century and Honorius Augustodunensis in the twelfth, among others.³⁹

For Warning, pre-Christian mythological typologies become more apparent in the embodied act of playing, impulses that are in conversation, and sometimes at odds, with the doctrinal elements of biblical drama. For instance, in some liturgical plays the climax of the Passion occurs at the *descensus* episode, while the body of Jesus (the actor playing Jesus) remains on the cross, suggesting that "the Redemption is in large measure detached from its specifically Christian background. The cardinal function has passed from the moral event of the Crucifixion to the mythologeme of the descent into hell."⁴⁰ Postponement of the doctrinal function of the Resurrection also occurs in the Cornish *Ordinalia*, a three-day event that covers episodes from biblical history, apocrypha, and folkloric traditions, as described in more detail below.

During the peak of Passion devotion in the late medieval period the public expression of remorse and sadness was essential and often expressed in tearful acts of contrition. Grief, of course, is the core emotion of tragic drama, both for the characters who mourn loss on stage and audiences who respond sympathetically (or, in medieval terms, with compassion). The ancient practice of performative lamenting and mourning in funeral rites was active through the Middle Ages. As it was rehearsed in liturgical drama and English Mary plays, mournful wailing would have contrasted dramatically with the stoicism of Christ in his role as the scapegoat, both occupying the mythological stratum. Yet, in other regions of Europe like Spain, public weeping was integrated into devotional practices in the Stations of the Cross, Holy Week processions, and other Passion enactments. From the thirteenth century forward, the lay population participated more directly in the celebrations of the body of Christ. In *imitatio Christi*, ritual actors somatically delineated the tragic suffering of Christ across spaces, mimetically reviving the Son of God's painful journey to Golgotha. Related to the prerogatives of sincere confession, the spectacle of violence and suffering in penitential processions partook in a wider culture of public crying and tearful contrition.⁴¹

In summary, medieval tragedy bodied forth "absolute space" where the fall of man and god *as* man were lamented. In the final section, I analyze dramatic iterations of this theory by observing correspondences between the dramaturgical patterns of tragedy and the mythopoetic journey of the soul, and how these trajectories were enacted in specific spaces of performance. The examples are limited by the availability of evidence for staging, the scope of my areas of expertise, and the editorial constraints of this collection. A more comprehensive list might include processional and private devotional acts that would produce additional areas for analysis and contrasting propositions.

THE SONG OF SYBIL, CASTILE AND CATALONIA (THIRTEENTH THROUGH SIXTEENTH CENTURIES)

The *Song of Sybil* was a paraliturgical music-drama popular in Catalonia and Castile, and is still performed (albeit in a less theatrical manner) in Spanish churches today. Developed from the liturgical, Latinate *Ordo prophetarum*, the *Song of Sybil* related a vision of the Apocalypse and was performed on Christmas Eve. Enactments included a procession of Old Testament prophets presaging the coming of Jesus, followed by the Sybil's prophecy of the end of the world. The Sybil was dressed as an angel and occupied a raised platform above the action in order to supervise the procession of prophets. The play resided at the cusp of two Christian liturgical seasons and contained thematic elements of both—the somber, penitential Advent season and joyous Christmastide with its carnivalesque features. The play employs allegorical characters to remind the lay population of the ultimate role the Son of God will play on earth at the very beginning of His life's story. By linking historical Old Testament prophecies of the birth of Jesus to the prophecy of the Second Coming, the *Song of Sybil* staged the intersection of past and future, signifying cyclical time and engendering a sense of timelessness.

