

PIOTR BERING

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

## STAGING IN THE MEDIEVAL THEATRE AND TEXT

ABSTRACT. Bering Piotr, Staging in the medieval theatre and text.

The present paper deals with different forms of staging, which are found in dramatic medieval forms and in narrative texts. As well in the theatre as in the text instructions for staging help to understand a sender's message.

Keywords: theatre; chronicle; staging; narration.

It's a common belief that in the Middle Ages – wrongly perceived as “dark ages” – cultural life was extremely poor.<sup>1</sup> And no one living at that time thought about theatre. This thinking could not be more inaccurate. If we take a closer look at “theatre production” in the times of *media aetas*, it will turn out that many contemporary staging ideas derive directly from medieval theatre theory and practice.<sup>2</sup> The beginnings of medieval theatre are deeply rooted in liturgy,<sup>3</sup> as Christianity is a historic religion, and its historical substance must be remembered and passed on. After all, Christianity is the Revealed Word and the written word. In conveying the written word – also in parchment code – onto any stage, one should take into account its possibilities and limitations. Hence, awareness of staging techniques has become one of the main categories organising the performance.<sup>4</sup>

Liturgical drama and liturgical dramatisations that stemmed from liturgy met the church interior as a natural set design. What can be found there is the altar, sacristy, choir, and chapels. Liturgy uses paraments. These elements will constitute the most important means of building the performance beside acting. It must be said at the outset, that corporal, crucifix or altar cloth are not

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<sup>1</sup>An instructive criticism of these views was expressed by Ullmann (1985).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Modzelewski 1964, 61–62 (note 1).

<sup>3</sup>The genesis of theatre religious performances is perceived differently by Dąbrowka (2001), who combines it with the human need of piety.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Balme 2002, 187–189.

just props. They also “act.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, detailed characteristics of the objects used should not be surprising. In the stage version of *The Last Supper* an important role is played by various utensils, and that’s why staging accuracy is a characteristic trait of these rites. As can be learned from the inventory of St. Stanislas Collegiate Church in Poznań *two big glass bowls* are used to wash feet, and a *big drawn cloth* to wipe them. It’s worth adding that this cloth is bought specially for this occasion: “*lintheum ad hoc [...] emptum et comparatum.*”<sup>6</sup> Vestments fulfil an identification function as the actors impersonating the three Marys going to the Lord’s Tomb should be: *albis induti*.<sup>7</sup> But attire can also be an evidence of resurrection. In the same drama, angels present in the Lord’s Tomb are to demonstrate to the congregation gathered in the church a clear sign confirming the resurrection:

Tandem pueri in sepulcro eiciant lintheamina extra sepulcrum cantando:  
Cernite, o socii...  
Postremo chorus subiungat hanc antiphonam cantando:  
Surrexit Dominus...<sup>8</sup>

In this case the object is no longer a prop, but becomes an actor. It’s particularly important, as the message of the truths of the faith is addressed to the inhabitants of Poznań, and not like it used to be before to the persons playing Apostles, and only through them to the congregation in the church. As Lewański pointed out: “the ritual both is and is not a ritual.”<sup>9</sup> This specificity of dramas and liturgical dramatisations in which there are no divisions into actors and spectators, and there are only witnesses to salvation mutually supporting themselves was already emphasised by Heinz Kindermann half a century ago.<sup>10</sup> In the stage version of *Processio in Ramis Palmarum* the Saviour’s impending death and subsequent resurrection must be announced. Christ is represented by a sculpture (often presenting the Son of God on a donkey) or crucifix. As the main actor, he is in the centre of the performance, and when Zachariah’s prophecy “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Zach. 13,7; Mark 14,27–28) must be illustrated, the parish priest lying in front of the cross is hit with a palm. An innovation introduced in about 1500 in Wrocław allowed the possibility of hitting the celebrant lying on the cross. In this way, a certain identification of the message with historic events occurred, thus making it easier for the congregation to understand the truths of the faith.<sup>11</sup> And so, we arrive at the role of movement

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, vide Bering 1994, 133.

<sup>6</sup> J. Lewański 1965, 132–133; Bering 1994, 133.

<sup>7</sup> *Agenda secundum cursum...* 1533, quote after: *Liturgiczne łacińskie dramatyizacje* 1999.

<sup>8</sup> *Agenda secundum cursum...* 1533

<sup>9</sup> Lewański 1981, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Kindermann 1957, 216; Modzelewski 1964, 62.

<sup>11</sup> This matter was described in detail by Lewański (1981, 28–30).

in shaping stage reality. *Processio in Ramis Palmarum* shows how significant was “the existing set design” for performers, because depending on whether there were one or two churches available, and where they were located (within town limits or outside town walls), procession route was set up differently. In the Polish church province, six types of this performance are known.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, when the Apostles’ run to the Lord’s Tomb or the Marys going there with the scents is to be illustrated, their movement takes place within strictly defined space. According to the text of the columns: “procedant de sacrario, portantes aromata, versus sepulchrum.”<sup>13</sup> However, giving the starting point or destination is not enough. The actors must know which type of movement they are supposed to imitate. One of extant manuscripts instructs that this should be an imitation of the run *quasi cursum ostentantes*. Naturally, such a feigned run took place inside the church, often becoming the most attractive moment of the whole dramatisation in terms of performance. If we add that St. Peter would stumble on the way, then this scene aroused general amusement or, on the contrary, it was a cause for scandal. In mystery plays, where a simultaneous stage existed, often at the marketplace or some other spacious place, movement acquired special significance. Except for the natural movement by no means marked by symbolism, there was another movement performing a clearly defined symbolic function.<sup>14</sup> Where the stage plot presents the spreading out of the Apostles, all the actors split up from the Throne of God the Father, and when they walk in circles – they imitate the Son of God. Symbolic is also the arrangement of individual simultaneous stages, and the place where the actors are. In the east are grouped the figures related to the Saviour, and in the west those in the service of hell. The Northern part of the square is occupied by stages related to the Old Testament, and the Southern part belongs to those of the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> It’s easy to find examples of natural movement, although, arguably, exaggerated (*overacting*). Before devils snatch Herodias and her mother to hell (in both body and soul), they first chase them around the stage. Today’s spectators would surely laugh at such a solution, but in the Middle Ages it was appalling. Comic were and still are the gestures of the guards of the Lord’s Tomb. These are always knights who are only gallant and brave verbally. When put to the test, they lose their bravery. No wonder that in *Historija o Chwalebnyh Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim*<sup>16</sup> the knights make fierce gestures. The full outline of stage boundaries available for acting is brought by the following words: “And he will stand in one corner of the

