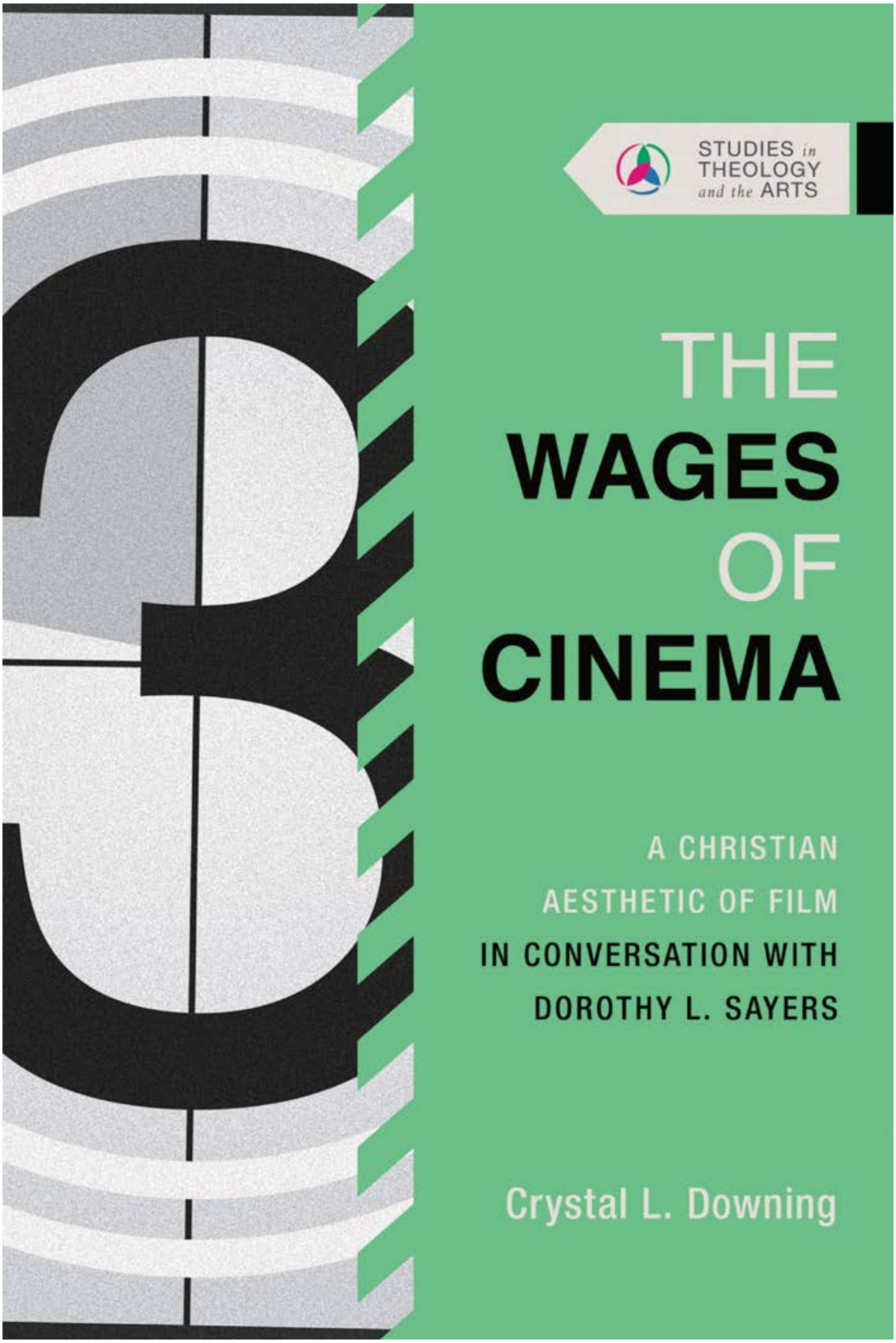

STUDIES *in* THEOLOGY *and the* ARTS

THE WAGES OF CINEMA

A CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC OF FILM IN CONVERSATION WITH DOROTHY L. SAYERS

Crystal L. Downing

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The Religious Origins of Cinema

Christians who write about film often fail to consider its connection to the stage—an oversight especially problematic for those who talk about movies in terms of the stories they tell.[1] After all, theater presented stories for viewing audiences millennia before moving images were a glint on the lenses of nineteenth-century cameras. Greek theater even preceded the gospel message, influencing it in multiple ways. This chapter therefore argues that a full appreciation for the relation between Christianity and film necessitates knowledge about the history of theater. Oxford-educated Dorothy L. Sayers, who not only read classical drama but also wrote scripts for both stage and screen, can help us see theater with new eyes.

The Seeds of Cinema

Without a doubt, the seeds of narrative cinema were incubated on theatrical stages.[2] In the silent era, filmmakers often adapted stage plays, such as those starring Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923), who reprised her famed theatrical roles for the screen. When "talkies" took off in 1927, studios recruited Broadway stage writers to compose dialogue. French filmmaker Marcel

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[1] For exceptions see Paul Kuritz, *Theater and Film: A Christian Perspective* (Enumclaw, WA: Redemption, 2014); Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); and Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). Kuritz discusses theater and film as important expressions of the *imago Dei* but does not explore historical parallels or medium distinctions between the two. Loughlin provides a two-page summary of medieval theater (*Alien Sex*, 51-52) to argue for the religious function of film. Lindvall discusses theater in the context of Christian resistance to it (*Sanctuary Cinema*, 28-34), making the point that Christians in the early twentieth century considered film far more "salubrious" than the vulgarity of the popular stage. Christian "effort to distance film from theater" (35) may explain why people who write about Christianity and film overlook the theatrical origins of cinema.

[2] For a comprehensive study of this incubation, see A. Nicholas Vardac, *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D. W. Griffith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949).

Pagnol went so far as to argue, in 1933, that "talking films" demonstrate "the art of recording, preserving, and diffusing theater." Even into the 1960s, as James Monaco notes, "Much of the best British cinema . . . was closely connected with the vital theater of that period." In addition to common words borrowed from theater—*protagonist, prop, scenery*—one of the most important terms in film scholarship comes from the French stage: *mise-en-scène*. Meaning "the fact of putting into the scene," mise-en-scène originally referred to everything theater audiences saw on the stage in any one scene.[3] In film it means everything cinema audiences see on the screen in any one shot.

