

**THE OBER-AMMERG AU PASSION PLAY:  
WITH SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS  
ON THE ORIGIN AND  
DEVELOPMENT OF MIRACLE PLAYS,  
AND SOME PRACTICAL HINTS FOR THE  
USE OF INTENDING VISITORS**

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The Ober-Ammergau Passion Play: With Some Introductory Remarks on the Origin and Development of Miracle Plays, and Some Practical Hints for the Use of Intending Visitors by Malcolm MacColl

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**MALCOLM MACCOLL**

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# THE OBER-AMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

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WITH SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON THE ORIGIN AND  
DEVELOPMENT OF MIRACLE PLAYS, AND SOME PRACTICAL  
HINTS FOR THE USE OF INTENDING VISITORS

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## INTRODUCTION.

**I**T is a trite observation that the drama, both ancient and modern, had a religious origin. The Grecian mythology was the source, and furnished much of the materials of the tragedy of Greece. In addition to that public worship of the gods in which there was nothing of mystery or concealment, there were, as everybody knows, a variety of Mysteries in which only the initiated could share. In these Mysteries there does not appear to have been any exposition of doctrine or any course of oral instruction. It was not the intellect that was addressed, at least primarily and directly, but the bodily senses and the imagination. After the initiatory rites of lustration and sacrifices, all the rest was an elaborate drama in which were represented the diversified adventures and

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various transformations of certain deities, with their relations—sometimes malign, sometimes beneficent—to the human race. This circumstance had an enduring influence on the subsequent drama of Greece, which retained to the end a semi-mythic character. The scene and characters are almost invariably laid in a remote past, and represent the results of actions rather than the actions themselves. The heroes of the national legends are seen on the Greek stage, not struggling or scheming, vanquishing or being vanquished, but in still and solemn repose—in a *state* of misery or happiness, rather than on the way towards it. There is thus no development of character, no play of human passion; and hence the use of the mask, which concealed the features of the actors, and gave to the face the appearance of preternatural impassiveness; hence also the liberal employment of *tableaux vivants* to illustrate and interpret the successive acts. Another reason for this characteristic of the Greek drama was, no doubt, the immense size of the ancient theatres. Any one who has

seen an old Greek theatre will understand the simple impossibility of any acting which required the visible expression of human emotions. Every citizen had a right to a seat—generally to a free seat. The theatre of Syracuse, for example, which is still in tolerable preservation, is 467 feet in diameter, and contains 61 tiers of seats ; and any one who has looked across its vast depth will hardly consider 30,000 as an exaggerated estimate of the audience which it was capable of seating. No human organ could send articulated words across that space, and no play of features, however lively, could be seen by those who sat at the back of the theatre. Artificial means were therefore necessary, both to increase the size of the human figure and face, and to swell the volume of the human voice.

The early Christian Apologists denounced the Greek Mysteries in the severest language. Clement of Alexandria, who took so favourable a view of Greek philosophy as a preparation for the Gospel, pronounces the sternest condemnation on the demoralizing influence of the Mysteries, into which



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he seems to intimate that he himself had been initiated before he became a Christian. But the early Christians were not satisfied with denouncing the impure Mysteries of Pagan mythology; they did not rest content with driving out the evil spirit, leaving the house "empty, swept, and garnished." They took pains to show that they had mysteries of their own with which to tenant it, mysteries which were as purifying and ennobling as the heathen Mysteries were loathsome and degrading. And thus the Christian drama rose gradually on the ruins of the Greek theatre. A considerable dramatic element enters into the composition of all the early Christian liturgies, and still more into the circumstances attending the celebration of the principal festivals of the Church. The eye was constantly appealed to, in order to deepen and confirm the impressions made by oral instruction on the understanding. And as soon as Christianity emerged from the Catacombs, and found itself in the enjoyment of freedom, it made a bolder and more direct attempt to enlist the sympathies of its

converts by means of dramatic representation. We find Greek tragedies on sacred subjects almost coeval with the establishment of Christianity, and there is direct evidence to their representation at Constantinople. One of these is the "Dying Christ" of St. Chrysostom, which was acted in Church, partly in *tableaux vivants*, and partly in dialogue. St. Gregory Nazianzen, too, and other early Christian writers, dramatized portions of Holy Scripture on the model of the ancient Greek plays.

These religious plays made their way gradually from the East to the West. We have records of convent plays in Germany as early as the time of Charlemagne. But the religious drama does not appear to have taken firm root in the West till about the eleventh century, when a great impetus was evidently given to its popularity—probably by means of the Crusades, which introduced into Western Europe many of the customs of Eastern Christendom, and, among the rest, the passion for the scenical representation of religious subjects. In no country did the Miracle Plays attain an earlier

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popularity than in England. Matthew Paris tells us that a graduate of Paris, called Geoffrey, afterwards Abbot of St. Alban's, while teaching a school at Dunstable, caused the legend of St. Catherine to be acted in that town, Geoffrey himself, with some of his scholars, taking the principal parts in the play. This was in the beginning of the twelfth century, but no manuscript of the play has come down to us. The earlier of these religious dramas were all written in Latin, and as most of the spectators were unfamiliar with that language, it is probable that the play was acted chiefly by means of *tableaux vivants* and pantomime. The earliest Mystery Play which has come down to us in the English language is "The Harrowing of Hell." It belongs to the earlier part of the fourteenth century, and consists of a prologue, epilogue, and intermediate dialogue. The principal *dramatis personæ* are Dominus and Sathan, Adam and Eve. The best known, however, of the English Mystery Plays, and the most famous, are those called the "Chester Mysteries," of which a good edition was published