

FLORENTINE RAPPRESENTAZIONI AND THEIR PICTURES



BETWEEN the twelfth and the sixteenth century nearly every country in Europe possessed some sort of a religious drama, which in many cases has lingered on, nearly or quite, to the present day. Even in England—in Yorkshire, in Dorset and Sussex, and perhaps in other counties—the old Christmas play of St. George and the Dragon is not quite extinct, though in its latter days its action has been rendered chaotic by the introduction of King George III., Admiral Nelson, and other national heroes, whose relation to either the Knight or the Dragon is a little

difficult to follow. The stage directions, which are fairly numerous in most of the old plays which have been preserved, enable us to picture to ourselves the successive stages of their development with considerable minuteness. In some churches the 'sepulchre' is still preserved to which, in the earliest liturgical dramas, the choristers advanced, in the guise of the three Marias, to act over again the scene on the first Easter-day; while of that other scene, when at Christmas the shepherds brought their simple offerings, a cap, a nutting stick, or a bob of cherries, to the Holy Child, a trace still exists in the representation, either by a transparency or a model, of the manger of Bethlehem, still common in Roman Catholic churches, and not unknown in some English ones. When the scene of the plays was removed from the inside of the church to the churchyard, we hear of the crowds who desecrated the graves in their eagerness to see the performance; and later still, when the craft-guilds had burdened themselves with the expenses of their preparation, we have curious descriptions of the waggons upon which each scene of the great cycles 'of matter from the beginning of the world to the Day of Judgement,' was set up, in order that scene after scene might be rolled before the spectators at the street corners or the market place, throughout the length of a midsummer day. Artists with an antiquarian turn have endeavoured to picture

for us these curious stages. In Sharp's *Dissertation on the Coventry Mysteries* there is a frontispiece giving an imaginary view of a performance; and only a few years ago an article was published in an American magazine, with really delightful illustrations, depicting the working of the elaborate stage machinery behind the scenes, as well as the effects with which the spectators were regaled. But of contemporary illustrations the lack remains grievous and irreparable. In England we have nothing at all for the Miracle Plays, while for the moralities by which they were superseded, the only manuscript illustration is a picture of the castle in the *Castle of Perseverance*, in which, with the aid of his good angels, its occupant, Man, was set to resist the attacks of the deadly sins and all the hosts of hell! The later moralities, printed by Wynkyn de Worde and his contemporaries early in the sixteenth century, have occasionally a few figures on the face or back of the title-page, to which labels bearing the names of the characters are attached. But these were venerable cuts, which had done duty on previous occasions for other subjects; and so far from being specially designed to represent the players on an English stage, were really French in their origin, and only imported into England from the old stock of Antoine Vérard.

In France we have much the same tale. It is true that so many of the old French Mysteries still remain in manuscript, unexplored, that there is a possibility of some pleasant surprise in store for us. But the printed plays were either not illustrated at all, or sent forth with only a handful of conventional cuts, some of which, as we have seen, soon afterwards found their way to our own country. One little ray of light, however, we have in the pictures, especially of the Annunciation to the Shepherds and their Adoration, in many of the numerous editions of the *Hours of the Blessed Virgin* (the lay-folk's prayer-books, as they have been called, of those days), which, from 1490 onwards, attained the same popularity in print which they had previously enjoyed in manuscript. In these illustrations we see the shepherds, with their women-folk about them, as they watched their flocks, till startled by the angel's greeting, and again crowding round the manger at Bethlehem. In one edition they even bear on labels the names Gobin le gai, le beau Roger, Mahault, Aloris, etc., by which they were known in the plays.