We should not be too surprised, then, that significant figures in the history of cinema had direct ties to theater:

- Louis Daguerre (1787–1851), one of the fathers of photography, was a theatrical set designer.
- D. W. Griffith (1875–1948), sometimes called "the man who invented Hollywood," started out as a stage actor and playwright.
- Another founding father of Hollywood cinema, Cecil B. DeMille (1881–1959), began his career acting, directing, and writing for the stage, from which he borrowed lighting devices for his films.
- Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), originally a theatrical set designer, argued that cinema was an extension of theater.
- In addition to directing what many regard as the finest films ever made—*The Grand Illusion* (1937) and *The Rules of the Game* (1939)—Jean Renoir (1894–1979) wrote and directed plays, and his film *The Golden Coach* (1953) "pays homage to Italian classical theater."[4]
- George Cukor (1899–1983), director of Hollywood classics such as *Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *My Fair Lady* (1964), started out as a stage manager and theater director.
- As artistic director and vice president of MGM studios, Irving Thalberg (1899–1936) filmed staged performances of every Broadway play the

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[3] Marcel Pagnol, translated and quoted in Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 58; James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media*, rev. ed. ((New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 269; David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1986), 119. As the authors make clear, "Mise-en-scene is at bottom a theatrical notion: the filmmaker stages an event to be filmed" (151).

[4] Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 348.

studio purchased in order "to provide a blueprint of the pacing and diagramming of scenes, the timing of individual lines for laughter and dramatic impact."[5]

- Howard Koch (1901–1995), a playwright who received an Oscar for his contributions to *Casablanca* (1942), published an essay about the similarities between writing for the stage and writing for the screen.[6]
- Sir Laurence Olivier (1907–1989), founding director of Britain's National Theater, appeared in over fifty movies, several of which he directed.
- Elia Kazan (1909–2003), Turkish-born director of film classics such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954), was also considered "the preeminent stage director of his generation."[7]
- Orson Welles (1915–1985) cofounded the Mercury Theater, where he directed Broadway stage productions before directing and starring in one of the greatest films in history: *Citizen Kane* (1941).
- Originally a playwright and theater director, Sweden's greatest filmmaker, Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007), once commented, "I am much more a man of the theatre than a man of the film."[8]
- Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945–1982), who helped energize new German cinema, was active in the theatrical scene as actor, director, and playwright.

We could add to the list Dorothy L. Sayers and her close friend Muriel St Clare Byrne, a specialist in Elizabethan drama, both of whom wrote for the stage as well as trying their hands at screenwriting. As famous film theorist André Bazin summarizes, "the relations between theater and cinema are much older and closer than is generally thought."[9]

Even denouncers of theater and cinema have much in common. In his magisterial work *Theo-drama*, Hans Urs von Balthasar outlines the antitheater teachings of Christian theologians such as Tertullian (160–220 CE) and Augustine (354–430 CE), polemics that anticipate the antimovie attitudes of

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[5] Quoted in Barry Day, *Coward on Film: The Cinema of Noël Coward* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005), 14.

[6] Howard E. Koch, "A Playwright Looks at the 'Filmwright,'" *Sight and Sound* 19, no. 5 (1950): 210-14.

[7] Michael Almereyda, "Everybody Part of Everybody Else," in booklet included with the Criterion Collection DVD of *On the Waterfront* (2013), 9.

[8] Quoted in Lise-Lone Marker and Frederick J. Marker, *Ingmar Berman: Four Decades in the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 6.

[9] André Bazin, "Theater and Cinema: Part One and Part Two," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 1:81.

Christians in the twentieth century. When bishops at the Fourth Council of Carthage (399 CE) wanted to excommunicate anyone attending theater on a Sunday, they foreshadowed followers of Canon William Sheafe Chase, pastor of Brooklyn's Christ Episcopal Church, who proclaimed in 1908 that attending cinema on Sunday was a "desecration."[10]

This genealogical connection between stage and screen is essential to *The Wages of Cinema* because theater, having nurtured narrative cinema from its very start, was developed in response to the wages of sin. As Sayers succinctly puts it, "All drama is religious in origin," initially watched not simply for "entertainment" but as "an act of communal worship."[11]

THE RELIGIOUS ORIGINS OF DRAMA

While the Hebrews were sacrificing lambs on their altars to Yahweh, the Greeks were sacrificing goats on their altars to Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. Both forms of sacrifice were about new life: the sacrifice of the Jewish lamb for reconciliation with God, the sacrifice of the Greek goat to guarantee the resurrection of crops in spring. Furthermore, like the Hebrews, who sang and danced in honor of Yahweh (Ex 15:20-21), the Greeks performed hymns called dithyrambs in honor of Dionysus.[12]

Theater began with the embellishment of these dithyrambs, as choruses of up to fifty males danced around the sacrificial goat while singing stories about the life of Dionysus. The event became known as "the goat song," from which we get our word *tragedy*: *tragos* = male goat; *ōdē* = song, or "ode." A tragedy, then, establishes that a sacrificial goat (or lamb) must shed its blood for human life to continue. This explains the plots of classical tragedies, in which powerful individuals, having defied the gods and/or human laws, must die so that harmony can be restored to society.

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[10] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 1:93-97. Von Balthasar notes that, as late as 1917, Roman Catholic clerics were forbidden to attend theater (104n52). Canon Chase is quoted in William Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood: How American Protestants Fought for Freedom at the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

[11] Dorothy L. Sayers, introduction to *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943), 2.

[12] Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge note, "Religious theatre goes back further than the Greeks. . . . Early tribes of hunters used drama, often in the form of dance, to ask the gods for help with the coming hunt and to thank the gods for success on their return." Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 150n13.

