

The Spirit of Irreverence

Everything that we have dealt with so far reflects the reverent observance of the rites or, as they are usually called, the 'liturgy' of the Church, and of the plays that developed from those rites. We have now to ask whether the observances were always as solemn and as reverent as a modern Christian or, for that matter, non-Christian would expect. The answer is that they were not, and that there were occasions when they were treated with the outrageous disrespect which we in our own day normally associate with theatrical burlesque of the coarsest kind. How this came about, and the sort of riotous fun-making that took place within the church building itself, I shall now try to explain; and the best way to go about it will be to draw an imaginary picture of the kind of scene which appears to have been common at Christmas-time, particularly in the larger churches of the greater part of Europe, including England.

In creating our picture we shall have to bear in mind that it is based for the most part upon the evidence gained from the efforts of outraged dignitaries of the Church—usually bishops, but sometimes the Pope himself—to suppress or restrain scenes of this nature. In other words, we shall rely upon orders which have been preserved saying that this or that shall not be done. The overall result will be an imaginary, composite picture of events which, while they certainly occurred, did not necessarily do so in a single specified place or exactly in the sequence given.

Imagine, then, the interior of a large church, say a cathedral, at the hour of Vespers (Evensong) on a certain day during the twelve days of Christmas. The chancel is packed with members of the clergy who sit in three rows on either side. In the back row we have the senior clergy: the Dean, the sub-Dean, the archdeacons,

canons, and so on. In the second row sit clergy of lower status, while in the first row sit those of the lowest status of all: the sub-deacons. If choir boys are present they will be seated in front of the first row of the clergy.

The service of Vespers is proceeding as usual; solemn, as we imagine, but with something a little odd about it. The precentor, perhaps, who is there in charge of the choir with his *baculus* or wand of office, shows a certain lack of concentration; and there is an atmosphere of expectancy in the place as though something unusual is about to happen. Probably what is most noticeable is a subtle tenseness in the sub-deacons: a tenseness, not of fear, but that which comes from gleeful anticipation of mischief. The orderly manner of the service, however, goes on unbroken for about one-third of its length, that is, up to the singing of the *Magnificat*.

Now, the *Magnificat* is one of the most solemn and significant hymns or canticles in the Christian liturgy. It was the hymn uttered by Mary the Mother of Jesus when, during her pregnancy, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and it therefore marks an important point in the Christian legend. But there is more to it than this. It is a hymn of thanksgiving and praise to the unseen God and it lays particular stress upon the divine characteristic which brings about the downfall of the powerful and the proud and the uplifting of the poor and oppressed. In other words, it sings in praise of the universal equalizing force or spirit which the ancient Greeks themselves honoured in their recognition of the dreadful sin of *hubris* (pride). The lines of the *Magnificat* that most clearly reflect this spirit are:

He hath put down the mighty from their seats
And hath exalted the humble and meek.

Yet it is here that all the tenseness of anticipation observed in our imaginary scene breaks forth into riotous action. The *Magnificat* is allowed to begin with sufficient solemnity:

Magnificat anima mea Dominum [My soul doth magnify the Lord]

But on the line ‘He hath put down—’, etc., the words ‘put down’ are taken up by the sub-deacons as a cry which soon rises to a positive yell: ‘Put down! Put down! Put down! Still yelling, they leave their stalls and mount to the third row where they seize

upon their superiors in status and throw them out, making them descend to the first row while they themselves with joyful ostentation take the higher places. Meanwhile, one of their number (appointed beforehand) approaches the precentor, seizes his wand of office and takes charge.

What follows is a complete travesty of the divine service. All is pandemonium and chaos. The sub-deacons form themselves into a procession and in mock solemnity cense the church—but not with incense. Instead they swing smouldering shoes from side to side, filling the place with the acrid stink of burning, sweaty leather. In what appears to be an appalling mockery of the altar, they eat black puddings there. Then a sermon is given which is not merely a travesty, but bawdy as well, and delivered in a sort of pidgin Latin which makes use of English words with latinized endings.

As time goes on the riot spreads and becomes even more rowdy. Wine and ale are brought into the church porch which becomes crammed with a disorderly mob of boozing men while perhaps a number of sub-deacons march into the streets where they capture a pretty girl (probably one known to have loose morals), mount her on a donkey and carry her in triumph to the altar of the church, as a burlesque upon Joseph's journey with Mary and the infant Jesus into Egypt.

Although, as I have said, this is an imaginary picture which must not be taken as an accurate account of a series of events known to have taken place in a particular church, we do know that such happenings were of regular occurrence at Christmas-time and that they took place on a special day set aside for the sub-deacons. This was the day which came to be known as the Feast of Fools. We shall in a moment look more closely at the matter and try to explain it in flesh-and-blood human terms, but since the word 'burlesque' has already been used, I shall first define the meaning of the word as we shall use it in the present book.

