

CONTEMPORARY SPECTATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

PERFORMING THE BARKING ABBEY CEREMONIES IN 2018

Performance Research

Staging conventual plays and ceremonies has been an integral part of the Medieval Convent Drama Project since its conception. Three of the project's productions were presented in front of a mixed audience of sisters and laity (the Huy *Nativity* in December 2017, the Barking Abbey *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in April 2018, and the Origny *Ludus paschalis* (Easter play) in April 2019), and one of the Huy plays (*Pelerinage de la vie humaine* (Pilgrimage of Human life)) was shot as a film (December 2021). I directed, in collaboration with my colleagues at the Medieval Convent Drama Project, the 2018 Barking Abbey production on which I will focus in this chapter.¹ It was performed in two different venues—in the church of the Cistercian Abbey of La Maigrauge in Fribourg and on the steps of the Aula Magna at the University of Fribourg. The decision to stage medieval performative events in such a way was partly a result of the distance we felt existed between the project and its setting in Fribourg. While the town possesses a long Catholic history as well as numerous religious houses, it lacks specific manuscripts that would allow the study of local medieval convent drama. Performance was therefore a means to share our research on convent drama with a wider audience, who might, due to Fribourg's culture and history, be interested in this subject. Exchanges with people external to the project were also beneficial to us: we were keen to hear their opinion of the Barking ceremonies, particularly when these opinions were informed by a knowledge of liturgy and of Catholic customs. They were able to draw our attention to elements we had not previously deemed important, to continuing or similar traditions, and to the use of drama and performance for religious purposes. Their reactions were particularly valuable for reflecting on intended and possible medieval reactions to the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*.

¹ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF4eL-Bon00 for a film of this production in the abbey church of La Maigrauge.

These modern responses had to be considered carefully because the production we presented to our audience was different from those performed at Barking Abbey. Even when modern performances attempt to be faithful to the time of the play or ceremony that they bring to life, they encounter a multitude of problems. First, they must deal with the play-text. This text may fail to describe costumes, sets, props, movements, and location in detail. Modern directors, stage managers, and actors must therefore make decisions about these missing pieces of information. While their solutions can work well in performance, this does not mean that things were done or always done in this way in the Middle Ages.² Even if the text is more descriptive, recreating costumes, sets, props, movements, or location exactly remains impossible. Furthermore, what the text describes might not be what was done in performance. The Ordinal, for instance, may be a record of existing ceremonies and the way in which they were performed at Barking, or it may be a prescriptive text, instructing those about to “stage” the ceremonies. They may not have followed the instructions written in the Ordinal and even if they did, improvisation could have taken place and mistakes could have been made in performance.³ The written version of the Barking ceremonies may alternatively represent an ideal, which the convent desired to transmit, or the version it felt should be performed, rather than what was really performed on Easter Day.⁴

In addition to these textual concerns, modern productions must deal with human factors: audiences and performers. Understanding the response of medieval spectators and participants to the Barking Abbey ceremonies is already a complex task because of the multiple and varied possible effects of performance. No two performances of the same play/ceremony in the same space by the same performers will elicit the same reactions. Even spectators and performers involved in one performance will not all react to it in the exact same way.⁵ These concerns are complicated when performance research is used because the plays/ceremonies are then performed by modern actors in front of modern audience members. These people do not approach what they see or perform with the same beliefs, expectations, and

2 Dutton, “A Manifesto for Performance Research,” 252.

3 See Davidson, “Improvisation in Medieval Drama.”

4 Gittos, “Researching the History of Rites,” 21–23; Symes, “Liturgical Texts and Performance Practices,” 239–41.

5 McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 1; Taylor, *Moment by Moment by Shakespeare*, 2; Dutton, “A Manifesto for Performance Research,” 252.

knowledge as their medieval counterparts did. Their relationship with one another may also differ from those of medieval spectators and performers, who were often members of a close community.⁶ Their acting and reactions thus probably do not replicate those of the Middle Ages and, even if they may be similar, we cannot be sure of it. Performance research—like many disciplines focused on understanding the past—does not provide researchers with definite answers. What it can do, however, is allow these researchers to explore possibilities.

These possibilities can be practical: performance research draws attention to the ways in which a play/ceremony is put on and works. This can mean for example working out the size of a set used in a specific performance space, the number of performers that can fit in this space, or the ways in which its acoustics work. These practicalities of performance are essential to understanding drama and liturgy but remain invisible on the page. Another set of possibilities that can be explored through this kind of research concerns the effects of performance. While modern performance does not claim to reconstruct medieval performance, it bears similarities to it. Both are embodied practices where a text is enacted in front of spectators. As such, performance research can “reconstruct aspects of an audience’s experience.” It can raise questions and generate thoughts, for instance, about the effects of music or of the type of staging practised in the Middle Ages.⁷ Staging medieval plays or ceremonies can therefore illuminate such texts in unpredictable and unexpected ways: either by emphasizing their practical aspects or by exploring their potential effects.⁸

Preparing, rehearsing, and performing the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* did raise unforeseen questions and bring enriching possibilities and fresh interpretations to the research that had gone before. This chapter will draw on my experiences and those of actors and spectators to reflect on the project’s staging of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio sepulchri*. A first part will be dedicated to explaining staging choices and describing the production our modern audience and actors experienced. The second part will explore their responses to the performances and the ways in which this experiment and the reactions it elicited may further our understanding of the ceremonies’ impact on their medieval spectators and participants.

⁶ Twycross, “The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays,” 27.

⁷ Dutton, “A Manifesto for Performance Research,” 253–55.

⁸ Dutton, “A Manifesto for Performance Research,” 259.

La Visite au Tombeau-Pièce de Théâtre Médiévale de l'Abbaye de Barking: Staging Choices

As I prepared our production of the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio sepulchri*, I hoped that, while obviously not identical to the medieval productions of the ceremonies, it would come as close to them as was achievable with our means and knowledge.⁹ This method had its challenges: even if our performances had been perfectly similar to those of Barking Abbey, we could not know whether they would have affected each spectator and participant as they have ours. Another solution would have been to adapt the ceremonies' language, references, and themes to modern expectations in order to produce an effect approaching that of the medieval ceremonies. I attempted for a while to imagine how a modern religious house would create this kind of dramatic liturgical ceremony. Yet I was not sure what to keep or what to change in ceremonies that have no modern liturgical equivalent. This type of adaptation would further have erased some of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s essential features, such as the music. The project's academic interest in medieval dramatic liturgy and my knowledge of the continuous presence of Latin in some liturgical chants of present-day Catholic liturgy were additional reasons convincing me against this option.¹⁰ I moreover did not feel that transforming the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* to avoid alienation would be useful when modern viewers of various religious beliefs and backgrounds might still feel, in some cases, alienated by modern Catholic liturgy. In spite of the differences between modern and medieval actors and spectators, I therefore decided to direct a version of the ceremonies which would approach as closely as possible their performance in the Middle Ages.

However, there was another profound difference between our project and these medieval performances to consider. Our general aim in staging the ceremonies was fundamentally other than that of the nuns and clergy of Barking Abbey had been. Ours was an academic project intending to further research on the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*—on their dramatic aspects in particular—and, if possible, to capture the attention of a modern audience. The Barking nuns also intended to affect their spectators, but their explicit purpose was first a devotional one.

⁹ We began working on the script in December 2017 and started rehearsing in February 2018. Our budget was one thousand francs.

¹⁰ For instance, the *Salve regina* (Hail queen) and the *Regina celi* (Rejoice, queen of Heaven).

Differing from the Text and Context: Breaking with the Liturgical Framework

Such a difference of purpose was partly the reason behind our deliberate decision to remove the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* from some of their liturgical framework and to rename the Barking ceremonies: *La visite au tombeau: Pièce de théâtre médiévale de l'abbaye de Barking* (The Visit to the Sepulchre: A Medieval Play from the Abbey of Barking). Disassociating the ceremonies from the liturgy in which they were originally inserted gave the audience and performers a very different experience from that of medieval spectators and participants who, presumably, attended the entire Matins. We settled on this option because of our background and our intention to appeal to a varied audience, as well as the time and means available to our production. Had we attempted to be faithful to the Ordinal, we should have performed the Matins in the morning. This was not feasible in our first venue, the Abbey of La Maigrange, which had its own Matins, and it was too early to attract a significant lay audience. To prevent some of this disconnection from liturgy, we asked conventual communities to take on the staging of either the whole Barking Abbey Easter Day Matins ceremony, or, if that was not possible, of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* only. A female religious community would have approached their performances with a purpose closer to that of medieval nuns than we ever could. Despite changes in conventual life and in the liturgy, modern and medieval nuns share similarly structured days, as well as a knowledge of and dedication to the liturgy. The scale of the task proved too daunting, however, and discouraged the communities we contacted. They understandably were not able to conduct a months-long experiment which would have involved learning numerous chants and movements.

We therefore resolved to use lay actors who were, for the most part, students at the University of Fribourg.¹¹ Personal faith drew some of them to the project, but it was not a condition for their participation. For reasons of space, time, and budget, only the speaking parts were cast: Christ, the three Marys, the two angels, a disciple, and two candle bearers/choir members. This meant that our actors were noticeably fewer than the medieval participants in the Barking ceremonies had been. Their task was also different from that of their predecessors: they were playing members of the medieval abbey of Barking who were themselves representing figures in a scriptural narrative. This was explained to them at the beginning of our

11 Christoph, David, and Dr. Olivia Robinson were not, or were no longer, students at the University of Fribourg.

LES ACTEURS

Prêtre officiant / Jésus : Christoph Mayer

Prêtre de la chapelle / Disciple : Mathieu Bach

Diacre 1 / Ange 1 : Guillaume Babey

Diacre 2 / Ange 2 : David Bruegger

Abbesse : Dinah Marti

Cantrix / Marie Madeleine : Sandy Maillard

Marie Salomé : Sylvia Wiederkehr

Marie mère de Jacques : Felicia von Allmen

Novice 1 : Olivia Robinson

Novice 2 : Aurélie Blanc

Costumes et Accessoires : Jacqueline Blanc, Elisabeth Dutton, Tamara Haddad, Céline Sidler, Claire Torrent

Publicité : Christoph Mayer, Olivia Robinson

Adaptation texte et musique : Aurélie Blanc

Aide musicale: Mathieu Bach, Sandy Maillard, Christoph Mayer

Mise en scène : Aurélie Blanc

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La pièce

Sybil de Felton, abbesse de l'Abbaye anglaise de Barking, commandita en 1404 la création d'un Ordinaire, un livre contenant un descriptif de la liturgie utilisée dans l'abbaye. La version des Matines de Pâques donnée dans ce dernier inclut deux cérémonies (*l'Elevatio* et la *Visitatio Sepulchri*) qui ont attiré l'attention des chercheurs intéressés par le théâtre, car elles mentionnent explicitement les rôles que prennent les participants, ainsi que les costumes spécifiques à ces rôles. Ces 'pièces de théâtre' font partie d'un ensemble de cérémonies toutes très semblables, jouées dans des couvents et monastères en Europe médiévale. Dans le cas de Barking, les 'acteurs' étaient les sœurs de l'abbaye, ainsi que le clergé qui y résidait.

Ce sont donc ces deux 'pièces' que nous allons vous présenter dans une mise en scène qui tente de se rapprocher de celle qui se faisait dans l'abbaye de Barking. Il demeure cependant impossible de les recréer parfaitement. Le lieu (l'abbaye est malheureusement détruite), les costumes (pour lesquels il nous faudrait un budget colossal), le nombre de participants (trente sœurs, une dizaine de prêtres et diacres, ainsi qu'au moins deux garçons portant des bougies) ne sont pas reproductibles à l'identique. Le public lui-même ne peut vivre la même expérience que le pouvait un public médiéval possédant d'autres habitudes, d'autres connaissances et attentes. La subjectivité entre également en compte dans la mise en scène et le jeu des acteurs qui ne sont que vaguement décrits dans l'original. On se rend compte en répétition des informations qui nous manquent : certains gestes étaient évidents pour les participants ; certains lieux simplement appelés 'le lieu habituel'. Musique et chant forment un autre aspect des pièces pour lesquels l'incertitude demeure. L'Ordinaire ne contient en effet aucune partition. La reconstitution s'est fait au moyen de musique provenant de pièces de théâtre similaires venant d'Angleterre et du nord de la France.

Vous êtes ainsi sur le point de voir une interprétation des pièces de l'abbaye de Barking. Sans prétendre présenter la 'vérité', notre mise en scène se propose d'explorer ces pièces, leurs effets sonores et visuels, et leur fonctionnement dans l'espace de l'église.

