# **Medieval Theatre/ Morality Plays Quick Facts**

When Rome fell, players had to make their living by performing where they could. They kept theatre alive in Europe during the Dark Ages, though the Catholic Church attempted to silence them in every way possible. Given the church’s belief that the end of the world was near, the church contended that people should mortify worldly interests and prepare for the Day of Judgment.

Players, consequently, traveled with little more than they could carry. Stages were probably not much more than an improvised trestle stage. As time went on and the world stubbornly refused to end, the church began to see less harm in entertaining diversions, but contended that they should be religious in nature.

We have to keep in mind that the people of this time were illiterate and pagan. They couldn’t be given the bible to read, which would have cost way too much to do anyway, so the priests started acting parts of the bible out, to help them understand Christianity. The first plays told of the nativity and the resurrection and then moved down to important events that took place in the bible.

Medieval Theatre Theatrical practices up kept by street players, jugglers, acrobats and animal trainers – mostly stock characters. Then the church worked to keep theatre (which it had earlier banned) alive through the middle ages. This resulted from the Church’s need to establish itself in the community — a community still steeped in pagan ritual and superstition which manifested itself in seasonal festivals. The Church ultimately linked its own religious holidays with these seasonal festivals and began to use dramatic form to illustrate the stories underlying these holidays so as to reinforce their religious connotation and to better communicate the stories to an illiterate congregation.

At first the parts played in these simple religious re-enactments of the nativity and adoration of the Magi were played by priests in the sanctuary of the church. The priests would stand at various locations throughout the church, acting out different scenes, often with a choir singing, and the audience would move from one scene to another. So the audience changed the scene, along with the priests/actors.

As the repertoire of the Church grew to include the passion and crucifixion of Christ, the Church was confronted with the dilemma of how a priest should portray Herod. While division of opinion in the Church continued as to the worth of dramatic interpretations, the members of the congregation clearly enjoyed and were moved by them. The dramas continued to grow, moving out of the sanctuary and into the open air in front of the Church. Ultimately, the members of town guilds began to contribute to these dramas, which continued to grow more elaborate with time. These plays became super popular, like a new movie coming out, and so to make it more interesting, they started to add subplots and elements of humor.

They moved them to Pageant Wagons that they could roll from one town to the other to teach the people. Many of the “mysteries” as they were called, could go traveling around at once. The wagon could story scenery, provide dressing room space, and space for the actors to wait offstage for their next entrance. People would pay more money than they could really afford to see them. Eventually, the tradition of staging religious plays developed to holding the performance in a more permanent location, often with scenes to be dramatized centered on the life of Christ. A single stage with an elevated “heaven” at one end and a “hellmouth” at the other end, usually belching flames and demons. In between were “mansions” that represented various points in the New Testament story. The hellmouth became one of the most popular parts of the mansion stage, because it used a lot of flashy special effects which were favored by the crowds. Known as passion plays, mystery plays, miracle plays and morality plays, they continued their close connection with the Church and church holidays, but began to introduce elements of stock characters that were more contemporary in nature. Eventually, when the protestant reformation took hold and stable government came into Europe, theatre became more secular.

**Every Man:** (late 15th century). Everyman is visited by Death. He is told that he can take one friend with him on his long journey. He approaches Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, Goods, Knowledge, Discretion, Strength, Beauty, and Five Wits. All refuse. Only Good Deeds will join him on his journey. The moral is obvious.

**Miracle**: (plays about conversion or saints)

**Passion:** (deals solely with Christ’s passion and crucifixion)

**Mystery play:** (a biblical or pseudo-biblical story), dealing with personified abstractions of virtues and vices who struggle for man’s soul.

**Morality plays:** dealt with man’s search for salvation Morality plays were dramatized allegories of the life of man, his temptation and sinning, his quest for salvation, and his confrontation by death. The morality play, which developed most fully in the 15th century, handled the subjects that were most popular among medieval preachers and drew considerably on preaching technique.

**Key Elements & Themes of Morality Plays**

Morality plays held several elements in common:

* The hero represents **Mankind** or **Everyman**.
* Among the other characters are personifications of virtues, vices and Death, as well as angels and demons who battle for the possession of the soul of man.
* The **psychomachia**, the battle for the soul
* A character known as the **Vice** often played the role of the tempter in a fashion both sinister and comic.

Certain themes found a home in the morality plays:

* The theme of the **Seven Deadly Sins**
* The theme of Mercy and Peace pleading before God for man's soul against Truth and Righteousness; and
* The **Dance of Death**, which focuses on Death as God's messenger come to summon all, high and low.