But however ready we may be to trace the influence of the miracle plays in these pictures, as illustrations of the plays themselves they are very

## Comperetta di frate Girolamo da ferrara della oratione mentale

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developed, for the causes which contributed to its popularity at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and for its close connection with the popular art of the day, the subject is one of considerable interest. On its literary and religious side, the late John Addington Symonds discussed it in *Studies of the Italian Renaissance* with his usual ability, and many of the plays have been reprinted by Signor Ancona. Of late years the little pictures by which they are illustrated have also received attention, a fact amply attested by the extraordinary rise in their market value. But it is worth while to bring together, even if only in outline, the pictures and the plays to which they belong, more closely than has hitherto been attempted, and this is my object in the present paper.

Book-illustration in Italy began very early with the publication in 1467, by Ulric Hahn, at Rome, of an edition of the *Meditations* of Cardinal

very inadequate; and the fact remains that in only one country, and practically only in one city in that country (for the Sienna editions are merely reprints) did the religious plays, which in one form or another were then being acted all over Europe, receive any contemporary illustration. This one city was Florence; and alike for the special form in which the religious drama was there de-



Cardinal Torquemada on the Life and Passion of Christ. For the next twenty years its progress was only sporadic, and though we find illustrations of greater or less artistic value in books printed at Naples, Rome, Ferrara, Verona and Venice, we can only group them together in

twos and threes; there is absolutely no trace of any school of illustrators. From this sporadic growth Florence was not entirely excluded, for besides a treatise on geography we find in the 1477 edition of Bettini's *Monte Santo di Dio*, and the famous 1480 *Dante*, pictures of very considerable interest. They differ, however, from those of the illustrated books of other Italian towns, in being cut not on wood but on copper, and it is a remarkable fact that until the year 1490 no Florentine book is known which contains a cut. The signs of wear in a woodcut of the dead Christ which appears early in that year, has given rise to a belief that there may have been some previous illustrated edition, now lost; but it is more probable that the picture had only been printed separately for pasting into books of devotion. In any case, it stands apart, with but one other cut, slightly later in date, from all other Florentine work, and



and must be looked on only as an example of the sporadic illustrations of which we have spoken as appearing in other districts. But from the 28th of September, 1490, onwards for twenty years, we have a succession of woodcuts which, amid all the differences which give them individuality, are yet closely linked together in style, and which form, on the whole, by far the finest series of book-illustrations of early date. The

popularity which these woodcuts attained is attested by the repeated editions of the works in which they appear; while the suddenness with which they sprang up, the general similarity of style, and the nature of the books they illustrate, all suggest that we have here to deal with a conscious and carefully directed movement as opposed to the haphazard use of illustrations in other cities during the previous twenty years. The book in which the first characteristic Florentine woodcut appears is an edition of the *Laudi* of Jacopone da Todi, printed by Francesco Buonaccorsi; and both the choice of the book and the name of the printer offer a tempting basis for theory-making. Printing, we must remember, though it had been in use for more than a third of a century, was even then a new craft, and was still taken up sometimes as a side-employment by many persons who had been bred to other trades or professions. Our own Caxton, as we all know, was a mercer; the first printer at St. Albans, a schoolmaster; Francesco Tупpo, of Naples, a jurist; Joannes Philippus de Lignamine, of Rome, a physician; and so on. In

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natural continuation, however, of the work of the Scriptorium in many monasteries, we find that a large number of the early printers were members of monasteries or priests, and it was to this latter order that the Buonaccorsi who printed the *Laudi* belonged. Now, the name Buonaccorsi is the name of the family of Savonarola's mother. A few months before the appearance of the *Laudi* the great Dominican had been recalled to Florence by Lorenzo de' Medici, and his first public sermon there—a sermon which had stirred the whole city to its depths—had been preached on the previous 1st of August. In

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the next year we find Buonaccorsi printing the first edition of the *Libro della vita viduale*, the earliest dated Savonarola tract of which I know; and I have not been able to resist hazarding the conjecture that between the preacher-monk and the priest-printer there may have been some tie of blood, and that it was to Savonarola that the splendid series of Florentine illustrated books owed their origin.