Nous avons eu la chance d'être généreusement accueillis par l'Abbaye de la Maigrauge qui nous a permis d'utiliser la copie de leur saint sépulcre. Celui-ci est contemporains des pièces que nous jouons et aurait pu être utilisé de manière semblable dans la liturgie de Pâques. Il relie pour nous le Fribourg médiéval et l'abbaye maintenant disparue de Barking.

Bien qu'imparfaite d'un certain point de vue, cette mise en scène nous apporte énormément d'informations, de remises en question (concernant par exemple les mouvements dans l'église) et nous force à nous intéresser à des aspects de la pièce sur lesquels nous serions autrement passés rapidement, comme l'ordre des processions ou encore la composition des vêtements liturgiques. Elle démontre à quel point le chant, qui ne saute pas aux yeux en lisant l'Ordinaire, est central à la cérémonie et change sa perception. Les répétitions ont également rendu clair à quel point ces 'pièces de théâtre' ne le sont pas vraiment, ou du moins pas seulement, et s'insèrent dans la liturgie. Il est problématique pour nous de 'jouer' ainsi des cérémonies que relèvent de la foi, particulièrement dans une église. Nous avons donc opté pour un ostensorio vide plutôt que contenant une hostie et avons été attentifs à traiter ce projet avec respect. Nous espérons que vous comprendrez notre démarche de recherche et de désir de compréhension de ces cérémonies.

Dans le reste de ce programme vous trouverez un résumé en français des pièces. Merci encore pour votre présence et je vous souhaite de passer un beau moment avec nous.

Aurélie Blanc



Résumé

Les pièces de Barking commencent par la Descente aux Enfers, avant de représenter la Résurrection du Christ et de se terminer par la Visite des trois Marie au tombeau.

Au début, les sœurs, accompagnées par des prêtres et diacres, se rendent dans la chapelle de Marie Madeleine qui symbolise les enfers. Le prêtre officiant, représentant le Christ, avance vers la chapelle avec deux diacres. Il donne trois coups à la porte et lui ordonne de s'ouvrir. Au troisième coup, celle-ci s'ouvre et ils entrent dans la chapelle. Tous sortent ensemble, les sœurs et le prêtre de la chapelle représentant les patriarches et les prophètes, et ils font une procession vers le saint sépulcre.

Là, le prêtre officiant encense le sépulcre avant d'en sortir un ostensorio contenant le corps consacré du Christ. Il chante avec la cantrix la Résurrection du Christ. Tous forment à nouveau une procession et marchent en direction de la chapelle de Marie Madeleine.

Une fois quelques changements de costumes effectués, tous se mettent en place. Trois sœurs portent maintenant des voiles et des surplis blancs. Elles confessent à l'abbesse, avant de commencer à jouer les trois Marie. Elles se lamentent et s'avancent lentement vers le sépulcre. Une fois arrivées, elles aperçoivent tout d'abord un ange qui leur annonce que le Christ n'est plus là et est ressuscité. Les Marie embrassent le sépulcre mais continuent de se lamenter. Le second ange interpelle Marie Madeleine qui ne sait pas où on a mis le corps du Christ. Jésus lui apparaît ensuite (joué par le prêtre officiant). Il lui demande de ne pas le toucher car il n'est pas encore monté vers son père et d'aller annoncer sa Résurrection. Marie Madeleine l'annonce avec joie aux deux autres Marie puis Jésus leur apparaît à toutes les trois. Elles embrassent ses pieds et annoncent à tous la Résurrection. Leur annonce est reprise par les autres sœurs. Un disciple vient ensuite vers Marie Madeleine pour lui demander ce qu'elle a vu. Elle répond et il proclame sa joie, d'abord seul, puis avec les autres sœurs. Enfin, tous chantent ensemble que le Christ est ressuscité.

Figure 2.1. Programme of *La visite au tombeau de Barking Abbey: Une pièce de théâtre médiévale*. Reproduced by permission.

rehearsals but was not insisted on and, as I will explore later, the actors responded to it in different ways. Our actors' modernity meant that they were unfamiliar with the medieval ceremonies they were performing but their lay status created an additional layer of separation between past and present performances. The actors' purpose in performing, much like that of the creative team behind the production, their liturgical training and, for some, their religious beliefs, did not match those of the nuns and clerics of Barking Abbey. Although our first performance took place in a monastic house, as had the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* in the Middle Ages, what modern audience members saw was a lay, academic reconstruction of medieval liturgical ceremonies, whose aim and conception differed extensively from the devotional intent and the liturgical context of the Barking Abbey *Elevatio* and *Visitatio sepulchri*.

Watching our actors rehearse in costume in the La Maigrange church, I became conscious of how problematic it was to see lay performers impersonate—for non-religious reasons—religious men and women in a religious building, in front of people who were, in some cases, practising Christians. Our performance had the potential to create confusion between reality and pretending. It might also have been perceived as disrespectful to the beliefs of some spectators because it turned liturgy into a dramatic spectacle. To make our project's intentions and our respect for the liturgical context of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* clear, I felt the need to announce them in our programme and in a speech before the beginning of the performance (see Figure 2.1).

We moreover refrained from using a Host in the monstrance and left it empty instead. For the same reasons, we decided against performing the whole Matins and limited ourselves to the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. Reducing our performance to these ceremonies was a way of ostensibly distancing our production from real liturgy. We found it more respectful to limit ourselves to the dramatic aspects of the Barking liturgy—which are the focus of our study—rather than to treat the entire Matins as a play to be performed in front of an audience. Removing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* from some of their liturgical context changed their effect on actors and spectators. We would have liked to have avoided such a disassociation but our identity as academic researchers, as well as the constraints of casting our production, unfortunately prevented such an outcome. However, not all liturgical aspects of the Barking ceremonies were discarded: our first venue, for instance, expressed the liturgical nature of the ceremonies.

Differing from the Text and Context: Using Local Spaces and Traditions

When looking for venues, we quickly realized that we would not be able to use Barking Abbey church: while performing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in their original location (which is now a park) was not unimaginable, with the building gone, we would not have been able to learn about the performance of this script in a church space.¹² We resolved to use regional spaces instead: we performed the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in a thirteenth-century church belonging to the Abbey of La Maigrange in Fribourg and in an outdoor space situated in front of the Aula Magna of the University of Fribourg (Figures 2.2 and 2.3).

This outdoor setting was chosen to contrast with the first location in the hope that it might emphasize different aspects of the ceremonies. While not liturgical, it allowed the actors and the audience to experience a space closer in size to the medieval venue and better suited to the length of the chants. The number of performers did not match those of the original convent, however, and they often looked isolated. By contrast, the first venue was chosen for its appearance and function: its connection with an active religious house which has strong ties with the Benedictine tradition, its medieval architecture, and the possibility of using a copy of a fourteenth-century wooden sepulchre, made it the most “historically accurate” space in Fribourg to attempt a performance of the Barking Abbey ceremonies.¹³

While the first venue possessed features that made it “liturgical” and “medieval,” it was also a local place. By deciding to use the La Maigrange church and its sepulchre, we thus departed from the Barking Abbey medieval performances and anchored ours in the history of Fribourg. The Barking sepulchre did not look like the wooden chest found in the La Maigrange church: it was—at least partly—a temporary structure able to contain two people.¹⁴ Our use of the La Maigrange Abbey sepulchre and church were thus instrumental in suggesting the “medieval” to our actors and audience, but they suggested the “local medieval” rather than the Barking “medieval.” This departure from the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*’s text and context does, how-

12 Most of the church is gone but its outline was re-built after Clapham’s archaeological excavation and its shape and size remain visible.

13 Both dates roughly match those of the Barking Abbey church building and of the ceremonies’ performances as described in the Ordinal.

14 *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 1:98.

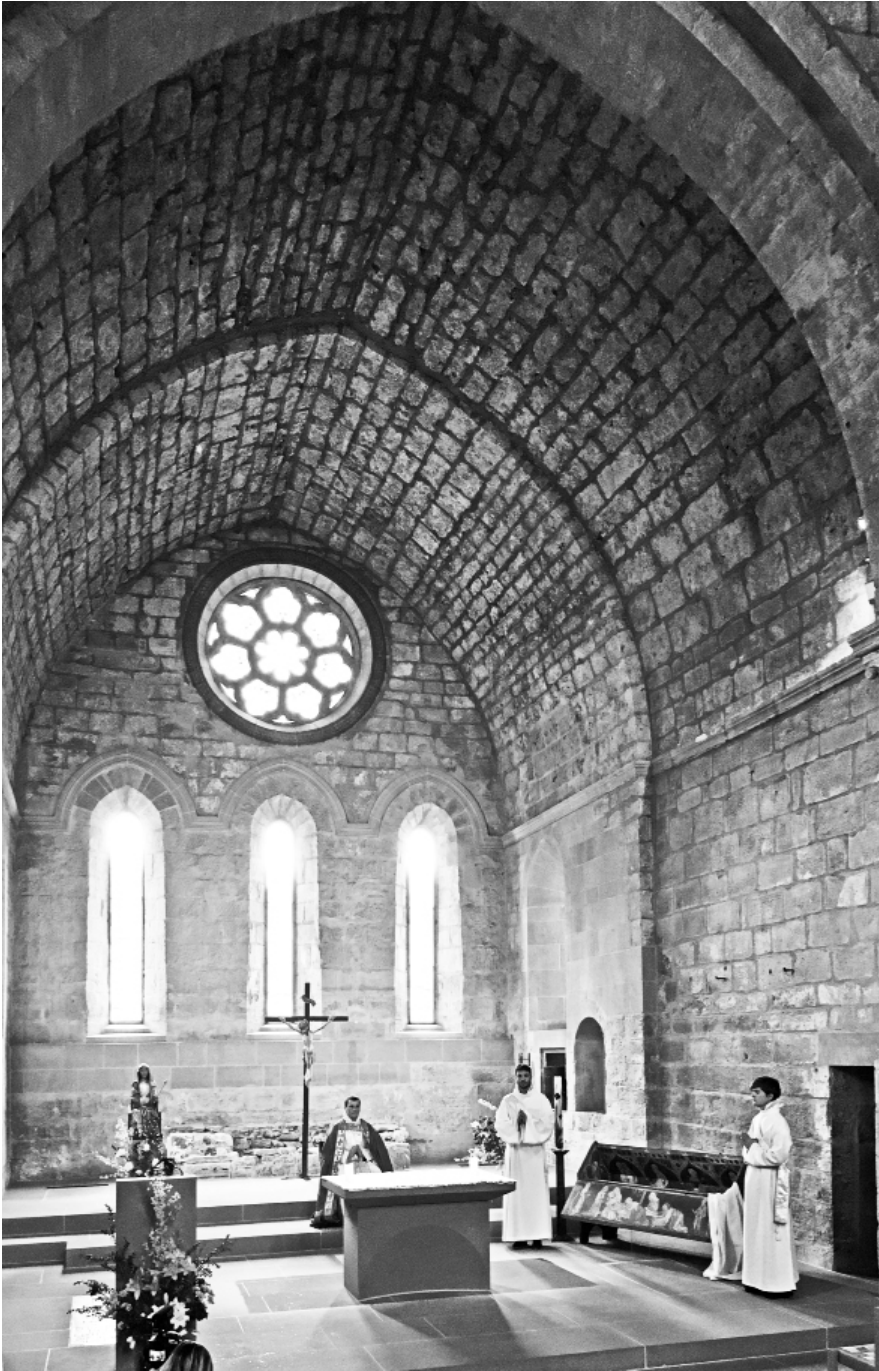


Figure 2.2. First venue: the church of the Abbey of La Maigrauge, Fribourg.
Photograph by Tamara Haddad, 2018. Used with permission.

