

# Gesture in German Mystery Play in the Late Middle Ages: to the Problem of Studying

Klimova Irina

State Institute for Art Studies  
Moscow, Russia  
E-mail: andrepis@yandex.ru

**Abstract**—The article is focused on the problem of studying gesture in the late medieval performances of German mystery plays. Gesture in mystery play is considered in the context of medieval culture and art. The author makes an attempt to classify the gestures and identifies their main categories: liturgical, biblical, juridical (legal), psychological, symbolical, parodical, ordinary (everyday) and realistic types. The author analyses theatre gesture based on the behaviour of mystery characters, determinates specificity of gesture in the structure of mystery play performance and importance of biblical texts and liturgy in the evolution of gesture. Special attention is paid to using of late medieval iconographic works in studying gestures in mystery plays. As follows from the analysis of various gestures in mystery play performances, the author gives a new definition of "gesture in mystery play".

**Keywords:** *manuscripts of passion and easter plays, gesture in mistery plays, Pieta (Lamentations of Mary), classification of gestures in mistery plays*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Any epoch not only originates its own concept of spectacular scenic gesture influencing the acting and performance style; but there is also a specific "triangle: a person's real behavior within the given culture system — theater — visual arts; within it there is an active exchange of symbols and expressive means" [1]<sup>p135</sup>. Such a circumstance provides an opportunity to look at gestures of Late Middle Ages mystery<sup>1</sup> plays from different points of view, in the context of medieval culture in general, taking into consideration the epoch's iconographic material, because gesture is the most binding element in the art system of painting, sculpture and theater. Its development reflects the underlying growth process characteristic of this or that style, art and architecture movement or trend. In this context, it is interesting to note that the architecture plastic language evolution might be compared with that of mystery play plastic language. The plastic of a building bulk is somehow connected with its purpose: on the one hand, with the function of the organized space, on the other hand, with the constructions used. It can be divided into three types: the

<sup>1</sup> "Mystery" is a common name for separate genres of medieval religious theatre; it also means a medieval mysterial performance in general, regardless of its genre.

functional and constructive, the art and tectonic and the decorative and symbolic ones [2]<sup>p25</sup>. Such a classification, for its part, reflects a common style evolution: the origin, maturity, and decline. The same evolution can be seen not only in the development of style and expressive means of medieval mystery play: from a strict solemn service to "total permissiveness" of the city square, but also in the development of mysterial gesture, from the biblical and liturgical ones to realistic ordinary body language.

## II. MYSTERY GESTURES CLASSIFICATION

In the late Middle Ages there are considerable changes within the framework set by the sacred canon, which is reflected in Passion plays and Easter performances. It is still more typical of German art, because it inherently "lives with the impression of movement, and any movement extends its limits" [3]<sup>p68</sup>.

The actions of the mystery play characters recorded in the manuscripts of late medieval Passion and Easter performances allow us to define the specific features of the mysterial gesture within the general scenic structure.

In its broad meaning, the scenic gesture includes the whole complex of an actor's behavior: the gesture as it is (hand and arm movements), mimics, posture, the actor's body plasticity; it is directly connected with the manner of a character's movement within the stage limits.

Medieval culture used to be that of gestures, from church services to civil proceedings [4]<sup>p53</sup>. Moreover, speaking of religiosity signs, we cannot overlook the fact that throughout the Middle Ages period their specificity and physicality had been the constant: imitatio Christi (imitation of Christ), asceticism, mystery plays and other stage performances where people could personally and bodily take part in Creation of the World, Passion or Last Judgement plays" [5]<sup>p103</sup>.

All those circumstances necessarily influenced and considerably determined the gestures of the characters in late medieval mystery plays.

Analyzing the manuscripts of Passion and Easter performances allows us to sort all the mystery characters' gestures into old and new ones, borrowed and superimposed,

as well as to distinguish the main gesture groups: the liturgical, biblical, legal, psychological, symbolic, parodical, everyday (common, or ordinary), and realistic ones.

### III. LITURGICAL AND BIBLICAL GESTURES OF THE MYSTERY

The essential role in the mystery gesture evolution is played by the relation of biblical text (scripture) and divine service. A. A. Gvozdev points out that “the performers of church stage versions used to wear liturgical vestments, and their gestures were closely connected with their character, originally solemn and abstractedly symbolic. That liturgical gesture implies several certain movements, such as kneeling, raising hands as a token of pleading, joining hands for praying, raising a hand for blessing, etc. The conventional gesture symbolism is connected with slow development of the movement to the sound of hymns and with solemn pace of processions. At that early stage of performance development there is no realistic interpretation of the gesture. The body movement is connected with the religious principle as a kind of its allegoric implementation. But later there is a gradual deviation from the strict forms of liturgical gesture” [6]<sup>p391</sup>.

