

Genre questions around early drama, [in:] K. Czibula, A. Emődi, J.-S. Szabolcs (eds.), *Dráma - Múlt - Színház - Jelen. Tanulmányok a dráma- és színháztörténet köréből*, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Kolozsvár; Partium Kiadó, Nagyvárad, 2009, pp. 15-24. <http://andrzej.dabrowka.com/Dabrowka-Genre.pdf>

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Genre questions around early drama

Looking at examples of dramas from Polish jesuit colleges around 1700 we see frequent use of new, non-classicist ways of dramatic representation, e.g. neglecting the unity of dramatic action, the use of bipartite structure Protasis-Apodosis, or in their *mise-en-scène*, as in the *laterna magica*. Traditional explanations of those phenomena as residue of earlier historical developments or even as results of artistic incompetence can be abandoned if we manage to understand their literary and theatrical aesthetic properly.

Let me first recall the regular mystery cycles we know well from the later Middle Ages. This type of drama was being written and performed until the 18th c., preserving the old function and subject matter, and occasionally changing its structure and style. This originally medieval genre, later crossing the boundaries of literary epochs, could be called *meditative Atonement drama*. It preserved the cycle (serial) structure, being a sequence of scenes separated in time and place with different persons – according to the subject matter in the separate books of the Scripture. The choice of scenes is not quite free, but the resulting works can differ a lot from each other. Continuous action is exceptional, if not impossible, and even the longest medieval cycles whose performance lasted weeks, were not complete in the depiction of biblical events. Authors and audiences found it sufficient to move along the most important stations of preparing and presenting the work of Redemption, with the Incarnation, the Passion and the Resurrection as crucial events.

What is the difference between the medieval mystery cycles and their later form? For the latter, the *Atonement (or Redemption) drama*, at least two aspects are distinctive: the explicit Redemption frame, enacted in one or another form of Trial in Heaven (Iustitia & Misericordia), and, secondly, a fictional thread, represented by a prototypical human figure called Peccator. Despite its episodic structure, the Atonement drama as a whole *does* represent *one* action and even the unity of time and place is in a sense observed, because (as far as) all events belong together, their sequence is irreversible, and the participants are historical, that is, not interchangeable. That is why the late medieval and early modern Atonement cycle is not *enacted epic* and cannot be called a mere sample of biblical drama, nor is it a morality play.

In order to understand the esthetic quality of the Atonement drama, we have to put it in the context of the Renaissance and its literary culture. What is new? What is the main change brought about by the early modern developments in literary practice? First of all, it is the **structural unification** of the drama form. The presented world of serious drama becomes self-sufficient and closed, it explains itself, and only those elements may appear which are connected by causal bonds.¹ To make the structure visible, time and space have to be confined. The principle of the unity of time is achieved in an optimal way if the time of the presented events is as long as the playtime or the physical time of the performance. Under the

¹ Only those events should make up the dramatic action, which are indispensable for the whole construction (*Poetics* 1451a; chp. 8)

rule of classicism open forms are banned, together with their potential for addition or reduction of subject matters, for allowing the use of blind motifs, and for introducing characters who are not involved in the core of the dramatic interaction. Only events connected necessarily with each other, and irreducible from the story, guarantee the unity of dramatic action. This was the main structural rule in Aristotle's *Poetics* (chap. 8).

But if we take the unity of *action* seriously, we soon come to the unity of *time* and *place* of action in drama. We owe this integrated system of three unities to the Italian, Castelvetro (1570);² almost at the same time (1572) it was formulated by the French Renaissance writer, Jean de la Taille, in the theoretical preface to his tragedy.³ The first regular tragedies of the French classicism appear after 1630.

On the level of literary composition Aristotle prescribed "universality" or typicalness (chap. 9). All events and persons the poets show must be *possible*, not *actual* or real. That's why the abandonment of allegory is sometimes seen as another anti-medieval development. Jean de la Taille prohibits introducing invented "persons who never existed", like Death, Truth, the World etc. According to Burt Kimmelman Chaucer was already abandoning the allegory by situating the literary subject increasingly "outside any allegorical framework." (178). Chaucer's *persona* – the writer's ego as a constructed person, introduced as 'Geffrey' in some of his works – may be the factor most vividly impressing his readers (ibid. 182).