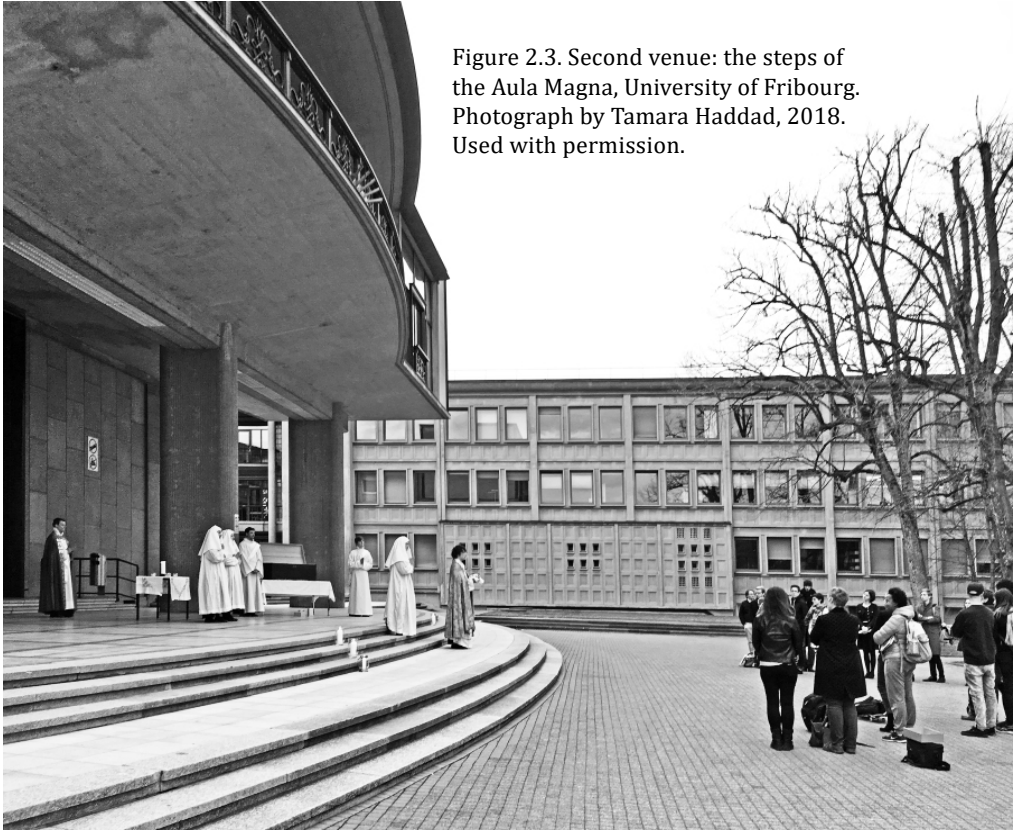


Figure 2.3. Second venue: the steps of the Aula Magna, University of Fribourg. Photograph by Tamara Haddad, 2018. Used with permission.

ever, mirror in some ways the familiarity that the sisters and inhabitants of Barking had with their local abbey church.

Although we were aware of and had to adapt to these many differences between our production and the medieval performances of the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, we nevertheless attempted to make as many staging choices as possible based on the indications provided in the Barking Ordinal in order to produce performances that would resemble their medieval counterparts. However, such a method cannot guarantee success since—as mentioned earlier—even if the Ordinal was followed perfectly by the nuns and the clergy of Barking during performances, it does not provide information about every aspect of these performances. Missing pieces of information became especially noticeable as I was preparing the script and rehearsing with our actors. I noticed, for instance, that we did not know whether the priests processing at the beginning of the *Elevatio* should start singing the *Elevamini* (Be lifted up) as soon as they entered the church or whether they ought to wait until they reached the doors of Hell. We were unaware of

both the gestures an abbess should perform as she absolved the three nuns about to represent the Marys and of the Marys' response. We were unsure what to make of Christ "appearing" (*appareat*) and "disappearing" (*disparuerit*) on the left and right side of the altar: would he walk backwards as he left or turn his back to the women? Was he visible before he "appeared"? We wondered how and how many times an altar should be censed, how many candles should be placed on the altar, how high a monstrance should be held and for how long. When the Marys kissed Jesus' feet, would they kiss them in turns or all together? The Ordinal provided few indications about processions and their order, about the transition between the *Elevatio* and the *Visitatio*, about the handling of "props" (which seemed to disappear or appear out of nowhere), about the lighting of candles, and about the position of non-speaking performers. It thus forced us to make these decisions ourselves.

To do so, we turned to liturgy and to medieval images. I hoped that they would enable us to make choices in accordance with the ceremonies' text and context. Yet, in practice, we did not always remain faithful to either text or context because of a mixture of practical constraints, mistakes, and a desire to present our research in an engaging way to our audience. The result of these choices was the production of a unique version of the Barking *Visitatio* and *Elevatio*.

Remaining Close to the Text and Context: Liturgy as a Source of Information

Expanding our knowledge of liturgy in general and of medieval liturgy in particular was essential to our understanding of the ceremonies' context and helped fill some of the gaps we encountered. However, liturgy was unable to offer entirely reliable answers to our staging questions. Medieval religious houses had their own traditions, their own feasts, and rituals.¹⁵ Such specificity became once more evident when we were staging our production. While the Barking Ordinal states that the nuns followed the clergy during the processions of the *Elevatio*, the Dominican friar who was advising us declared that the clergy usually went last. We wondered whether the indication from the Ordinal was a mistake made by the manuscript's scribe or composer, whether this practice was unique to Barking Abbey, or whether it was a widespread tradition. In this instance, we decided to follow the Ordinal's instructions rather than the more standard liturgical rule since they seemed to bring us closer to the local specificity of medieval liturgy.

15 See Salisbury, *Worship in Medieval England*, 13–43.

Liturgical knowledge nevertheless remained valuable to us as it offered plausible—if not verifiable—solutions to our questions. Although not specific to Barking Abbey and at times not medieval either, these solutions were grounded in the ceremonies' liturgical context. Liturgy helped us decide the way in which the priest playing Jesus should knock on the doors of Hell (with the bottom of his cross) and in which the nuns should position themselves during confession (kneeling). It determined the order of the clergy in procession (the deacon carrying the thurible went first, followed by the deacon carrying the cross, the officiating priest went last), and the reaction to the elevation of the monstrance (all actors knelt).

We moreover made extensive use of *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* ceremonies from approximately the same period and area in the hope that their “stage directions” would be more explicit than those of Barking Abbey. These liturgical ceremonies proved especially valuable in terms of movement and gestures. They prompted us to direct the Marys to kneel as they kissed the sepulchre and to make actors step back when they showed fear, bow their heads in sign of respect, clasp their hands to express sadness, bend their bodies to communicate mourning. Slow movement tended to indicate sorrow and running to connote joy. The intensity of the singing generally evolved during a *Visitatio* ceremony from its initial sadness to a louder, more sonorous sound, exultantly announcing the Resurrection.

Elevatio and *Visitatio* ceremonies were also used to decide which costume the actors should wear. They—Barking ceremonies included—generally show their performers in liturgical vestments, although these seem to have been adapted to circumstances and figures. The Barking Ordinal remains vague concerning the “costumes” worn by Jesus and the disciples (portrayed by priests and clerics) in the *Visitatio* and it does not include all the vestments worn by other participants. The *Elevatio*'s mention of the priests in copes persuaded us to leave them in this vestment for the following ceremony but even this solution raised questions. We did not know what colour the copes were, whether they had a hood, whether the priests wore a stole or a maniple. Research on liturgical vestments was therefore necessary to help us dress the clergy appropriately for early fifteenth-century Easter Day Matins without (hopefully) forgetting any of the numerous layers prescribed. In the case of the actors portraying the disciple and the angels, we chose to respect the usual liturgical colours of white and gold.¹⁶ However, we

16 Braun, *Die liturgische Gewandung*, 734–35, 750–51. See also Durand, *Rational ou manuel des divins offices*, ed. Barthélemy, 1:278–80.

gave Jesus a red cope. This choice was supported by other *Visitatio* ceremonies, which show Jesus in either white or red vestments.¹⁷ Dressing Jesus in white would have been appropriate for Easter Day; he would have shared this colour with the other participants who all benefitted from the grace of Christ resurrected. It would also have drawn attention to his divine nature, which is emphasized in the *Visitatio* through the inclusion of the *Noli me tangere* scene. Yet, given the possibility, we felt that dressing him in red fitted the elements of compassionate devotion present in the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, and we chose to focus on that aspect of the ceremonies. Red is a reminder of Christ's blood: it was worn at Barking on Good Friday and was generally the colour of feasts associated with Christ's Passion, the Apostles, the Evangelists, and the Martyrs.¹⁸ The colour also had the benefit of making Christ visually stand out, which facilitated the identification of this figure by the audience.

Since the Barking Ordinal contains no notated music, other *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* ceremonies were also instrumental in providing musical options to choose from for our production (see Appendix 2). I selected chants from the Dublin *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* (from the church of St John the Evangelist, belonging to the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity) from the Rouen *Visitatio* (Rouen Cathedral), and from the Wilton *Visitatio* (Benedictine women's house). These seemed to share the greatest textual similarities with the Barking Abbey ceremonies and were neither too geographically nor chronologically remote.¹⁹ When chants existed in all three ceremonies, I tried to

17 The Dublin ceremonies describe the clothes of the disciples in detail. They were barefoot, wore albs without decorations and, over the albs, John had a white tunicle and Peter a red one (tunicles were similar to dalmatics but they were frequently coloured and decorated). At Meissen, both apostles wore red dalmatics. In Prague and Rheinau they wore copes. I went for a dalmatic / tunicle because the Barking and Dublin ceremonies seem closely related. The Christ of Fleury changed between looking first like a gardener and then like Christ with a white dalmatic and a chasuble. In Chiemsee, Christ wore a dalmatic, a chasuble, and a crown, and he was barefoot. At the Mont Saint-Michel, Christ had a red alb, and in Coutances he was given a silk cope. I decided that the priest portraying Christ in the *Elevatio* would continue to do so in the *Visitatio*. Therefore, our actor wore the cope indicated in the *Elevatio* for both ceremonies. Young, ed., *Drama of the Medieval Church*, 1:331, 345, 347–50, 372, 385, 395–97, 409; *Liturgische Osterspiele und Osterfeiern*, ed. Lipphardt, 5:1510–12.

18 Durand, *Rational ou manuel des divins offices*, ed. Barthélemy, 1:281; *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 1:97–99, 100.

19 According to Lipphardt, the Dublin ceremonies are found in two late fourteenth-century manuscripts; the Rouen *Visitatio* is found in an early thirteenth-century manuscript. *Liturgische Osterspiele und Osterfeiern*, ed. Lipphardt, 5:1464, 1478.

privilege continuity and selected sequences of chants from one of them. My choices were facilitated by the similarities existing between many of these chants; they often possessed a common melodic base. I nevertheless struggled to find texts and music for the seven seemingly unique chants of the Barking *Visitatio*. We could have mirrored the nunnery's creativity and composed new musical pieces, but we chose instead, chiefly for reasons of time, to replace these seven chants with chants taken from the *Visitatio* ceremonies cited above, as well as from other northern French dramatic liturgical ceremonies.²⁰ Our reliance on these ceremonies—which, while similar, all differ from each other and cannot be proven to have directly influenced each other—was an imperfect solution. It had the benefit, however, of providing us with staging options that existed around the time and area of the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*.

Remaining Close to the Text and Context: Images

Another source of information we used were illuminations taken from medieval manuscripts whose date and location also approached those of the Ordinal.²¹ We replicated gestures found in the Queen Mary psalter, for instance. This manuscript shows nuns kneeling with their hands together as they confess to their abbess. It then depicts the abbess blessing them with her right hand while holding the crozier in her left hand.²² Representations of the three Marys at the tomb likewise revealed gestures that we adopted in our production: as the actor playing the angel sang *Venite et videte* (Come and see), he copied the movements commonly attributed to this angel and

Altstatt believes that the Wilton manuscript dates from the fourteenth century. Altstatt, "Re-memembering the Wilton Processional," 690–732.

20 See Appendix 2. On creativity and Barking Abbey, see Yardley, "Liturgy as the Site of Creative Engagement," 267–82.

21 On the connections and exchanges between medieval art and theatre, see Plesch, "Words and Images"; Davidson, *Drama and Art*, 1–14, 100–125; Twycross, "Beyond the Picture Theory."

22 Psalter of Henry VI, in London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian, A.XVII, fol. 74v (French origin, this miniature was added in England around 1430); The Queen Mary Psalter, in London, British Library, MS Royal, 2 B VII, fol. 219r (early fourteenth century); London, British Library, MS Arundel 233, fol. 96v (thirteenth-century English psalter); London, British Library, MS Egerton 945, fol. 214r, fol. 237v (late thirteenth-century French manuscript); London, British Library, MS Harley 2975, fol. 73v (Germany, fifteenth century); Hours of the Umfray Family, in London, British Library, MS Sloane 2468, fol. 227v (France, fifteenth century).

pointed first towards the sepulchre and later upwards.²³ We additionally consulted medieval images to gather information on medieval nuns' clothing. The Ordinal does not describe their standard habits, nor could we find many secondary sources on this subject.²⁴ We thus largely based our costumes on pictorial representations of Benedictine nuns. Illuminations, as had liturgy, gave us options that seemed as rooted as possible in the medieval and liturgical context of the Barking ceremonies. They enabled us to offer our modern spectators a visual and aural experience not too distant from what had been experienced during the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s medieval performances.

