



Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theater

Michael Norton



EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

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Introduction

The Illusion of Liturgical Drama

SOME YEARS AGO, I was asked to put together an article on liturgical drama for an online encyclopedia of medieval studies. But as I set to work out the contours of the study, I discovered that I had no idea how to define the expression. I had spent more than two decades thinking and writing about the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, a liturgical rite that most considered the *sine qua non* of liturgical drama, but given the narrow focus of my own research, I had never been forced to confront the larger category to which these ceremonies had been consigned. While I had long been uncomfortable with both the label and the concept “liturgical drama,” I was content to ignore my discomfort so long as it did not hinder my own work. If others wished to see this curious liturgical ceremony as a species of drama, then so be it. I saw no reason to dissuade them.

I had come to see the label “liturgical drama” as attached to two different kinds of events. On the one hand were liturgical rites such as the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, rites that were celebrated within specific liturgical contexts at particular churches at particular moments in time, rites that were celebrated year after year and century after century. On the other hand were what appeared to be Latin religious plays that had at best a tangential association with the liturgy, plays that may have been performed one or more times at some unspecified location at some usually unspecified time, if they were performed at all. Any definition that I might suggest for liturgical drama that could encompass both of these activities would be chimeral at best. So far as I was concerned, the notion “liturgical drama” had been effectively neutered by C. Clifford Flanigan in any case. In a series of articles and conference presentations given over the two decades that preceded his untimely death in 1993, Flanigan had offered what I thought was a convincing case that what we saw as drama in the liturgy was largely a creature of our own making, an imposition of our own understanding of what drama and/or theater might be. As a student of the music and liturgy of the Middle Ages, I could see no reason to regard the *Visitatio Sepulchri*

and other similar ceremonies as anything other than liturgical acts that were best understood in liturgical and theological terms.

As I reengaged the more recent literature on liturgical drama and medieval drama in general, though, I was astounded by the degree to which some students of medieval drama had ignored Flanigan's brilliant analyses in the wake of his untimely death. I can well remember hearing a conference paper given by one prominent scholar who declared without reservation that the *Visitatio Sepulchri* of the tenth-century *Regularis Concordia* not only *was* drama, but that it was likely created to replace an even more overtly theatrical, albeit no longer extant, spectacle of some sort. I was distressed to discover that Flanigan's insights had resonated so poorly, and I resolved to see what, if anything, I could do to reanimate Flanigan's voice. I was certainly not alone in this. Nils Holger Petersen, among others, had done much both to carry forth Flanigan's legacy and to move it in new directions. But even his incisive analyses seemed to have little impact among some scholars, particularly those whose focus tended toward the literary rather than the liturgical. In the meantime, the project to which I had been asked to contribute went defunct, and I began the odyssey that would become this book.

Problems of Definition

The expression "liturgical drama" has come to represent a genre of musical texts that were dramatic in nature: with characters portrayed by clerics costumed in vestments, in dialogue form, and staged within the confines of a monastic, ecclesiastical, or parish church as a part of the liturgical observance for a particular feast. Definitions for "liturgical drama," however, have proven elusive. In 1860, Edmond de Coussemaker offered the following:

The liturgical dramas are those bound in an intimate way to the ceremonies of worship, having developed from the liturgy of the time and of the saints; they were an outgrowth or a complement. . . . The liturgical dramas had only churches and monasteries for their stages, monastic and secular clerics for their actors. These dramatic plays were not composed for theatrical purposes. The spectators did not come there to engage worldly and mundane emotion, to applaud the talent of the actors; they were there to attend the feast being celebrated, to identify with the ceremony of the day for which the drama had been put into action.¹

That these were drama was taken for granted—Coussemaker offered no defense for this. That these were liturgical was also clearly implied, if not precisely stated. The words “liturgical” and “drama” came to entail their own referents, and any further understanding could be culled from the examples provided in the remainder of the volume. For Coussemaker, the expression “liturgical drama” embraced more than the few liturgical plays that he offered within his edition, moreover. Drawing on the work of Charles Magnin a generation earlier (see chapter 1), Coussemaker saw these so-called liturgical plays as but one aspect of a larger manifestation of representation in the religious art of the Middle Ages: “The liturgical drama was the mimetic representation not only of the liturgy of the time and of the saints,” he noted, “but of all religious stories that were figured on the windows, on the walls, in the stalls, in the niches, through painting and sculpture; which gave them a grandeur, a pomp, a sparkle that had to act powerfully on the imagination of the faithful.”² The expression was also overly broad. After distinguishing the liturgical dramas from the mysteries, Coussemaker observed that it was necessary also to distinguish among the liturgical dramas themselves:

These were of two types. The one was bound closely to the religious ceremonies and formed, to some extent, a unit with them by borrowing the liturgical texts that were paraphrased and put into dialogue that required action. The others, while having the same religious character, did not have such an intimate connection with the ritual. They were dramatic at their creation. They have as their subject the sacred text, but their development made them into special compositions whose extent made it impossible to be kept in the offices. These were represented sometimes in processions, sometimes during or after the ceremonies, either in the choir or at the rood screen.³

Coussemaker’s definition for “liturgical drama” was the most comprehensive of his era, and over the next century and a half, those who followed emulated Coussemaker by allowing their own definitions for “liturgical drama” to form in the minds of their readers rather than on the pages of their studies, the category generating spontaneously around one or more prototypical texts. In his 1954 article on “Liturgical Drama” in the *New Oxford History of Music*, for example, William Smoldon offered the following:

It will be useful here to define ‘liturgical drama’ in more detail. The first simple compositions to which this term could be applied were

closely connected with Divine Service, and arose from a brief dialogue sung before the Easter Mass, one of the free compositions known as “tropes” which in early medieval times had begun to invade many parts of the liturgy. By an evolution which will presently be described this became the “Easter Sepulchre” music-drama, the three Marys and the empty tomb receiving the news of this Resurrection from the angel.⁴

For Smoldon, the repertory defined the category, and no further details were needed. In the revised edition of the *New Oxford History of Music* thirty-six years later, Susan Rankin offered more description, but moved quickly to a discussion of the repertory:

The liturgical books of the medieval western church preserve a large repertory of dramatic representations intended for performance on the highest church festivals. Of widely varied form, these ‘dramatic ceremonies’ or ‘plays’ drew on the literary and musical as well as dramatic skills of their creators. Like the liturgical ritual itself, they were expressed in Latin words and were sung throughout. . . . Liturgical plays first appear in the tenth century, initially the product of a widespread interest in new liturgical composition of many kinds. The earliest examples are of two types, based on biblical stories relating to the Nativity and Resurrection of Christ.⁵

This reluctance to define the expression “liturgical drama” has carried across disciplines as well. Peter Meredith, in his chapter on “Latin liturgical drama” in *The Medieval European Stage*, offered the following: “Liturgical drama is the theatrical action growing out of and to an extent remaining within the annually recurring services of the church.” After a brief but engaging discussion of the difficulties of determining when “ritual action becomes theatrical action, and, in turn drama” as well as what it means for something to be liturgical, he ultimately allowed the texts themselves to give substance to the expression.⁶ In his chapter on premodern theater in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, John Coldeway introduced his discussion of liturgical drama by noting the tenth-century plays of Hrosvitha of Gandersheim modeled on those of Terence. Moving on to liturgical drama proper, he offered a brief overview of the genre’s purported origin, but quickly shifted focus to the repertory without having defined what the expression “liturgical drama” itself might actually mean:

At about the same time, another kind of dramatic performance was spreading in other monastic settings, based on musical

embellishments of the liturgy known as tropes, or significant phrases extended musically for emphasis. Liturgical dramas, in turn, extended the musical phrases one step further, enacting biblical stories referred to in the liturgy. Their purpose, clearly, was to heighten the religious experiences of the ritual practices. The best-known example of such liturgical embellishment is the *quem quaeritis* trope, which dramatises the Easter morning biblical episode in which the three Marys approach the sepulchre where Jesus was buried.⁷

Historians of the liturgy have similarly avoided explicit definitions. Fr. Richard Donovan, in his 1958 study of liturgical drama in Spain, attempted to define the expression by examining its terms. After accepting Young's claim that drama was characterized by the use of impersonation,⁸ Donovan went on to look at the term "liturgical," relying on the individual instances of liturgical drama that he would offer later to give substance to his definitions:

The word *liturgical* itself is not devoid of certain difficulties, inasmuch as it is not always easy to determine just which ceremonies fall into this category. In the Middle Ages the 'official liturgy' of the Church, if one may so speak, was limited to the essential part of Catholic worship, such as the Canon of the Mass, etc.; in the more secondary portions, usage varied considerably from diocese to diocese. The liturgical plays were one of these secondary items.⁹

In his discussion of liturgical performance in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Éric Palazzo offered a perspective that was markedly different, although he still came no closer to defining what he meant by the expression:

These "liturgical dramas" appear in the tenth/eleventh century primarily in monastic settings where they gave rise to new liturgical books. For many decades, historiography has tended to style these new ritual displays "liturgical dramas," an expression, which though doubtless convenient, seems to me to be ill-suited to designate what these productions of the life of Christ or of other biblical characters really were. For my part, I am convinced that these new kinds of rites are in no wise "dramatic" in the modern sense of the term, and that it would be out of place to dislocate them from monastic ritual in its entirety.¹⁰

While Palazzo admitted his misgivings about the expression, his discussion assumed that his readers had a prior understanding of "liturgical drama"

and of the repertory that defined it. Scholars who have dealt with the notion of “liturgical drama,” in fact, appear to have depended heavily upon the understanding of their predecessors, while failing to notice that their predecessors had come no closer to defining the expression themselves. On the whole, definitions for “liturgical drama” have thus tended toward circularity. The words “liturgical” and “drama” have drawn onto themselves the individual ceremonies and plays that would delineate the category, and these in turn have provided the parameters for the definition.