The music dramas were performed in cathedrals and churches in Catalonia and Castile, and due to the unique architectural design of many Romanesque and Gothic churches in Spain, the plays were staged in the center of the nave, with parishioners viewing the scenes from all sides. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, choirs were installed at a distance from the main altar in the naves of the cathedrals of Toledo, Barcelona, Oviedo, Mallorca, Tortosa, and elsewhere. In many ways, liturgical dramas staged at the pulpit of the choir, in the transept, and the antichoir (between the choir and the chancel) involved a greater participation of the laity than in music dramas staged in churches where the choir was situated behind a rood screen in the chancel. Eduardo Carrero Santamaría points out that the unique position of the choir among the laity provided a natural arrangement for procession and greater stage visibility for larger audiences in the antichoir, nave, and north and south transepts. The “theater-in-the-round” setting for various feasts plays, including the *Song of Sybil*, included highly theatrical stagings and spectacular effects to enhance miraculous, supernatural, and apocalyptic visions: temporary scaffolds and platform stages (including planked bridges linking the high altar and the choir); ornate costumes; angels wielding swords and torches; biblical characters, doves, and burning axes flown in from the ceiling; lightning and thunder effects; groups of musicians; and, in the cathedral of Burgos during the first and second vespers of Pentecost, live chickens and geese let loose into the playing area.⁴²

FARSA DEL JUEGO DE CAÑAS, TALAVERA LA REAL (1554)

Evidence about the staging of the *Song of Sybil* is also available in the play *Farsa del juego de cañas* (the Farce of the Game of Canes), written by the parish priest of Talavera la Real, Diego Sánchez de Badajoz. Performed inside the church at Christmastide, the *Farsa* frames the traditional *Song of Sybil* liturgy with dramatic dialogue between the Sybil and two shepherds, beginning with a scene in which the Sybil conjures a procession of Old Testament prophets for the entertainment and edification of the pastoral characters. Only the shepherd, the shepherdess, and the Sybil are in view of the audience; Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah sing their roles offstage. To the traditional dramaturgy of the *Song of Sybil*, Sánchez de Badajoz adds to the drama a staged “game of

canes,” a mock battle with sticks between the seven Virtues and seven Vices. Perhaps to increase the sense of surprise for the shepherd, shepherdess, and audience in the nave, sound effects from battle were produced from a location hidden from view. As in the widespread Peninsular tradition of *La Sibilia*, the Sybil “settles into a chair, to be placed in a section above so that she subjugates everyone and everyone sees her, in front of which will be a candle or burning ax with a thread of iron, with a metal sheet on top, made with skill so that it seems to be in the air.”⁴³ The Sybil sat on a rotating seat in a supernatural realm above the nave, directing and judging the singing and battling a cast of characters. Similar stage arrangements were used to perform Sánchez de Badajoz’s *Farsa de la Muerte*, a short comic sketch about the inevitability and unexpectedness of death that conforms to the pan-European Dance of Death tradition.

DANCES OF DEATH, PAN-EUROPEAN (FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES)

The Dance of Death (or *danse macabre*) was a theme in literature, the visual arts, and performance culture that developed in the fourteenth century. Similar to the allegorical forms discussed above, the Dance of Death was a confrontation of the living with allegories of Death, often illustrated as human skeletons or ghostly post-mortem figures. As in the visual and textual representations of Fortune’s Wheel, the men and women who were pulled into the dynamic force of mortality came from every station in society. Direct and indirect evidence for embodied representations and dances on the theme are extant. For instance, the conventions of the German *Totentanz* appear to have developed from a deathbed monologue into a dialogue song form between the dying and the allegorical figure of Death. Also, the music from the *Totentanz* tradition incorporates elements from popular dances of the period. Death also appears as a character in performance forms other than dance, such as *tableaux vivants*, court entertainments, and biblical plays, such as the N-Town *Death of Herod*. Death is a staple character in morality plays, one example among many of animated skeletons that cajole and threaten in the visual, sculptural, and performance arts. As an allegorical form that “plays” with heightened emotional commitment to fear and sorrow, the Dance of Death discloses medieval poetics of tragedy. As Walter Benjamin wrote, allegories of death that constitute the ancient roots of tragedy are especially potent because “the allegorization of the physis . . . can only be carried through in all its vigour in respect of the corpse.”⁴⁴

