

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

“Phantoms of Performance: History, Drama, and the Carolingian Pursuit of Truth”

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Many critics have long observed that the degree to which film and its visual and textual language inform the modern Western imaginary is very great. At times consciously, at times unwittingly, people often make sense of and convey the reality they perceive through the vocabulary, grammar, and generic conventions of movies. Even the thinking of someone as sensitive and highly self-conscious as the historian Marc Bloch was informed, in rather intriguing ways, by the new medium of film. I have called attention to this phenomenon of “cinematic thinking” not to condemn it (as most critics do), but simply to point out that it is only the latest manifestation of a venerable tradition. In fact, before the advent of the motion picture, the popular dramas of the stage held an equally tenacious grip on the thought of their audience long after they had left the theater. And as with the modern cinematic imaginary, so, too, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries were events past and present frequently understood, ordered, described, and critiqued in terms related to the dramatic spectacle—in this case, of genre, acts, scenes, roles played, stages set, and so forth. Savants such as Voltaire and Montesquieu (who also tried their hand as playwrights) may have sought to discern the terrestrial, and thus empirical and predictable, causes that lay behind the “decline” of civilizations, but to their delight they often found those same causes isolated, embodied, and in play on the stage. Consequently, it is not difficult to find theatrical referents, metaphors, and modes of plotment informing and running through their historical analyses and narratives; indeed, their various works are rife with them.

Does this “venerable tradition” of spectacular thinking appear any earlier? Scholarly consensus says yes, but “earlier” is usually understood to be the era of classical antiquity. Erich Auerbach, John Matthews, and Timothy Barnes, among others, have made a persuasive case that during Roman late antiquity, with its crowded arenas and bustling theaters, savage games and vulgar farces, social relations and their representation frequently conformed to a theatrical idiom. Conspicuous by their absence in this chronological divide between the “spectacular” eras of Antiquity and the Enlightenment are the Middle Ages. Yet, this medieval lacuna should come as no surprise, for if the dramatic spectacle is taken to engender a mode of thinking, then, it is assumed, only the eras that performed such spectacles were prone to think through them. And as scholars have long maintained, during the Middle Ages—and especially in the era before the turn of the first millennium—the classical theatrical tradition had been abolished as a performed art. No dramatic performance, therefore no dramatic imaginary. But even if this caesura were so, what did

early medieval readers and scribes make of their inherited miscellany of ancient theatrical texts and images that they studied and copied so meticulously? When Charlemagne's courtier Einhard noted that a woman once yawned so widely that her jaw locked and, to her dismay, "she looked more like a mask (*persona*) than a human being"; when Pope Nicholas I wondered if the *historia* about two rebellious archbishops "should not rather be called a *tragoedia*"; when Paschasius Radbertus, abbot of Corbie, lamented that the imperial palace of Charlemagne's heir, Louis the Pious, had shamefully become "a *theatrum*," whose courtiers now resembled nothing so much as the ridiculous, deplorable characters of an ancient comedy; when Einhard and other courtiers assumed biblical and classical nicknames (Bezaleel, Homer, Delia, Naso, etc.) as their *personae* at the palace of Charlemagne, one wishes they had said more. Yet, what seemingly little such early medieval intellectuals did say about theater and drama reveals much about the degree to which they, too, engaged in "spectacular thinking," despite the absence of any formal theatrical performance.

My plan of research is to problematize this early medieval understanding of drama and theater and its influence upon hermeneutics, historical consciousness, and the very notion of identity and the self. In my first book, *Past Convictions: The Penance of Louis the Pious and the Decline of the Carolingians*, I examined an event customarily viewed as the first serious political crisis for the Carolingian realm—the ritual divestiture and penance of Emperor Louis the Pious in 833. Rather than interpret this event as the traditional "beginning of the end" of the Carolingian dynasty, I explored how both contemporaries and subsequent generations thought about Louis's forfeiture of the throne. Among the results of this research was the revelation of a dramatic consciousness outlined above—that classical drama, despite its long and enduring absence as a performed art, had a conspicuous influence upon the shape of historiography and the processes of interpretation during the ninth century.

Picking up where *Past Convictions* left off, my new project participates in and contributes to the new history of medieval drama advanced by Carol Symes and Jody Enders, who suggest a reconsideration of what the artifacts of ancient drama meant within early medieval cultures that were devoid of formal theater but highly sensitive to affectation and enactment. How were dramatic artifacts embedded in, accessories to, and catalysts for a larger culture of performance, politesse, and dissimulation in the early Middle Ages, one replete with political protocol, rhetorical gesture, liturgical practice, public processions, and the like? In short, how did dramatic artifacts themselves perform? The old explanation for their preservation and reproduction is well known—that thanks to their pedagogical utility to the Christian, dramatic works might be studied conditionally, so long as their profane, vain, and idle content was ignored. Long a staple of the ancient classroom, the comedies of Terence or Plautus, together with detailed commentaries on the former, continued to be copied in whole or as extracts, taught as part of the early medieval curriculum, and allegedly valued largely for their form—as sources of proper Latin grammar, style, and even proverbial

wisdom. Yet, such reasoning does not explain the careful Carolingian reproduction of the dramas' detailed late antique illustrations. Nor does it account for the borrowing by Paschasius Radbertus of Terentian character names in his highly complex, allusive work, the *Epitaphium Arsenii*, which he constructed as something of a typological drama about recent history. As Mayke de Jong has noted, Radbertus drew on his intimate knowledge of the ancient plays' content to better articulate his own present concerns; he frequently invoked Terence's decorous words in contexts such that they are made to connote, with their same cogent economy and style, the very opposite of what they meant in the comic writer's original works. This deliberate inversion suggests a fluency that went well beyond mere attention to form.

Building on the platform outlined above, I have already conducted a good deal of research for *Phantoms of Performance*, and presented my results in a number of conference papers and articles. Beginning with a study of the survival and sophisticated use of Terence's plays during the Carolingian era, I have extended my investigation into the discourse of drama and theater that was enabled and amplified by the increased interest in these same artifacts. For example, in one paper I have argued that it is no coincidence that Carolingian biblical exegetes, having a host of conventional definitions to choose from, nevertheless explained the problem of hypocrisy specifically by referencing classical theater and its actors, with their masks and split *personae*. In another paper, I looked closely at the ways Carolingian exegetes on the liturgy not only explicitly invoked the ancient rhetorical technique and language of "*characterismos*," but also noted its use both within the biblical Song of Songs and by classical playwrights to lend artificial depth and verisimilitude to their respective *dramatis personae*. These exegetical remarks are actually confirmed by the large number of Carolingian scribes who, in their production of Bibles, interpolated the Song of Songs with rubrics that designate the alleged, allegorical *personae* conversing within the text. Still other papers have addressed the notion of *persona* and its relationship to the self by examining Carolingian ideas and debates regarding personal names and name-changes, the possession and execution of an office, and other means and criteria by which one's *persona* was constructed, identified, and at times systematically differentiated.

The heightened appeal of dramatic discourse evidenced in these studies, I contend, is symptomatic of a much larger, existential problem with which the Carolingians were struggling, for they were deeply and urgently concerned with the discernment of the interior, the scrutiny of the conscience, and the finding of truth. How to identify corrosive sin with certainty, given man's inability to know the nature of the correspondence between another's interior and exterior? Augustine may have thought this for men a hopeless task, but for the Carolingians it was—like so much else—a problem of scale, organization, and determination, of resources and will, and thus a problem whose solution was well within reach. Weaving my research together into a monograph, I hope to demonstrate the prevailing function of ancient drama in this early medieval forensic pursuit.