This process of preparing to perform the ceremonies would have been vastly different for the nuns and clergy of Barking. No information has survived about such preparations, but the nuns probably learned the ceremonies as they did much of liturgy. As novices, they would have observed and participated in rituals and have been instructed by the novice mistress. Then and once professed, they would have followed the guidance of the abbess and *cantrix* during the liturgy.²⁵ While there was probably some space for the community and especially for the performers to make "staging" decisions—about the way in which to move and sing—they would not have experienced the same difficulties as we did preparing the ceremonies: they knew their church, their house's liturgy, the liturgical vestments that should be worn on such an occasion, many of the chants that should be sung, and gestures that should be performed. These would also have been passed on year after year. We did not possess the same knowledge. Therefore, attempting to transfer the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* from the page to the stage had the benefit of drawing our attention to the multitude of elements that are not spoken of in the Ordinal but that would have influenced the reception of the ceremonies among their spectators and participants. Christ wearing white clothes would have conveyed a different message than Christ

23 We used these manuscripts as inspiration: De Lisle Psalter, in London, British Library, MS Arundel 83 II, fol. 133r (early fourteenth-century English Psalter); London, British Library, MS Harley 2449, fol. 167v (Netherlands, late thirteenth century); London, British Library, MS Harley 2930, fol. 12v (Netherlands, last quarter of the thirteenth century).

24 The secondary sources I consulted either focused on liturgical vestments only or spoke of the changes nuns made to their standard habits (for example Carroll-Clark, "Bad Habits.") After our production, I found two useful sources on the subject: Kuhns, *The Habit*; Koslin, "Robe of Simplicity," 255–74.

25 Yardley, *Performing Piety*, 50–68.

wearing red; a priest closing a procession would have signified something other than an abbess doing the same thing; a performer kneeling would not have suggested the same reverence as one standing. The priest representing Christ would also have had a different effect depending on whether he was visible during the whole *Visitatio* or whether he appeared suddenly in the middle of the ceremony. Modern rehearsals encouraged us as researchers to show caution when confronted with the unknown but also—given that this “unknown” would have affected spectators and participants—to discuss it and to explore various possibilities.

Differing from the Text and Context: The Script and its Translation

Although we wished to stage the Barking ceremonies in a way that would be faithful to their text and context, we occasionally distanced our production from them. Such a departure was not always made consciously. It happened, for instance, as a consequence of translating the ceremonies. We performed the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in Latin, but I translated the “stage directions” in the script given to the actors and inserted a translation of the chants in the script’s footnotes (see Appendix 2). My wish was to create a script that would resemble a modern theatre script and would be simple for the actors to understand and work with. I based my editing work on the manuscript of the Ordinal and Customary, as well as on the editions of Tolhurst, Lipphardt, Young, and Yardley and Mann, but I added scene and speech markers, a character list, and my own layout and font to provide clarity. As I mentioned earlier, I also added musical notation to the script, and translated it. My translation remained literal and often retained the Latin syntax and word order; I hoped that this would help the actors understand each word they were singing.²⁶ This approach was meant to allow actors to know what they were saying and doing, while presenting the audience with a text resembling the one heard in the early fifteenth century. As discussed in Chapter 1, I believe that the nuns and clergy of Barking understood—at least broadly—the content of the ceremonies. It seemed important for their performance that modern actors did as well. While some medieval lay spectators may also have understood Latin, a modern audience was unlikely to do so. Modern spectators were therefore provided with an explanatory

26 As I presented this script to actors during the first rehearsal, I noticed that my efforts towards clarity had not been entirely successful. I had not modified speech markers in stage directions and the actors playing the deacons did not realize it was their turn to move when the “clergy” was mentioned. Fully adapting the script to modern performers would therefore need more adjusting.

programme summarizing the content of the ceremonies (see Figure 2.1). This may have given them an advantage over some lay people attending the Barking performances, although medieval spectators were perhaps more exposed to scriptural stories and to the performance of these ceremonies and thus better equipped to understand them.

The modern translations then seem in some ways justified but they can easily result in mistakes and may therefore modify the effect of the production. I noticed this issue in the case of Latin words whose meaning had undergone a transformation by the time of the Ordinal. *Ampulla*, for instance, designated a “vase” or “vessel” according to classical dictionaries but, in a medieval liturgical context, it indicated a specific container which could be filled with consecrated oil, wine, or water.²⁷ Unfortunately, I did not translate the word appropriately prior to the production. Our Marys did not carry liturgical vessels to the tomb of Christ but silver boxes and vases. The choice of prop, made because of a mistranslation, thus had the effect of distancing the Marys from the ceremonies’ liturgical context instead of connecting them to it.

My other modifications to the text of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*—made to facilitate the organization of the rehearsals by dividing the ceremonies into scenes and to save time by presenting the actors with an easily readable script—may have had a similar distancing effect. Although I had not planned this departure from the liturgical ceremonies’ context, the script I gave the performers made the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* look like plays rather than liturgy.

Differing from the Text and Context: Modern and Practical Choices

At other times, our production consciously departed from the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*’s text and context because neither known liturgical practices, nor the examination of other dramatic liturgical ceremonies, nor even the Ordinal’s text offered fitting solutions to our staging problems. In those cases, we tested the possibilities at our disposal, and based our decisions on what worked practically and on what suited our modern venues, means, and expectations.

²⁷ Gaffiot, Félix. “populus,” in *Dictionnaire latin français*, ed. Gérard Gréco (2016), accessed September 17, 2024; *Glossarium mediae et infimae latiniatis* (1883–1887), Du Cange, Charles du Fresne, et al. *Glossarium mediae et infimae latiniatis*, ed. Léopold Favre (Niort: Léopold Favre, 1883–1887), available online at <http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/AMPULLAE1>.

One such case was the question of acting. Gestures, movements, and emotions are mentioned in the Ordinal, but they are not systematically described. As explained above, liturgical texts, practices, and pictorial depictions provided me with options that had been used in the Middle Ages for the representations of such scriptural scenes. As useful as these sources were, however, they did not convey how understated or extravagant the gestures were meant to be. Even if they had attempted to explain it, I might not have understood it accurately: the perception of what “good acting” is and of the meaning of gestures is rooted in place and time.²⁸ Our use of these “medieval” gestures was therefore in accordance with our modern sensitivities. For instance, I wanted Christ, when he revealed himself to Mary Magdalen, to stand as he did on medieval images of the scene. As the actor attempted this pose in rehearsals, those watching him could not help laughing at the “sassiness” they felt Jesus displayed. We kept this gesture in the final performances but toned it down to make it more acceptable to modern eyes. My direction therefore generally privileged broad gestures which were inspired by medieval liturgy and imagery, but which remained a product of a twenty-first century frame of reference.

Another instance of departure from text and context was the attribution of palms and candles in the *Elevatio*. They are mentioned at the start of the ceremony when they were carried by the priests and clerics representing the patriarchs and prophets who went inside the Mary Magdalen chapel. As all exited the chapel at the end of the ceremony, it is unclear whether all priests and clerics or the first clerical group only held them in their hands. When rehearsing with these props, we decided to give them to the nuns and to the one priest who went to the Mary Magdalen chapel with them. It made sense to attribute them to the clergy exiting Hell since they already held them in their hands. However, since we had reduced the number of priests and clerics from about ten to four, only one actor would have carried the palms. This seemed odd and underwhelming.²⁹ We felt justified in giving nuns these props “designantes victoriam de hoste recuperatam” (indicating victory regained over the enemy) since the female community, as well as that one priest, are said to portray the prophets and the patriarchs who triumphantly exited Hell.³⁰ However, this approach was motivated by our

28 See Butterworth, *Staging Conventions*, 94–108.

29 The second clerical group had their hands full already and could not have taken them. One deacon carried a cross and another the thurible, and the priest was about to lift the monstrance from the sepulchre.

30 “The priests and clerics sing the antiphon: When the king of glory... in a pro-

limited number of actors and our wish to have more than one person carry the palms.

Apart from the number of performers, the other factors which conditioned some of our most daring choices were the spaces we chose for our performances. We especially adapted to our first venue (La Maigrange church) and maintained many of these staging decisions in our second venue (University of Fribourg). As I was preparing our performances, I realized that the information available on the arrangement of the original Barking Abbey church space was unfortunately limited. Archaeological excavations have not been able to discover the internal layout of the church. Yet, in order to stage the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, I had to situate several altars, a Mary Magdalen chapel, and the sepulchre. While their position in the Barking Abbey church is unknown, the Ordinal informed me of some of their spatial relations with one another: one had to walk through the choir to go from the sepulchre to the Mary Magdalen chapel and the sepulchre was built near an altar, probably the high altar: “Sacriste...sepulcrum iuxta altara preparetur. Ubi sancta crux fuerit adorata decenter collocetur” (the sepulchre should be prepared next to the altar where the holy cross should be appropriately placed when it will be worshipped).³¹ Most scholars believe that the Mary Magdalen chapel was one of the two small side chapels found in the transept of Barking Abbey church. In *Playing Spaces in Early Women’s Drama*, Alison Findlay argues instead that it was the chapel located behind the high altar in the space called the Saints’ Chapel by archaeologist Alfred Clapham (Figure 2.4).³² I tend to disagree with her conclusions because the Ordinal’s indications seem to situate the Mary Magdalen chapel on the western side of the choir.³³ On the other hand, that solution is not exempt from problems:

cessional manner through the middle of the choir in the direction of the sepulchre, carrying each a palm and a candle indicating victory regained over the enemy...The mistress abbess, the prioress and the whole convent following them, as if they were the patriarchs.” See also *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 1:108.

31 *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 1:97–100, 108–9. On Good Friday, the priests carrying the cross brought it very close to the choir, before putting it down *ubi debet adorari* (where it should be worshipped). We also know from the *Ordinal* that the cross was worshipped close to an altar next to the sepulchre. This seems to indicate the high altar on which the cross is later laid.

32 Findlay, *Playing Spaces in Early Women’s Drama*, 54.

33 The altar used in the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* is not named but it seems likely to have been the high altar. This altar was fronted by steps and its position was ideal for the ceremonies. Its proximity to the sepulchre would have made the movement between the two easier.

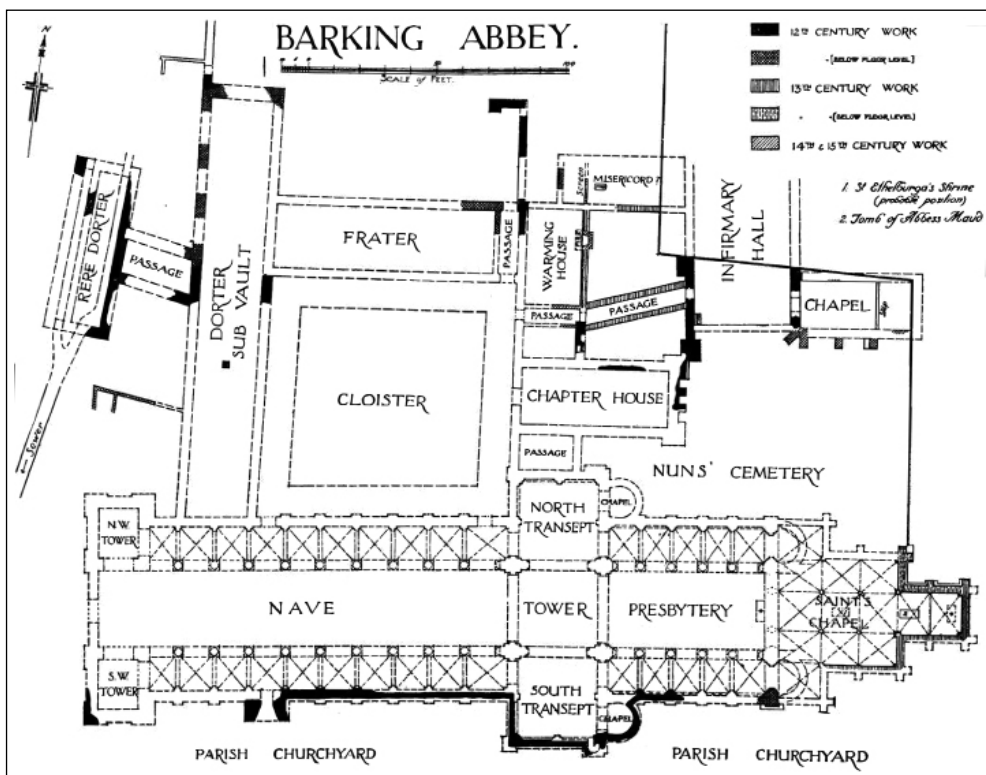


Figure 2.4. Ground plan of Barking Abbey. From Alfred W. Clapham, "The Benedictine Abbey of Barking: A Sketch of its Architectural History and an Account of Recent Excavations on its Site." *Essex Archaeological Transactions* 12 (1911): 69–87. Public domain.

the side chapels appear to be too small to contain the thirty nuns and ten members of the clergy who enclosed themselves in the Mary Magdalen chapel during the *Elevatio*. We nevertheless chose to adopt this solution: not only did it seem to be the most likely, it was also the most practical one for us to apply in a church with no chapel behind its main altar.