Arnold Hauser explained the reduction of allegory as caused by "emancipation" of societies from "ecclesiastical dogma."

The real change brought about by the Renaissance is that metaphysical symbolism loses its strength and the artist's aim is limited more and more definitely and consciously to the representation of the empirical world. The more society and economic life emancipate themselves from the fetters of ecclesiastical dogma the more freely does art turn to the consideration of immediate reality. (*Social History of Art...* II 2, Dollimore 1980:25).

The abandonment of allegory may admittedly be a characteristic development in the particular case of Chaucer, or even in more writers, but it may in no way serve as a criterion of modernity. Apart from Chaucer himself, who was no enemy of allegories (God of Love, *The House of Fame*), I give one counter-example: What about Stultitia – the heroine of the most famous Renaissance narrative by the most excellent humanist writer Erasmus? Or is he medieval?

Hauser's confining the artist's area of interest to the "empirical world" is also a very partial truth (nor is it *impartial*). Is there any conflict between the "metaphysical symbolism" and hyperrealism in the paintings of John van Eyck from the Lamb altarpiece of Ghent?⁴

To sum up this paragraph: The principle of the unity of dramatic action (granted by the famous three unities) was a well-known and observed rule from the Renaissance until the

² Ludovico Castelvetro (†1571), *Sposizione della Poetica di Aristotile*, 1570 (fragment [in:] Udalska 2001:240-250; Bernard Weinberg, 1952; Aristotle speaks about the unity of time in tragedy in *Poetics*, chp. 5 (1449b), the unity of action in chp. 8 (1451a). Unity of place was defended by J.C. Scaliger in his poetics of 1561.

³ *De l'art de la tragédie*, in: *Saul le Furieux* (1572); cf. J. Morel, *La tragédie*, Paris 1964, p. 83; from: Udalska p. 283.

⁴ „Die Bedeutung, die seitens der Nominalisten dem Einzelding und der empirischen Beobachtung zugemessen wurde, dürfte die altniederländische Malerei im 15. Jh. in ihren Bestrebungen bestärkt haben.“ (Pochat 1986, p. 202).

Romanticism. And it is against this background that the irregular, non-classicist forms of school drama (like the early modern Atonement cycles) should be interpreted. Let us discuss now some techniques of writing which ignore the principle of unity and create dramas we perceive as “irregular” or non-classicist.

First **(I)** comes the author’s **selection** of scenes from redemption history, one so strong that it creates no logical line between the events. Further **(II)** the bipartite structuring of drama in **Protasis and Apodosis** – a technique introducing events with no causal connection between each other. Finally **(III)** a *mise-en-scène* technique disturbing the illusion of unity (of place and time of the dramatic action) by projecting pictures from the **magic lantern** to replace or enrich the real stage setting and actual behavior of actors.

I. Among types of composition that ignore the principle of the unity of action the simplest one consists of a strong selection of scenes that prepare the main action:

Three Prophets predict the coming of Christ. Gabriel announces it to Mary. Another angel shows an empty barn to Mary and Joseph looking for shelter. The Child is born, and a regular shepherd play follows.⁵

Here only two scenes prepare the main action, separated from it by different amounts of time and space (the prophets – by centuries, the Annunciation – by 9 months). Both scenes are part of a bigger action, which is confined here to a shepherd play in Bethlehem.

A popular, and quite cheap, device of crossing time (and place) is the introduction of allegories (Fatherland, Church, Ancestors). Another little more subtle solution is “literary spiritism.” Ghosts from earlier times are evoked to participate in the time of the main action. Sometimes it is an actual miraculous resurrection when the dead are brought to life with the same aim.

