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Review Article

The Hazards of the Theological-Literary Critic

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

THE BIBLICAL THEME IN MODERN DRAMA. By Marie Philomène de los Reyes, SPC. Quezon City, University of the Philippines Press, 1978. x, 179 pages.

Maria Corazon de los Reyes, the author of the present volume, was born in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, Philippines, made her profession in the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres under the name of Marie Philomène in 1938. She received her M.A. in English from the University of Santo Tomas in 1948. During 30 years of educational activity in Japan, she published widely in scholarly periodicals and is the author of three other books. *The Biblical Theme in Modern Drama* was first presented as a doctoral dissertation to Sophia University in Tokyo, which granted her its first Ph.D. in comparative literature in 1977.

Sister Philomène says that her interest was first drawn to biblical themes in modern drama by reading Fry, MacLeish, and Claudel. Her present study includes 12 plays by 9 different authors and the conclusion of her study is: "When modern drama employs the scriptural theme, therefore, more often than not, the outcome is no longer biblical drama, the biblical being recognized only in the undertones" (p. 161). Her work is valuable for a number of insights on modern drama. Her analysis of some of the lesser known plays is perceptive and, hopefully, should help to making them better known among Filipino readers.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

Fundamental to Sister Philomène's study of the biblical theme in modern drama, of course, is the whole problem of the relationship of theology and literature which has exercised so many critics in recent years. The exploration of this relationship has resulted in the emergence of a whole new school of

contemporary criticism that has been termed "Theological Criticism." Rather cautiously in 1966, Nathan Scott wrote that "it might be somewhat premature at the present time to announce the emergence of a new movement that is distinguished by the influence upon it of a Christian theological perspective. And even if this nascent impulse has already become so vigorous as to justify some such announcement, the more sensitive ones among those in whom it finds expression would doubtless be embarrassed by any sudden election to membership in a special "school" or "party" (*The New Orpheus* [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966], p. ix). But even Scott continued, "however cautiously we plot the rising curve of this new insurgency, it does begin to be a significant fact in the literary life of our time" (*ibid.*, p. ix). In the 12 years that have elapsed since Scott's cautious pronouncement, the evidence of the existence of this new approach to literature has multiplied to such an extent that no one need hesitate to christen it a school. The emergence of a school of criticism that attempted to bridge literature and the religious dimension, of course, was based on the presence of that relationship in creative works themselves, as well as the theologian's growing interest in creative literature as a source for theological reflection. Scott, cautious as he was about the existence of a critical school, could also write without hesitation in 1966 that

the theological horizon is centrally important in the literary landscape of our period For not only does the literature of our time most emphatically initiate theological inquiry . . . but . . . Christian theology as a result of its dialogue with the literary imagination will find itself more richly repaid . . . than by any similar transaction into which it may enter (*The Broken Center* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966], p. x).

Ten years later, there is no doubt about the fact of what Scott calls the "transaction" between literature and theology.

The nature of the transaction, however, is not so obvious, and the common meeting ground has not always been clearly mapped out. Theologians, for the most part, have gone to contemporary literature as a source book for their reflections on theological matters in a contemporary context, as an attempt to enter into the contemporary mind, and make the perennial Christian message more meaningful and relevant. Literary men, on the other hand, have been less concerned with what the theologians have said and more intrigued by the traditions, images and problems of Christian man as a source for theme and plot in their creative work. The danger in the transaction, of course, is that when the theologian uses literature he uses it to serve as a casebook for his own purposes. The essentially dichotomizing approach of the case book method destroys the integrity of the creative vision. And those who try to ride both horses most often end up in the ditch.

This is not to deny, however, that there is value and profit in the

commerce of literature and theology, but simply to point out the difficulty of the task which Sister Philomène set herself in the present volume. One might sit in the theologian's chair and complain that what Sister Philomène is talking about in most of her analysis is not biblical theme at all. Or one might, on the other hand, sit on the critic's throne and lament that Sister Philomène has distorted literature by trying to force it into theological categories. I am afraid that in the case of the present volume, both complainers would have justification, for the author has not clearly established her stance as either theologian or critic, and she has not clearly defined her terms of reference.

THE SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

In the opening chapter, Sister Philomène provides a rather sketchy survey of biblical drama in the early middle ages and its reappearance in the twentieth century, after its apparent death and burial in the seventeenth century. She then proceeds to discuss four problems that are at the heart of the relationship between literature and theology.

First is the problem of contemporary fixation, or relevance of the biblical drama for the contemporary audience. (The terms are mine, not Sister Philomène's). When the biblical theme is fixed in an alien time and culture, how can the dramatist bridge the gap between the past and the present? Sister Philomène says:

In exploring the potentialities of biblical materials, dramatists of our century have performed . . . a wide range of experiments . . . The audacities of these experiments can well be amazing. The biblical material is indubitably present, but the reaction to its use will vary from a shocked sensibility to a rapt wonderment (p. 11).

One of the modern sciences that the modern dramatist has used as bridge is psychology:

If theatre-goers today can no longer give full credence to the biblical narrative, let them at least recognize themselves and their own world in the personages and events presented in the Bible (p. 12).