We then had to situate our sepulchre. Pamela Sheingorn's extensive work on Easter sepulchres in England argues that most were located on the north side of the church's chancel.³⁴ While we were aware of this information, we placed the sepulchre on the south side of the chancel. We chose this option because of the opportunity we were given to use the sepulchre belonging

³⁴ See Sheingorn, *Easter Sepulchre*, 3–25.

to the Abbey of La Maigrange.³⁵ It had been positioned on the south side of the church by the nuns for their own liturgy during Paschal time, had been opened, and draped with white cloth. We adapted to their practice, which also worked best spatially since a stone lectern made it difficult for the sepulchre to fit on the north side of the chancel.

A final question regarding space was raised by the transition from the *Elevatio* to the *Visitatio*. The Ordinal indicates neither breaks nor movements between the two ceremonies. Yet the *Elevatio* ends at the altar of the Holy Trinity and the *Visitatio* starts with mentions of three nuns in the Mary Magdalen chapel. The Ordinal fails to record either their entrance into the chapel or the movements of the clergy, but, before the second ceremony, the three nuns must have reached the Mary Magdalen chapel and the clergy may have adjusted their “props” and vestments. The palms and candles carried by the *prioress*, for instance, had to be set down after the *Elevatio*. Although Ogden and Findlay argue that the altar of the Holy Trinity could have stood at the western end of the church, continuity led us to place it inside the Mary Magdalen chapel. This had the benefit of shortening the time between the two ceremonies and of leaving no costumes and props visibly unattended. Our solution might not have worked at Barking Abbey where, if we believe that the Mary Magdalen chapel was one of the transept chapels, the priests, clerics, and three Marys changing in this small space would have proved difficult.³⁶ Moreover, considering the fact that altars were commonly dedicated to the saints of the chapel in which they were placed, it is unlikely that the altar of the Holy Trinity was located inside the Mary Magdalen chapel.³⁷ It is more probable that the Barking Abbey priests left their “props” by the altar of the Holy Trinity or took them to the vestry, while most of the convent returned to their choir stalls and the three Marys prepared in the Mary Magdalen chapel. Our decision was thus largely motivated by our choice to open these performances to the public and by our modern notion of what an audience would expect from a performance.

While we wished to be faithful to the Ordinal, performing for an audience changed our perspective on staging. We were aware of their presence and wanted to fulfil some of the expectations we imagined they had. We were especially attentive to the pace of the performance and to sight-

35 From 1329. Schaller and Aballéa, “Le st sépulcre.”

36 These chapels were 3 metres (12 feet) in diameter, with walls 1 metre (3 feet) thick. Clapham, “The Benedictine Abbey of Barking,” 81.

37 See *The Altar and its Environment*, ed. Kroesen and Schmidt.

lines. I repeatedly instructed our actors—the lamenting Marys in particular—to look at the audience as well as at the actors they were addressing in order to convey their character’s feelings. I also asked them to kiss Jesus’ feet in turns rather than at the same time and to confess outside the chapel rather than inside. We felt that these options would be more visually appealing than their alternative, either because of symmetry or because of visibility.³⁸ It was in this same spirit of consideration for our audience that we reflected on the question of the candle bearers. The Ordinal alludes to these schoolgirls who stood with the Marys at the beginning and end of the *Visitatio*. Their movements throughout the ceremony remain ambiguous and it is unclear whether they were meant to follow the Marys constantly or to accompany them in these moments only. We chose the latter solution: had the candle bearers followed the three Marys, they would have overcrowded the first venue and have made it difficult for our audience to see. The electrical lighting in the La Maigrage church also made the light provided by the candle bearer—which may have been a welcome source of illumination in the Middle Ages—redundant. The medieval nuns and clergy of Barking presumably did not encounter this issue. Their church was much larger than the one we used and less prone to feel overcrowded. The use of light, which we approached in terms of its impact on the staging, may moreover have been considered instead or as well in terms of its symbolic importance. The Ordinal emphasized the devotional purpose of the ceremonies and did not seem to consider perfect sightlines a requirement to that end. No mention was made in the manuscript of the need for the laity to *see* the ceremonies, and their view of the performance may have been hindered by a *pulpitum* and perhaps by a choir screen.

Although we were attentive to our modern audience, research conducted for this performance did add to our understanding of the medieval congregation witnessing the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio sepulchri*. As part of this research, stage manager Dr. Tamara Haddad and I attended the Good Friday service in the Fribourg Basilica, which still uses the Tridentine Rite.³⁹

In addition to the insight this service gave us into liturgical gestures and procession, it had the benefit of bringing us as close as possible to a medieval liturgy and therefore, of putting us in a position akin to that of the

38 The Ordinal does not mention how the Marys kiss Jesus’ feet, nor does it describe the Marys leaving the chapel of Mary Magdalen. They might have been inside when confessing to the abbess.

39 “La messe en latin autorisée à Fribourg,” *La Liberté*, February 21, 2022.

medieval lay congregation at Barking. As I was watching the clergy, I grew conscious of how confident they appeared and of how clueless I was. In spite of a booklet listing the words that would be sung during the service and providing a French translation, we often felt unsure of what exactly was happening: the clergy spoke at times softly and their words could not be heard. Our sense of confusion, accompanied by a lack of physical inclusion in the ceremony, led us to feel somewhat excluded from the events unfolding in the chancel. The clergy looked at us directly only once, when we were queuing to kiss a statue of Christ crucified laid on the steps in front of the high altar. Their gaze helped us feel included in the service, but it also magnified the importance of the moment, as well as our nervousness. We were frightened of making mistakes and intimidated by their knowledge. This experience was one of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, of curiosity about the ceremony yet inability to understand it fully. While a medieval congregation was presumably more familiar with such ceremonies than we were, the Good Friday service in the Basilica brought our attention to the tension one could have experienced when attending medieval liturgy: feeling a sense both of mystery and of communion with the clergy. The Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, with their mentions of turning towards the *populus* and of going inside the Magdalen chapel, exemplify such tension. Although the Basilica service did not alter our staging of the Barking ceremonies, it was instrumental in informing my research in Chapter 1, bringing to light the power of liturgy, and its potential for intimidation as well as inclusion.

All these elements, some taken from the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s medieval text and context, some the result of choices made by twenty-first-century director, stage manager, and actors, combined to create our production. The performances we presented swayed between the medieval and the modern, imitations of the past and fresh creativity, liturgical and lay impulses. With these decisions in mind, I will now explore the ways in which our performances of the Barking ceremonies affected their participants and spectators and discuss what was learned from their insights.⁴⁰

40 In general, comments on our efforts were positive. However, all interviewees freely chose to speak to us and friendly audience members were unlikely to express truly negative opinions. The absence of this type of criticism does not imply its lack of existence.

Watching a Modern Performance of the Barking Abbey Liturgical Ceremonies

The people whose reflections we collected after the performances can be divided into two groups: the participants in the production and audience members. The participants did not write the ceremonies, but much like the medieval nuns, priests, and clerics of Barking Abbey, they both observed and created the performances of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. Participants whose views will be examined here include some of the actors who agreed to be interviewed and me, as an actor and director. Their comments will be supplemented by those made by lay audience members—written down after the two performances—as well as by interviews conducted with the nuns of La Maigrange. Before exploring and comparing their testimonies, I would like to describe the two groups to understand some of the factors that influenced their impressions of the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio*.

Recording the Opinion of Actors and Spectators

As a director, I had been working on these ceremonies for more than a year and therefore came to them with a certain knowledge of their text and context. While I had experience performing drama (including medieval drama), I had a more limited experience of singing and of performing liturgy—and only as a child choir singer and altar server. Aside from directing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, I played the small part of a candle bearer, which entailed little movement, a few chants, and gave me time to observe the other actors.

The actors recruited for this production had diverse experiences of singing and acting. These shaped some of the difficulties they encountered when rehearsing and the elements on which they focused in their interviews. Sandy and Mathieu had sung liturgical chant before; Sylvia, Felicia, and Christoph were trained and experienced singers but did not know this repertoire. Sandy, Felicia, and Sylvia had acted before. Christoph had extensive acting experience. David was inexperienced in both singing and acting, and Guillaume and Dinah were experienced actors who enjoyed singing. Just as varied as their experience of performance were their religious beliefs. These included non-religious, mildly religious or at least spiritual, Christian but non-Catholic, moderate Catholic, and devout Catholic views. Faith was not discussed in rehearsals, but it was frequently mentioned in interviews, and it influenced the participants' responses to their performances.

Their responses were also probably shaped by their knowledge and understanding of the ceremonies. During their first rehearsal, on February 14, 2018, performers were given their script. I further gave actors handouts

introducing them to the lives of the nuns, priests, and clerics of Barking Abbey. Later in the rehearsal process, performers were provided with medieval images depicting the scriptural scenes told in the Barking ceremonies and with “stage directions” found in other *Elevatio* or *Visitatio* ceremonies. They thus had access to textual and visual tools helping them understand both some of the medieval context in which these ceremonies had been performed and the meaning of the words they sang. While the liturgical aspect of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* was explained to them, the script and my tendency to refer to our production as a “play” may have further influenced their approach to the performances.

Actors were encouraged to bring their own thoughts and ideas to the production. A few of them even became instrumental in developing its musical side. They helped with vocal warmups, led singing rehearsals, and two of them (Christoph and Sandy) recorded the chants to facilitate the others’ learning process. Actors’ physical, intellectual, and creative participation affected their view of the performances and separated it from that of audience members. While audience members were more passive, they also had more leisure to observe our performances. Their number amounted to about forty-five in La Maigrage and to about twenty-five in front of the University. Most lay spectators seem to have been actors’ friends or family members. In La Maigrage, the nuns of the abbey were also present and watched the performance from their stalls. The abbess and the prioress were informed of the ceremonies’ original insertion in the Divine Office. In consequence, we decided together to set the performance in the afternoon, before Vespers, and to invite the audience to stay in the church for that service. This solution allowed audience members interested only in the dramatic aspect of the performance to leave. It simultaneously honoured the original context and purpose of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* by permitting those who wished to reflect upon them in a more spiritual manner to continue this reflection during a real liturgical ceremony. I do not know how much the other sisters of La Maigrage knew about the Barking ceremonies before witnessing our performance. I left a script with the abbess and prioress, which might have been transmitted to them, and I believe that the decision to welcome us inside their church was communal. Yet some expressed their surprise at the form of the ceremonies.⁴¹ Our contact with La Maigrage, as well as our use of its space and objects, therefore

41 We talked to five nuns, who are referred to here as A, B, C, D, and E for reasons of anonymity. This comment was made by A.

influenced the sisters' perception of our performance. Their vast knowledge of liturgy, of chant, and of the Scriptures, as well as their faith, further informed their responses.

We attempted to collect as many of these responses as possible in the days following the performances. In the case of the nuns and of the actors, this was done through interviews following the guidelines of the University of Fribourg's ethics committee and which had been agreed upon before the date of the performances (April 9, 2018). Five of the eleven La Maigrange nuns—called in this document A, B, C, D, and E for reasons of anonymity—took part in the process. I conducted the interviews and recorded them with handwritten notes only. Five actors—Sandy, Guillaume, Sylvia, Christoph, and David—agreed to be interviewed by Dr. Olivia Robinson in April 2018.⁴² They allowed us to film and name them. Neither nuns nor actors knew in advance the questions we would ask them.

The project's chosen interviewing technique was that of semi-structured interviews, which aimed to allow the subjects to express their feelings—even if those were going in a different direction than anticipated—without being interrupted. Since we were not interested in obtaining specific answers, we hoped that this process would feel like a conversation, and we tried to let the interviewees talk as much as possible. We had prepared a list of questions, but it merely served as a guideline (see Appendix 1). Comments made by other audience members, as well as my own thoughts on the production, were recorded through notes during the rehearsal process and shortly after the performances.

The reactions collected express a multiplicity of viewpoints: they show some of the director and actors' feelings and intentions, and some of the audience members' responses to these. In spite of this variety, three themes—The Importance of Music, Drama and Liturgy, and Connection to the Past—frequently reoccur. Their prevalence supports and informs some of the previous arguments concerning spectatorship and participation proposed by this book, but it also opens new paths of investigation.

42 The nuns were interviewed in French; the actors were interviewed in English or in French according to their preference. All translations into English are my own.

