IS THE CHRISTOS PASCHON THE PROTOTYPE OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS DRAMA?

EDMUND RONEY
Speech and Drama Department
Ripon College

In his *Essai sur les Moers et L’Esprit des Nations*, Voltaire states his belief that Christian religious drama was originated by Gregorio Nazianzeno, the 4th century bishop who served briefly as patriarch of Constantinople. Since the only drama attributed to Gregorio Nazianzeno is the *Christos Paschon*, we may conclude that Voltaire based his remarks on his familiarity with this play, which has come down to us through a 12th century manuscript.

The *Christos Paschon* is of great interest for a wide variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it is the earliest known complete dramatization of the passion of Christ. It is composed in the form of a cento, a style of poetic composition popular in the fourth and fifth centuries. This poetic form has repulsed many later critics because it has appeared to them to be based on plagiarism. The form requires the composer to select his lines from well-known works of poetry or drama and re-work them into a separate, self-contained poetic composition. In the case of the *Christos Paschon*, more than 80 percent of the lines are recognizably derived from a wide variety of Euripides’ plays. It should be noted that this was a perfectly acceptable and respectable poetic form that came into being around the 4th century A.D. and continued in use for some centuries thereafter. Once the play is translated into the vernacular, the resemblance of its lines to those of Euripides vanishes and the play stands forth as a strikingly original dramatization of the passion of Christ.

Although Gregorio Nazianzeno is the author to whom the play is most frequently attributed, it has also been attributed to a variety of subsequent sources, some as late as the 12th century. Even if the latest attribution is accepted, the *Christos Paschon* remains the earliest example of a complete dramatization of the passion of Christ. If the earliest attribution is accepted, then it is clearly the earliest example of a Christian liturgical drama.

André Tullier consulted twenty-five extant manuscripts of the play in thirteen different libraries in Europe and Asia Minor. While his main effort is devoted to establishing the authenticity of the authorship of Gregorio Nazianzeno, his scholarship indicates that the manuscripts were circulating in the west as early as the twelfth century and perhaps earlier. In a recent paper “Grégoire de Nazianze, La Passion du Christ, Tragédie,” which includes a fully annotated publication of the Greek text with a French translation, Tullier concludes that the play is very probably the work of the 4th century patriarch, Gregorio Nazianzeno, who lived from 330 to 390 A.D. In another article containing an excellent thematic analysis of the play, Sandro Sticca also concludes that the play should be attributed to Gregorio Nazianzeno. Professor Sticca pays particular attention to the theological intent of the author, which he thinks parallels the theological interests of Gregorio. In “Liturgical Drama in Byzantine Literature,” Theodore Bogdanos, while recognizing the persuasiveness of Professor Sticca’s arguments, nevertheless believes that the play is a literary exercise of the eleventh or twelfth centuries. Professor Bogdanos’ opinion seems to be based on his extreme distaste for the form of the cento. In an earlier article, “La datation et l’attribution du Christos Paschon et l’art du centon,” Tullier clearly established the historical fact.
that the cento was an art form that flourished in the 4th and 5th centuries.7

The early date of the play is further supported by Vénétia Cottas who presents a fascinating argument that the Christos Paschon served as a direct inspiration for most of the iconographic works dealing with the passion of Christ from as early as the fifth century A.D.8 While admitting that she is unable to present direct testimony on this point, she nevertheless presents numerous persuasive examples of art works whose details coincide meticulously with the scenic details set forth in the dialogue and action of the Christos Paschon.

Regardless of the fact that over eighty percent of its lines may be shown to have been adapted from various sources in Euripides and elsewhere, an objective examination of the work reveals that it is a self-contained dramatization of the passion of Christ presented through the perspective of his mother, Mary. Tuiller aptly refers to the play as.

"... la tragédie Chrétienne par excellence. Ce drame imite les Anciens pour le fond et pour la forme. Tout en reprenant les expressions mêmes du grand Tragique, l'auteur utilise les thèmes et la mis en scene du théâtre grec.9"

The play’s dramaturgy is wrought with great technical skill, and its thematic development presents considerable insight into the human condition. It assumes the fundamental dignity of man and womankind, emphasizes free will and responsibility in the area of moral choices, and assumes the existence of a supernatural force that is concerned with human affairs. It then proceeds to dramatize the conflict between its tragic heroine and the problem of evil in the universe. The pattern of action thus presented is tragic in form.