It is little wonder that I was unable to come up with a definition that could adequately cover the repertory of what we now call “liturgical drama.” The splintered nature of the repertory precluded an easy definition, and scholars largely avoided the task. Indeed, the problem of definition did not result from any deficiencies on the part of the various scholars. The problem resulted from a defect in the notion “liturgical drama” itself. The bulk of the repertory is made up of liturgical rites whose dramatic nature has only recently been claimed, while the remainder are religious plays whose liturgical nature lacks evidentiary binding. Although each text can make an individual claim for its inclusion within the category, the category crumbles when all are considered together. The repertory of what we have come to know as “liturgical drama” was not a bifurcation, therefore, not a division of similar things into multiple branches, but rather an amalgam of different kinds: liturgical ceremonies, religious plays, and perhaps other things as well.

Words and Such

Given the difficulty of defining “liturgical drama,” coming to terms with the vocabulary invoked in its treatment can be vexing. In this study, I will distinguish between the two sorts of musical texts typically included among the so-called liturgical dramas. For those preserved in liturgical manuscripts and celebrated at specific moments in the liturgical *cursus* I will use the expression “representational rites,” while for those found in non-liturgical manuscripts or in non-liturgical contexts that offer scant evidence of liturgical attachment, I will use the expression “religious plays” or “religious representations” (since I am not fully convinced that these should be seen as drama either).

One attempt to deal with the difficulties of the expression “liturgical drama” was the invention in the mid-twentieth century of “music-drama” or “medieval music-drama,” an expression popularized by musicologist

William Smoldon to make clear that these rites and plays were sung rather than spoken.¹¹ Indeed, for Smoldon and for most musicologists since, the melodies to which the texts were set were as important as the texts, if not more so.¹² This expression, though, has proven even more troublesome than “liturgical drama.” While the expression did highlight the need to consider the melodies to which these texts were sung, it divorced the representational rites fully from their liturgical contexts. No longer “liturgical dramas,” the texts became “music-dramas” (along with the unfortunate Wagnerian overtones). The liturgical nature of these rites was overwhelmed by their musical attributes, and the label could no longer evoke its repertory. Indeed, music-drama could be anything.

Such terminological issues underscore the ontological problem that we face when dealing with the individual instances of what we call “liturgical drama.” There is no single noun that can adequately stand for all instances. The words “rite” or “ceremony” might be appropriate for what I am calling “representational rites,” but these do not suit those religious plays where evidence of liturgical use is scant. The word “play,” conversely, might well be appropriate for what I am here calling “religious representations,” but it is unsuitable for representational rites such as the *Visitatio Sepulchri* (for reasons that should become obvious as the study progresses). So, should I need to refer abstractly to an instance of the so-called liturgical drama, an instance that might be either rite or play, I will use the words “text” or “representation” or the expression “musical text.” I should note that my use of the single word “text” implies the presence of musical notation, whether specifically provided in the manuscript (as in antiphoners and graduals) or not (as typically in breviaries and ordinals).

Also problematic are terms that imply performance or that suggest theatrical activity when talking about the representational rites in particular. The study of what we now call “liturgical drama” has been ongoing for so long that it is difficult to avoid talking about individual rites or individual aspects of how these rites were celebrated without using terms and expressions drawn from the study of theater. I will strive to avoid using such terms and expressions when referring to these rites. I will use the term “represent” rather than “portray,” “celebrate” rather than “perform,” “in the person of” rather than “role,” “vestments” rather than “costume,” “movement” rather than “staging” and so on.