Elina Gertsman argues that a coherent and recognizable embodied dance practice of the *danse macabre* existed in many regions of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the dance was conducted in the presence of spectators. She writes that Death’s dance

appears as a tool for differentiation between the immoral, supernatural, demonic, and chaotic domain of death and the ordered world of the living that death disrupts. This dancing, moreover, is performed for the sake of the spectator, the viewer of the Dance of Death, who is not (yet) performing the dance, but is invited to contemplate it.⁴⁵

A number of medieval theater historians have recommended restraint when examining works of art as evidence in the theater arts. As Clifford Davidson has shown, theater was experienced within a larger culture of images, and this broader culture informed the reception of iconographic figures metonymically.⁴⁶ The large murals of the Dance of Death painted and carved into interiors and exteriors of church naves and tympana, cloisters,

FIGURE 2.4: *Danse Macabre* mural, Parish Church of Kermaria-an-Isquit. 1490. Courtesy of Elina Gertsman.

charnel houses, and graveyard walls offer another way of thinking about late medieval art and theater. Processional narratives in mural form need to be analyzed in the context of the spaces they inhabit; the standard uses of those spaces must also be considered. Church naves, aisles, and yards were commonly used for processions, dances, and enactments. Graveyards, of course, were the endpoints of funerary processions. Murals painted on the walls surrounding these spaces required viewers to walk alongside the painted surfaces to appreciate the full picture, as in the 60-meter long mural painted on the walls of a Dominican cemetery in Basel. Or they required circular movement around the inner circumference of a church nave, as in the parish church of Kermaria-an-Isquit, France, and the *Danse Macabre* mural (c. 1490) within (Figure 2.4) or cloister (such as the painted cycle on the walls of the enclosed burial ground of Old St. Paul's Cathedral in London, where John Lydgate's English translation of Dance of Death verses was inscribed (c. 1430)). The dioramic images functioned like stage objects that invited interaction from ritual actors. Paintings were sites "for active spectatorship" that played "a crucial role in the construction of meaning as well as its reception," particularly since the format and the size of the murals required the physical movement of viewers through space.⁴⁷

***LLIBRE VERMELL*, MONTSERRAT (c. 1399–1400)**

The ten songs from the *Llibre Vermell* were written for pilgrims worshipping a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Montserrat at a Benedictine monastery high in the mountains surrounding Barcelona. Nine of the ten songs (verses in Latin, Occitan, and Catalan) are Marian, and the last falls squarely within the *ars moriendi* tradition and may have influenced

the composition of songs from the Castilian *Dança general de la muerte* manuscript from the same period. A miniature of a skeleton illustrates the stanzas and verses of the last song, *Ad Mortem Festināmus* (“We Hasten Towards Death”) (Figure 2.5). The placement of this song at the end of the cycle, with its thematic shift away from the main subject of the other songs, suggests that it served as punctuation to the nightly festivities. The style of music of the entire collection, in fact, is unique for the region and the time period, supporting the idea that the songs were written for a very specific purpose in a specific location. Kevin Kreitner concludes that since the songs are uniquely popular in tone—contrasting the self-conscious service music found in other contemporary Peninsular church manuscripts—the inscription on folio 22 can be trusted as evidence for staging in the plaza outside the monastery:⁴⁸

Because sometimes the pilgrims holding night vigil in the church of Santa Maria of Montserrat wish to sing and dance, and also by day in the plaza, and only decent and devout songs are allowed there, the songs above and below are written. And these must be used decently and sparingly, not disturbing those who continue in their prayers and devote contemplations . . .⁴⁹

The eleventh-century Romanesque monastery is still standing, however it is difficult to determine the dimensions of the plaza with any degree of certainty since the majority of the current architectural elements in the complex were built after the medieval period. Still, because the shrine was a popular pilgrimage destination at the time, the plaza would have been sizable in order to facilitate the activities of a large number of unruly celebrants, as the inscription implies. The forms and styles of the songs are remarkably diverse. Prominent among them is the Iberian popular dance form, the *virelai*. The *virelai* is a round dance, and the clear melodies and simple, even rhythmic patterns of the song lend themselves to devotional dancing and singing.⁵⁰

The boisterous cadence of the *virelai* form contrasts with the somber verse of *Ad Mortem Festināmus*:

Ad mortem festinamus:
peccare desistamus.
Peccare desistamus.