Poland and the Church waken their heroes from graves by ringing bells and singing “*Evigila, assurge Polonia*”. The Ancestors will tell about the excellent old time and excite the living contemporaries from their sluggishness.⁶

In those cases the unity of action is maintained, because all segments and participants belong to one complex of events tied together in one causal chain. The unity of time and place of action is in a sense preserved, but only at the cost of probability. **Unity of action** is disturbed evidently by scenes with quite different persons involved in another action, situated in a different *mise en scène*. This can be seen in following examples:

Two main scenes from the passion play cycle *Dialogus pro feria quinta ante Parasceven* are preceded by 1 prefigurative episode (Jacob and Esau), and are followed by a dialogue of ancient philosophers who are cursing the misery of this world – this purely fictional scene serves as a moral lesson to be learned.⁷

The disturbing part precedes the scenes of Passion and the Planctus in the *Pityful Tragedy de Passione Christi for Good Friday*.⁸ Here the only episode disturbing the unity of action is a short moral prelude alluding to the matter around John Baptist and Herod. The author could easily have incorporated the episode into the typological order, as the subject matter comes from the Bible, but elaborates a purely fictional

⁵ *Dialogus in Natali Domini*, Calissia 1586; ed. Ziabicka, Warszawa 2001.

⁶ *Mortua Polonia e tumulis, cineribusque a posteris Polonis excitata* (Calissia 1706); 5 scenes in Latin prose with Polish songs. MS Ossol. Bibl. Pawl. 204 [f.205-207v].

⁷ *Dialogus pro feria quinta ante Parasceven*, ed. in *Dramaty staropolskie*, vol. VI: 61-89.

⁸ *Żaloszna tragedia de Passione Christi na Piątek Wielki*, ed. in *Dramaty Staropolskie*, vol. VI: 91-135.

morality play closing with a danse macabre. The main play is otherwise a regular meditative Atonement drama in five acts, closing with a Planctus. The action operates within the unified anamnestic time, in which Christ, his Mother, and other participants of the events are seen and met by the fictional Peccator, whom the Two Daughters of God (Iustitia and Misericordia) accuse and defend.

II. The aforementioned cases represented disturbances in the traditional sequential types of drama. We now come to a structure that breaks with any form of unified action on stage. The Protasis-Apodosis technique connects in one spectacle two subject matters from quite distant areas and times without any historical justification or causal connection.⁹ The both parts can be of a different genre, from full dramas to declamations with no action at all.

In the *Exhibitiones quadragesimales* (1714?, written in Polish verse) three typological pairs are collected. In the protasis parts actors play biblical and historical scenes as prefigurations of the Passion. In the Apodosis part of each bipartite performance the Passion of Christ is sung, not played.¹⁰

Such drama is not any “imitation of life” or of any invented possible events. Although treated commonly as one work with one title, it has no unified action, being only an intellectual construction aimed at better understanding the Redemption history by way of creating *correspondences*, not actual *connections* between events. The correspondences between the subject matters may be interpreted as cases of typology, in the broad sense of Dante who included purely historical matters from the history of the Roman Empire as prefigurations of the events of the history of salvation (Auerbach 1953: 9, 12, 17). The typological correspondence may connect fictional matters (*protasis*) to small segments of the Scripture (*apodosis*).

In a Jesuit play from 1722 (Calisia) the protasis part staged a story of an Athenian king demanding from his subjects their sweat as tribute, in apodosis we see Christ sweating blood in Getsemane.¹¹

Some dramas are metapoetical utterances showing (and at the same time self-explaining) their own typological structure. In the protasis a scene of a Roman hero sacrificing his life to save his country, while the Apodosis has only a declamation explaining the preceding scene as a metaphor of the Atonement.¹²

In a saint play of 1738 twelve emblematic tableaux vivants episodes give separate scenes from the lives of ancient heroes; appended declamations – called *Declamatio*

⁹ Both terms are used in grammar of conditional compound sentences, protasis meaning condition, apodosis the consequence. The term protasis means in the ancient drama theory the first part of comedy (Lausberg, Donatus), for the second part of the double P-A structure the liturgical term *apodosis* has been used, meaning the last day of a church feast of more days (as the octave).

¹⁰ *Exhibitiones quadragesimales* (1714?) folios [47-56v] of the codex of the Jesuit college of Lublin, as described in the *Bibliografia Dramatu Rękopiśmiennego*, file 3L[2], original codex in the Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych in Warszawa, shelf No: Sucha 40/54.