Probably most of us would agree that we like to see things, particularly the 'established order of things', turned upside-down occasionally and that we frequently laugh when they are. The spectacle 'tickles our sense of humour'. What we seem most to enjoy, however, is the turning upside-down of authority, especially when authority becomes self-important, aggressive or in any way over-blown. When I use the word 'burlesque' in these

pages I mean the deliberate turning of things upside-down or, as we say, 'topsy-turvy', for the sake of laughter. We therefore regard the Feast of Fools as burlesque because it replaces reverence with irreverence; religion with irreligion; and respect for authority with contempt for it. Each pair of terms, we should note, represents an exact opposite.

Now, it seems that man has always possessed an instinct for burlesque and its companion spirit of irreverence. Certainly burlesque is the surest cure for an overdose of reverence, so it is just as well perhaps that we have it. There are many examples in history of burlesque rituals or rituals in reverse. The ancient Greek Comus (from which our word comedy is derived) is one of these. The dancers of the Comus had the right, which was jealously preserved, to hold important men of the time, and even the gods, up to ridicule. Another well-known burlesque was the Roman *Saturnalia* in which the whole of the social order was turned upside-down when masters changed places with servants and slaves. The *Saturnalia* is very important to us historically because of the influence it has had upon our celebration of Christmas through the ages, despite the efforts of many Christian men to suppress it. Even today, the traces of this Roman festival of December remain in the lighting of candles, the exchange of gifts and the general revelry with which we always associate Christmas. In mediaeval times the pagan appeal was exceedingly strong and the riotous behaviour of the sub-deacons in the Feast of Fools reflected this appeal to a considerable degree.

But it is most probable that the root of the sub-deacons' festival and other Christmas festivals of a similar nature lay in a piece of Christian symbolism that was very solemn and reverent in its intent. In purely Christian terms, the celebration of Christmas was a reminder of a number of things. In the first place, of course, it celebrated the birth of the founder of Christianity. But the birth took place in lowly and squalid circumstances, and herein lay a fundamental principle of the Christian faith. For the whole life of Jesus was characterized by poverty, humility and obedience, and these were the characteristics through which his divine being conquered the whole world, making him King above all kings. What better time could there be to demonstrate the point symbolically; and what better moment could be chosen to introduce a symbolical act than the singing of the *Magnificat* at the point where the chorus

tells of the putting down of the mighty from their seats and the raising or exalting of the humble and meek?

Long before we hear any mention of the Feast of Fools, we learn of days set aside during the Christmas festival for priests, middle clergy and boy choristers during which each group in turn is 'exalted' to the high places of the choir. As an additional dignity on such a day, a previously appointed member of the group took the precentor's wand and from that moment 'ruled the choir'. On Innocents Day, for example, the day which commemorated the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem on the orders of Herod, the choir boys, led by a boy-bishop, took their turn. The boy-bishop was allowed to occupy the high chair of the Dean, and he preached a sermon. It seems, however, that unruliness of one sort or another crept into each of these festivals and it is more than possible that the sub-deacons were largely responsible for it.

Taken altogether, the sub-deacons were a pretty ignorant lot who were held very much in contempt by their more literate superiors. Moreover, it fell to them to perform all the menial and less savoury duties connected with the living-quarters of the cathedral clergy, which meant that their standing amongst the cathedral fraternity was little better than that of servants who were given scant encouragement to respect their betters. Here, if anywhere, was fertile soil for the growth and flourishing of burlesque. For if authority, having asserted itself for the greater part of the year with contempt for the underdog, decides in a sudden fit of humility to say 'On this day of Christmas you shall be raised from the status of underdog to that of topdog taking precedence over me because God works in that way,' it is hardly surprising if the underdog refuses to behave according to the pattern set for him. He will most likely 'burlesque' his part and accept the gesture with an irreverent gusto and enthusiasm which are the reverse of the humility and gratitude expected. We do not know that this was in fact the case but, human nature being what it is, it seems more than possible. One thing that we do know for certain is that at the end of the twelfth century it was deemed necessary to restrict the cries of *Deposit!* [Put down!] to five in number.

Another outlet for the mediaeval spirit of irreverence appears in the form which we should now describe as rude parody. And here again it seems that the sub-deacons were mainly responsible.

There were various parts of the Church liturgy (see the Glossary of Terms) which called for the reading of passages from the Old and New Testaments. It became the practice on certain occasions to insert into the text short passages, or tropes, of simple doggerel rhyme, the serious purpose of which was to impress the lesson on the minds of the ignorant and semi-literate. A well-known scholar of the nineteenth century, J. M. Neale, has translated a passage of this kind into English. Here is a part of it with the tropes in italics:

He that fears the Lord will do good,
And when this evil life is past
Receive the King's reward at last.
 And he that has knowledge of the law shall obtain her,
 And as a mother shall she meet him.
For He is full of love and grace,
And mercy guards his dwelling place,
And glory shines around his face.

The name given to this practice was 'infarcation' which means 'sandwiching in between'.