Until the early 15th century, mystery play producers hardly ever changed anything with the meaningful evangelical gestures, they “did not introduce any modern gestures without religious content, which would have blurred the picture made with the help of canonical expressive means”; they used to adhere to the old Christian rule: “As for the body movements, aim at bigger uniformity and avoid anything excessive” [7]<sup>p208</sup>.

Max Herrmann attracts our attention to the relation between the liturgical and biblical gestures which were used in mystery performances: “There is a number of expressive movements imposed on clergymen for the mass and blessing; they have been almost the same since old times up to the present: crossing oneself, bowing, kneeling down, raising eyes (to heaven), joining hands in prayer, upraising hands, thumping the chest and kissing... All these gestures can be found in the Bible: in the New Testament, including Epistles, and in the Old Testament, too” [7]<sup>p209</sup>. Moreover, the researcher singles out such an important circumstance as the origin of the Christian liturgical gestures from the cult gestures of Ancient Greece and Rome. “That very relation demonstrates their primary character, and the history of liturgical expressive forms is developing in such a way that they remain unstable: they are used in different places. Such free application of the small, almost non-extensible sphere of ancient body movements is a sample given by liturgy to religious theater; the character of liturgy performed with half-theatrical methods and having originated the medieval drama, together with precise dramatizing of liturgical movements lead a medieval religious stage producer to developing a strict stage ritual. Such parallelism preserves the relationship; it is smaller in the direct influence of liturgical gestures on stage movement” [7]<sup>p210</sup>.

Thus, liturgical and biblical gestures can be attributed to the oldest ones used in mystery performances of the late Middle Ages, and at the same time they can be defined as borrowed ones. Medieval culture in general and mystery performance in particular include quite a number of borrowed gestures (directly or indirectly).

### IV. THE PRINCIPLES OF THE SEPARATION OF GESTURES OF THE MYSTERY

The borrowed gestures of medieval mystery can be legal and juridical ones, expressed in the gesture of *digito demonstrando* (Lat. finger pointing), which was used in court while giving testimony. The manuscript stage directions often read, “Speaks and points his finger”. In that way the actor used to attract the audience’s attention to the character he was addressing. The medieval court procedure produced another gesture, that of announcing the verdict. In the Middle Ages a judge used to be sitting while announcing the verdict, and the habit was reflected in a mystery, in the Pilate Judgement scene. For example, in Augsburg Passion play, the stage directions say, “Pilates sits down on the chair, takes his rod and speaks”.

Alongside with borrowed gestures we also come across mock (or parodical) ones. Thus, in Erlau Passion play devils disguised as youngsters to win the affection of Mary Magdalene and copied the lovers imitating their manners.

The gestures of mystery characters reflect the ethical component of a medieval person’s behavior. “An indecent gesture was seen as a rude incapability to control one’s own movements; it was scornfully defined as “gesticulating”. On the contrary, over time, the ability to manage the movements had been understood as manifestation of inner harmony demonstrating the mind dominating over the body” [5]<sup>p120</sup>. The behavior of Christ, angels, or devils in mystery plays confirms this: the Savior steps solemnly and quietly, angels march, and devils run, skip and bounce.

M. Herrmann pays attention “to a number of “stable gestures” (*stabile Gesten*) referring to the beginning of Passions as such, which are regularly reproduced in the performance: praying on the Mount of Olives, kiss of Judas, the warriors’ falling, tearing the high priest’s clothes, Christ looking at Peter, Peter’s lamentation” [7]<sup>p221</sup>, which allows to distinguish two types of gestures in the medieval mystery play: labile (unstable) and stable (steady) ones. Therefore, the researcher determines the difference between the gestures fixed for certain characters in certain scenes (the stable) and the gestures used by various characters in different scenes of mystery performances (the unstable).