¹¹ Wojciech Bystrzonowski, *Amoris census sudor Christi Gietsemano profusus horto*, in Latin verse, 1722; MS Biblioteka Jagiellońska 182, fol. 294v-297v.

¹² Antoni Rychter, *Exercituum Dominus ruens* (1719, Latin), fol. 232v-234v of the MS Bibl. Jagiellońska 182, from the Calissia/Kalisz college of the SJ.

Elogiaris cum Apodosis – explain them as precedents of the crucial moments in the life of the French saint *Ioannes Franciscus Regis*.¹³

Otherwise – we see this in many non-religious school dramas – the co-occurrence or superposition of motifs has only an argumentative function serving the better exposition of a generally Christian-ethical, but not any purely religious message. All presented bipartite constructions may be said to fulfill the law of Auerbach (1953:13), “Typology doesn’t present a continuous development of history, but its interpretation”.

III. Pictures projected from the **magic lantern** disturb the unity of place and time of the dramatic action shown on stage. There are dozens of plays and performances where the use of a magic lantern has been documented. Most frequently the projected pictures are used to show scenes of the Passion.

The Passion play *Utarczka...* written in Polish and performed on March 23, 1663 in an unknown church, most probably sung and with music between acts, uses the magic lantern in scene three showing the flogging, the coronation, and the *Via dolorosa*.¹⁴

Another case are pictures of the *novissima* (Last Things, including the Last Judgement or Hell), projected on a screen.¹⁵

A drama performed at the Jesuit college of Calissia in 1717 compared deaths of a Just Man and a Sinner. A magic lantern was used in each scene and in the anti-prologue. Following both deaths the Last Judgement was shown and the subsequent taking of the sinner to hell.

Using pictures instead of an actual stage setting can in no way improve the effect of mimesis. A two-dimensional depiction, only a shadow on a white screen made of tablecloth, projected through a primitive optical device lit by candlelight, could bring poor and second hand knowledge instead of real empirical stimuli caused by 3-D imitation of reality granted by common stage setting and acting by moving and speaking persons.

Interpretation

The anti-mimetic techniques presented were consciously used to ignore and oppose the classicist rules, whose main purpose was to increase the mimetic effect of the performance. It is due to this attitude that in non-classicist drama the interpretation can prevail over the presentation (as in typology according to Auerbach). Mimetic effect comes from fictionality, and fictionality is the opposite of historicity (Aristotle, *Poetics* chp. 9). However, and this is the experience of Christian exegesis, “the historical reality of literary persons stands in no contradiction to their profounder meaning, but precisely ‘figures’ it” (Auerbach 1959, p.73). Historical empiricity doesn’t imply only one literal meaning.

This is what we see in the protasis-apodosis structure, the protasis episode may be a selected historical matter, or even a fictional story, but the apodosis always relates it to the

¹³ *Sol Franciae, sanctus Ioannes Franciscus Regis*, printed summary, Poznań 1738 (after the hero’s canonization in 1737).

¹⁴ *Utarczka krwawie wojującego Boga i Pana Zastępów...*, MS Ossolineum 2040/I, fol. 234-244v, ed. by Lewański in *Dramaty staropolskie*, vol. VI 7-40: the references to the magic lantern in: *Tu się pokaże biczowanie przez obrus; przez umbry koronacyja; z Krzyżem iście przez umbry*.

¹⁵ Anoni Rychter, *Novissima hominis...*; Latin, MS Bib. Jag. 182, fol. 210-213.

one and only real history that counts – the history of salvation. The historical reality is not annulled by the interpretation *sub specie aeternitatis*, but is “confirmed and fulfilled by the deeper meaning.” (Auerbach)

Among its borrowings from classical antiquity the Renaissance brought a revival of the old notion of *mimesis*, of art as imitation, and consequently of the work of art as a depiction, or even as a “faithful reproduction of reality.”¹⁶

“In the Renaissance (...) there have always been differing views on the nature of the reality which art imitates. (...) there were those who interpreted that reality *idealistically*, and therefore to be represented through the ‘metaphysical symbolism’ (Hauser), and those who interpreted it *empirically* – and correspondingly, to be represented in terms of ‘immediate reality’. Growing from the first ... is the additional conception of art as didactic: typically, art represents an ideal moral order which improves those capable of apprehending it. When idealist *mimesis* takes on this didactic dimension its conflict with empiricist *mimesis* is most acute.”¹⁷

Renaissance drama was “particularly susceptible” to this conflict; artists wanted to represent at once “the ideal order and an actuality which seems to contradict it.”¹⁸ Dollimore says that the reason for the technique of “idealist *mimesis*” preserved in the morality tradition, is a didacticism.