That this should be the case would not be surprising. Savonarola was no Puritan, or rather he was like the Puritans of the better sort, and loved art so long as it was subservient to the main object of man's being. The pamphlets with which he flooded Florence during the next few years are, for the most part, decorated with a cut on their first page

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or title; and if the subject were ever worked out, it would probably be found that this was uniformly the case with the original editions, and those issued with the author's supervision; while the unillustrated copies are mere reprints, which the absence of any law of copyright made it possible for any printer, who thought it worth his while, to issue, with or without the author's leave. The woodcuts to the Savonarola tracts number from forty to sixty, according as we include or reject variants on the same subject, and fall naturally into three divisions, illustrating respectively the Passion of Christ, the duties of Prayer and Preparation for Death, and various aspects of Savonarola's activity, in which, however, the representations of him are always imaginary, never drawn from life. As an example of these cuts, I give that which decorates the title-page of an undated edition (*circa* 1495) of the *Operetta della oratione mentale*. I have had occasion to use this before in my little work on *Early Illustrated Books*, but there is a certain largeness of pictorial effect about it which gives this cut, I think, quite the first place in the series, and makes me unwilling to take any other as an example. The cuts in the *Rappresentazioni* are seldom quite as good as this, but they form a parallel series to those of the Savonarola tracts, occasionally borrowing an illustration from those on the Passion of Christ, and evidently inspired by the same aims. The same types (our only means of fixing the printers of these dateless little books), were used in many of the works of both the series, and it does not seem fanciful to believe that Savonarola, either directly or through some trusted disciple, was nearly as intimately connected with the one as he undoubtedly was with the other.

We have said that the choice of the work in which appeared the first typical Florentine woodcut was not without interest for our subject. Jacopone da Todi, whom the cut exhibits kneeling in an ecstasy of prayer before a vision of the Blessed Virgin, was a Franciscan mystic, eccentric to the verge of madness in his manners, but a spiritual poet of no mean ability, and the reputed author of the *Stabat Mater*. He died in 1306, and was probably old enough to have remembered that strange epidemic of the *Battuti*, when thousands of frenzied men and women marched from city to city, scourging themselves almost to death for the sinfulness of the world; till their career had to be stopped by the free use of the gallows. When the frenzy was past, those who survived it formed themselves into companies for the continuance of their religious exercises in a more moderate form, and from their meet-  
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ing together to sing their *Laudi*, hymns of a peculiarly personal fervour, in the chapels of their guilds, they obtained the name *Laudesi*. Of the writers of these *Laudi*, Jacopone da Todi was the greatest, and it was out of the *Laudi* that the later *Rappresentazioni* were gradually developed. In his excellent account of the *Rappresentazioni*, to which I have already alluded, Mr. J. A. Symonds seems to me to have laid rather undue stress on the manner in which this development took place, as offering a contrast to the history of the religious drama in other countries. It

is true that in England the plays which have come down to us belong almost exclusively to the great cycles which unrolled the history of man from the creation till the crack of doom, but we have mention of several plays on the lives of the Saints—*e.g.* one on St. George and the Dragon, and another (which survives) on St. Mary Magdalene, and the popularity at one time of these Miracle Plays, properly so called, is witnessed by the fact that it is their name under which the cycles of Scriptural dramas generally passed. At Florence these longer dramas were not wholly unknown, but they seem to have been acted only in pantomime or dumb-show, in the great pageants on St. John's Day; the shorter plays developing from the *Laudi* just as, at an earlier period, the liturgical dramas had developed in France and England out of the dramatic recital of the gospel of the day. It is worth noting, by the way, that the *Laudi* themselves were not superseded, but continued to be written and sung when the *Rappresentazioni* were already becoming popular.

popular. Two of the writers of them during this period have a special interest for us—Maffeo Belcari, as the author also of the earliest printed *Rappresentazioni*, and Girolamo Benivieni, as the friend and disciple of Savonarola, whose doctrine and prophecies he defended in 1476 in a tract, printed, this also, by Buonaccorsi.