Now, we should no doubt most of us agree that, while it is a good and worthy thing to convey knowledge to the ignorant, this is a particularly dangerous way of setting about the task. If you 'talk down' to ignorance with childish tum-te-tum rhythm and rhyme, then ignorance will feel that you are patronizing it and resent the fact. It will, moreover, take its revenge and use its native wit to parody your instructive little rhyme with a rude and probably bawdy version of its own. It is hardly necessary to emphasize this point since our own age bristles with examples which reveal the same process at work. What is historically important is that the theatrical word 'farce' is derived from the word 'infarcation' and that the art of farce developed from mediaeval parody.

But, the bawdy 'goings-on' of the sub-deacons apart, mediaeval people seem to have been ready at all times to laugh at the expense of 'holy things' and 'holy personages', just as they were ready to laugh at such prime representatives of evil as the devil and his attendant demons. Sometimes, as a few of the great Miracle plays show, they would laugh at God himself—and when they did, the laughter was often decidedly rude. This is a characteristic that often puzzles the modern student of mediaeval theatre because it seems so much out of keeping with his conception of an

audience saturated with Christian doctrine. The problem becomes less difficult, however, when we begin to take into consideration the simple directness of popular mediaeval belief.

We have already referred in the second chapter to the vivid imagery which filled the minds of mediaeval people in their interpretation of Christian history and legend. Let us take a look at some of the more important figures and conceptions that played a direct part in their lives and, so far as we are able, estimate the effect these had, and in consequence their theatrical impact.

God, of course, was universally accepted as the ultimate power; the giver of life and punisher of sin. He was God Omnipotent; the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who was constantly at war with Satan, the Prince of Evil. And because God's war with Satan was for the possession of men's souls, the sense of his presence was intense and vividly familiar and personal. This is most certainly the impression that we get from the Miracle cycles in which God is frequently represented as a living character upon the stage. But the stage image of God is never quite consistent. Sometimes he appears as a benevolent, merciful person, pitying the sufferings of mankind. At other times, as in the Chester play of the *Deluge*, he appears as an angry, destroying tyrant. When, as he frequently does, he appears as the God of Eternity whose thought alone is creation, he is sublimely beautiful.

Now, the very inconsistency of these stage images of God throws a light upon the mediaeval mind. Each image represents a view or aspect of the one thing that all the images of God have in common, namely, absolute authority. This is simply a way of saying that God is made to appear, not 'in the round', which would hardly be possible, but as an intensely familiar caricature of a *person* in authority. By looking at the matter in this way we are able to make common ground with the minds of mediaeval people in comparing their reactions to personal authority with our own. How often, we have to ask, do we see the people who wield any sort of authority over ourselves, be they parents or teachers or our 'bosses' at work, absolutely as they are or 'in the round'? Most of us probably would admit on reflection that we do so very rarely, even when they are our parents, and that we most commonly saddle them with an image which changes in accordance with the way in which their authority is felt. When they are benevolent and loving we see them as friends and champions; when they are angry and oppressive

we are apt to see them as tyrants. In either case what we see is a caricature, although we often believe that we are seeing the whole person—for the moment, at least. What do we do, then, about the person who appears as a tyrant and whose tyranny we fear? Obviously there are individual answers to this question, but we should all probably agree that a very common one is to do as we are told for fear of the consequences of rebellion, and to cheek the tyrannous one behind his back.

This certainly seems to have been a favourite solution among mediaeval Christians. We have already referred to the angry punishing God of the Chester *Deluge*. To mediaeval people he represented an aspect of God which had to be feared and, whenever human flesh and blood could rise to the occasion—which seems not to have been remarkably often—strictly obeyed. But, as we shall see, they often cheeked him or, as it were, thumbed their noses behind his back, and they loved to see him similarly treated by others.

Finally, something needs to be said about the mediaeval sense of irreverence when applied to Satan and his attendant demons. Here, in a way, the reaction of mockery and laughter seems to have been against the tyranny of evil and its consequences. Devils play a large part in popular mediaeval humour, both on the stage and elsewhere. This does not mean that mediaeval people treated the powers of darkness lightly or with less respect than they treated the powers of Heaven. These devils were ugly, vile beasts who were the inhabitants of the fiery pit of Hell, the place of unending, unspeakable torture to which all souls would inevitably be condemned without the redeeming mercy of their God. Their familiar presence was, in consequence, a continual menace, for they always struck through the material and fleshly lusts of mankind. Much of the laughter gained at the expense of the Devil and his minions, therefore, was of the catch-as-catch-can type, in itself a form of child-like irreverence pointing to the simple uninvolved acceptance that characterizes mediaeval Christian belief. The same images of evil, too, are often found as the agents of social and personal satire. Plate 4A shows a typical example of laughter of this nature, in which a devil is seen carrying off an ale-wife who has been caught giving short measure. Note that the woman is being carried towards the mouth of Hell which is represented by a dragon's mouth just as it was upon the stage of

the day. To us the carving possibly appears as a simple piece of mediaeval fun—a light social satire of the time. So, doubtless, it was intended to be. But behind the fun there lay the terrifying and familiar reality from which the mind escaped only through the agency of irreverent humour.

SAMPLE