In this regard, MacLeish's *Nobodaddy*, Giraudoux's *Judith*, Fry's *The Firstborn*, Connelly's *The Green Pastures*, and Obrey's *Noah* are analyzed for their varying usages of psychological identification to bridge the gap between biblical narrative and contemporary play. A second approach to relevance is exemplified in *Back to Methuselah* and *Lazarus Laughed*, in which Shaw and O'Neill "take the biblical material and use it as a point of departure for the presentation of ideas" (p. 27). The final approach is for the dramatist to integrate biblical themes into historical action and contemporary situation as Eliot does in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Giraudoux in *Cantique de Cantiques*. "In this one-act play, Giraudoux is making use of biblical material as a point of reference outside the petty situation of a

French Cafe" (p. 42). Fry goes even further in "his attempt to integrate biblical themes into contemporary action" (p. 43) in *A Sleep of Prisoners*. In these three plays the dramatists, in Sister Philomène's view, are manipulating "a continuous parallel between contemporary and antiquity" (the phrase is Eliot's) by establishing a figural analogy (the phrase is Auerbach's) between biblical theme and contemporary drama (pp. 46-47). So far so good. For what is being said is nothing new. The dramatist, or the creative writer in general, will use any meaningful myth to present his vision to the audience or reader. This does not necessarily make the writer a good theologian, simply a good dramatist.

In the third chapter, Sister Philomène addresses herself to another aspect of the basic relationship of theology and literature. This depends on whether the biblical theme is accepted by the audience as a cultural myth or whether it must be presented as a new vision. In using a biblical theme

the dramatist may possibly assume one or other of two attitudes. First, he may consider his audience to be skeptical regarding material from the Bible . . . The second way of approaching the audience might be to assume a common belief in the truth of the Bible (pp. 48-49).

Sister Philomène suggests that the two approaches to this problem would be "the presentation of an intellectual discussion and the sharing of a dramatic vision" (p. 50). The first is exemplified in Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* and the second in Paul Claudel's *L'Annonce Fait A Marie*.

The fourth problem, that of language in Biblical Themes, is discussed in chapter four. "While integrating biblical themes which are drawn from the past, the dramatist must use the language of the present" (p. 91). Sister Philomène calls this "The Dialectic of Immediacy." The second approach Sister Philomène calls "The Voice of the Poet." She says that

to convey the sense of mystery which is necessary to do full justice to the biblical theme, dramatists have seen the advantages of employing language that can communicate a kind of double pattern (p. 103).

Here I think Sister Philomène is making an unwarranted assumption — that for the dramatist the language of the Bible does possess a certain mystery. (We shall return to this point later in our discussion of the difference between biblical theme and biblical allusion.)

The techniques used by modern dramatists to achieve this presumed sense of mystery in biblical language have varied from author to author. O'Neill, according to Sister Philomène, uses the "Rhythm of Enchantment" (pp. 104 ff.); Fry uses "The Logic of Dream Language" (pp. 113 ff.); Claudel uses "Liturgical Language" (pp. 118 ff.), and Eliot makes use of a combination of all three (pp. 124 ff.).

In the fifth chapter, Sister Philomène attacks the problem of the possibility of tragedy and comedy in biblical drama. She accepts, with more than enough evidence from medieval biblical drama, the possibility of the comic

in the use of the biblical theme in drama. But I do not see that she establishes, or even attempts to do so, the validity of comedy in biblical drama. The presence of tragedy in biblical drama is easier going for our author. She accepts, with Balthazar and others, the possibility of tragedy in the Passion and the Cross. There are other critics of course, who would deny the possibility of tragedy even in the Cross, but she has good precedents in the Greek concept of tragedy as tragedy and glorification.

The final chapter discusses biblical themes as mythopoeic designs. But even here Sister Philomène runs into the problem of what she calls the "displacement" of biblical themes (p. 163). If we accept the definition of myth as "any recurring theme or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions," it is clear that considerable "displacement" has taken place even in many of the plays she has chosen to discuss. I find difficulty in seeing how this final chapter contributes to the thesis as a whole, except in a very indirect way. It is clearly an afterthought and should, perhaps, have been reduced to an appendix, if not omitted completely.

CRITICISM OF THE THESIS

It is hard to see whether Sister Philomène has come to any worthwhile conclusions in her study of *The Biblical Theme in Modern Drama*. She has certainly established the presence of biblical references in the 12 plays she has chosen to study, but she herself admits that the dramatists' use of the biblical material varies considerably, and that it would be impossible to consider these plays as biblical dramas in the earlier sense of the word. Her final conclusion, it seems to me, would have to be that they are plays with biblical overtones. The difficulty in coming to a satisfying conclusion stems in part from the task Sister Philomène has set herself. Furthermore, I do not think she has satisfactorily established her posture as literary critic, and as a result, her preoccupation with theology (the bible) keeps interfering in her critical approach to the 12 plays. From a theologian's point of view, it is rather disconcerting to come to the conclusion that, strictly speaking, there is no biblical theme in modern drama. But such a conclusion might be eminently acceptable and critically satisfying to the literary man.