The ontological issues presented by the expression “liturgical drama” manifest also when dealing with the several subgenres of the representational rites and religious plays that constitute its repertory as cur-

rently understood. The manuscripts themselves rarely provide titles, and when they do, the titles are often inconsistently applied. For the liturgical visit to the sepulcher, I will use the expression “*Visitatio Sepulchri*,” while for the expanded versions that are not liturgically connected, I will use the expression “*Ludus Paschalis*.” For other liturgically bound rites, I will use the Latin “*officium*,” e.g., “*Officium Pastorum*” or “*Officium Stellae*,” while for texts lacking a liturgical context, I will use the Latin “*ordo*,” e.g., “*Ordo Pastorum*” or “*Ordo Stellae*.” To be sure, the terms “*officium*” and “*ordo*” were both commonly used to describe ritual acts of various sorts in medieval liturgical manuscripts. The distinction that I am drawing here is thus purely arbitrary. While the distinction holds generally among the medieval sources for these rites, there is some degree of crossover.¹³ So, I make the distinction here merely to clarify for the reader my own understanding of a particular musical text. I will not restrict my use of the term “*ordo*” only to religious plays (as I am calling them), moreover. I will also use the term to refer to texts where the liturgical intent is ambiguous or unknown, a text that might or might not have been used liturgically (see chapter 4).

Readers unaccustomed to dealing with liturgical matters may find the plethora of liturgical books and categories of liturgical books confusing. I have included a glossary at the end of this study that I hope will mitigate some of the issues the reader may encounter. However, a summary here might prove helpful. One major distinction in the types of documents preserving the rites and plays that have come to form the genre of what we now know as liturgical drama is that between manuscripts and printed books. While the majority of texts now included among the liturgical dramas were copied into manuscripts from the tenth century and later, more than a few have survived in printed liturgical books from the late fifteenth century and beyond. Should I need to indicate both manuscripts and printed books, I will use the term “books” to refer to the collection and “book” to refer to an individual instance from the collection. Beyond this, there are many ways to classify liturgical books in ways that are more meaningful. They can be classified according to the type of ceremony (e.g., books for the celebration of Mass and books for the celebration of the Divine Office), by content (e.g., books with musical notation and those without), by usage (e.g., books for the chorus, books used by priests, books used by cantors), or any number of other ways. In the brief survey below, I will proceed by content, by type of ceremony, and by usage. I should note that there is some degree of overlap in the various books, so the distinctions among the various types of books should not be held too firmly.¹⁴

Books containing musical notation were generally intended for choral use. *Antiphoners* contain music for the Divine Office (the round of eight prayer services held over the course of a day). This book is typically arranged chronologically, beginning with Advent and moving through the liturgical year. In some books, the feasts for the saints are interspersed with those for the events of Christ's life and ministry and their associated seasons (e.g., Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost), while in others they are given separately. For each feast, the music for the antiphons and responsories are given in the order that they are sung. Music for vespers, matins, and lauds are typically provided, while antiphons for the lesser hours (prime, terce, sext, none, and compline) are entered when they diverge from normal usage. *Graduals* contain the music for the Mass. Items for the Proper of the Mass (texts that change with the feast, including the Introit, Gradual, Alleluia/Tract, Offertory, and Communion) are listed for each feast day, which are arranged chronologically beginning with Advent as in antiphoners. Separate sections are typically provided for the music of the Ordinary chants (the invariable texts of the Mass, including the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei) as well as for tropes and sequences. *Sequentiaries* contain sequences for the Mass, often but not always with music. *Processionals* contain the music for liturgical processions and, in some cases, the rites of Holy Week as well. *Hymnals* contain hymns for the Divine Office. *Troper*s contain tropes and other musical items intended for solo singers. Typically not including musical notation are the *breviary*, which contains the order of items for the Divine Office, and the *ordinal*, which includes the order for both Mass and Divine Office. These contain textual incipits along with rubrics that outline the details for celebration. Some breviaries and ordinals, particularly those copied before the fourteenth century, contain musical notation as well. *Missals* are books intended for the use by priests at Mass. A final group of books, variously called *rituale*, *agenda*, *obsequiale*, or *benedictionale* contain the liturgy for sacraments such as baptism, marriage, and the rites for the sick and dying, along with blessings for various occasions. These books are destined for use by priests and often contain music for other rites as well, such as the processions for the Purification of Mary and Palm Sunday and the rites of Holy Week, including the *Visitatio Sepulchri*.

Unravelling the Threads

The story of “liturgical drama” began with a tectonic shift. Before 1834, there was no such concept. After 1834, the metaphor “liturgical drama” took hold, and with the publication of Coussemaker’s *Drames liturgiques* in 1860, the genre “liturgical drama” was born. Coussemaker’s approach to the idea of “liturgical drama” was more nuanced than those of his twentieth- and twenty-first-century successors. While the metaphor “liturgical drama” may have faded by the time of Coussemaker’s edition, Coussemaker and the French scholars who followed still saw “liturgical drama” broadly, as encompassing “the dramatic” in other venues—drama in its metaphorical sense—as well as embracing two broad groupings of texts, one securely set within the liturgy and the other not. This framework for understanding the divided repertory of “liturgical drama” prevailed throughout most of the nineteenth century among French scholars, evaporating as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth and as the language of scholarship shifted from French to English and to German (see chapter 1). This distinction between texts dramatic and liturgical, moreover, had dominated over the centuries that preceded the expression’s nativity as well (see chapter 3).