In an edition of the *Laudi* of the first of these two writers, seen by Mr. Symonds, but which I am unlucky enough never to have come across, there is an interesting cut representing the *Laudesi*, standing before a crucifix, singing their praise. In course of time dramatic divisions had been admitted into the *Laudi*, and under the name of *Divozioni* they were recited with appropriate action in dialogue form. The actors were for the most part boys, who were formed into confraternities, while the expenses of the plays were doubtless defrayed by their parents. As the dramatic element in the performances became more decided, the plays came at last to be generally termed *Rappresentazioni*, and under this name they attained a great popularity during the last quarter of the fifteenth century, and the first of its successor.

Unlike the northern Miracle Plays, which are almost without exception anonymous, the majority of the earliest *Rappresentazioni* which have come down to us contain the names of their authors, and in editions separated by half a century the text remains substantially unaltered. In English plays the text often appears to have grown up by a process of accretion, so that a cycle, or even a single play, in the form in which it has survived, could hardly with justice be assigned to a single author, even if we knew the name of the first writer concerned in it. The difference is not unimportant, and is one of numerous small signs which tell us that the religious drama in Florence, at least in this stage of its development, was less popular, less spontaneous, than in our own country, and more the result of deliberate religious effort.

The earliest *Rappresentazione* printed was the *Abraham* of the Maffeo, or Feo, Belcari, whom we have already mentioned. It was printed in 1485, the year after Belcari's death at a good old age (he was born in 1410), so that the whole of Belcari's plays were published posthumously. Among them are plays on the Annunciation, on St. John the Baptist visited by Christ in the Desert, and on St. Panuntius. Of the last two of these I have seen fifteenth-century editions—the one at the British Museum, the other at the Bodleian Library, each with a single charming woodcut. No less a person than Lorenzo de' Medici was the author of the play of *S. Giovanni e S. Paolo*, which has also come down to us  
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in its original edition with a graceful cut ; and Bernardo Pulci, who died in the first year of the sixteenth century, produced a play on the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat. But the most prolific of these dramatists seems to have been a woman, Bernardo's wife Antonia, to whose pen we owe plays on the Patriarch Joseph, the Prodigal Son, S. Francis of Assisi, S. Domitilla, S. Guglielma, etc. The names of a few other writers are known ; but there were also numerous anonymous plays, written very much on the same lines, to some of which we shall have to allude.

Almost invariably the plays begin with a Prologue spoken by an Angel, who is represented in the title-cut of Lorenzo de' Medici's *San Giovanni e San Paolo* as standing behind the two saints in a kind of pulpit. In other early plays the Angel is represented in a separate woodcut whose lower border is cut off, so as to fix on to the border of the special title-cut of the play. Later on, another design was substituted for this, without any border at all. I think it probable that these angelic prologuisings were mostly spoken from some machine at the back of the stage, especially contrived for celestial appearances. In other respects, the services of the stage-carpenter do not seem to have been much called for. The plays were acted, we are told, either in the chapel of the guild or confraternity, or in the refectory of a convent, and the arrangements were probably very similar to those in modern school-plays, the imagination of the spectators being often required to take the place of a change of scene. In the so-called 'Coventry' Plays we hear of a device by which a new scene, or perhaps rather a new centrepiece, with the actors all in their places, could be wheeled round to the front ; but more often the whole of the *dramatis personæ* were grouped at the back or sides, and individual actors merely stepped forward when their turn came. In the play of *San Lorenzo* we are expressly told that two scenes were shown simultaneously on different parts of the stage, Decius and his satellites offering their heathen sacrifices on the one side, while Pope Sixtus comforts the faithful against the coming persecution on the other. This combination of two scenes in one is a familiar feature in mediæval art, and is not unknown even in these Florentine woodcuts, small as they are : witness our fourth cut, in which the bartering at the pawnshop, and the indignities offered to the sacred wafer, tell the story of the play by means of its two most prominent scenes.