A key development in Greek theater occurred in 534 BCE, when a dithyramb singer named Thespis began to "answer" the rest of the chorus in the guise of a character from one of the Dionysian myths. Thespis thus created the first known actor, which explains why stage actors to this day are sometimes called thespians. Several decades later, Aeschylus (ca. 525–ca. 456 BCE) added a second "answerer" to a play, inventing costumes to distinguish the two.[13] Sophocles (ca. 497–ca. 406 BCE) not only added a third answerer but also invented scenery—a word that comes from the Greek *skēnē*: the closed space at the back of the open-air Athenian stage. The most dramatic development, however, was initiated by Euripides (ca. 480–ca. 406 BCE), who separated the chorus from the action, making character portrayals seem more lifelike. The greater the realism, of course, the easier it was for audiences to see thespians as people acting out a story rather than as mere celebrants of religious rites.

FROM GREEK THEATER TO THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

The Greek language changed considerably in the four hundred–plus years between Euripides and the Gospel writers, just as the English language changed considerably in the four hundred–plus years between Chaucer (d. 1400) and Jane Austen (d. 1817). Nevertheless, in both instances numerous words from one culture helped shape messages to follow, if even with considerably different spelling and/or alphabet systems.

For example, during the height of classical theater (500–300 BCE), the Greek word for "answerer" was *hypokritēs*. Jesus would have been very aware of the *hypokritai* (plural) performing on stages in his own day. According to Carsten Peter Thiede, "There were theatres all over Galilee, Judaea, Samaria, and in Jerusalem. One of them, the theatre of Sepphoris in Galilee, was actually built while Jesus was living a mere four miles away in Nazareth." Some scholars go so far as to suggest that Jesus, trained as a "builder," may have even aided in its construction.[14]

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[13] In an essay on the *Godfather* films, John R. May argues, "The two generations of the Corleone family recall pointedly the tragic world of . . . Aeschylus's *Oresteia*." May, "The Godfather Films: Birth of a Don, Death of a Family," in *Image and Likeness: Religious Visions in American Film Classics*, ed. John R. May (New York: Paulist, 1992), 72.

[14] Carsten Peter Thiede, "A Critic of the Critics: Dorothy L. Sayers and New Testament Research," *Inklings* 12 (1994): 141-42.

Whether or not he ever saw a theatrical performance, Jesus clearly knew that *hypokritai* wore distinctive masks by which audiences could identify characters on stage. The Greek word for mask was *prosōpon*, which literally means "face." To this day, the medical community uses the term *prosopagnosia* for a condition in which people cannot recognize faces, the Greek word for "face" coupled with one that means "not knowing" (as in *agnostic*). This lends special significance to a verse in Matthew in which Jesus exhorts, "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites [*hypokritai*] do, for they disfigure their faces [*prosōpa*] to show others they are fasting" (Mt 6:16). The Gospels, written in Hellenistic (Koine) Greek (300 BCE–300 CE), therefore employ *hypokritēs* to describe people putting on an act for self-serving purposes.

Matthew quotes forms of the word *hypocrite* five times more than the other three Gospel writers combined, sometimes in combination with other theatrical terms. For example, he reports that the Pharisees, attempting to trick Jesus, "sent their disciples to him, . . . saying 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality'" (Mt 22:16 NRSV). Literally, that last phrase reads, "you do not regard the *prosōpon* of men." They thus admit to Jesus that he does not judge individuals by their masks—their roles, reputations, or status in society. Ironically, their words come true when Jesus sees under their own masks, saying, "Why are you putting me to the test, you *hypokritai*?" (Mt 22:18 NRSV). In the next chapter, Matthew quotes Jesus using the word *hypokritēs* seven times to condemn the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 23:13-29). Luke, in his Gospel, literalizes the theatrical metaphor when he writes, "Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who *pretended* [*hypokrinomenous*] to be sincere" (Lk 20:20), thus alluding to a conflict between the authenticity of Christ and the theatrical pretenses of his enemies.[15]

Significantly, the Greek word for "conflict" is *agōn*, explaining the terms *protagonist* and *antagonist*, borrowed from Greek theater. Though Gospel writers clearly establish priests and Pharisees as the antagonists of Jesus, forms of the word *agōn* appear primarily in the Epistles, as in "Fight [*agōnizou*] the good *agōn* of the faith" (1 Tim 6:12). The writer to Timothy was probably thinking of Olympic *agōn*s, as was the author of Hebrews, who includes the viewing audience as well: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great a cloud of witnesses, . . . let us run with perseverance the *agōn* marked out before us" (Heb 12:1). *Agōn* appears nowhere in the Gospels other than in alternate forms employed by Luke. For example, while recounting Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, Luke writes, "In his *anguish* [*agōnia*] he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Lk 22:44 NRSV). The word *anguish* captures well the internal conflict (*agōn*) Jesus feels over his mission, as though his human fears were competing with his divine understanding. Though all three Synoptic Gospels recount Christ's agonized prayer, "Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me" (Mt 26:39; see Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42), Luke is the only writer to use the word *agōnia*, which appears frequently in Greek drama.

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[15] My understanding of New Testament Greek relies on George V. Wigram and Ralph D. Winter, *The Word Study Concordance* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1978). See esp. 778.

The Acts of the Greeks and the Acts of the Apostles

According to a tradition established by Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 339 CE) and confirmed by Jerome (ca. 347–420 CE), the writer of the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles is the same man mentioned in the letter to the Colossians, "Our dear friend Luke, the doctor" (Col 4:14). While Garry Wills makes a compelling case that the author of Acts could not have traveled with Paul or known him very well (if at all), there is good reason to assume that the author of Acts knew Greek culture well, which influenced the way he recounted incidents in Paul's life.[16]

Paul preaching in front of the Areopagus in Athens provides a good example. As part of his message to the Athenians, Paul quotes from Greek literature, saying of God, "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). This line, originally describing the Greek god Zeus, is taken from a poem by Epimenides, a poet living in Crete during the sixth or seventh century BCE. Paul invokes the literary allusion to suggest that the Athenian search for an "unknown god" (Acts 17:23) has been fulfilled, the unknown God performing on the stage of the world through Jesus.[17] Athens, of course, was also home to the Theater of Dionysus, where gods were often seen on stage. However, as Paul's listeners well knew, those gods were merely *hypokritai*, humans acting like gods, whereas Paul stunningly suggests that God literally became flesh in Christ.

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[16] Garry Wills, *What Paul Meant* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), 11-12, 30-37, 157-66. Wills's expressed goal is to prove that Paul's "letters stand closer to Jesus than do any other words in the New Testament" (10).