Thus, the arguments I advance here are not entirely new. The two classes of texts covered by the expression “liturgical drama” were evident from the outset, if later forgotten. More recently, C. Clifford Flanigan and Nils Holger Petersen have argued persuasively for considering those liturgically bound texts now called “liturgical dramas” as liturgical, rather than dramatic, phenomena, and I take these arguments one step further by challenging the notion “liturgical drama” itself. This genre “liturgical drama” is like a quilt pieced together from patches of conflicting materials and design haphazardly stitched together. From a distance, the quilt appears coherent and compelling. Up close, however, the patches clash in unexpected ways with stitching that is both slipshod and disjunct. While scholars have sought to understand some of the individual patches and have traced a few of the threads woven through them, the quilt as a whole has remained unexamined, and it is this lack of scrutiny that has hidden the defects of the so-called genre within its folds.

In this study, I will assess the quilt as a whole. I will offer a comprehensive, albeit not exhaustive, study of the origin and history of the notion “liturgical drama,” of the texts that make up the collection that we now call “liturgical drama,” and of the words that make up the expression.

I will also offer a critical analysis of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* that places it clearly within its liturgical and theological context. Each thread: historiographical, etymological, repertorial, and analytical, moreover, will wind to the same conclusion. The label “liturgical drama” does not, and cannot, adequately characterize the full range of rites and plays that have collected under its banner.

In short, this study traces how we got to our current understandings of what we have come to know as “liturgical drama” and how these understandings have distorted our perception of the rites and plays that have formed this synthetic genre. This was by no means a linear progression. Nor did the transformations in scholarly outlook occur smoothly. In building such an historical narrative for the concept “liturgical drama,” I am mindful of Nils Holger Petersen’s admonition that any such narrative must “tell the story of how generations after generations have appropriated and thus changed what they inherited, re-contextualising and bringing it to new uses.” He observed further:

Discontinuity and continuity work hand in hand in that re-contextualisation is sometimes closely based on former uses, but at other times, consciously or unconsciously, radically changes the practice that was taken over. The narrative of such changes is a narrative that does not presuppose an ontological essence of what is studied, but at the same time does not shy away from telling a narrative of transformations which over time have contributed to a situation at the end of the narrative which could not have been expected from the outset. Still, the narrative connects these different historical situations, constituting an interpretation of the course of events from one end-point to the other.¹⁵

This study thus seeks both to contextualize the ways that the notion “liturgical drama” has been regarded over the century and three-quarters of its existence and to recontextualize the texts embraced by the notion in ways drawn both from earlier attempts to understand these texts and from others altogether new.

Prospectus

When I began my research into the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, the ideas of C. Clifford Flanigan were just beginning to take hold. As I absorbed the substance of what he had put forth, and as I delved ever deeper into the liturgical fabrics into which the *Visitatio Sepulchri* was woven, the notion

“liturgical drama” became for me ever less relevant, an illusion that was incapable of capturing a singular essence for that vast array of liturgical rites and representational texts that it strained to contain. While I was aware that scholars on the dramatic side of the divide likely saw this differently, I was confident that the cumulative arguments of Flanigan, and of Hardison and De Boor before him, would ultimately prevail. What I could not anticipate was the widespread indifference to the thrust of these arguments that would ensue once the voices of their framers had been stilled (see chapter 2).

Ignoring the issues, however, does not negate them, and the difficulties presented by both the label and the notion “liturgical drama” continue to resonate whether sounded or not. The problem with liturgical drama, ultimately, is ontological. If there is such a thing as liturgical drama, what is it that defines the collection that has gathered under its rubric? Indeed, can we justify applying the label “liturgical drama” to the prescriptions for—or the performances of—those medieval rites since cast as drama and those religious plays since assumed to be liturgical in the absence of any encompassing and concurrent notion of liturgical drama? Asked more broadly, was there a notion “liturgical drama” that existed independently of the minds that would one day consider it?

Such questions form the core of this study, with each set of questions triggering the questions that animate the inquiries to follow. If the expression “liturgical drama” was an invention of the mid-nineteenth century, for example, then how were the rites and plays covered by the expression understood before the expression came to be? Given this, is the category “liturgical drama” at all viable? If so, how broadly should this category extend, and if not, how should the rites and plays included among the liturgical dramas be considered? If the notion “liturgical drama” should fail as a category, then what, if anything, might the expression “liturgical drama” signify? What do we mean by the words “liturgy” and “drama,” and what can these words possibly mean when combined? Since Flanigan’s passing, such questions are rarely asked, and when they are, their force has tended to dissipate before their influence could be felt. In the chapters that follow, I address these questions anew, with each chapter confronting a discrete aspect of the notion “liturgical drama” and the ways that it has spawned our reimagining of medieval theater.

