

## A CASE OF A NON-MUSICAL RELIGIOUS PERFORMANCE IN THE 16<sup>th</sup> CENTURY VALENCIA

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Amazingly enough, we find in a MS. dated in 1672, which belongs to the Arxiu municipal de Valencia, and published by Hermenegild Corbató (1932-1933, p. 148), together with the Mystery of Saint Christopher – later edited by Josep Romeu (1957, vol. II, pp. 25-53 –, and the Auto de Adán y Eva – later edited in critical edition (Huerta, 1976, pp. 101-118) –, a play entitled *Misteri del rei Herodes*, which is the only one of the three that doesn't use any kind of singing, whether liturgical or popular, for the recital of its dialogues.

The three plays belonged to the Valencian Corpus Christi procession, but it is only the Herod play the one which is not using a Roca for its performance, since it is clear that the action requires the use of an open-air space for the movement of the characters.

Are we obliged to think that the street acting was the cause for the play's lack of musical use in its performance? Perhaps a comparison with similar plays of the cycle of the *Magi*, coming from Majorca, might help us to clarify this feature.

It is in comparison with those two plays contained in the so called Manuscript Llabrés, from the Library of Catalonia – named both of them *Consueta dels tres Reis d'Orient* –, that a first feature in this *Misteri del Rei Herodes* strikes our attention: it is the appearance of the words *auto* and *autor* at the start of the text. An obvious stylistic parentage with the Spanish Drama of the *Autos Sacramentales* comes to our mind, especially when we see that the *Autor* initiates the action of the play with a *Loa* where he offers us an abridged plot of its contents, with references to the Magi, to Herod, to the flight to Egypt, etc. And, what is even more surprising, is the fact that this character, once the *auto* has started, it continues to intervene in the action by speaking to one of the Kings, *Melchior* (vs. 25-52).

The inclusion of a *Loa* as a prologue, together with this duality in the terminology used (*Misteri* in the title and *Auto* in the beginning of the text itself), give us the impression of being before a transitional play, which has already been influenced by a more modern kind of Drama, in spite of keeping most of the

features of a characteristic example of the late medieval religious theatre and the cycle of the Magi.

As I was pointing out, the appearance of the *Autor* declaiming the *Loa* it is already a new enough feature in this kind of plays, but it is so even more when we see that the *Autor* gets involved in the very action by speaking to one of the main characters: *Melchior*. Indeed, in the first scene, the King addresses himself to the *Autor*, calling him, by the way, *Regidor*, in order to leave him in charge of the kingdom, because he must depart for Israel, where it is being born the Saviour of the world, according to the words of the prophet Balaam, who had said that a star would guide him to the exact place where the child is.

It is from this moment that the play fits into the tradition of the cycle of the Magi, with its faithfulness to the biblical history. As a matter of fact, in one of the two Majorcan plays already mentioned, the opening of the action consists in the very appearance of the prophet Balaam, who will announce the coming of a star from the East, which will guide the three Kings to the place where the Messiah is born. As it happens in the two *Consuetas*, there is also here an initial thematic moment of the encounter of the three Kings, where they introduce themselves to each other, deciding then to start the way to Jerusalem as a single caravan. The striking difference here is that the respective places of origin of the three characters don't coincide completely with those we find in the Majorcan plays. In one of these, as they present themselves to King Herod, they attribute their place of origin to *Sabbà* and the three kings manifest coming from the same place. In this *Misteri* only one of them, Gaspar, says that his country is *Sabbà*, while the other two come from *Aràvia* (Baltasar) and *Tarsis* (Melchior). Along the medieval Age the attribution of the Kings to their origin places was constantly changing and we can find in the Valencian play a line of tradition obviously different from that of Majorca. There is also another aspect from the Majorcan plays which doesn't appear in this Valencian example. The star announced by Balaam to indicate to the Kings the way to Jerusalem has the face of a child depicted in it, detail originally coming from an apocryphal medieval legend. In the *Misteri* no one mentions that feature of the star, showing again to belong to a different tradition.

However, from this moment the pattern of the action is most similar to that of the Majorcan examples. The star suddenly disappears and that obviously worries the three monarchs, a fact which obliges the Kings to visit Herod in search for information about the place where the new King is born. The only differential aspect is the appearance of an Angel in the Majorcan plays to announce the star, while in the *Misteri* there is no such Angel. The performance within the Church is more obviously adequate for this kind of characters, while in the street an An-

gel could more likely cause problems, although one does appear briefly later in the play to tell the Magi not to visit Herod again; we will find another Angel also in the episode of the miracle of the Growing Wheat.