[17] The Epimenides source was discovered by Professor J. Rendel Harris, who published his findings in *The Expositor* (April 1907): 333-35. Others suggest, "Paul is quoting Aratus and is also suggesting the words of

Paul in fact used Greek theater to communicate the good news about Christ in his testimony before King Agrippa in Caesarea. While recounting his Damascus road experience, Paul explains how, after a bright light from heaven made him fall to the ground, he heard Christ's voice speaking "in the Hebrew tongue" (Acts 26:14 KJV). When he translates the voice into Greek for Agrippa, however, he employs a phrase used by the playwright Euripides in *The Bacchae*: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee *to kick against the pricks*" (Acts 26:14 KJV). The plot of Euripides's play lends this quotation special meaning.

Premiering at the Theatre of Dionysus in 405 BCE, *The Bacchae* begins with Dionysus explaining his dual nature. Because his heavenly father, Zeus, impregnated a woman on earth, Dionysus claims to be both god and human. Doubting such an outrageous story, skeptics imprison Dionysus. But, due to his divine nature, Dionysus breaks free of his tomb-like containment, only to have his disciples, the Bacchae, perform miraculous works in his name.

The parallels with the gospel message are obvious, adding power to a conversation between the disguised Dionysus and a doubter named Pentheus. Dionysus counsels Pentheus,

> Better to yield him [Dionysus] prayer and sacrifice
> Than *kick against the pricks*, since Dionyse
> Is God, and thou but mortal.[18]

Paul seems to have included "kick against the pricks" to better influence his listeners about salvation through Christ. Agrippa, the primary listener in this case, was educated in the court of the Roman emperor and hence well acquainted with Greek theater. He therefore would have caught Paul's allusion to a divine human who could bring new life. Indeed, after Paul's narration,

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Cleanthes in his 'Hymn to Zeus.'" See Peter Fraser and Vernon Edwin Neal, *ReViewing the Movies: A Christian Response to Contemporary Film* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 106.

[18] Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. Gilbert Murray (Project Gutenberg, 2011), 47, www.gutenberg.org/files/35173/35173-h/35173-h.htm.

Agrippa states, if even suspiciously, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28).

In contrast, two other accounts of the Damascus road experience do not include the theatrical allusion (Acts 9:4; 22:7), both simply ending Christ's statement with "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" If all three accounts included "kick against the pricks," we might assume that the phrase was a common idiom in first-century Roman culture. Quoting it only for Agrippa endorses something Paul states in his letter to the Corinthians: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22 NRSV). To Agrippa, Paul has become a lover of theater—or at least someone familiar with Euripides.

Christians today might do the same with cinema, which also carries the marks of Greek theater. In fact, French film director Robert Bresson (1907–1999) describes his process of filmmaking using language reminiscent of the dismemberment and rebirth of Dionysus that generated Greek theater: "A film is born in my head and I kill it on paper. It is brought back to life by the actors and then killed in the camera. It is then resurrected into a third and final life in the editing room where the dismembered pieces are assembled into their finished form."[19] Though Bresson's films are considered some of the most artistic in the history of cinema, lowbrow movies also display techniques developed by Greek and Roman dramatists. Even the Academy Awards follow classical convention, the very word *academy* originating from the location where Plato taught Aristotle, the philosopher who describes the development of Greek theater in his *Poetics* (ca. 335–323 BCE).

FROM SATYR PLAYS TO COMEDY

As dithyrambs to Dionysus became more and more embellished, competitions developed, awards given to the best dithyrambs. Interestingly, *competition* is another translation of the Greek word *agōn*. Hence, by the time of Aeschylus, *agōn*s among playwrights had been formalized such that each playwright submitted four plays as part of the competition: three tragedies and one satyr play. The latter tended to lampoon ancient gods and heroes from Greek mythology, often using vulgar language and obscene sight gags.

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[19] Quoted in David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2017), 17.

Because satyrs were followers of Dionysus, the god of wine, their antics seemed to symbolize the excess associated with drunkenness, actors often tying to their groins humorously gigantic phalluses. Satyr plays thus anticipate the gross-out vulgarity of teen-oriented comedies in our own day, which seek to outdo one another in obscenity.

Only one complete satyr play has survived—*The Cyclops* by Euripides—perhaps telling us something about the artistry of the genre. Like most movies made to elicit laughs from adolescents, satyr plays may have not been considered worth preserving. In contrast, the comedy genre, which appeared a century after satyr plays, can offer sophisticated commentary on contemporary cultural issues.

The word *comedy* originates from Greek terms meaning "revel song," and Aristophanes (ca. 450–ca. 385 BCE) is usually considered the best exemplar of "old comedy." Though borrowing fake phalluses and other vulgar sight gags from satyr plays, Aristophanes's extravaganzas, graced by passages of beautiful poetry as well as comic originality, had purposeful content: to expose the self-serving behavior of his contemporaries, both highborn and lowborn. Writing plays that satirized politics and personalities—including the personality of Dionysus—Aristophanes was accused of slander when the sharp edge of his scripts cut too deeply.

We might compare the topicality of Aristophanes to movies that make fun of contemporary political and religious issues. For example, in summer 2012, as the presidential race between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama began to heat up, Warner Brothers released a movie called *The Campaign*. Starring Will Ferrell and Zach Galifianakis as Southern politicians running against each other for a seat in Congress, the movie spoofs the use of Christian rhetoric and corporate financing in the contemporary election marketplace. Like comedies by Aristophanes, it alludes to actual persons in the news. The movie's portrayal of the wealthy and manipulative Motch brothers (John Lithgow and Dan Aykroyd) is a thinly veiled satire of the Koch brothers, whose foundations have supplied Republican candidates and causes with millions.

Aristophanes did much more than satirize his contemporaries, however. Making the chorus larger than in tragedies, he divided it in two, setting up an *agōn* between the groups and the *hypokritai* with which they identified. In cinema, the closest thing we get to the feel of old comedy *agōn*s may be musicals, wherein choruses of bystanders sing and dance in response to the dramatic tension established between the primary actors. Take, for example, *West Side Story*, the 1961 film adaptation of a 1957 Broadway musical. Inspired by the *agōn* between Montague and Capulet families in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the film sets up an antagonism between two teenage gangs in Manhattan: the Jets and the Sharks. Though the movie holds the record for the most Academy Awards granted a musical (ten Oscars, including Best Picture)—a record that Steven Spielberg's critically acclaimed remake in 2021 could not surpass—many viewers today will find the synchronized song-and-dance routines of supposedly vicious gang members unintentionally humorous, more like Aristophanes than the filmmakers intended.