In chapter 1, “A Prodigious Birth: Creating ‘Liturgical Drama,’” I trace the expression “liturgical drama” from its creation in the mid-1830s through the early years of the twentieth century. The expression was intro-

duced during a course on the history of drama given at the Sorbonne by Charles Magnin, curator of printed books at the Royal Library in Paris. For Magnin, “liturgical drama” served as a metaphor that stood in place of the dramatic tendencies that he observed within the rites of the Church and within medieval society at large. This metaphorical sense was carried forth in the writings of most critics over the following quarter-century. As late as the early 1850s, Félix Clément clearly understood “liturgical drama” as metaphor, and he used the label to describe the expressive, indeed dramatic, nature of the texts and melodies of hymns, sequences, and proses rather than those ceremonies that we might consider to be liturgical dramas today. It was not until 1860 that the expression began to take on the sense of genre that we have come to expect of it. From this point, subsequent scholars abandoned any metaphorical understanding they may once have held, and the category “liturgical drama” took hold. By the latter part of the nineteenth century the expression found its way into the work of scholars outside of France, and despite all attempts to challenge it, the notion has remained steadfast in scholarly discussions.

In chapter 2, “An Improbable Fiction: Confronting ‘Liturgical Drama,’” I examine efforts to challenge the notion of “liturgical drama” over the course of the twentieth century. In the century’s first decade, John Manly challenged the theory of medieval drama’s incremental development, thus laying the groundwork for the challenges that would follow. Beginning in 1930 and continuing through the mid-1950s, scholars began to challenge the accepted view that drama had originated within the liturgy as well. Oscar Cargill saw the origin of medieval drama in the activities of medieval minstrels, while Robert Stumpff and Benjamin Hunnigher saw drama’s beginnings in pagan ritual. All three saw liturgical drama as having been imported into the medieval liturgy from external sources rather than serving as the origin for drama in the Middle Ages. Beginning the mid-1960s and continuing through the early 1990s, the tenor of scholarship shifted from examinations of dramatic texts to inquiries into the liturgical foundations and contexts of the liturgical rites within which most of these texts were embedded. The studies of O. B. Hardison, Jr. and Helmut de Boor set the parameters for much that followed, and with the studies of C. Clifford Flanigan in particular, the notion of liturgical drama was shown to be largely vacuous. In the decades since Flanigan’s passing, treatments of liturgical drama have reverted among some literary scholars to attitudes that prevailed before the mid-1960s, this despite the efforts of Nils Holger Petersen and others to carry forward Flanigan’s voice.

In chapter 3, “Past as Prologue: Preceding ‘Liturgical Drama,’” I examine the rites and plays that came to make up the category “liturgical drama” as they were understood before the introduction of the expression. I approach this in reverse chronological order, beginning with the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries—the period separating the era when these rites and plays were celebrated and performed and the invention of the concept “liturgical drama.” For the literary and liturgical scholars of the seventeenth through early-nineteenth centuries, liturgy and drama (or theater) were distinct classes. The liturgical aggregators of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries published texts for many of the ceremonies that would later fall under the banner “liturgical drama” without any sense that these rites were anything other than liturgical ceremonies that had fallen out of general use. Several religious representations now considered to be plays were also published during the eighteenth century, including three from what we have come to know as the Fleury Playbook along with the *Sponsus* of Saint-Martial and the Tegernsee play of Antichrist, but these were seen strictly as theater. The polemics of Protestant reformers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often cited as evidence for the theatrical nature of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* and other Holy Week ceremonies, did not single out the rites of Holy Week for special consideration. Rather, they treated the entire Roman liturgy as idolatrous pomp or theatrical pageant—what we now see as liturgical drama was no more and no less theatrical than the rest. Puritan critics of theater during the seventeenth century appear also to have included instances of religious drama among their condemnations. However, these turn out to have been festivals or tournaments rather than theatrical productions. Complaints by twelfth- and thirteenth-century critics are often cited as evidence for the existence of drama with the liturgy as well. Under closer scrutiny, however, these criticisms do not appear to point to any of the liturgical ceremonies that we might today designate as liturgical dramas.