Impressions of Modern Actors and Spectators

The Importance of Music

Music played a significant role when preparing and performing the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. This was partly because of the difficulty of mastering its complexity.⁴³ Sylvia, Sandy, and Christoph, who all possessed considerable singing experience, as well as Guillaume, who sang frequently but did not have formal training, testified to this difficult learning process. Christoph and Sylvia had problems remembering the Latin texts, and all four felt that medieval chants sounded strange to modern ears and lacked recognizable, easily memorable tunes.⁴⁴ Singing these chants further required, as described by Sylvia, a different technique, a particular *souffle* (breath) previously unknown to her.⁴⁵ The staging continued to complicate their learning process, particularly when it came to group singing. Movements regularly prevented actors from seeing each other's mouths and faces, the change of venues and acoustics meant that they needed to make constant adjustments, and the caps, veils, and wimples worn by the women did not allow them to hear each other properly.⁴⁶ These difficulties were exacerbated by the diversity of the actors' musical training.⁴⁷

It is unlikely that the medieval nuns and clergy of Barking, who were utterly familiar with this type of music, struggled as our actors had when learning the chants. What our rehearsals revealed about their experience, however, was the demands that music made on staging. We noticed that it had an influence on how and on how much performers could move (particularly in a group), on how they positioned themselves in relation to each other, and on how they acted. The demands of singing created a distortion of the actors' faces which obstructed any expression of subtle emotions and made facial expressions challenging to read. To counteract this, we encouraged actors to vary their way of singing—softly or loudly, slowly or quickly. The broader types of movements seen in pictorial depictions also worked well to solve this issue: while they could have appeared exaggerated, when paired with the singing and if well timed, they seemed to smoothly accompany the music—as perhaps a dance would. Too much movement was dif-

⁴³ Sylvia, Aurélie, Christoph.

⁴⁴ Sylvia, Christoph, Sandy, Guillaume.

⁴⁵ Sylvia.

⁴⁶ Christoph, Sandy, Sylvia, Guillaume.

⁴⁷ Sylvia. David also acknowledged the differences in levels.

difficult to coordinate when performers simultaneously had to sing *unisono*. Choral moments worked better when they were static or processional and allowed performers to concentrate on their singing. These challenges may have led—as they did in our production—medieval nuns and clergy to privilege a focused and perhaps solemn type of staging. Yet such staging could also create a sense of intimacy between the members of the singing group. In rehearsals, I noticed that the Marys seemed closer to each other because of the movements originated by their singing: as they sang together, they looked intensely at each other. This kind of intimacy may have reinforced for spectators and participants, in the Middle Ages as today, the impression of a closeness existing between the scriptural figures in this group and between the performers taking on these roles.

Singing in general can strengthen community: it was the case in our production and may also have been the case during medieval performances of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. When singing in a group, I felt united to the other actors more than I did during shared but silent movements. I believe that this was caused by the anticipation present before the beginning of a chant, by the simultaneous breathing, by our awareness of one another, and by the collective creation of something beautiful. Other actors echoed my reaction: Sandy emphasized the feeling of a group working together, of a *communautaire* (communal) experience created by singing. Guillaume defined the way in which the actors supported each other when performing and when singing as “communal.” Christoph talked about being in an “acoustic cloud” with the other singers in La Maigrauge, hearing all of their voices “reflect from the walls.”⁴⁸ For David, singing created a *communion* (communion) not only based on a group feeling but also interlaced with spirituality. As a devout Catholic, singing in an abbey, in close proximity to others, and in Latin, felt the same to him as singing at Mass. The *communion* he experienced while performing the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* was like a prayer: it was *très très fort* (very very strong i.e., moving, intense) and was reminiscent of similar intense moments he had experienced during liturgical ceremonies.⁴⁹ Music therefore had the potential to affect spectators and participants in the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in various ways. It gave the performance of the ceremonies a certain static solemnity, imbued this performance with greater intimacy between certain figures, but it also seemed to enhance the devotional and emotional experience of the performers.

48 Sandy, Guillaume, Christoph.

49 David.

This emotional response was, to a certain extent, surprising. It is easy not to realize, when reading the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, how overwhelming the effect of their music would have been in performance at Barking. The manuscript page does not show any musical notation, but, when the ceremonies are performed, music is omnipresent. It turns them into what feels like one long chant rather than a series of lines. While on the page all chants are recorded as short, text-only, *incipits*, expanding the incipits to the full text and setting it to music significantly prolonged some of them—the *Cum rex gloriae* for instance, or the *Christus resurgens*—and thus altered the perception of the length of the ceremonies and of the length of specific moments within the ceremonies. The increased duration of these chants gave them more weight, emphasizing the scriptural moments that they depicted: the glorious exit from Hell and the announcement of the Resurrection.

Plainchant might not possess a “dramatic quality” and was felt at times and by some actors to be “monotonous.”⁵⁰ Yet it brought to life the words on the page in unexpected ways and was able to create moving and beautiful moments. I found the Marys’ laments, as well as Mary Magdalen’s surprised and longing *Raboni* (Rabbi), particularly poignant. Sandy, who played the role of Mary Magdalen, did not always feel that the chants fitted tonally—at least to our modern ears—their textual content but, at times, their tune enhanced her emotions in a way that helped her act her character’s feelings. She cited the exchange between Christ and Mary Magdalen, her *Congratulamini* (Rejoice) chant, and her interaction with the second angel as examples of music carrying her emotionally and setting the appropriate mood. In her dialogue with the angel, music matched the *supplication* (pleading) and increased the *intimité* (intimacy) conveyed by the chants’ words. She also felt that the *Congratulamini*’s tonal change corresponded with the joy experienced by her character. In these moments, few movements and *mimiques* (facial expressions) were required to convey the message of the piece: “la mélodie parle d’elle-même” (the tune speaks for itself). The tune supported the actors who only had to follow its lead to create their *jeu* (acting).⁵¹ The content of the lines did not seem to be quite as influential as music on their acting. While actors possessed a translation of their Latin lines and had read it in rehearsals, many of them did not remember exactly what they were saying when they were performing. At specific times, they understood

50 Christoph. On this topic, see Hiley, *Western Plainchant*, 263; Ogden, *The Staging of Drama*, 180; Hughes, “Liturgical Drama,” 52–54.

51 Sandy.

the meaning of their words—Christoph during the *Noli me tangere* and Guillaume for his angel chants—but they often only knew the essence of the meaning of the chants.⁵² The presence of music in performance thus appears to have shaped the spectators' impression of the ceremonies and the actors' performance more directly than the Latin words could: it took them—at times at least—on an emotional journey.⁵³

For the medieval spectators and performers of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, music also probably played a significant part in their reception of the ceremonies, as has been raised in the previous chapter. Some of the ideas evoked in that chapter, particularly in terms of the emotional effect of music, were supported by the findings made during modern rehearsals and performances. But what the 2018 production strongly and perhaps unexpectedly emphasized, was the ubiquity of music and, therefore, its prevalence in the perception of the ceremonies. Such music may not have been as striking to the Barking nuns, clergy, and laity, who were familiar with it, but it would have been just as omnipresent in performance then as it was in our modern production.

Drama and Liturgy

The second theme emerging from comments on these performances is also one that has been discussed at length in this book: the importance of liturgy in the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* and the distinction between drama and liturgy. Singing and hearing the chants rather than only reading their words encouraged reflections on the liturgical aspects of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. In a region as traditionally Catholic as Fribourg, it is likely that most spectators recognized this music as sacred. Our actors certainly did. As David noted, its sound connoted a church service.⁵⁴ Gregorian chant remains, according to him, the “official” chant of the Catholic Church. Sylvia mentioned the relation between such music and the Catholic Church as well. She believed that Sandy's impressive motivation to learn the Barking chants might have come from her faith.

In addition to the music, the set, props, and costumes also brought the actors' (and the backstage crew's) attention to the liturgical characteristics of the ceremonies. These characteristics were much more prominent

52 Guillaume, Christoph, Sylvia, David.

53 Sylvia, Christoph, David, Sandy, Guillaume.

54 David. Although Mass is now in the vernacular in most churches in Fribourg, it can still feature some Latin chants.

than anticipated when reading the script. When preparing the performance, stage manager Tamara Haddad and I realized that an extensive knowledge of liturgical vestments was necessary. After conducting our own research, we met with Dominican brother Conor McDonough who was kind enough to show us vestments and explain their use. We borrowed some from priests and sewed the rest ourselves.⁵⁵ This work brought to light for us the specificity of liturgical vestments, of their appearance, size, decorations, and significance. We understood that the clergy's clothes in the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* carried with them a symbolic value, which might have been known to them and some of their spectators, particularly the religious ones.

We, as director and stage manager, thus began to be aware early on in the rehearsal process of just how liturgical the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* were, but it was the move from our rehearsal room into the first ecclesiastical venue—accompanied by a move from our everyday clothes into vestments and conventual habits—that was especially instrumental in this realization for the actors. Sylvia noticed the resemblance between her costume and the habit still worn by nuns today, while Sandy declared her respect for the habit and for the women who have worn and wear it still. Christoph admitted that he had felt pressure to handle liturgical vessels in a respectful way in front of the nuns of La Maigrange. Even Guillaume, who claimed in his interview that he was “practically a heretic,” believed that the first venue possessed a “real” religious or liturgical atmosphere. Many actors reacted to their recognition of the liturgical nature of the ceremonies with a sense of respect and responsibility towards the faith of the medieval nuns and clerics of Barking, as well as the faith of the La Maigrange nuns in the audience.⁵⁶ Just as I had modified my introduction to the performances after my own uncomfortable realization of the ceremonies’ nature, they adapted their performance.

In a post-performance discussion, Dr. Olivia Robinson—a member of the Medieval Convent Drama project who had also acted as a candle bearer in our production—remarked that the actors had performed the sadder moments of the ceremonies with more ease than the happier ones, especially at La Maigrange. The *Christus resurgens*, for instance, had sounded sad to her even though it should be a celebratory chant. We asked ourselves whether the modern perception of what constitutes an appropriate attitude in a Catholic

55 We borrowed two copes, four albs, and two dalmatics from priests, as well as four cassocks from Oxford choir singers. We made most of the nuns’ habits, as well as the stoles, amices, and the cinctures of the clergy. I extend my thanks to Bernard Brocard, Sylvain Gex-Fabry, Conor McDonough, and Tamara Haddad for their generous help.

56 Guillaume, Christoph, and Sandy all spoke of “respect.”

church and during a Catholic service might have affected her impression, my direction, and/or the actors' work.⁵⁷ In the case of the *Christus resurgens*, the tune apparently failed to carry the actors towards the emotions experienced by their characters. This might have been due to its musical features. It could alternatively have been caused by the modern listeners' perception of liturgical plainchant as generally solemn rather than jubilant, or by the actors' seriousness when singing sacred music, especially in a church space. Sylvia was certainly affected by the liturgical environment in which she sang. She declared that she had not sung as loudly inside the church as she had outside, partly because of the acoustics but partly because she did not dare raise her voice in this space. The acoustics, as well as the liturgical "props," such as incense, gave *un côté très solennel* (a very solemn side) to the first performance.⁵⁸ Christoph stated that he knew he was not "supposed to shout" or to "run around" in a Catholic church and acted accordingly in La Maigrage.⁵⁹ I, too, felt acutely aware in that environment that I was a lay woman and not a nun. This made the performance of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* uncomfortable for me; I thus tried to be as respectful as possible, which meant, in my case, remaining quiet and serious.

Our second performance did not affect the actors in the same way. David said that his performance displayed more *légèreté* (lightness) and less seriousness than it had in La Maigrage. I also experienced this change and felt more at ease in my nun costume: presenting the ceremonies in a non-sacred space expressed more plainly our purpose: we, as lay actors, were not attempting to perform a liturgy but to reconstitute a medieval performance for academic reasons.⁶⁰ The lack of religious landmarks and the high steps in front of the University aula reminded Sylvia more of a stage than of a church. The large space, as well as the acoustic quality created both for her and for Guillaume a "more dramatic" performance: "*c'était plus théâtral en fait, c'était plus une performance théâtrale*" (actually, it was more theatrical, it was more of a theatrical performance).⁶¹ Some spectators commented on the disjointed impression this second performance produced on them:

57 Although Mary Magdalen's *Raboni* and *Congratulamini* did, for me and for Olivia Robinson, convey joy (as discussed on April 10, 2018).

58 Sylvia.

59 Christoph.

60 People walking past the University might not have understood them as non-liturgical. None stopped to watch even if many watched from windows.

61 Sylvia, Guillaume.

while the ceremonies looked and sounded liturgical, they were not adapted to the space in which they were performed. Some of the actors echoed these thoughts: Sylvia reflected on the difficulty of the distance between the actors and on how it affected singing together. Christoph mentioned the passers-by who distracted him and who, along with the modern space of the university, made him feel like he was in “a today world” rather than in the past. David, on the other hand, felt that the spectators had been distracted. These observations made me realize how essential space was to the effect of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. The ceremonies were designed to be performed in the church of Barking Abbey, a liturgical space large enough to accommodate both the length of the chants and a high number of nuns and priests.