Sister Philomène has also blurred the function of the dramatist (or the creative author) by asking him to straddle the frontiers of both literature and theology. Quite frankly, I do not think any of the writers set out to use the Bible as Sister Philomène seems to indicate they did — by the dialectic of immediacy, or the voice of the poet, or the logic of dream language, or the presentation of intellectual discussion, or what have you. I think the writers were simply writers, and used the material that came to hand (because it represented a shared and viable myth for their audience) to present their vision. That is,

perhaps, a simplistic version of the creative process, but I suspect it is the true one.

My main quarrel with Sister Philomène's thesis is her lack of clarity and precision on several key terms. I am not quite sure what Sister Philomène means by "biblical theme," and a second reading of her volume has not helped me to solve the problem. To be sure, she defines the term biblical theme as follows:

When I speak of biblical theme in this work, therefore, I refer to subject matter taken from the Bible: 'plot containing already the elements of tension or causal connection before the process of literary fashioning has set in (J. Roggendorf, *Sophia*, 1962, pp. 92-95);' the term has also been interpreted to include motif, as for instance, return from the dead (Lazarus theme), the innocent victim offering an oblation of suffering for redemptive aims (theme of redemption) (pp. 9-10).

I find no major problems with the definition. Theme

is the central dominating idea in a literary work In drama, it is the abstract concept which is made concrete through the representation in person, action and image in the work (Thrall and Hibbard, *Handbook of Literature*, s.v.).

But it seems to me that many of the biblical references Sister Philomène uses are biblical allusion rather than biblical theme. If the biblical reference is merely used to set a scene, or the conflicts of the biblical narrative are no longer apparent in the play, or when characters are recognized only because of their biblical names, do we truly have biblical theme or simply biblical allusion?

Sister Philomène has further complicated the issue by clearly defining her concept of a biblical theme, and then using a multiplicity of other terms to describe its presence in the plays. She speaks, for example of biblical message (p. 14), biblical material (p. 41), biblical dimensions (pp. 158-62), biblical perspective, biblical content, biblical motif (p. 53), and a "movement that is parallel to the biblical account" (p. 51), or a "pattern that belongs to the bible" (p. 38). In the midst of this welter of synonyms, it is difficult to figure out exactly what Sister Philomène means by biblical theme.

The matter is further complicated when Sister Philomène speaks of *the* biblical theme (as she does in the title of her thesis.) I find it hard to interpret the meaning of the phrase in any sense except specific — there is *one* biblical theme. Nowhere does she indicate what this one biblical theme is, and as a matter of fact, her discussion indicates the presence of multitudinous biblical themes in modern drama (though again I would be slow to admit that all of them are true themes.) It would have immensely simplified matters if Sister Philomène had talked about biblical themes in modern drama or, even better, biblical allusions in modern drama.

My second major criticism of Sister Philomène's thesis is that it is out of

date. She discusses 12 dramas; no one of them is later than 1956 and only 3 of them are later than 1940 (*J.B.*, 1956; *The Firstborn*, 1949; and *The Green Pastures*, 1947). There is 22 years of modern drama which is left unexamined, and authors like Beckett, Ionesco, Albee, and others left unremarked upon. An examination of these later dramatists, I think would have made substantial revisions necessary in Sister Philomène's thesis.

Sister Philomène's bibliography is equally out of date. There is no reference later than 1969, and only three references later than 1965 (Frye, 1969, first published 1967; Sean Lucy's study of Eliot, 1967; and Roston's volume on biblical drama in England, 1968). Since Sister Philomène's thesis ends properly on page 161 with a neat conclusion, and since the chapter on Northrop Frye follows as a obvious appendage, it is clear that Frye has not seriously influenced the bulk of her thesis. We are thus left with a thesis whose research ended, for all practical purposes, in 1965. Even in that period there are significant omissions. I look in vain for references to Nathan Scott or Amos Wilder. These are basic volumes in the field of theology and literature and certainly fall within even Sister's dated time frame. (Nathan Scott, *Adversity and Grace*, 1968; *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier*, 1958; *The New Orpheus*, 1964; *The Broken Center*, 1966; Amos Wilder, *Theology and Modern Literature*, 1958). Sister Philomène would certainly have profited from William F. Lynch, S.J., *Christ and Apollo* (1960), which discusses many of the problems she has set herself in the present work. It is regrettable that her thesis, obviously written many years ago, has not been revised and brought up to date for publication.

CONCLUSION

The Biblical Theme in Modern Drama does serve a useful purpose in calling attention to an area of literary criticism which is destined to play a rather significant role in Philippine literature in the years to come. It is inevitable as we begin to rediscover the lost traditions of Philippine literature, that the bible and theological themes will be found to play an increasingly important role. The work of critics like Ileto, Tiongson, Francisco, Fernandez, Realubit, and others has already called attention to the value of the biblical and liturgical themes in Philippine literature in determining the Philippine sensibility. Though Sister Philomène makes no references to Philippine literature, the questions she raises are relevant for the critic of Philippine literature and of Philippine drama in particular. The problems she has had in negotiating this confusing frontier between theology and literature should serve as a warning to those who would follow in her footsteps.