We hasten towards death:
sin we must end.

Scribere proposui de contemptu mundano,
ut degentes seculi non mulcentur in vano;
iam est hora surgere a sompno mortis
pravo.
A sompno mortis pravo.

I write about the contempt of the world
so this degenerate age will not pass in vain;
now is the hour to rise from the evil sleep
of death.

Vita brevis breviter in brevi finietur,
mors venit velociter quae neminem veretur,
omnia mors perimit et nulli miseretur.
Et nulli miseretur.

Life is short, and shortly it will end,
death comes quickly and respects nobody,
it destroys everything and has no mercy.

Ni conversus fueris et sicut puer factus
et vitam mutaveris in meliores actus,
intrare non poteris regnum Dei beatus.
Regnum Dei beatus.

If you do not turn back and become like
a child,
And transform your life into good deeds,
And change your life for the better,
You will not be able to enter blessed into
the Kingdom of God.

FIGURE 2.5: *Ad Mortem Festinamus*. Llibre Vermell de Montserrat (c. 1399–1400). 26v–27r. Courtesy of the Biblioteca de Montserrat.

What is striking to the modern reader, perhaps, is the expression of themes on death in a festive dance. However, a treatment that might seem irreverent or frivolous to our ears had far more complex meanings in late medieval culture. The sense of mortality, particularly after the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, was ever-present. *Ars moriendi* was a creative means for reconciling the nearness of death. The phenomenon of dying, and the ways in which this phenomenon was expressed somatically in dance, “was viewed both as a destructive phenomenon and a possible gateway to eternal recompense,” inviting a “flood of ambiguities, including the liminal nature of the Dance protagonists: the deadened state of the living and the enlivened state of Death.”⁵¹ Choreographed in the form of a round dance, the presence of death in the pilgrim song enters into a rehearsal of celestial circularity. Burdened with maladies that hastened them towards their deaths, worshipers entreated the Mother of God to heal their illnesses (as is expressed in the seventh song from collection, *Mariam matrem virginem*). Having recently completed a journey and strenuous climb to the mountaintop shrine, the pilgrims sought a means for expressing their thanks and love for the Virgin of Montserrat in voice and movement, and to receive the comfort and restoration She provided. The songs of the *Llibre Vermell* offered a way for worshipers to embody the ambiguities experienced at the threshold of death, resolving difficult emotions through familiar round dances in sacred/secular space in the sky.

DANÇA GENERAL DE LA MUERTE (COMPOSED c. 1392, COPIED c. 1460–80)

Descriptions of choreographies of the Dance of Death are also found in the Castilian *Dança general*. For instance, as part of one narrative, a preacher introduces the dance from a raised platform (not unlike the church platform for the *Song of Sybil*) as a procession of members of various estates forms in a circle below. Michelle Hamilton's work on the fifteenth-century Hebrew *aljamiado* (Arabic transcriptions of European-language texts) copy of the manuscript (MS Parm. 2666) also points to a performance tradition specific to Peninsular Muslim and Jewish cultures. What distinguishes this text from those of the popular northern European tradition of Dance of Death are the figures of a rabbi and a Muslim judge partaking in the processional dance, as well as a figure of Death which more closely resembles the Semitic Angel of Death (Mal'ak ha-Mavet) and Angel of the Resurrection (Israfil) than it does the skeletal image common in other regions of Europe. The choreographies suggested by Parm. 2666 do not exclude a courtly milieu (such as *entremeses* and coronation rituals) and also strongly imply ancient Mediterranean funerary rites among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. These include accounts of pantomimes in which gravediggers wore skeleton costumes and depicted Death leading all humankind in a dance to the grave. Both the *Dança general* and its Hebrew copy allude to musical instruments, and the works are written in dialogue form.⁵² Further, the dance may have had a performative function in Jewish and *converso* funerals, and in the Jewish Diaspora the themes would have highlighted theological aspects of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah: transgression, repentance, sin, and forgiveness.⁵³