Where the Valencian play shows an important characteristic is in the development of the figure of King Herod. In the first place one must value the fact that his appearance in the title as the only protagonist shows a clear loss of status for the three Kings. As he first appears, he sustains a long dialogue with his wise counselors, in which they discuss about this mysterious arrival of a new King who is to become the Messiah, although nobody can find this notice in any of the prophecies of the sacred books. When the three Kings come to the presence of Herod, arguing that they have lost track of the star supposed to guide them to the birthplace of this new King, Herod insists to his wise men in order that they find the exact prophecy which must announce the mysterious arrival. The counselors consult thoroughly their books this time until they finally discover that *Isaïes*, the prophet, had already spoken about a virgin who would give birth to the Messiah. And that also Jacob had announced that the scepter of Judea will not change hands until that child will be born. Referring to this event Daniel, in his writings, speaks of a time of 70 weeks until this happens. Finally, according to David, they see announced the arrival of the three Kings, who coming from *Mèdia, Efa and Sabà*, will bring presents to the newborn. As we can see here, the play does not give the same places of origin to the Kings, except for one (*Arabia*), as compared to what they themselves had said previously.

But the most interesting finding of the wise men in the sacred books is what the prophet *Miqueas* had said about the exact location where Jesus is to be born: *Betlem*, which is what all the characters were anxious to know. And the prophet words are even quoted from the Bible: *De tu, Betlem, terra Judà, nequaqua minima est*. Both the two plays from Majorca, in the same passage, quote these words, but they attribute them mistakenly to Isaiah. Obviously, the *Misteri*, a more modern play, finds already fixed the correct attribution of the birthplace to the right text, while the two *Consuetas* still belong to an older tradition.

Once they have found out the exact location of the birthplace, as it happens in the canonical biblical source, the Kings take their leave from Herod, who has asked them to come to visit him once they have seen the new born baby, in order to be able to visit him himself. It is exactly the same development of action that we find in the two Majorcan plays.

The Kings start their way to the manger, again like in his two sister plays, as the star has newly appeared for guiding them. Once they find *Betlem* the scene of the adoration, in which the Kings offer their presents to the child, we can find

an attribution of the three gifts which oddly doesn't coincide with none of the Majorca texts or, even, with the one that has brought to us the tradition (*Melchior* gold, *Gaspar* incense and *Balthasar* myrrh). It is not surprising to find this deviation in between the plays, since the Gospel only mentions the gifts without attributing them to any of the Kings in particular. But it is surprising to find the modern attribution in one of the Majorca plays, which should belong to an earlier date than the *Misteri*. In the latter we find *Melchior* offering myrrh, *Balthasar* gold and *Gaspar* incense. That shows how much the thematic matter referring to the Kings went varying along the Middle Ages in the popular tradition.

In the following episode, that is the return of the Magi to their places of origin, an Angel appears to warn them not to visit Herod again, since it's obvious that Herod's intentions towards the child were not good. That is a scene which must have become very traditional, since the three plays have it in an identical version, although there is no Angel in the canonical source, where the only reason for the Kings to change their way of return is a "dream" which they have.

Again, an Angel (the same one?) appears to Joseph to order him to take Maria and the Child and escape to Egypt, so that Herod's fury will not fall on Jesus, killing him. The Gospel's Angel only appears to Joseph in a dream, but again it's obvious that this appearance had become traditional, since the three examples have an identical scene.

However, it is the *Misteri* the example which has the most original version of the flight to Egypt of the Holy Family. While the two Majorcan plays include only a standard dialogue between the two characters of Maria and Joseph, who talk about the hardships of the journey, the text from Valencia includes in the scene the famous legend of the Growing Wheat that originates the loss of track of the Herod's soldiers who had gone in persecution of the flying couple. Indeed, in their way to Egypt, they meet two farmers who are beginning to sow wheat, an encounter which gives Maria the opportunity to work a miracle: she asks the two men to tell anybody who appears in that path that since the wheat was sown nobody had passed by. As soon as the holy couple has left the two sowers discover to their surprise that the wheat just sown has rapidly grown, even with mature ears. An Angel appears to exalt the figure of the Virgin Mary, who has been a mother without losing her virginity. Of course, here the play echoes the great Marian devotion that in the Middle Ages gave birth to such legends that only appear in apocryphal texts.

The two farmers, seeing the corn so grown, begin the task of reaping it, and when the officers sent by Herod ask if they had seen anybody on that road, they reply "no, since that wheat was sown". That causes the officers to return

to Herod to report about the loss of the fugitives. As soon as they are gone, a curious character appears in scene: a *Espigoladera*, who pronounces a quartet of verses that exhort the reapers to go away, since she is now the one to do the job. This intervention in an almost Castilian language is unheard of in the Majorcan plays, and therefore we must suppose that it belongs to a local tradition in Valencian area.

The following scenes, as it was to expect, develop the theme of the *Herodes iratus*, which so popular had become along the Middle Ages. Once Herod has had the proof that the three Kings have not return from where the child had been born, and seeing that his two officers have lost track of the flying couple, he takes the famous decision of ordering all children under the age of two to be killed, thinking this to be the best way to eliminate this long promised Messiah newly born. This well-known episode of the "Slaughter of the Innocents" is, perhaps, what most differentiates this text from the other two from Majorca.