Of the literary value of the *Rappresentazioni* it is not possible to speak

speak with much enthusiasm. From a literary standpoint, indeed, the lives of the Saints, with which most of them have to do, are a difficult and not very promising subject. Most stories of heroism are best told in ten lines at longest; and to attempt to spin them out into several hundred, without any considerable material in the way of authentic detail, leads inevitably to weakness and exaggeration. In this respect the *Rappresentazioni* are neither much worse nor much better than the average *Legenda Sanctorum* in verse or prose. They follow these, in fact, with remarkable fidelity, and as they are written for the most part

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in the familiar *octava rima*, it is only by the speeches being made in the first person, instead of in historical narration, that they differ very greatly from them. Thus, to take the plays from which we have chosen our illustrations, that of S. Francis of Assisi, by Antonia Pulci, faithfully records all the main incidents as told in the legends—the colloquy with the beggar during which he was stricken with compunction, the theft from his father of money to repair a church, the founding of his Order, the conference with the Pope, and the reception of the stigmata; this last being, as might be expected, the subject chosen by the artist for the woodcut on the title. The play of *S. Lorenzo* shows us the martyrdom of Pope Sixtus in the Decian persecution, and then the torture and death

death of S. Laurence for his refusal to surrender the treasure which the Pope had bequeathed to the poor of the church. Both of the woodcuts to these two plays are of great beauty. The first probably follows the traditions of the many pictures on the subject rather than that of the stage, though it was, no doubt, for a scene like this that the stage-managers of the day used their utmost resources. In the martyrdom of S. Laurence, on the other hand, we may be sure that we have a very exact picture of the scene as played on some convent stage.

Both these plays belong to the fifteenth century, and, as is mostly the case in the earliest editions, have only a rough woodcut each. This was not invariably so, as in the Bodleian Library there are copies of editions of the plays of *Stella* and *S. Paulino*, which have every appearance of having been printed before 1500, but yet have sets of several cuts, all obviously designed especially for them. These, however, are exceptions; and as a rule where we find several cuts, it is easy to trace most of them back, either to other plays, or to other illustrated books of the time, such as the *Epistole e Evangelii*, the *Fior di Virtù*, Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore*, etc. Thus, of the two cuts given here as illustrations to the curious *Rappresentatione duno miracolo del corpo di Christo*, the first alone occurs in the fifteenth-century edition, while in that of 1555 (probably sixty years later) this original cut reappears, with three others added to it. The first, here shown, representing a drinking scene, is borrowed, I strongly suspect, from the *Morgante Maggiore*; while the second, which shows a man being burnt, and the third, in which a king is consulting his council, may be called stock-pictures, and reappear with frequency.

This play of the *Corpo di Christo* is an Italian version of a miracle which was constantly being reported during the middle-ages, and was often the excuse for a cruel persecution of the Jews. The well-known 'Croxtton' *Play of the Sacrament* is cast on the same lines, and a detailed comparison of the two would yield some points of interest. In the *Rappresentazione* the story is well told, and with unusual vivacity. After the angelic prologue there is an induction, in which a miracle of a consecrated wafer, dripping blood, is announced to Pope Urban, who discourses on it with a cardinal and with S. Thomas Aquinas and S. Bonaventura. The play then begins with a drinking scene, in which a wicked Guglielmo squanders his money, and then takes his wife's cloak to the Jewish pawnshop to get more. The poor woman goes herself to the Jew to try to get her cloak back, and is then persuaded to  
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filch a wafer at mass and bring it to the Jew, on his promise to restore her garment. Her horror at his proposal is overcome by the pretext that his object is to use the Host as a charm to heal his sick son, and that if this succeeds he and all his family will become Christians. This, of course, is a mere fiction, but it serves the woman in good stead; for when the Jew is discovered by the unquenchable flow of blood from the wafer he maltreats, he is promptly burnt, while the Judge is warned by a

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special revelation to spare the life of his accomplice, whose guilt might easily be represented as the greater of the two.