In chapter 4, “Strange Bedfellows: Unfolding ‘Liturgical Drama,’” I offer an overview of the rites and other representations that make up the repertory of liturgical drama as currently understood. Looking at these in terms of the contexts within which these are found within the manuscripts and books that preserve them, I divide the repertory into two broad categories: representational rites and religious plays. Included among the representational rites are those ceremonies preserved within liturgical books that clearly show the liturgical context for their celebration. Included among the religious plays are those settings that offer no such context,

most of which are included in manuscripts containing sermons or other exegetical works. A third category of ambiguously placed works includes those that might have been representational rites in practice but which are preserved in a context that does not allow their liturgical intent to be established along with what might have been religious plays that are preserved in liturgical books but which hold a tenuous connection to the book in which they are preserved.

In chapter 5, “What’s in a Name: Defining ‘Liturgical Drama,’” I consider the label “liturgical drama” itself. I examine the words “liturgy” and “drama” in their ancient and medieval contexts, and I trace the meanings of these words from the beginnings of their modern incarnations in the sixteenth century until the present. Both words have a manifold set of meanings with a great many shades depending on context. Putting the words together to form “liturgical drama” magnifies the range of possible meanings to an even greater degree. After looking at what the words could possibly mean, I conclude that whatever decisions we may make in that regard are ultimately meaningless, as the expression has no clear referent. There are two different kinds of activities joined together under that label, one that is liturgical but not drama and the other that may be drama but not liturgical.

In chapter 6, “All That Glitters: Dismantling ‘Liturgical Drama,’” I observe that it was Magnin’s definition of drama, later refined by Karl Young, that made it possible for the first time to see texts that were not intended as dramatic as drama nonetheless. This reclassification of what were originally liturgical ceremonies into theatrical forms removed the representational rites from the liturgical contexts into which they had been copied and within which they had been celebrated, allowing them to become something altogether different in the eyes of literary scholars. However, neither the literary perspective, which saw these rites as a form of theater, nor the more recent musicological perspective, which saw them as a form of innovative chant composition, was wide enough to offer insight into how those involved in their celebration might have experienced these rites. Using the *Visitatio Sepulchri* as an example, I provide an alternative view, examining the rite within the context of the Holy Week liturgy and offering one interpretation of how it functioned within the cycle of special rites between Palm Sunday and Easter. In addition, I offer an analysis of a twelfth-century revision of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* often noted for its enhanced realism and dramatic potential. I argue that this rite is more easily understood in liturgical and theological terms than in

terms of theatrical realism. I take a closer look at the process of metaphorical transformation by which a figurative understanding of dramatic processes within the medieval liturgy was reconstituted into a literal category, and I consider the implications of expunging the expression and the category that it describes from scholarly discourse. I suggest that, all ontological arguments aside, we can have a clearer understanding of the individual rites or ceremonies and plays if we consider them as individual expressions rather than as members of the larger category that we have come to know as liturgical drama.

* * *

This is not an introductory text. I do not intend to lay out for my readers what liturgical drama might be or what kinds of musical texts might be included under its banner, although I will deal with these issues along the way. I see this book not as an entranceway into the study of liturgical drama, but as an exit ramp. To ensure that my readers can find their way to the exit, I expect that they should have some familiarity with the subject of liturgical drama at the start and that they have in mind some idea of what they believe liturgical drama to be, although, given the problem of definition, I do not expect that these understandings will correlate with my own or those of others. I expect that my readers know what I am talking about when I refer, for example, to the *Visitatio Sepulchri* or the *Officium Stellae* or the Fleury Playbook and that they have some familiarity with the classical works on liturgical drama from the last century, such as Edmond K. Chambers's *The Mediaeval Stage*, Karl Young's *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, O. B. Hardison, Jr.'s *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*, and Helmut de Boor's *Die Textgeschichte der lateinischen Osterfeiern*.

What I argue here is not wholly new. Nor am I alone among contemporary scholars in putting these arguments forth. I may or may not be successful in convincing others of liturgical drama's illusory nature. This remains to be seen. However, in pursuing my thesis from multiple perspectives: historical, repertorial, etymological, and philosophical, I hope that my arguments might find more fertile soil. To accept my thesis requires reimagining the nature of the rites and plays now called "liturgical drama," and this might prove too much for some. If nothing else, I can only hope that the combined force of these perspectives might at least resurrect and bring into focus the stilled voices of those who not only made these claims before, but who made them far more eloquently than I could ever hope.

NOTES

¹ “Les drames liturgiques sont ceux qui se liaient d’une manière intime aux cérémonies du culte; ils étaient la mise en action des offices des temps et des saints; ils en étaient le développement ou le complément. . . . Les drames liturgiques, au contraire, n’eurent pour scène que les églises et les monastères, pour acteurs que les clercs monastiques ou séculiers. Ces jeux dramatiques n’ont jamais été composés dans un but théâtral. Les spectateurs ne venaient pas là pour s’égayer ou se livrer à des émotions mondaines ou terrestres, pour applaudir au talent des acteurs; ils y étaient pour participer à la fête qu’on célébrait, pour s’identifier à la cérémonie du jour dont le drame n’était que la mise en action.” Coussemaker, *Drames liturgiques*, viii.