ARISTOPHANES AND DEUS EX MACHINA

In addition to politics and religion, Aristophanes mocked the conventions of theater itself. Perhaps the most famous convention is deus ex machina, meaning "god from the machine." When tensions among characters became too tangled for logical resolution, Greek playwrights would lower an actor onto the stage from a crane-like machine, as though he were a god descending from heaven. This god would resolve the dilemma or rescue the hero through judgment or command, sometimes whisking the character away on the machine. True to his comic craft, Aristophanes, in one of his plays, mocks Euripides's overuse of deus ex machina by lowering an actor pretending to be Euripides onto the stage.

The Latin term *deus ex machina* was made popular by Horace (65–8 BCE), the most famous Roman poet during the reign of Augustus, the Caesar who "issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (Lk 2:1). Using the Greek theatrical device as a metaphor for any contrived resolution to a plot, Horace warned writers against use of deus ex machina, as did Aristotle before him: "The unraveling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the *deus ex machina*."[20] Thanks to Horace's *Ars Poetica* (*The Art of Poetry*), "deus ex machina," used even in translations of Aristotle, has become a phrase that refers to any arbitrary problem-solving device, whether on stage or screen.

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[20] Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 57.

DEUS EX MACHINA IN CINEMA

Deus ex machina is explicitly invoked in Joseph Mankiewicz's 1959 film adaptation of a play by Tennessee Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer*, nominated for three Academy Awards. A controlling mother named Violet (Katharine Hepburn) makes her first appearance while being lowered from the second story of her mansion in an open elevator, an image not included in the original 1958 play. Her first words in the film, unlike the play, make the allusion clear: "Sebastian always said 'Mother, when you descend, it's like the goddess from the machine.'" Indeed, seeking to save the reputation of Sebastian, Violet tries to play God by hiring a neurosurgeon to lobotomize her niece (Elizabeth Taylor) to stop her from recounting her son's horrific Dionysian death.

Not coincidentally, Sebastian's demise closely parallels an episode in *The Bacchae*, the play by Euripides from which Paul quotes in Acts. Like the mother in *The Bacchae*, who discovers her son was dismembered and eaten, Violet is forced to confront her complicity with her son's violent death. *Suddenly Last Summer* ends with another image not included in the original play—Violet ascending alone in her elevator, failing in her role as deus ex machina.

Lloyd Baugh asserts that the Greek convention is employed in movie Westerns any time a hero's "origins, his arrival, his powerful goodness and his departure" are left "unexplained."[21] Far more simplistic are movies in which we see characters, traumatized by unbearable situations, suddenly wake up. They are lifted out of sleep just as characters in Greek and Roman tragedies were lifted off the stage by the deus ex machina. Establishing that a terrifying scenario "was only a dream," filmmakers can titillate audiences without having to write intellectually viable scripts.

Consider *The Invasion*, a 2007 film featuring multiple well-known actors: Nicole Kidman, Jeremy Northam, Daniel Craig, and Roger Reese. The movie begins with the space shuttle Patriot crashing to earth, carrying with it an extraterrestrial life form that infects humans, turning them into emotionless automatons as soon as they enter REM sleep. These infected humans feel the need to spread the disease by regurgitating into the food or faces of others, causing their victims to fall asleep. As Carol (Kidman) and Ben (Daniel Craig) seek to evade infection through violent chase scenes, they appear to be the only healthy people in the country except for a team of scientists ensconced at a military fort. After Ben is infected, Carol and her son are nearly captured by diseased automatons until a helicopter lands on top of a building in Baltimore and whisks them away to safety.

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[21] Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 157.

As a machine descending from above, the helicopter functions as deus ex machina almost literally. But the movie's figurative deus ex machina is more outrageous. Even though most humans were infected, those protected in the military fort somehow manufacture enough antibodies to reverse the disease. And, happiness of all happinesses, the inoculated people totally forget their infection, each thinking it was only a bizarre dream. Deus ex machina! Of course, we are never told how these recovered people explain the devastation surrounding them: dead bodies and crashed cars on the streets, buildings looted and burned. Instead, the last scene of the movie shows Carol living in a gorgeous house with her handsome recovered lover, Ben, who remembers nothing of his infection. Even Euripides would be ashamed.

Mocking the Machina in Cinema

Aware of such contrived ex machina endings, some filmmakers, like Aristophanes before them, mock the use of deus ex machina. At the end of *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story* (Rawson Marshall Thurber, 2004), we see a chest with "deus ex machina" written on it—clearly alluding to the outrageous plot twists by which loose ends in the movie have been tied up and protagonists rewarded.

Far cleverer is Woody Allen's award-winning 1995 comedy *Mighty Aphrodite*. The title itself tells us that Allen was thinking of the Greeks, since Aphrodite was their goddess of love, beauty, and procreation. Allen begins *Mighty Aphrodite* with the shot of an ancient Greek stage, on which appears a chorus wearing masks. Though mostly set in contemporary New York, the film includes characters from famous Greek tragedies: Oedipus, Tiresias, Jocasta, and Cassandra. We should not be too surprised, then, that the film's tensions are resolved through deus ex machina. The Aphrodite of the story is Linda, played by Mira Sorvino, who won an Oscar for her role. Seeking to break free from her life as a prostitute, the goodhearted Linda wants to reconcile with a suitor who rejected her once he learned of her past. As Linda drives to the city in a desperate attempt to win him back, a helicopter suddenly lands, delivering to Linda a man who gives her a new life through marriage and a child. As though dropped by a crane, the helicopter is clearly Allen's comic reference to a deus ex machina that resolves everything for the protagonist. We might even conclude that Allen was mocking the helicopter scene from *The Invasion* if it weren't for the fact that *Mighty Aphrodite* preceded the Nicole Kidman vehicle by over a decade.