All the mystery gestures can be nominally divided into technical (external) ones, connected with the characters’ movements, and psychological (internal) ones, associated with changes in their mood and emotional condition. External gestures in turn include independent and accompanying ones. The latter are connected mainly with such actions as taking an oath, pledging an allegiance, pleading, expressing respect etc. “Independent” gestures, according to the German researcher S. Mauermann, are

symbolic elements of medieval mystery plays, which is seen, in his opinion, in the verb *finget* (Lat. *finco* — fancy, imagine) used in stage directions and determining the actions of a performer but not a character. For example, “Then Lazarus imagines being dead”, i.e. the actor should pose as if his character had died [8] <sup>p232</sup>.

Theater historians, particularly H. Kindermann and H. Borherdt, pay attention to the fact that in the late medieval German mystery manuscripts there are stage directions for the performers’ actions, which include the prepositions “as if”, “as though” (Germ. *als ob*) also confirming the symbolic element in the mysterial gestures. For example, the stage directions of Donaueschingen Passion play include the following instructions: “Three young men sit down and pretend as if they are sleeping”; “Pilate makes believe as if he is sleeping”, i.e. in this case we can also speak about a symbolic representation of a certain action.

Alongside with this, Kindermann emphasizes that “vital” gestures (*Vital-Gebärde*) are present in late medieval German mystery plays. They should not be understood as naturalistic ones depicting life as it is, but as a symbolic reflection of life spirit. This is “spiritual” naturalism, a veristic “as if” game (“*Als-ob*” *Spiel*) [9] <sup>p287</sup>.

So, we can distinguish a special group of symbolic gestures within the mysterial ones.

Numerous paintings and sculptures, as well as literary works, of the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, confirm excessive interest in a person’s mental experience that appeared in the period. The texts of Passion and Easter plays of the late Middle Ages reflect the tendency towards the characters’ psychological extension through their behavior. The mystery manuscripts include the following stage directions: “tenderly”, “mockingly”, “furiously”, “angrily”, “crossly”, “joyfully”, “sadly” etc., as well as “moans”, “sighs”, “plaintive voices”, “mumbling”, “fright”, “surprise”, which demonstrates the wish to capture any detail of the characters’ mood and feelings. Not only these directions reflect the changes in the spiritual life of the late Middle Ages and “demonstrate deep and more various experiences reflecting the abundance of complicated reality” [10] <sup>p182</sup>, but they are also directly connected with mysterial psychological gestures.

In this context the stage directions with “as if” (*als ob*) remark are noteworthy; they are not related to the characters’ external actions (as it has been mentioned above), but to their internal state of mind, to bodily expression of the spirit, and are meant mostly for the performers. So, one of the stage directions in “Mary Magdalene’s Conversion” scene from Donaueschingen Passion play includes an attempt to show Magdalene’s change of mood through changing her behavior. First Mary Magdalene makes jokes, plays chess, but then, all of a sudden, she “sits still as if she got frightened”. In Eger Passion play, one of stage remarks reads, “as if in ecstasy” (Lat. *quasi in exthasi*).

## V. PATHETIC AND EXPRESSIVE GESTURES: LAMENTATIONS OF MARY

The characters of late medieval mystery plays are pathetic and expressive, and it is their typical feature. Body eloquence is a specifically theatrical manifestation of general medieval pattern [7] <sup>p211</sup>. The most striking example of mysterial psychological gesture can be found in Lamentations of Mary scene.

Lamentations of Mary scene is popular in the mystery plays in connection with the medieval Virgin Mary cult. Religious paintings reflected the image of Virgin Mary in such objects of worship as Our Mother of Mercy, Virgin of Immaculate Conception, or Our Lady of Sorrows. The latter image is that of the sorrowful mother standing at the cross or sitting and lamenting Christ’s dead body in her lap. The image is directly related to Lamentations of Mary found in mysterial performances. Max Herrmann points out that both in painting and late medieval mystery plays, Lamentations of Mary scene “expresses the strongest pathetic feelings in contact of the old and the new” [3] <sup>p245</sup>. This scene does not have a canonic background that demanded strict rules to be followed, because Lamentations of Mary originated in late Latin literature, but not in the Bible.

The earliest dramatic variant of Lamentations at the cross dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century; it is recorded “as her monologue with gradual, partly rhetorical appeals to death, Christ, Jews, to the women surrounding her; sometimes there are intrusions of dialogues between the Virgin and her son, the Virgin and execution witnesses” [11] <sup>p130</sup>. The 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from Lilienthal monastery in Baden also includes a simplest dialogue between the lamenting Mary and John consoling her. But the stage directions for the Lamentations scene in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Benediktbeuern manuscript give a more precise picture of the Virgin’s behavior in the scene: “Here Our Holy Mother will enter moaning, with John the Apostle”; “Then Holy Mother will raise her sobbing voice in great lamentation and speak to the women shedding tears”; “Here Mary will embrace John and she sings”; “Then she will sit relaxing for a while, and having risen, she starts singing”; “And John will support Mary holding her by the shoulders” [11] <sup>p131</sup>.