² “Le drame liturgique était la représentation mimique, non seulement des offices des temps et des saints, mais encore de toutes les histoires religieuses figurées sur les vitraux, sur les murs, dans les stalles, dans les niches, par la peinture et la sculpture; ce qui leur donnait une grandeur, une pompe, un éclat qui devaient agir puissamment sur l’imagination des fidèles.” Coussemaker, *Drames liturgiques*, viii–ix.

³ “Indépendamment de la différence qui existait entre les drames liturgiques et les mystères, il convient, suivant nous, d’établir aussi une distinction entre les drames liturgiques eux-mêmes. Ceux-ci étaient de deux sortes: les uns se liaient étroitement aux cérémonies religieuses, et faisaient en quelque sorte corps avec elles, en empruntant le texte liturgique qu’on paraphrasait légèrement, et qu’on mettait en dialogue pour le besoin de l’action. Les autres, tout en ayant le même caractère religieux, n’avaient pas une liaison aussi intime avec le culte. Ce furent déjà de véritables créations dramatiques. Ils ont pour sujet le texte sacré; mais le développement qu’on y donna en fit des compositions spéciales dont l’étendue ne permit plus de conserver leur place dans les offices. On les représenta tantôt aux processions, tantôt pendant ou après les cérémonies, soit au chœur, soit au jubé.” Coussemaker, *Drames liturgiques*, ix–x.

⁴ Smoldon, “Liturgical Drama,” 175.

⁵ Rankin, “Liturgical Drama,” 310.

⁶ Meredith, “Latin liturgical drama,” 55–56.

⁷ Coldeway, “From Roman to Renaissance,” 27–28.

⁸ On the history of the term of “drama,” see chapter 5, pp. 166–70. For Magnin’s and Young’s definition, see chapter 6, pp. 179–81.

⁹ Donovan, *The Liturgical Drama in Spain*, 6–7.

¹⁰ Palazzo, “Performing the Liturgy,” 487–88.

¹¹ Smoldon, “The Easter Sepulchre Music-Drama” (1946), “Mediaeval Music-Drama” (1953), and *The Music of Mediaeval Church Dramas* (1980).

¹² See, for example, Andrew Hughes’s masterful demonstration of the ways in which an understanding of the musical structures can both clarify ambiguities inherent in the texts and make possible a deeper understanding of the exegetical potential of these rites and plays. Hughes, “Liturgical Drama.”

¹³ For example, the term “ordo” is used to identify settings of the non-liturgical *Ordo Stellae* in the Fleury manuscript, the non-liturgical *Ordo Rachelis* from Freising, and the *Ordo Paschalis* (*Ludus Paschalis*) of Klosterneuburg (see chapter 4, table 4.2). It is used also for the ambiguously situated representations from Bilsen (*Ordo <Stellae>*), Laon (*Ordo Prophetarum*, *Ordo Stelle*, and *Ordo Joseph*), the *Ordo de Ysaac et Rebecca* from Vorau, and the *Ordo ad Peregrinorum* from Beauvais (see chapter 4, table 4.3). It is used sometimes for liturgically placed rites as well, for example the settings of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* from Augsburg (LOO 526) and Bamberg (LOO 530), both from the late sixteenth century, as well as Metz (LOO 268), Prüfening (LOO 311A), Würzburg (LOO 371), Wrocław (LOO 536V), and Gurk (LOO 543). The term “officium,” on the other hand, is almost always used for liturgical rites, and nearly all of these are preserved in manuscripts from the Rouen cathedral (*Officium Pastorum*, *Officium Trium Regem*, *Officium Sepulchri*, and *Officium Peregrinorum*—see chapter 4, tables 4.1C–4.1E).

¹⁴ The problem of determining the classification of liturgical books based on their contents is particularly acute when working with liturgical manuscripts antedating the thirteenth century. In a recent conference presentation, for example, Hanna Zühlke, outlined a number of difficulties that she encountered when trying to determine the book types of processions from the tenth century. I thank Dr. Zühlke for providing me a copy of this stimulating paper, Zühlke, “Angehängt, integriert oder separiert.”

¹⁵ Petersen, “Medieval Latin Performative Representations,” 5 (pre-publication text). I thank Dr. Petersen for providing me a copy of this paper prior to its publication. See also the discussion in Petersen, “Introduction,” 13–17.