This thesis is not acceptable because too many things can be called didactic, and because didactic effect of moral improvement can be achieved not only by showing positive patterns (idealistic *mimesis*), but also by showing the negative consequences of bad behavior. This showing can happen by means of ‘empiricist *mimesis*’ serving the “poetic justice,” as elaborated by the fable or exemplum, but flourishing in modern fiction as well. The label ‘didactic’ should be reserved for those types of pragmatic writing that have no narrative, no (acting or fictional) figures, and where time plays no structural role.

The early modern moral drama, Dollimore called didactic and idealist, is in fact literature of religious inspiration operating a special time, the time of anamnesis.¹⁹ The content, i.e. presented world, of anamnestic representations cannot be called “ideal order” or “idealist *mimesis*.” Anamnestic representations are historical, that is real, not spiritually transcendental or immanent. Their being real is objective, but it is not only the immediate reality around one person, perceived by the senses and consciousness within one’s private neurological time and covered by the individual’s personal psychological anamnesis.²⁰

If the past and future are as equally real as today, it makes no sense to speak about the imitative mirroring of reality in drama, it is a depiction of time. Such a narrow view of *mimesis* as mere imitation was not even faithful to Aristotle, who defined plot (*mythos*) as

¹⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, Columbia 1968, p. 47 [from:] Dollimore p. 25.

¹⁷ Dollimore 1980: 25.

¹⁸ “...a dynamic conflict between idealist and empiricist *mimesis* [in Elisabethan drama]: on the one hand didacticism, ossified as a dramatic convention inherited from the Morality tradition, demanded that the universe be seen to be divinely controlled; justice and order were eventually affirmed, conflict resolved and man re-established within, or expelled from, the providential design. On the other hand, drama was rapidly progressing as an art form with empirical, historical and contemporary emphases – all of which were in potential conflict with this didacticism.” (Dollimore 26).

¹⁹ Dąbrówka 2003.

²⁰ This is the quality of our mind guaranteeing us that after being asleep or unconscious through an accident – we regain and resume our personal identity after waking up or turning conscious after an injury.

representing *not people, but actions (praxis)*, and life (1450a).²¹ At this point a possibility of theoretical reconciliation between Aristotle and religious drama is open for further study. It is a paradox that for Aristotle mimetic poetry should busy itself with *possible* events, not with actual ones – while it is only the latter that can pretend to belong to *immediate empirical reality*. The dualism *idealist – empirical* neglects history – the “not immediate,” not actual, but still *empirical* reality. Possible events are not idealistic inventions, they are fictions. They are not the same as artificial “persons who never existed” (like Death, Truth, the World) because the latter could *never* have existed as such, while fictional figures could, and that is why their descriptions are indiscernible from depictions of historical persons (and vice versa, as we know today). For the Middle Ages both our life now and future eternal life are real, even if not identical. The first is only the foreshadowing (*umbra futurorum*) or prefiguration (*figura*) of the authentic, future, ultimate truth, the actual reality to unveil and preserve the *figura* (Auerbach 1959, p. 72). Both worlds are real, only their time is different.

The “long-lasting reality” perceived in a collective way in the additive consciousness of the given group is also covered by general religious anamnesis. The latter appears as a device making reality objective and historical. This long-lasting reality may be not immediate, but after all, when talking about “immediate reality,” we must think of a reality that is *not immediate*. The closest immediate reality we can observe in art is the subject matter of impressionist painting, perhaps in shadow-portraits, or in music a phrase imitating the cuckoo, and, of course, modern music including actual noises of the street, etc. But no narrative reality is ever immediate and it must always be mediated (made objective) in a constructed temporality.