Rehearsing and performing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* thus provoked an awareness of their liturgical context, which elicited a sense of respect from our company. It raised questions about acting while singing such music in such a space dressed in such clothes. How much should one “act” to remain respectful? Medieval performers would probably have had this same respect for their liturgical surroundings. Their familiarity with such surroundings, however, may have made their approach to performance less rigid than that of modern actors.⁶² All our modern actors expressed this respect, but some also felt that the performance of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* had engaged them in a different and more profound way: it had engaged their faith. The way modern actors perceived their performance varied in large part depending on their religious beliefs.

Music, Space, Costumes, and Props: Theatrical Tools

In the case of the non-Catholic or the less religious actors, such as Christoph, Sylvia, and Guillaume, performing the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* seems to have been a theatrical rather than a devotional experience.⁶³ Music, space, props, and costumes helped them get into character. By creating an atmosphere close to that of the original ceremonies, they provoked a kind of time-travel experience, which allowed performers to feel they could portray medieval

⁶² Such familiarity seems to bring a more flexible approach: the abbess of La Maigrange, for instance, spoke aloud in the abbey church when I only dared whisper.

⁶³ Christoph, while he described himself in his interview as religious and admitted a certain knowledge of Catholic rites and customs which he had acquired in his childhood, added: “it is not what I believe in. So there was no connection.” He did not consider his performance a devotional experience. Neither did Sylvia, who had described herself as connected to Christianity in a previous interview without affirming a strong faith.

religious people more faithfully. For Christoph, the church of La Maigrange, apart from producing an awareness of its importance for some of the spectators, did not affect his performance differently than a well-crafted set would have. He felt there as one does “on stage” or on a film set. This set, as well as props and costumes, made the situation look “real,” and helped him get into “the atmosphere” and perform the role of a medieval priest.⁶⁴ Sylvia—although more attuned to the spirituality evoked by the space, music, and costumes—expressed similar thoughts. As they had with Christoph, costumes made her move differently and *entrer* (get into) her character. In the case of Guillaume, the age of the clothes he wore and the fact that they were actual liturgical vestments rather than theatre costumes brought him “back in time.” Space and props further put him in the right “mind-set” to perform: they transported him into this medieval, liturgical “atmosphere” and enabled him to act with the right decorum and mood.⁶⁵

Costume also helped actors get into character both by creating visual connections between them—Sylvia’s costume united her to the other two Marys during the *Visitatio*, Guillaume felt that he and the other men were part of a group, while Sandy and Christoph thought all actors visually belonged to “another world”—and by changing the actors’ perceptions of each other.⁶⁶ Sylvia, for instance, was surprised when she saw Sandy, dressed as Mary Magdalen, come towards her with the *sudarium*. In that moment, the shape given by the costume to Sandy’s body made her look unfamiliar. Sylvia did not see her as Sandy but *avec la forme de Marie Ma[deleine]* (in the shape of Mary Ma[gdalen]).⁶⁷ Guillaume similarly believed that costumes had allowed him to see “only the role” instead of familiar fellow actors. For Christoph, costumes did not change his view of his colleagues, but they modified the context of their interactions. These interactions became something new and different from those of everyday life. Costume therefore facilitated actors’ performances by helping them realize or establish relationships between their characters and forget their own relationships with the actors portraying these characters. Medieval participants in the Barking Abbey ceremonies presumably would not have experienced “costume” in the same way: they were used to seeing and to wearing liturgical vestments and religious habits. However, the nuns portraying the three Marys did wear unfamiliar

64 Christoph.

65 Sylvia, Guillaume.

66 Christoph.

67 Sylvia.

white veils and surplices. In their case, like in our modern production, “costume,” may have led those watching to associate these three women with the figures that they were portraying. Moreover, as evoked in the previous chapter, “costume” could have created for medieval performers and spectators—as it did for Guillaume, Sylvia, and Christoph—the feeling of belonging to a group: to a group of performers but also a group of characters.

Guillaume, Sylvia, and Christoph thus seem to have adopted a theatrical approach to their work. They felt that the various elements of the performance—space, music and text, objects, clothes, movements—were useful because they brought them closer to the atmosphere that had existed during the medieval performances of the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* and to the medieval people who had performed them. Yet, for actors who identified as Catholic or as close to Catholicism in their spirituality, these elements led, unsurprisingly, to a different and much more devotional experience—probably closer to that of the nuns, clergy, and laity of Barking Abbey.

Music, Space, Costumes, and Props: Liturgy and Devotion

In their interview, these actors did not describe music and text, space, clothes, or objects as tools to help their theatrical performance. For them, these were reminders both of liturgical services and of the history and traditions of the Church. They did relate them to the medieval past: Sandy, for instance, approached her performance with an eye to history. She claimed that we all were *d’abord des chercheurs* (researchers first).⁶⁸ As for David, he spoke of costumes as useful to help our production be as close as possible to the medieval performances of the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. David and Sandy’s discourses, however, differed from those of Sylvia, Guillaume, and Christoph because space or costume neither seem to have been atmosphere, nor character-building for them. Instead of insisting on these elements’ ability to bring them back to the Middle Ages, Sandy and David emphasized the connection they created between past and present. The music, text, space, clothes, and objects used in our production were either close to those of modern Catholic liturgy or were still used in this liturgy today. They carried multiple layers of sacred meanings for Sandy and David, who thus tended to connect them to their own present faith and to respond to them in a devotional way.

David associated costume, for instance, with his desire to enter a religious life: being dressed as a deacon felt more like receiving an encouraging sign from God than like wearing a theatre costume. As for singing, *c’était une*

68 Sandy.

prière (it was a prayer) and it *ouvre vraiment à quelque chose aussi de mystérieux* (opened him to something mysterious). He associated it with singing in church, he repeated the saying *chanter c'est prier deux fois* (singing is praying twice)—which had already been reported to us by a Carmelite nun in December 2017—and defined it three times as moving.⁶⁹ Sandy similarly deemed singing more devotionally *engageant* (engaging) than speaking. In her case, music, costume, and space connected her to a long tradition of women in the Church, which she felt had started with Mary Magdalen and was now on the brink of extinction. She described her costume as *plus qu'un costume en fait* (more than a costume, really) and proceeded to mention its tradition, the values it conveyed, and the women who wore it, as well as their faith. The church of La Maigrauge further drew her attention to the nuns who use this space every day and who were present in the audience. As for music, she described it as a point of connection between her performance and the sisters of La Maigrauge's daily participation in sung services. Sandy expressed her respect and admiration for the history and the traditions of women in the Church.⁷⁰ Her admiration for these women had an emotional impact on her performance of these conventual ceremonies: she felt *beaucoup touchée* (very moved) to perform them in front of modern nuns.

Sandy further included herself in this female Christian tradition by connecting her own faith to that of the Barking and La Maigrauge's sisters and of Mary Magdalen. She claimed an affinity to the Benedictine *courant* (ideas) and, when performing these Benedictine liturgical ceremonies, felt herself suddenly carried by her faith. This feeling, which she had not experienced during rehearsals, came when she was in the conventual church—a space she immediately connected with her own devotion—and in front of an audience (some of whom were nuns). She recounted being especially moved when she sang Mary Magdalen's joy at having seen the Lord and simultaneously saw light coming through the window at the back of the church.⁷¹ The juxtaposition of this joyful moment for Mary Magdalen with an element commonly associated with Christ and his Resurrection seems to have created a connection between past and present, between Sandy's and Mary Magdalen's experiences. In that moment, Sandy was telling the story of Mary Magdalen and of the Resurrection through her words and movements, but

69 David.

70 She spoke of the sisters' brave lifestyle: "je pense que ces gens, ils sont courageux" (I think that these people are brave). Sandy.

71 Sandy.

she was also seeing the light, a reminder of Christ's presence and of the continuing importance of his Resurrection for Christians today.

Sandy and David's reactions may suggest some of the responses of the medieval nuns and clerics of Barking Abbey to the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. Like David, they would have associated liturgical music and vestments with prayer. They may have reflected, like Sandy, on the similarity between their faith and that of past scriptural figures or may have been moved by the symbolism of light and the Resurrection. The experience of these two actors, while specific to them, supports some of the arguments made in Chapter 1 and gives examples of possible devotional reactions from medieval spectators and participants.

Acting in this Context: Prayer and Impersonation

Knowledge of, but also belief in, the Catholic faith therefore played a significant role in determining the effect the chants, space, props, and costumes of the 2018 production had on actors and on their performances. Those possessing such faith seem to have connected these elements to their own experience of prayer and of the liturgy while those who did not considered them as useful tools to stage a play. Catholic piety further influenced the actors' approach to acting. If one is used to attending liturgy and believes in the Resurrection, performing these liturgical ceremonies can be, as it was for David and Sandy (and presumably for the nuns and clergy of Barking Abbey), a devotional experience. For them, acting in the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* did not merely consist in playing religious people from the past, but in praying themselves. The actors who did not share their beliefs but who nonetheless recognized the liturgical nature of the ceremonies oscillated between attempting to impersonate medieval nuns and members of the clergy and avoiding impersonation out of respect.

Christoph decided to remain in character, as a medieval priest, for the entirety of the two ceremonies. He wondered how a medieval priest would have moved and how he would have portrayed Christ. He believed that such a man, although he could have been at times "dramatic" in his gestures, might not have handled his portrayal of Jesus in a theatrical way.⁷² Sylvia had a similar approach to Christoph's. Realizing the liturgical nature of the ceremonies, she decided to interest herself in medieval nuns in order to understand how they would have performed the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*.⁷³ She

⁷² Christoph.

⁷³ Sylvia: "c'est pas dans le sens du théâtre totalement à fond" (it is not, in a way,

adapted her acting style accordingly: she believed that what had mattered to these nuns were *positions* (positions) rather than *jeu pur* (pure acting) and the creation of tableaux rather than the expression of deep feelings. Sylvia thought nuns would have performed symbolic and—a view reinforced by wearing a habit and a surplice—calm movements. These clothes, which were not a realistic costume for her character of Mary mother of James, further supported her opinion that the characters would not have been *characterisés* (represented as characters) but represented more symbolically.⁷⁴ As already acknowledged, it is impossible to know how medieval religious people acted: they may well have expressed deep feelings. However, based on existing pictorial representations, on the movements common in contemporary liturgy, as well as on the costumes worn by the performers, Sylvia's views seem to a certain extent well founded. Like Christoph and Sylvia, Guillaume perceived “medieval church people” as calm and did not believe that they would have performed the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* very theatrically. Because of the liturgical nature of the ceremonies, he did not feel that it would be fitting for him to be “acting,” particularly in moments when he was only “taking the place” of the deacon: while the gestures and movements of medieval deacons inspired him, he did not want to impersonate one. He acted a little more as the angel, but he mostly remained himself. He let himself be taken over by the atmosphere and by the practical tasks he had to accomplish.⁷⁵ All three actors realized the liturgical importance of the ceremonies and took it into account in different ways when performing. They either attempted to play people who felt at home in such a liturgy or tried to understand these people while resisting a clear impersonation.

When discussing the question of acting, Sandy and David added the dimension of their faith. This dimension, coupled with their knowledge of the liturgy and of the traditions of the Catholic Church, seems to have prevented them from playing medieval characters only. Rather than consciously portraying just a medieval nun or just Mary Magdalen, Sandy navigated different *couches* (layers) of being during her performance. She specifically used the verb “to be” in her interview, insisting that she was at once a Benedictine nun, Mary Magdalen, and a *cantrix*.⁷⁶ At times, she became one of them more than the others:

fully theatre).

74 Sylvia.

75 Guillaume.

76 *Mais, vraiment* (But really). Sandy.

De temps en temps j'étais qu'une seule des trois, de temps en temps, deux, enfin, il y avait vraiment quelque chose de...voilà, comme un va et vient en fait, un constant aller et retour.

From time to time, I was one of the three, from time to time two. There was something...a coming and going actually, a constant coming and going.

She described herself as a kind of *mystique* who, for a few hours, could both understand these characters and *be* them.⁷⁷ Sandy's account of her acting experience fits in with her awareness of women in the Church. Yet, when considered along her description of seeing the light, it also seems close to the juxtaposition of layers of meaning and of being experienced in the liturgy. During the liturgy, the past is brought into the present and the present into the past. One does not just witness the re-telling of scriptural events, one lives them. This is echoed in the interview of sister B of La Maigrange, who said that liturgy *actualise les textes des Ecritures* (makes present the scriptural texts). For sister C, its purpose is to make us contemporaneous with Christ. Sandy did not go as far as to compare her performance with liturgy. She even explained that staying at La Maigrange for Vespers—an actual liturgical ceremony—made her feel uncomfortable because she was still wearing her costume and had the feeling that she was *blasphemer* (blaspheming). However, her *démarche de foi* (process of faith) during the performance ultimately convinced her that it was acceptable for her to remain dressed as a nun.⁷⁸ While Sandy differentiated our production from real liturgy, she appears to have experienced it in some of the ways one does liturgy. She also perceived her devotion during the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio* as legitimizing her performance by bringing it closer to the ceremonies' liturgical nature and purpose and by distancing it from its theatrical context of production.