Remaking the Machina: Science Fiction

While Greek theater developed machines that brought imagined gods to earth, cinematic science fiction imagines machines themselves as gods. The *Matrix* movies (one in 1999, two in 2003, and another in 2021), as well as both *Total Recall* films (1990 and 2012), play on the idea of deus ex machina by having their characters' brains literally attached to machines. After wrenching our emotions with terrifying scenes, the movies repeatedly return us to shots of the protagonists' bodies in the machines. Hence, like audiences in ancient Greece, we see protagonists escape the devastating consequences of their experiences through machines. However, these films make the escapes more ambiguous, encouraging viewers, along with the protagonists, to question the distinction between reality and machine-made fiction, an ambiguity that reflects contemporary viewers' vexed relationship with artificial intelligence and other computer technology that defines, if not controls, their actions. Not coincidentally, credits for *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) announce that the final Matrix machine encountered by Neo (Keanu Reeves) is called "Deus Ex Machina." Like a scene straight out of Euripides, Neo is carried off by Deus Ex Machina after it helps him destroy his antagonists, the Smiths.

From New Comedy to Movie Comedy

While the old comedy of Aristophanes satirized political and religious issues of his day, the new comedy that followed focused on the perils of private life. Menander (ca. 341–290 BCE), the most famous representative of Athenian new comedy, is quoted by the apostle Paul, "Do not be misled: '*Bad company corrupts good character*'" (1 Cor 15:33).

Plautus (ca. 254–184 BCE), a Roman playwright who translated Menander's work into Latin, became a master of the plot devices of new comedy, humorously portraying ordinary people and family life. Many contemporary Hollywood films echo new comedy's focus on the family, including its humor. Take, for instance, the outrageous scenarios of the Ben Stiller / Robert DeNiro comedies *Meet the Parents* (Jay Roach, 2000), *Meet the Fockers* (Jay Roach, 2004), and *Little Fockers* (Paul Weitz, 2010). The name "Focker" itself echoes the Plautine love for vulgar wordplay.

New comedy stock characters are clear ancestors of stock characters in Hollywood movies. For example, a common figure in Plautus was the *servus callidus*, Latin for "clever servant," who functioned as talkative companion to and brilliant tactician for the protagonist, called *adulescens* in Roman drama. (The Latin *adolescere* means "to ripen" or "grow old," explaining the origin of our word *adolescent*.) Accompanying the *adulescens*, the *servus callidus* compares to the buddy or sidekick in contemporary movie comedies, a companion aiding and many times challenging or ridiculing the protagonist. *The Lone Ranger* movies (1956, 1958, 2013), based on a television series of the same name, established Tonto as a sidekick comparable to characters from Plautus. Indeed, even though Tonto takes a subordinate position, the name with which he addresses the Lone Ranger, "Kemosabe," makes mild mockery of the protagonist. Reflecting the wordplay loved by Plautus, "Kemosabe" sounds like the Spanish phrase *quien no sabe*: "the one who does not know."

Influenced by Plautus, Terence (195/185–159 BCE) seems to have lived the life of the *servus callidus*. Sold as a slave to a Roman senator, Terence was so brilliant that his master (from whom he took the name Terence) set him free after educating him. By the time he was twenty-five, Terence had written six plays so celebrated that they were referenced by Shakespeare in the sixteenth century and President John Adams in the nineteenth.

Terence appropriated the stock characters employed by Plautus, thus perpetuating identifiable roles still seen in contemporary film:

- *Miles gloriosus* (Latin for "braggart soldier") is the arrogant man who desires the same woman as does the *adulescens*, causing the hero great trauma while deceiving the female. The *miles gloriosus*, then, is two-faced, a characteristic literalized in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) when district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) appears with a face divided in two, one handsome, the other horrific. Though the film starts with the handsome Dent dating Rachel Dawes (Maggie

Gyllenhaal), Batman's love interest, it ends with Dent in mortal combat with Batman.

- *Senex* (Latin for "old man") can be either an old man competing with the *adulescens* for a young woman's affection or a father resisting the overtures of the *adulescens* for his daughter's attention. Both kinds of *senex* appear in Franco Zeffirelli's 1967 film adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew* by Shakespeare, who explicitly mentions Terence in the play. Other times, *senex* takes the form of a wizened figure who counsels the hero with sage, often enigmatic, advice, like Gandalf in Peter Jackson's film adaptations of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* novels. *Senex* also anticipates a stock movie character dubbed "the magical Negro" by director Spike Lee, who has dramatized *agōn*s ignited by race relations in multiple award-winning films such as *BlacKkKlansman* (2018). The "magical Negro," according to Lee, is a Black man who aids a White protagonist by channeling supernatural power and/or insight rather than by exercising critical thinking or character depth. Commonly cited examples of the racism underlying "the magical Negro" are Bagger Vance (Will Smith) in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Robert Redford, 2000) and John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) in *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999).[22]
- *Meretrix* (Latin for "prostitute") functions as a temptation for the *adulescens* but also can be the goodhearted fallen woman, such as Linda in *Mighty Aphrodite*. In an essay exploring "The Image of Woman in Contemporary (Religious) Film," Diane Apostolos-Cappadona argues that the "convention of the 'fallen woman' with the heart of gold" is fulfilled by Michelle Pfeiffer's Countess Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* (Martin Scorsese, 1993). By contrasting Olenska with "the virginal maiden" played by Winona Ryder, Apostolos-Cappadona alludes to another stock figure from ancient theater, *virgo*.[23]
- Latin for "young maiden," *virgo* is the sweet ingenue who engenders competition among the *adulescens*, the *miles gloriosus*, and the *senex*, her character serving as a motivator for male action more than having much depth of its own.

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[22] See Matthew Hughey, "Cinethentic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films," *Social Problems* 3 (August 2009): 543-77.

[23] Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "From Eve to the Virgin and Back Again: The Image of Woman in Contemporary (Religious) Film," in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 124, 122. Though she attributes these stock figures to Victorian convention, Apostolos-Cappadona does a good job of assessing how the mise-en-scène reinforces the women's characters.