An edition of the play of *S. Cecilia*, probably printed about 1560, affords a good example of the gradual addition of cuts in later reprints. This little tract of about twenty pages has no less than eighteen pictures in it, three of which, however, are only repetitions of one of the most familiar cuts in the whole series of *Rappresentazioni*—a Christian virgin dragged before a king; while three other well-worn cuts are each repeated twice, so that the number of blocks used was only thirteen, though these yielded eighteen impressions. As might be expected, the little pictures are often dragged in with very little appropriateness. Thus, the Roman soldiers sent to arrest Cecilia gave the publisher an excuse to show a party of knights riding in the country, and so on. On the other hand, the little picture here shown of a disputation, though undoubtedly executed in the first instance for some other work, probably

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gives us a very correct representation of the costume and grouping of the actors, and the same may be said of the companion picture from the play of *S. Orsola*.

One point in the text of the *S. Cecilia* deserves noting. In the main it resembles very closely indeed the legend as it is known to lovers of English poetry from the version which Chaucer made in his early days and afterwards inserted, with little revision, into the *Canterbury Tales*. But when Cecilia has gone through the form of marriage with the husband who is forced upon her, and is proceeding with him to his home, the lads of the neighbourhood bar their passage with a demand for petty gifts, to which the virgin submits with good grace—a fragment of Florentine life thus cropping up amid the rather unreal atmosphere of the old legend.

Whatever the shortcomings of the *Rappresentazioni*, their popularity was very great, and they were reprinted again and again throughout the sixteenth century. Naturally the woodcuts suffered from continual use, and the stock-subjects, like that of a general martyrdom shown in cut 8, are often found in the later editions with their little frames or borders almost knocked to pieces. Recutting was also frequent, and in the same edition of the play of *S. Mary Magdalene*, from which, for the sake of the unusual freedom in the handling, I have taken the title-cut as one of our illustrations, it is repeated later on from a new block, clumsily cut in imitation of the old one.

As the *Rappresentazioni* and their illustrations are connected with the Savonarola tracts on the one hand, so on the other we find them influencing some less dramatic forms of literature. Thus, among the early Florentine illustrated books we find a number of *Contrasti*—the contrast of men and women, of the living and the dead, of riches and poverty, etc. These were rather poems than plays, but the name *Rappresentazione* is sometimes applied to them in later editions. This is so, for instance, with the famous *Contrasto di Carnesciale e la Quaresima*, from which the first of the two cuts is here given, the second representing a visit to the fish and vegetable market for Lenten fare when the days of Carnival are over. Again we find the same methods of illustration applied to the *Giostre* of Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici, the story of Orpheus, by Angelo Politiano, which forms part of the former, being adorned with no less than ten admirable woodcuts, of which the picture here reproduced, of Orpheus frightened by a fury from attempting a second time to visit Hell in quest of his lost Eurydice, is quite



quite one of the finest. The same methods of illustration were also used in the *novelle* and other secular chapbooks, which have nothing either religious or dramatic about them. It is clear, however, that the religious use was the earlier of the two, and that while the writers of the *Laudi* anticipated the practice of later revivalists in adapting profane songs and tunes into hymns of devotion, it was the secular literature which was the borrower in the matter of illustrations.

As to the authors of these charming woodcuts, we know absolutely nothing. Dr. Paul Kristeller has lately attempted to trace out three or four distinctive schools of style in them, but no name of any artist can be connected with them; and we can only conjecture that there were one or two special workshops in Florence where they were designed and executed, and that printers and publishers applied to these workshops when they were in need of cuts.

ALFRED W. POLLARD.

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