The text of the play, as translated by Tuiller, commences with a thirty line prologue. The author states his intent to dramatize the passion of Christ after the manner of Euripides, and outlines his theme of the redemption of humanity through the sacrifice of Christ. The action starts with a monologue by Theotokos, the virgin mother of Christ, who explains that she is abroad in the night to witness the passion of her son. She is shortly joined by a chorus of holy women, and, together, they witness the approach of an armed crowd that is cursing and beating Christ. A messenger enters and describes the betrayal of Christ by Judas and the condemnation of Christ to death. They follow the mob to Calvary, where Christ speaks to her from the cross, entrusting John to her care and consoling her in moving terms. From this point on, Mary assumes the additional role of the mother of humanity. Christ grants her pleas for the forgiveness of Peter and the descendants of those who are tormenting him. After his death, John, who is also referred to as the Theologian, predicts his resurrection. The chorus then divides itself into two parts to interpret and discuss the preceding events. Their dialogue is interrupted by the episode of the centurion Longinus and his miraculous conversion. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus then arrive to recover Christ’s body. They lower it into the arms of Mary, who gives voice to a particularly poignant lamentation over the body of her son. This scene is felt by Vénétia Cottas, the author of L’influence du drame Christos Paschon sur l’art chrétienne d’Orient to have served as the initial inspiration for many subsequent depictions in the graphic arts of Mary mourning over the body of her son.10 Joseph then announces the death of Judas, and the chorus gloats in a manner strongly reminiscent of the Bacchae exulting over the death of Pentheus. Joseph and Nicodemus then carry the body to the tomb, and all of the characters repair to John’s house to rest for the night. In his role as Theologian, John explains the Christian mysteries and describes the harrowing of Hell to Joseph and Nicodemus. In the morning, a messenger arrives to report that a guard has been placed over the tomb of Christ. This persuades them to remain in the house until Easter
morning. That night the Virgin asks for a volunteer to reconnoiter the tomb and Mary Magdalene agrees to do it. The Virgin then decides to accompany her and (from lines 2020 through 2097) the visit of the Marys to Christ’s tomb on Easter morning is acted out. Christ appears to them and instructs them to inform the disciples of the good news. On their way to do so, they are stopped by a messenger who relates the dialogue he has just overheard between the tomb guards and the Temple priests after the resurrection. The priests have bribed the guards to hide the truth. As the messenger repeats the words of one of the guards, his speech gradually assumes the characteristics of that guard until he actually becomes the guard. At this point, he is joined by the High Priests and Pilate and they proceed to act out the scene that the messenger has been describing. The dramaturgic intent of the author seems clearly to have been to insert a flashback scene into his play at this point. It is probably the earliest example of the use of a flashback scene in dramatic literature. At the end of this scene, the messenger re-adopts his initial characterization, and the focus of the scene returns to Mary, the chorus and Mary Magdalene, with no sign of a break in the continuous action of these scenes. Presumably, Pilate, the High Priests and the other guards leave the stage as the flashback ends.

The characters then return to John’s house, where Christ again appears and instructs the disciples to preach his word to the world. The play concludes with a prayer or exodos celebrating the dual nature of Mary, both as Mother of God and as the mother of humanity.

While it cannot be denied that there has been a great deal of controversy concerning the authorship of the Christos Paschon, the latest, most meticulous scholarship appears to indicate that it is the work of Gregorio Nazianzeno. It would therefore seem to be an authentic drama of the 4th century A.D. In “Il Christus Patiens: Rassegna Delle Attribuzioni,” Francesco Trisoglio presents an exhaustive review of research concerning the play. It is by far the best bibliographical study of the problem to date. While he does not seem to clearly state his own opinion concerning the attribution of the play, the latest research covered by his study seems to favor the authorship of Gregorio Nazianzeno, lending further credence to its standing as a 4th century A.D. drama.

While there is no evidence that it directly inspired a Latin liturgical drama, the mere existence of Christos Paschon lends considerable support to Voltaire’s assertion that Christian Greek religious drama influenced the origins of medieval Italian and French religious drama. If the latest scholarship dating the play from the 4th century A.D. is accepted, then it is undoubtedly our earliest example of Christian drama.

NOTATIONS

3 Loc. Cit.
10 Ibid., pp. 36-42.