One cannot help wondering whether the conventional characters of *virgo* and *senex* influenced a powerful Christian tradition of Joseph as a *senex* called by God to wed the *virgo* Mary. By the second century CE, the husband of Mary had been established as a widower, a means by which the church could suggest that the siblings of Jesus mentioned in the Gospels were not biological (Mt 12:46-50; 13:55-56; Mk 3:32; 6:3; Lk 8:19-20). The *virgo* married the *senex* Joseph, who brought with him children from his previous marriage. By the seventh century Joseph was said to have been in his nineties when he married the fourteen-year-old girl, an age that ensured Mary's perpetual virginity after giving birth to Jesus.[24]

Senecan Tragedy and Christian Tragedies

Jesus was born around the same time as the most famous writer of Latin tragedies, the philosopher Seneca (ca. 4 BCE–65 CE), who wrote Greek-inspired plays filled with violence and gore. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), with its graphic torture and bloodshed, seems straight out of Seneca, who, like Jesus, died according to the commands of Roman authorities.

Hired to tutor a twelve-year-old named Nero, Seneca remained his adviser when Nero ordered the construction of more theater spaces after he became Caesar in 54 CE. Thirsting, perhaps, for greater visual stimulation than Seneca's stylized violence on stage, Nero became the first imperial sponsor of theatrical Christian torture. In fact, according to a tradition established by Eusebius of Caesarea, the apostle Paul was beheaded in Rome during Nero's reign. As Nero became intoxicated with power, he even accused Seneca of infidelity, finally ordering him to die by suicide. So, like his contemporary Jesus, who willingly went to the cross, Seneca willingly killed himself by cutting open his veins and bleeding to death.

The Nero-like thirst for graphic blood-and-guts violence, of course, influences cinema today, with viewers differing little from those who filled the Roman Coliseum to watch humans get eviscerated. While consumers that pay for real-life torture may be more deplorable than filmgoers who know that what they see is illusion, there is something vastly disturbing about cinematic close-ups on eyeballs being pierced, arms severed, and brains scrambled, close-ups that paying audiences in Rome usually did not see.

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[24] A document written around 145 CE known as the Protoevangelium of James is the earliest known source to suggest the perpetual virginity of Mary after the birth of Jesus. It also established that Joseph was a widower, with children from a previous marriage. The document asserting that Joseph was ninety is called History of Joseph the Carpenter. See Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Plese, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Partially due to its dehumanizing violence (literally de-humanizing), theatrical murders died out in the fifth century, their demise influenced by Christian protesters. One monk, while attempting to stop gladiators from murdering one another, was stoned to death by spectators, their bloodlust aroused by the theatrical battle. As Hans Urs von Balthasar notes, "By the time Christianity arrived, there was little left [to theater] but a noisy, popular entertainment; it was principally coarse and lewd and often cruel, so that even the pagans themselves turned away from it."[25] Hence, Roman emperors began to prohibit theatrical displays, such that, as David Bevington bluntly puts it, "drama ceased to exist."[26] Before it ceased to exist, however, Roman theater profoundly influenced the development of Christian theology.

Theater and Theology

Romans borrowed numerous conventions from Greek culture, including the wearing of masks during theater productions. However, rather than using the Greek word for mask, *prosōpon,* Romans used the Latin word *persona.* A stock character's role was indicated by the *persona* worn, leading to the idea that personhood, even for individuals offstage, was a function of the roles played in society. We still retain the concept of role-playing in our words *impersonate* and *personnel*; to impersonate is to act like someone else, and business personnel have certain roles to play in a company.

Some linguists suggest that *persona* originally meant "to breathe through," since the actor under a mask had to breathe through it to make the character seem alive. This etymology lends special meaning to Tertullian's Latin description of the Trinity, which he formulated around 200 CE: *tres Personae, una Substantia*. God, in other words, though one substance, *breathes* through three separate persons, who have different roles to play.[27]

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[25] Von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 89.

[26] David Bevington, *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 3. Bevington's statement is based on the lack of textual evidence for drama between 500 and 900 CE. Other theater historians, however, identify nontextual theatrical activities during the period: traveling minstrels and mimes, as well as religious rites and festivals. See Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre,* 9th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003), 74.

[27] Sounding like Plato, Tertullian disparages theater, arguing "All plays . . . arouse strong emotions." Quoted in von Balthasar, *Theo-drama,* 94n1.

Having borrowed *personae* from Roman theater to explain an essential doctrine of their faith, Western Christians were also the ones to resurrect theater several centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire. In the tenth century, European churches began to embellish their Easter services, with priests acting parts while they recited the liturgy. Two or three portrayed the women who visit Christ's tomb, while another pretended to be the angel who asks them, *Quem quaeritis?*—Latin for "Whom do you seek?" Because manuscripts from France, Germany, Italy, and England contain the phrase, often repeating it, these dramatic liturgies have become known as *quem quaeritis* plays.

Hence, like classical Greek drama, which began with celebrations over the death and resurrection of a god, Christian drama of the medieval period began by celebrating the death and resurrection of the God "above all gods" (Ps 95:3). At its very start (both times), theater thus focused on new life, a body put to death so others could live. Gaston Baty goes so far as to suggest, "Although Aeschylus and Sophocles could foresee neither the dogma nor the ethics of the Gospels, they acted in accordance with a Catholic aesthetics."[28] Nevertheless, as Sayers argues, each bloody and tragic event in Aeschylus and Sophocles is "mere domestic incident" compared to the founding event of Christianity, when "a number of quite commonplace human beings, in an obscure province of the Roman Empire, killed and murdered God Almighty—quite casually, almost as a matter of religious and political routine."[29] The casualness of the crucifixion, of course, reinforces the doctrine of Christ's resurrection. Something amazing must have happened in order to ignite a movement that changed the world.

Quem quaeritis plays were so thoroughly about Christian doctrine that many were performed without a congregation present. In such cases, the point was not to entertain or to educate the common people, as is often assumed. Instead, priests or monks acted out *quem quaeritis* to incarnate, for its own sake, the profundity of incarnation, God taking on flesh in order to conquer the wages of sin by rising from the dead. "Whom do you seek?" captures the essence of Christianity—seeking the savior who left an empty tomb.