In one of these King Herod starts the action of killing children by choosing for the first victim his own son, in order to give a stunning example. This is, of course, based on an apocryphal legend that proves the medieval interest in the fury of the King once he sees he has been betrayed by the Magi. The Gospel of Saint Mathew only says that all children under two were killed, without any mention of Herod's own son. But what the gospel does say is that, as a consequence of the slaughter, it became true what Jeremiah had announced in his prophecy: "the lament of the voice of *Raquel* was heard after the loss of her children". And indeed, the play of Majorca, with a great biblical fidelity, introduces the character of *Raquel*, who ends the scene of the slaughter with her *plant*.

Nothing of this kind happens in this *Misteri d'Herodes*. The slaughter is preceded by a long scene in which a *Trompeta* reads a street cry, where with a tone half serious half humorous he calls the mothers of all the villages surrounding the town of Valencia, not without having said beforehand that they are lazy women, accustomed to give birth in all seasons, etc. This antifeminist tone, together with the mention of the local places, gives to the cry an unusual level of humor and liveliness which is hard to find in the Catalan religious plays of this period. The fact of linking the text to the women of the area, who were most likely to be found among the public, gives to the performance an unusual realistic tone which, at the same time, enhances the dramatic aspect of the children's killing. The scene ends traditionally, with the laments of the wet nurses that accompany the mothers and children, but without any reference to the biblical *Raquel*. It is obvious that this text seeks a strong connection with the public, which is what gives it a great tone of popularity.

According to Merimée (1985), this three-sided play was not even in 1587 performed in its integrity, being “The flight to Egypt” a separate episode in the Corpus procession. But no doubt the present text presents a solid cohesion among the three episodes, fact that makes us think that the fusion would have taken place not much later than 1587. But what is undoubtedly clear is that the use of the *Rocas* from the beginning of the XVI century procession would not apply in this case any longer, given its complexity of action and large requirement of performing space.

The long movements of the characters from one site of the action to another prove that they had to cover quite a distance between the palace of Herod to *Betlem* (the three Magi) or the Holy Family to go towards Egypt and meeting in their way the two sowers of the wheat. It is obvious that a square or an open place might have been destined to the Herod throne and the birthplace of Jesus, as the dialogue shows, needed to be unseen by the monarch, being therefore located in another place along the procession’s route at a considerable distance. This would allow for the appearance of the Angel to take place in between the two sites.

Again, the site for the miracle of the Growing Wheat, should be at a distance that would make believable the fact of not seeing the fugitives the two captains of Herod. And, finally, the place for the execution of the Innocents, which is by far the most spectacular scene of the play, must have been somewhere central in the town, which could be totally seen by the followers of the procession. Documents preserved speak of the red paint used for the puppets that were supposed to be the slaughtered children. On the whole, therefore, one must take this play as a good example of popular spectacle, so much like what the public of the procession were keen to enjoy viewing.

Let us remind of the great differences that the plays from Majorca must have supposed as compared to this one. In the first place, the vicinity of the sites of the action must have been much greater, since the church has a space much more limited than the streets where the procession used to be moving. Here, therefore, the processional frame is much more in accordance with the action and the simulation of distances much more easily acted.

Also, the fact of being outside the church, in the case of the *Misteri*, has caused the loss of that feature of paraliturgical drama that the Majorcan plays had. Although it has kept the same kind of verses, and vocabulary (except for the scene of the cry of the slaughter), none of its passages are sung, while in the *Consuetas* the characters spoke always following the melody of the hymns from the Breviary (*Alme laudes*, *Vexilla*, *Rabí*, *Plant*, etc.) or other more popular melodies. Even on one occasion, as the Angel appears to show the Kings the star with the face of a

child, the Magi to show their enthusiasm employ a text in latin, which belongs to the *Magnificat* devoted to Virgin Mary: *Suscepit Israell puerum suum: recordatus misericordie sue, sicut locutus est ad patres nostros: Habraam et semini eius.*

The lack of all these features must have made the text from Valencia a performance much closer to the spectators than in the case of the Majorcan plays, where the public saw the action much more as part of the liturgy. Indeed, the Corpus procession of Valencia created an atmosphere that made the plays from the *Rocas* evolve from the biblical seriousness of an Adam and Eve Mystery to this text of *Herodes*, with such a street cry that connected directly with the very public and made humoristic comments on women's behavior.

But perhaps what we should appreciate as a feature of a great original value is the fact of having incorporated the episode of the miracle of the Growin Wheat in the flight to Egypt. It is a unique case among the plays of the period which have assembled the three thematic units of Adoration, flight to Egypt and Innocents Slaughter. Neither in Majorca or in Castile is there another similar case, nor even in France, where the Passion of Arnoul Greban, which does also join the three episodes, doesn't either include the miracle.

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