Two conclusions can be drawn from these Iberian examples. First, unique interfaith relationships in Iberian communities reveal practices that occurred at and around gravesites (dance performances by grave-digger guilds were a tradition long before the fourteenth century), and in circular choreographies that resonate with other medieval tragic forms discussed above.⁵⁴ Second, the evidence shows that the exploration of tragic affect—fear, sorrow, and contrition—were not exclusive to Christian communities, and additional research on Jewish and Islamic exegesis and funeral rituals and other forms of public lamentation might reveal strains of mythopoetics of tragedy in these cultures.

THE CASTLE OF PERSEVERANCE, EAST ANGLIA (c. 1440)

The stage diagram of *The Castle of Perseverance* (Figure 2.1) plots a comic-tragic-action/adventure journey for the soul of Humanum Genus (Mankind), embodying not only the circular pattern of Christian revelation, atonement, and redemption, but also the didactic metaphor of Fortune's Wheel. The *platea* illustration in the Macro manuscript exemplifies a microcosmic geography according to a cardinal orientation with spiritual dimensions: God in the east, Flesh to the warm south, World opposite paradise in the west, and the devil's scaffold in the north. In *Perseverance*, Mankind physicalizes this cosmic motion in a peregrination around the scaffolds on the perimeter of the playing space, where he experiences some success, but more often failure, in his pursuit of his goals. A war for the soul of Mankind is the centerpiece of the drama, a tragic *agôn* in the most basic sense, that which "stages conflicts where the contesting characters are given ample opportunities to present their reasons for wanting to act in a certain way before their disputes culminate in the obliteration of the world that they live in through these actions."⁵⁵

The resolution of *Perseverance* is unlike all other extant English morality plays (except for the fragment *The Pride of Life*) since the protagonist dies in a state of sin, and rather than proceeding to heaven, he is summarily beckoned to hell where he is repeatedly beaten by devils. Fortunately for Mankind, and in the nick of time, the Four Daughters of God plead for this undeserving soul—who, in 3,649 lines of text prior to salvation mostly fails to resist the Vices—and he is retrieved from Hell and brought to God’s scaffold. As Clifford Davidson points out, the progression of Mankind through the scaffolds does not suggest a sense of pilgrimage towards a transcendental goal.⁵⁶ Although the eventual salvation of Mankind is doctrinally sound, the action leading up to this point suggests a tragic downfall culminating in Mankind’s exhortation to the audience, “takythe example at me./ Do for youreself whyl ye han spase” (2,839). The ultimate reconciliation with God, then, emphasizes the theological point that good deeds and penance are not enough to save one’s soul; ultimately, salvation depends on God’s mercy. This typology fits into the poetics of medieval tragedy described above: a lack of control over one’s destiny, with suffering along the way. The last line of the play encourages the audience to meditate on the end of life and the end of history itself: “Thynke on youre last endynge” (3,648). More than other English moralities, then, the emotional trajectory of the soul follows the path of the *Psychomachia*, buffered by a chance act of mercy that sends the protagonist back up the other side of fortune’s wheel.

The appearance of Belyal (Satan) recalls another trope familiar to the audience of *Perseverance*: the Dance of Death. Belyal mentions bones a few times in the play (the typical depiction of Death in the *danse macabre* is a skeleton), and during battle he dances to the sounds of bagpipes, “gunne-pwder brenнын In pypys in his handis and in his eris, and in his ers”:

BELYAL What, for Belyalys bonys,
Whereabowtyn chyde ye?
Have don, ye boyes, al at onys.
Lasche don these moderys, all three.
Werke wrake to this wonys.
The vaunward is grauntyd me.
Do these moderys to makyn monys.
Youre dowty dedys now lete se.
Dasche hem al to daggys.
Have do, boyes, blo and blake
Wirke these wenchys wo and wrake.
Claryouns, cryeth up at a krake,
And blowe your brode baggys!