Due to its powerful significance, the phrase *Quem quaeritis?* eventually entered into dramatic liturgies written for Christmas services. In a twelfth-century manuscript from Fleury, France, shepherds go to Bethlehem only to be greeted by midwives asking, *Quem quaeritis, pastores, dicite?* (Whom do you seek, shepherds, say?). In the same Fleury text, Herod asks the magi, *Quem quaeritis . . . ?*[30] As its playwright well knew, Christianity is about seeking Jesus, the medium of salvation, both at his birth in a physical body and after his death in the resurrected body.

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[28] Quoted in von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 11n9.
[29] Sayers, introduction to *Man Born to Be King*, 5.

The importance of Christ's body led to the next development in medieval drama, English Corpus Christi plays, often called mystery plays. Literally meaning "the body of Christ," Corpus Christi was a holiday instituted by the Roman Church in 1311. Scheduled to fill in the gap between the holy days of Easter and Christmas, the Corpus Christi Feast celebrated the doctrine of transubstantiation, the holy moment during Mass when bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ. By 1318 many British towns sponsored processions for the feast day, in which priests and clerics would walk through the streets in full regalia holding up a box containing the Eucharist host.

In northern England, these processions eventually developed into Bible stories performed on wagons by different guilds. As in parades today, townspeople would stand along the designated route, waiting to see the pageants roll by.[31] Audiences were thus given an overview of Christian history in minidramas, from the fall of Lucifer, at the start of the procession, through the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, to the last judgment at the end. Inspired by the importance of the incarnated body of Christ, these medieval Corpus Christi plays drew attention to how common human bodies—not just priests' bodies—might incarnate biblical truths. And the plays themselves drew attention to the body: Noah and his wife hitting each other as he tries to get her on the ark; Isaac desperately trying to talk Abraham out of killing him; Joseph worrying that Mary has cheated on him due to his old age; the scribes and Pharisees trying to trap Jesus with the body of a woman taken in adultery; Roman soldiers ineptly trying to nail the body of Jesus to the cross, adding humorous double meaning to his prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34).[32] Corpus Christi playwrights, in other words, endorsed the assumption that God celebrated embodiment through the incarnation.

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[30] "The Service for Representing Herod," from *The Fleury Playbook*, in Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 58, 61.

[31] Not all Corpus Christi festivals used pageant wagons. Some towns employed multiple stage scaffolds arranged in a circle, where audience members would move around to see the action on the various stages (Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 479-80).

FROM CORPUS CHRISTI TO CORPUS SAYERS

Sayers had in mind Corpus Christi cycles, or "mystery plays," as they were known, when in 1940 she agreed to write a cycle of plays about Jesus for the Children's Hour on BBC radio. In letters to the director of religious broadcasting, she contrasts the freedom medieval playwrights had "to let Christ say anything that seemed natural and appropriate" with the problematic British "prohibition against representing Our Lord directly on the stage or in films." Believing that radio drama got around that prohibition, Sayers wrote plays that included complex psychological, social, and political issues relevant to her own day, justifying the complexity with the benefits of cinema, which had made children "far more sophisticated than we ever were at their age."[33] Hence, when personnel at the BBC asked Sayers to dumb down her plays, Sayers tore up her contract. After heated correspondence, the BBC removed Children's Hour personnel from oversight of the project, thus encouraging a broader audience, like the audiences of all ages that watched medieval Corpus Christi plays.

Deciding to broadcast Sayers's twelve plays over a ten-month period, beginning in late December 1941, the BBC scheduled a press conference in which Sayers read dialogue from her upcoming plays. Journalists turned the theatrical moment into a tragedy worthy of Aeschylus, playing up the fact that Sayers not only failed to use King James English but sometimes had her disciples speaking slang. Christians all over England mounted a censorship campaign, demanding the broadcasts be taken off the air. Ironically, because of the controversy, thousands of people indifferent to Christianity listened to the broadcasts, writing Sayers to say that they finally understood the gospel message, which changed their lives. In the introduction to her published version of her Jesus plays, *The Man Born to Be King* (1943), Sayers states that insistence on King James English is a "singular piece of idolatry" that "imposes difficulties upon the English playwright from which the Greek tragic poets were free."[34] She later wrote a correspondent about the problem with "bibliolatry," saying, "The Pharisees, after all, read their Bibles from cover to cover, and were none the better for it—they might have done better to wrestle with the great human problems of Aeschylus or Euripides."[35]

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[32] The Middle English reads, "What they wirke wotte they nought," in *The York Crucifixion of Christ*, in Bevington, *Medieval Drama*, 578.

[33] *Letters* 2:147, 146, 214.

Due to the power of theater to capture truth, both of human nature and about Christ, *The Man Born to be King* radio cycle was broadcast four years in a row. It was the "nearest modern approach to a genuine Mystery Cycle," wrote Sayers in 1955, noting, "Last year, portions of the Mediaeval Mystery Cycles have been revived, for the first time since the 16th century."[36] Sayers, in other words, was important to the revival of religious drama in England as well as the revival of faith for thousands.

How, then, might resurrection, the originating event of both Christianity and theater, apply to cinema? Film critic Charles Champlin suggests an answer, explaining that what keeps him going to the movies is a "constant hope of *resurrection*. You have to hope that the next one you see is the one that's going to knock you into the aisle and make you come alive and restore your *faith in the medium*."[37] Though faith in Jesus Christ as the medium of salvation radically transcends all other kinds of faith, both religious and artistic, Champlin's words force us to consider how the medium of film differs from that of theater, the subject of the next chapter.

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[34] Sayers, introduction to *Man Born to Be King*, 3.

[35] *Letters* 3:524-25. Sayers alludes to Greek theater repeatedly in her detective fiction. See, e.g., Dorothy L. Sayers (with Robert Eustace), *The Documents in the Case* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 136, 208; Sayers, "The Incredible Elopement of Lord Peter Wimsey," in *Hangman's Holiday* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 55.

[36] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Sacred Plays," in *Episcopal Churchnews*, January 9, 1955, 22. My sincerest thanks go to Laura Simmons for drawing my attention to this essay, the first of a three-part series.

[37] Quoted in Jeffrey Overstreet, review of *Conversations at the American Film Institute with the Great Moviemakers—The Next Generation*, ed. George Stevens Jr. (New York: Knopf, 2012), *Books and Culture* 18, no. 4 (July/August 2012): 8, emphasis added.

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