At this moment the problem of the ontological status of the constructed temporality appears.²² How to relate old scriptural events to the actuality of the audience in a cognitively acceptable way? Which literary technique can relate the eternal world of the Revelation to the actual one? How to coordinate the new rules of mimetic realism in art with the representation of scriptural or historical subjects? The typology seems to be the only cognitive apparatus enabling an artistic genre to solve the aforementioned tasks of recognition, explication, and expression of the unity of the “great action” of human history and life eternal. A drama form invented within the framework of this aesthetic was the structure protasis-apodosis.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* was unknown in Europe until ca 1500, afterwards it became common knowledge. If poets worked against its ideas after the Renaissance, it was not accidental, nor did it happen by force of inertia. What are the reasons for this resistance against the pressure from the official cultures with flourishing courts of powerful kingdoms with the most brilliant authors and directors working hard to increase the mimetic effects of their performances?

In the type of plays discussed above the audience cannot feel comfortable in a smooth fictional real-time story. The disparate subjects and discontinuities in plot, alienate the audience from the presented world, and make identification with the heroes on stage difficult if not impossible. Moral lessons of the “memento mori” sort are presented as conclusions of

²¹ „In the *Poetics* Aristotle used the concept of mimesis in several senses, some of which are complex. For present purposes they can be reduced to two: ‘the representation of reality... and its free expression’ (Tatarkiewicz vol. I: 144). „Moreover, there are strong arguments in favour of *representation* as the more important of the two: ‘primarily the term mimesis in the *Poetics* must be taken as referring not to some kind of aid or parallel to nature *but* to the making of a likeness or image of nature’ (Dollimore p. 26, from Wimsatt/Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, N.Y. 1959:26).

²² It is as late as in Francis Bacon that the poetic ideal “has no ontological status whatever - immanent (Aristoteles) or transcendent” (Plato, neoplatonism) – “It is an ideal which is pleasing, gratifying, possibly useful, but ultimately illusory”; “fictive world of poetry and imagination” (Dollimore p. 32).

narrative passion plays. In this way the essential functions of the plays remain quite traditional, confirming the aura of factuality²³ of the salvation history. Empirical mimesis could only suggest that the presented matter is fictional, void of metaphysical “deeper meaning.”

This memory of a “deeper meaning” should explain the question, why did teachers of religious schools all over Europe use (in their theaters, texts and performances) artistic techniques that caused reverse effects to the mainstream theater? If we presume they knew well what they were doing, and if we know how many they were, the conclusion must be only this: they *didn't want* to increase the mimetic effects of their performances, they wanted the results of their activity not to be *closer* to officially preferred literary standards, but to be more *distant* from them.

The argumentative factor should be taken into account in the reflection on the sources of medieval drama. Along the rhetorical-literary line of development (poets and courts) there was a dialectical-argumentative line (lawyers and schools).²⁴ This background of dialectics may give more strength to the literary explanation for the genre name's *dialogus* having been used so long in schools.²⁵ The label warned that the representation's presented world is not the world of imagination or “pleasing lies,” but the domain of truth; the serious dialogue is not inviting the audience for a gratifying holiday trip, but it is going to help them find the way, the truth, and the life.

Conclusion

The new anti-classicist techniques of dramatic representation and of performing art express the typological sense of the presented world – a manner of literary construction of religious representations we know best from medieval drama and spectacle. In many plays we see efforts to also speak in the “modern” language of fiction. Coexistence of the typological structures with fictional scenes is not a question of experiments, since we find it in repertory codices with quite explicit informations in prologues and epilogues addressing the audience. To make the coexistence of history and fiction possible, special techniques were necessary. They did not happen by accident, nor in an ad-hoc experiment or as a result of mental inertia. Their invention and use were an esthetic solution caused by active resistance against classicism.

²³ This term comes from the definition of religion as a cultural system, creating its own legitimation: Clifford Geertz 1966.

²⁴ This could be also an explanation of the two-fold evolution of the *ars dictaminis* (from the poetical and the notarial rhetoric). Another factor was the curriculum in Jesuit colleges, where both the class of rhetorics as well as the class of poetics were producing spectacles.

²⁵ It has been used along the terms tragedy or comedy, in their regular meaning given by mainstream poetics.

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