In late medieval mystery plays, the stage directions added to Lamentations of Mary scenes are more dramatic and emotionally strained, Virgin Mary’s emotional expressions are pathetic, they order the performer to demonstrate Mary’s sorrow with absolutely new gestures alongside with “kneeling down”, “raising her eyes”, and “plaintive voice”. “Besides the fact that long rejected *prosternere se ad terram* (to spread on the ground) appears, this time it is not a sign of worship, but an expression of Mary’s great suffering; moreover, there are more directions which had been unacceptable before to demonstrate sufferings — *elevat brachia* (raises her arms) and *plangit cum manibus* (wrings her hands)... The directions of a big religious drama include solemn decisive remarks, such as *plangendo cum manibus* (wringing her hands) or *ad terram residendo* (sitting on the ground), referring to Mary, and other instructions like that”

[7, 246]. Holy Mother's sufferings are expressed with "the tragic language of hand and arm movements".

#### VI. NEW AND REALISTIC ELEMENTS IN THE GESTURES OF THE MYSTERY

In Bordesholm, Wolfenbüttel and Trier Lamentations, as well as in Alsfeld, Donaueschingen, Frankfurt and Eger Passion plays, we can find "turning to different sides with outstretched arms", "beating on the chest", "raising hands", "falling on the ground", "wringing hands". Lamenting Christ, Mary not only moans "with deep pain", but she also raises her hands to heaven and covers her face with her hands; she not only screams "harshly", but being extremely agitated she "falls on the ground like mad", "exhausted, she falls on the women standing beside her" who in turn did not stay indifferent to what was going on.

We will note that in late medieval mysteries, alongside with dramatism of single characters, the dramatism of action rises, and it seems that extreme emotions pushed to their very limit are then discharged with unexpected decrease of the situation. But deep feelings and emotions are not characteristic of "elevated" characters only. While Virgin Mary is expressive, Lucifer is hysterical, exposed to fits of remorse, doubt and fear, which is reflected in his behavior — he screams, sobs, and even whines. Expressiveness and sensibility as psychological gestures become different.

Max Herrmann singles out an important feature of the late medieval mystery play, which relates it with the paintings of the epoch. In mysterial performances, as well as "in late medieval pictures, the old body language is next to the new time elements, psychological signs familiar for the theatre also remain the same: sighs and muttering, kneeling down, bowing, feet kissing, nodding, pointing fingers at something and many similar things. But alongside with all these, new things can be seen clearly" [7] <sup>p247</sup>. Thus, one of the remarks in Donaueschingen Passion play reads, "And then the Savior leaves them for the Mount of Olives for the third time and prostrates spreading his arms out like crucifix, then, trembling he prostrates with his hands raised and he should break into a bloody sweat, and so trembling, he starts speaking with a timid voice" [ibid.]. Another remark shows Mary sobbing and falling down at the cross. "Eventually, everything naturalistic and individualized comes to such expanded pathetics in the New time, drawing it partly from life but partly from paintings, too < ... > Somebody shakes his fist at someone, pushes someone away, crosses himself/herself, takes his/her nearest and dearest by the hand in a friendly way and so on. Everything is absolutely new here; the new and the old can actually fuse with each other like in the pictures" [ibid.].

Let us note that the process of "decisive modernization" of late medieval mystery plays was not universal as far as the gestures were concerned. Thus, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century Passion plays from Tirol we can find "some new features relative to the old processes, but in general, the conservative manner of the old mystery predominates" [7] <sup>p247</sup>.

Though the religious drama adopted the gesture pattern of the Bible, where contrary to mimics and recitation, there are lots of regulations about gestures: "thumps his chest", "falls down", "bends his knees", "sits down", "turns round", "shivered", "trembled", "drooped", "kisses". In spite of that, new expressive means and opportunities appeared chronologically in mystery performances. And the later a mystery play was performed, the more new — realistic — trends were presented in it [12] <sup>p125</sup>.