<sup>12</sup>Modzelewski 1964, 1–62.

<sup>13</sup>*Agenda secundum cursum ...*

<sup>14</sup>Nowé 1996, 1–17.

<sup>15</sup>Nowé 1996, 4, 15–17 (drawings).

<sup>16</sup>Critical edition with extensive commentary: *Historija o Chwalebnyh Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim* 1971 and *Dramaty staropolskie* 1959.

tomb, and others will stand on the remaining corners.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, medieval dramatic texts were regulated by stage requirements. These examples are of course only a small fragment of the rich repertoire of extant texts.

Consideration should be given here whether one can refer to “staging” in narrative texts. The answer, at least partly, is positive. Jerzy Ziomek points out that “literature may be for the theatre what theatre for literature.”<sup>18</sup> It turns out that the medieval annalistic text is particularly destined for the dramatic function. And it’s not just the dramatic descriptions of battles, banquets, etc.<sup>19</sup> I believe that the hallmarks of theatricality must be traced to deeper layers of the text. The very method of text arrangement and selection of special means of imaging can bring the narrative text closer to the dramatic one. Furthermore, the text may contain numerous traces of “orality.”<sup>20</sup> These are clear in *Kronika Polska* by Gallus Anonymus. Already in the first parts of the text, he turns to the readers, and perhaps to the audience, with the following words: “Possumus vobis dicere, / Si placeat addiscere.” Establishing contact with the audience is characteristic not only of stage performance, but also oratorical contact.<sup>21</sup> No wonder that some scholars claim that Gallus’ work was meant for public melorecitation performance, and not necessarily performed by one actor.<sup>22</sup> Master Wincenty’s chronicle does not directly appeal to the audience, as it includes no phrases meant for a potential public. However, the reader is introduced to the scenery of chronicle story. Kadłubek sketches it already in the prologue:

Non enim adolescentularum inter Musas collasciure choris, set sacri senatus assistere tenemur suggestui; non umbratiles palustrium harundines, set aureas patrie columpnas, non puppas fictiles, set ueras patrum effigies de sinu obliuionis, de ebore antiquissimo iubemur excidere; imme diuine lampades lucis in arce regia arcemur appendere et bellicis inter hec insudare tumultibus. [prologus 2,2]<sup>23</sup>

This scenery is worthy of great epics, and one of a particular “theatre of memory”, which updates and supplements the chronicler’s account. The communicative situation that accompanies any individual reception of the work is subject to intentional theatricalisation.<sup>24</sup> Hence, it seems certain that also the

<sup>17</sup> *Historyja o Chwalebnyh...* (marginal text before v. 107); cf. Bering 1994, 135.

<sup>18</sup> Ziomek 1977, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Brogi-Bercoff 1985, 187–203.

<sup>20</sup> Michałowska 1993, 83–124.

<sup>21</sup> Extensively on this writes Lalewicz (1983, 268–270).

<sup>22</sup> The article by Targosz (1980, 141–178) provoked discussion among scholars. Critical opinions dominated, but lately the author’s views have been “rehabilitated” by Wojtowicz (2004, 41–51).

<sup>23</sup> *Magistri Vincentii dicti Kadłubek, Chronica Polonorum*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Wojtowicz (2004, 50–51) most accurately and convincingly interprets the prologues by both Kadłubek and Gallus. He indicated the differences in perceiving “theatricality” by both

authors of chronicles (narrative forms) realised they had to introduce certain “existing set design” to fulfil an important role in reception of the work. Like in the theatre, stage elements assist the reader in separating existing reality from created reality. So, they are signposts helping one to understand the author’s thoughts.

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chroniclers. “The culture of memory” is comprehensively addressed by Wójcik (2006); cf. Praz 1970, 56, 58, 70, 75, 153.

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## BÜHNENWESEN IM MITTELALTERLICHEN THEATER UND TEXT

### Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag befasst sich mit der potenziellen Anpassung des narrativen Textes zur Inszenierung. Selbstverständlich gilt der dramatische Text als ein Ausgangspunkt. Er verfügt über zahlreiche Hinweise über die notwendigen Gebärde, die Bühnenaustattung oder Bühnenbilder. Diese sind explizit formuliert oder muss man sie im Haupttext finden. Im Gegensatz zum Drama im narrativen Text, meistens in Chroniken, zeugen die textimmanenten Signale über eine Möglichkeit der dramatischen Eigenschaften, von denen die innere Struktur des Textes die wichtigste Bedeutung hat. Das „verborgene“ Theaterwesen ist relativ einfach erkennbar in Textpassagen, in denen Ich-Sänger ans Publikum appelliert.