—2,186–98

The iconography of the Dance of Death is rehearsed again in a speech near the end of the play when Justice says of Mankind “that he schulde a levyd ay, Tyl Deth trypte him on hys daunce. . . .” (3,424–5)⁵⁷ The inducement of Death into playful circumstances was a familiar theme in a variety of art forms, and in this network of associations a sense of tragic doom was made present for audiences. In the microcosmic place and scaffold of the fifteenth-century morality, Death marked for the viewer the tragic threshold for the soul’s pilgrimage in real time and space.

ORDINALIA, CORNWALL (LATE FOURTEENTH CENTURY)

Like *The Castle of Perseverance*, the staging plan in the compendious fourteenth-century Cornish *Ordinalia* symbolically connects the emblematic force of space with the iconography of misfortune, downfall, and death. Of the four plays in the Bodley 791 manuscript, three are structured on a composition of biblical and extra-biblical events: *Ordinale de Origine Mundi*, *Passio Domini Nostri Jhesu Christi*, and *Ordinale de Resurrexione Domini*. Each play is around three thousand lines in length and thematically linked to the others by the defeat of the Devil and Redemption, from the Fall to the Resurrection. The tremendous size and scope of the plays, which included music and an invitation at the end of the fourth play in the manuscript (*Beunans Meriasek*) to dance and drink, indicate that they must have been performed on occasions of some importance, perhaps Corpus Christi.⁵⁸ In addition to the plan from the manuscript, remaining physical evidence provides information about the staging of the *Ordinalia*. The plays were staged on Cornish rounds (*plen an gwary*), permanent playing spaces built out of earth and held by stone retaining walls in an amphitheater arrangement. The diagram for staging the second play of the trilogy, the *Passio Christi* (Figure 2.6), indicates locations for the principal characters of the play (clockwise from the east): Celum, Centurio, Cayphas, Princeps Annas, Herodes, Pilatus, Doctores, and Tortores.

FIGURE 2.6: *Passio Christi* stage plan. *Ordinalia* (1425). MS Bodley 791, 56v. Used by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

Two elements of the second play relate to the subject of tragedy. The *Passio Christi* includes various events from Christ's ministry and ends with two non-biblical scenes and the deposition, after which Nicodemus addresses the audience directly, calling on them to reflect on the events of the Passion. The Resurrection play was performed on the third day, which provided an interval in which the audience could fully explore affective sorrow in response to the death of God's son. The Three Marys, Harrowing of Hell, Death of Pilate, and the Ascension are held in abeyance. As such, the arc of the *Passio Christi* reaches its nadir at the most sorrowful scene of Christian history, prior to the positive sign of resurrection in the *visitatio* or the victorious Harrowing of Hell. Old Testament prophecies remain unfulfilled in *Passio Christi* and death is thematically triumphant. The audience is left to lament the violent end of the protagonist without an optimistic resolution or hope for salvation. The scapegoat becomes an empty vessel in which witnesses to the sacrifice may pour their emotions.

Like the Passion episodes expressed in the English pageants and on the continent, the physical trials of Christ in the *Ordinalia* are particularly violent. The instruments of the Passion receive strong emphasis: Christ's brain is pierced by the crown of thorns and he is stretched, pierced, and tortured on the cross. The nails used in the crucifixion are the subject of a non-biblical mini-episode all of their own. In contrast to this intensity of mortal violence, which is germane to tragic drama prior to, and after, the Middle Ages, Jesus remains silent and impassive throughout, fully embodying the ritual scapegoat function of pre-Christian ritual.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the Aristotelian linear diagram of exposition, rise, climax, fall, and denouement, the medieval circular trajectory of tragic action was repetitive, open to changing outcomes, and ultimately unresolved for the audience. Likewise, life on earth for medieval Christians was a pause more than it was a trajectory—an interregnum between the First Advent and the Second Advent, lived between unknown periphery and spiritual center in Jerusalem. Only upon the threshold of death does Fortune's Wheel come to a stop, and even when this moment is staged in choirs, *platea*, and graveyards, the ultimate destiny of mankind remains a terrible unknown for the future to determine. The theatrical processions, dance forms, morality dramas, and saint's plays that rehearsed the spatiality of Christian cosmos did not resolve these paradoxes by ending in social stasis, but rather challenged audiences with compelling questions that required resolution only after the crowds had dispersed, within the soul's encasement.

80. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fonds latin 14925, fol. 132; cf. lat. 3594, fol. 192; ed. [J.-] B. Hauréau, *Notices et extraits de quelques manuscrits latins de la Bibliothèque nationale*, 6 vols. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1889–94), vol. 3, 317. “Cum voce jocularis, in plateis sedentis, quomodo illi strenui milites antiqui, scilicet Rolandus et Oliverius, etc., in bello occubere recitatur, populus circumstans pietate movetur et interdum lacrymatur; sed cum voce Ecclesiae incluta Christi bella, quomodo scilicet mortem moriendo devicit et de hoste superbo triumphavit quotidie fere commemoratur, qui sunt qui pietate moventur?” See Symes, *A Common Stage*, 154–74.
81. Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy*, xiii, 36, 111.

Chapter Two

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38. *Ibid.*, 179–81; 233–9.
39. See Carol Symes’ essay in this volume. Also Symes, “The Tragedy,” and Kelly *Ideas and Forms*.
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41. See essays by L. Blanchfield, C. Swift, and F. Thürlemann in E. Gertsman, *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
42. E. Carrero Santamaría, “Entre el Transepto, El Pulpito y el Coro. El Espacio Conmemorativo de la Sibilía,” in *La Sibilía. Sonido. Imagen. Liturgia. Escena*, ed. M. Gómez Muntané y E. Carrero Santamaría (Madrid: Alpuerto, 2015), 248–55; 260.
43. “. . . se asentará en una silla que a de estar puesta en parte alta de manera que sojuzgue a todos y que todos la vean, delante de la qual estará un blandón o hacha ardiendo pendiente de un hilo de hierro con su joja de lata encima, de arte que parezca que se tiene en el aire.” D. Sánchez de Badajoz, *Recopilación en metro* (Sevilla, 1554), *reproducida en facsímil por La Academia Española* (Madrid: Tipografía de Archivos, 1929): f. cxxxix^r.
44. Benjamin, 217.
45. E. Gertsman, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 67.
46. C. Davidson, *Visualizing the Moral Life: Medieval Iconography and the Macro Morality Plays* (New York: AMS, 1989), 113.
47. Gertsman, *The Dance*, 159.
48. K. Kreitner, *The Church Music of Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2004), 23.
49. From Latin, transcribed in Gómez I Muntané, M. Carmen. *El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat: Cantos y danzas s. XIV* (Barcelona: Libros de la Frontera, 1990), 19.
50. Kreitner, 23–6.
51. Gertsman, *The Dance*, 74.
52. M.M. Hamilton, *Beyond faith: Belief, Morality, and Memory in a Fifteenth-Century Judeo-Iberian Manuscript* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 211–14.
53. *Ibid.*, 245–6.
54. K. Meyer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970. Reprint. New York: DaCao Press, 1984), 311–12.
55. F. Rokem, “The Ludic Logic of Tragedy,” *Performance Research* 21.4 (2016): 26.
56. Davidson, *Visualizing*, 51.
57. *Ibid.*, 117.
58. B. Murdoch, “The Cornish Medieval Drama,” in R. Beadle, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 211–39.

Chapter Three

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3. See C. Symes, “Forms and Media,” in this volume; “The Tragedy of the Middle Ages,” in *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE to the Middle Ages*, ed. I. Gildenhard and M. Revermann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 335–69; and “Ancient Drama in the Medieval World,” in *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*, ed. Betine van Zyl Smit (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 97–130.
4. Symes, “Tragedy of the Middle Ages,” 338–9.
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