What is the appearance of mysterial characters' realistic gestures connected with? According to researchers of medieval theater, both western and Russian ones, it is mainly because of new scenes and new characters, such as ointment seller, his wife, her lover, Mary Magdalene's lover, Jews, knights, Pilate's soldiers, devils, allegoric characters and so on. Since they are not present in the Bible, they do not have their "biblical story", and they add movements and gestures from their everyday life to the mystery play; they can be called realistic or common (everyday) ones. But there is a problem here. What does the "realistic" gesture of late medieval mystery imply? Don't biblical instructions like "turns", "sits down", "thumps his chest", or "kisses" have anything to do with everyday reality? It seems that the question here is different. It is the quality of realistic gestures, or medieval realism. For example, there is a "kiss" in the Bible. Note that hugs and kisses used to be allowed in the early religious performances, but only in certain biblical places. For example, Mary kisses Jesus, it is a token of mother's love; kiss of Judas is a token of betrayal; when Pilate and Herod meet, their kiss is a token of greeting. But in Alsfeld Passions, Mary Magdalene not only jokes with a soldier, like in earlier mystery plays, but she also hugs and kisses him. What act or what feeling does this absolutely new feature mean? Theater historians are of different opinions of that Mary Magdalene's gesture. H. Kindermann claims that it is not harsh naturalism, but a symbolic token in Mary Magdalene's behavior, that of her promiscuity [9] <sup>p289</sup>. W. Müller insists that here we first come across an erotic kiss [12] <sup>p129</sup>. Generally, the two researchers' positions are not contradictory, but they need some clarification. Biblical behavior regulations are meant for the characters of Holy History, they are not introduced by late medieval mystery authors or performers, they have nothing to do with modern life reality - this is a qualitative difference of their reality and one of characteristic features of medieval realism.

#### VII. THE INFLUENCE OF THE MYSTERY THEATER ON THE FINE ARTS OF THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

Another problem in studying late medieval mysterial gestures is connected with using iconographic material. Engaging iconography is logical here, because "the main feature of the late Middle Ages is its extremely visual character... They think with visual images only. Everything to be expressed is reflected in the visual image. Tendency to direct reproduction of external visible things was more powerfully expressed with the help of painting than with literary means" [13] <sup>p283</sup>.

Undoubtedly, theater influenced the visual arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Max Herrmann insists on such correlation in his research, but not on the opposite [7] p245.

In medieval liturgical drama, “characters of sacred legends used to develop within clearly defined limits, and to obey a conditional character and behavior scheme; they used a conservative set of postures, gestures and mimics, they used to wear familiar clothes and attributes” [14] p105. A medieval artist also “used to manipulate a certain set of visual formulas, and each of them provoked the viewers’ memories established with traditions. Recurring iconographic patterns can be called a method of pictorial quoting, a visual citation of authorities” [15] p17. A similar citing principle was also reflected in the play of mystery actors. But earlier performers and late medieval mystery actors used “to quote” different things. The uniqueness of earlier mystery performances was in the fact that the actors did not have to demonstrate personality (though later performers did not do that either); on the contrary, the characters had to be recognized for certain gestures and actions. However, late medieval mystery performers imparted their characters with more and more “human” but not “biblical” features. Actors used to determine their characters’ behavior more than sacred samples.

Let us note that the 1430s produced paintings and sculptures distinctive with their invasion into the real world and wish to capture its minutest phenomena and “humanize” the divine image [16] p16. “Humanizing” of sacred characters can be compared with similar representation of the same characters in the 15th century mystery performances. In the middle of the century “there is a battle of typifying and personalizing trends [in German art]. The latter ones overweigh” [17] p33. The whole medieval culture mechanism started to go down at the end of Middle Ages. Creating after the sacred canon “given in advance” is understood the other way round: after the surrounding world. That is why the gesture in late medieval mystery can be considered as a temporal category determined with the time and different view of the world. In the biblical time, the gestures in early medieval mystery performances used to be biblical and liturgical; when the time of merchants came, the gestures of the late medieval Passion and Easter plays became completely different. In this case, it is crucial to take into consideration the change, which resulted in the fact that the actor’s gesture became a “dictating” one instead of the character’s gesture.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

Analyzing mysterial gestures allows us to find out their origin, the links with church rituals, art, culture and everyday life of late Middle Ages; which is more important, we can systematize the mystery gestures and consider them in all their diversity and single out the concept of “mysterial gesture”.

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