David's approach went further than Sandy's and he seems to have considered his experience of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* as extremely close to the experience of liturgy. He first associated the Barking ceremonies with church services by comparing his emotions during their performances to what he had felt during the Holy Week ceremonies—some of the most dramatic ceremonies of the liturgical year—which recount Christ's Passion and Resurrection. When attending the Holy Week services, David "commence à ressentir un peu ce que les disciples ont ressenti" (had begun to feel a bit what the disciples had felt): these emotions went from grief, to anticipation,

⁷⁷ Sandy.

⁷⁸ Sandy.

and then to joy. Performing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* was a similar kind of emotional and spiritual journey for him; the past was lived again in the present and the present in the past. He spoke, as other actors had, of a *voyage dans le temps* (time travel), but not of one which brought him to the Middle Ages. Instead, he was brought back to scriptural times where he was able to *vivre la situation* (live the situation) he performed. David did not act: “j’ai pas l’impression d’avoir joué un rôle en fait, j’ai l’impression d’être moi-même” (I do not have the feeling that I played a role actually, I have the feeling that I was myself). He was present, observing or listening, focused on himself, often with his eyes closed, in his *bulle* (bubble). For him, witnessing Vespers after his performance was a *prolongation* of his experience, of his *état de grâce* (state of grace) rather than something other. He did not substantially differentiate this liturgical service from the performance: the environment, the singing, and the place were all similar.⁷⁹

The comments made by David and Sandy indicate their perception of our production as close to, and even, in David’s case, almost identical to liturgy. David’s words also evoke compassionate meditation: he was emotionally imagining the events of the life and death of Christ. The perception of these two actors made them perform the ceremonies in a different way than they would have another type of play. They were not always acting but instead were praying, were re-living scriptural events, and remembering the Catholic Church’s tradition. They were living their faith. Even when produced in a largely lay environment, the Barking Abbey *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* were thus still understood as liturgical, and their devotional aspect remained prominent. Sandy and David’s experience may indicate the way in which medieval nuns and clergy perceived their performance of the ceremonies: they most likely saw it as a devotional and liturgical moment. This is also how the nuns of La Maigrange described the production we presented.

Impressions of Modern Women Religious

To better understand some of the nuns of La Maigrange’s responses, I would like to examine first their opinion of theatre and of dramatic liturgical ceremonies. As I was interviewing them, I rapidly realized that theatre did not feature prominently in the lives of Cistercian nuns. While the sisters had witnessed concerts performed in their church before, they had not seen plays in that space and reported no internal practice of theatre.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ David.

⁸⁰ A, B.

When theatre was performed, it served an educational purpose. E and D, for instance, described its importance in the noviciate. They remembered performing *scénettes* (short scenes) depicting the stories of Jonah, Simon, Mary Magdalen, and Bartimaeus on feast days. These scenes were apparently read from the Bible; novices were attributed a role and performed it when their turn came in the scriptural text.⁸¹

The interviewees' view of theatre was not always a positive one. E described her experience of acting at school with a professional who taught the pupils *à entrer dans le personnage* (to enter into the character). She did not entirely dislike this idea but feared it could lead actors to imitate characters superficially. The word "theatre" itself seemed for her to be associated with the idea of hollow pretence: she wondered whether our performance would be *juste du théâtre* (only theatre) or would be "lived."⁸² Her own, positive view of what entering into a character meant was intimately connected with the idea of "living" the performance. One should not attempt to be the character portrayed: no actor can "be," for instance, Mary Magdalen. What one ought to do is try to be in the spirit of the character, to express their truth while living it along with them. She thought that it was only when actors succeeded at performing in such a way that the audience was able to connect to the reality of the characters and to be moved.⁸³

While E was not particularly favourable to theatre, most nuns approved of the use of dramatic features in liturgical ceremonies. They found processions in their abbey, in particular those of Ascension Day, of Palm Sunday, and of the Assumption to resemble the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*.⁸⁴ In La Maigne, the procession on Ascension Day generally precedes Mass: the nuns and the faithful walk around the cloisters before entering the church, as the apostles did when they escorted Jesus. The procession is accompanied by singing—as was the case at Barking Abbey—and nuns carry nearly identical objects, such as candles and a processional cross. The Assumption procession follows a similar pattern. On Palm Sunday, there is another procession

81 E, D.

82 "Est-ce qu'on le vit?" (Do we live it?). E.

83 E. E's reservation about theatre seems to match some views expressed by medieval Cistercians who rejected Latin liturgical dramatic ceremonies, as well as some of the opinions on theatre expressed during the late medieval period. They saw an accumulation of artifice and disguise in theatre, which created a gap between what one saw and what was real. Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 143–56; Davidson, "Improvisation in Medieval Drama," 198, 203; Briscoe, "Some Clerical Notions."

84 B, D.

around the cloisters during which the antiphon *Hosanna* is sung, as it was at the time of Christ's entry into Jerusalem according to the Bible. After a hymn, the nuns and the faithful return to the church where the Passion is read by two nuns and a priest who divide the "roles" between themselves.⁸⁵ A similar reading is conducted on Good Friday. Both A and B reported the faithful's positive reaction to this year's readings of the Passion: a man even claimed that he had never been *ému aux entrailles* (deeply moved) by this text before.⁸⁶ The final ceremony the nuns of La Maigrange described to me was their Paschal Vigil, which involved the lighting of the paschal candle in the dark church and, from it, the lighting of the other candles.⁸⁷ E saw this ceremony as an example of *tangible* liturgy.⁸⁸ The opinions of the Fribourg sisters on these kinds of ceremonies and on their benefits may echo those held by the nuns of Barking Abbey and may explain some of their reasons for performing liturgical dramatic ceremonies. The nuns of La Maigrange felt that dramatic features in the liturgy could help deepen faith and increase devotion. B qualified the processions of *vivification* of the liturgy: they bring life into it or bring it back to life. Even without dramatic features, liturgy is meant to be a re-living of the past, it is meant to be "alive." Yet—as discussed in Chapter 1—these features make the nature and purpose of the liturgy perceptible in a clearer and more emotional way. Dramatic liturgical ceremonies thus have an increased number of chances to reach people, in particular the laity, and to encourage devotion. The processions at La Maigrange, for instance, seem to be used to renew, physically remember, and accompany the journey of scriptural figures from one place to another or from one state to another. The Palm Sunday procession involves the laity by having them walk with the nuns on a day full of emotional changes—from jubilant joy to sorrow, from the entrance into Jerusalem to the reading of the Passion.⁸⁹ Its performance thereby encourages spectators to understand, and possibly to feel these emotions along with the figures they are accompanying. The tan-

85 B.

86 A, B. The word *entrailles* designates the belly area. It is often used to speak of the guts but can describe the womb, as in the *Ave Maria*. It can also, as I believe is the case here, refer to the place containing one's deepest feelings. *Larousse: Dictionnaire de français*, s.v. "entrailles," accessed June 22, 2024, www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/entrailles/29979.

87 B explained that the service has involved the presence of the laity since the liturgical reforms of the 1950s.

88 E.

89 B.

gible quality of the Maigrage Paschal Vigil and the roles given in the Passion readings may bring a similar result: visual, sensory means draw the attention of the faithful to the Scriptures in a striking way and stir their feelings. For A, the layman's comments on the Passion showed that such ceremonies could transmit a message, that they could convey something deep and emotional about the events recounted.⁹⁰ The sisters of La Maigrage thus perceived these ceremonies as encouraging affective devotional responses. As was explored in Chapter 1, this may also have been the case for the sisters of Barking Abbey. Their *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* resemble the ceremonies of the Abbey of La Maigrage both in their structure and, according to the Ordinal, in their purpose as means to increase devotion. The sisters of La Maigrage recognized these similarities; they saw the Barking ceremonies as liturgical rather than theatrical and believed that their effects were akin to those of their own dramatic liturgical ceremonies.

The liturgical features of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* initially surprised some of them. C thought that the show would be a *mystère* (mystery play) or a *mime*, and B had not expected us to represent the conventual context of the ceremonies. C felt that the performance had opened the Maigrage nuns to a beautiful liturgical truth of which they had previously been unaware. She qualified the whole production as *pas du théâtre, même si c'est du théâtre* (it is not theatre even if it is theatre). She described it instead of *une réalité qui devient présente* (a truth that becomes present), a truth that one could experience in the atmosphere of prayer existing at the time of the performance.⁹¹ I do not want to imply, nor do I believe, that the sisters of La Maigrage perceived our performance to be liturgy; rather, they recognized the Barking ceremonies as liturgy and understood their performance by lay actors to have been a profound spiritual experience for some spectators and participants. C, for instance, approved of our decision to avoid using a Host since this clearly distanced our work from real liturgy, but she also seems to have reacted to the performance partly as she would have to a liturgical ceremony: she was struck and moved when the monstrance was lifted from the sepulchre.⁹² During our performance of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* in the La Maigrage church, the texts came alive according to B, allowing spectators to "live these texts" and experience their content in an emotional way.

90 A.

91 C.

92 C.

C further felt that the ceremonies renewed in a deep and strong manner, laden with truth, the experience the nuns live every day through liturgy.⁹³

The nuns of La Maigrange therefore believed that the performance of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* affected spectators and participants in some of the ways liturgy did. They more specifically compared it to a particular kind of liturgy: dramatic liturgical ceremonies. As in their own ceremonies, it was the singularity of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*—the singing according to B and their striking aspects according to E—which helped them take people on a liturgical journey and encouraged devotion.⁹⁴ E supposed that such an unusual performance might have surprised many audience members and stimulated their curiosity concerning these unknown liturgical traditions. They may have realized the continuing relevance of the themes present in the ceremonies. E did not state that the performance had converted the audience. However, she thought that this unusual work, done in a conventual context, was favourable to reflection and could bring a change for some spectators. While describing the effects of the performance, E repeatedly used the term *entrer en soi* (enter into oneself), indicating introspection, meditation, and personal devotion. She observed that the lay audience members had been quiet, meditative, and *saisis* (struck) during the performance. Helping lay people find their path towards God is, according to E, an essential part of her role as a nun. Although she had disliked the idea of performing theatre in the abbatial church, her reasons for welcoming our project were intimately related to this understanding of her role. Nuns are the *messagères et collaboratrices du Seigneur* (messengers and collaborators of the Lord) whose service to him is to provide welcome in the hope it will bring people closer to him.⁹⁵ The sisters of La Maigrange's perception of their vocation echoes the self-presentation of the Barking Abbey nuns as messengers discussed in Chapter 1. The medieval nuns wanted to reach the laity and they presented to them ceremonies in which they also acted as messenger figures. There is thus, both in the discourse of the nuns of La Maigrange and in the Barking Ordinal, a perception of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* as tools to develop the devotion of the laity.

Another group of lay people discussed by the nuns of La Maigrange were the actors. Although our actors had not been *imbibés de liturgie* (imbibed in

93 B, C.

94 B, E. The nuns' understanding of the ceremonies made them deem a liturgical setting appropriate for our performance (A, C, E).

95 E.

liturgy) as much as nuns had and made some mistakes, they performed the ceremonies as recommended by E: it was not *juste du théâtre*, it was *vécu* (just theatre, it was lived).⁹⁶ While the nuns did not believe that a real liturgy was happening in front of them, they described the actors' experience of performance as close to what happens during liturgy, in particular during a more dramatic kind of liturgy. A, C, and E all believed that something profoundly emotional and/or spiritual had happened to some of the actors during the performance. C described the chants as full of emotions.⁹⁷ Another moment noticed by C was the raising of the Host by the actor playing Christ. The *recueillement* (contemplation) she felt he had expressed had shown her that this moment had been real for him.⁹⁸ E similarly believed that had there been no *présence* behind what was presented, the performance would not have had the power to move hearts. She believed actors had all *pris cela à coeur* (taken it [acting] to heart), had approached it with respect and seriousness, and had even experienced the reality of the ceremonies while acting. She added that the conventual, liturgical setting had helped them enter and transmit this reality.⁹⁹ The "reality" she spoke of seems to have referred to the recognition of the liturgical nature and purpose of the ceremonies but also to an understanding of the lives and emotions of the scriptural characters represented and, possibly, to an experience of devotion.

The sisters thus appear to have separated our performance from what they named "theatre" and, while recognizing that it was not liturgy, to have considered it as close to liturgy in its effects on lay spectators and actors. Some of their observations were supported by these spectators and actors. Guillaume, Sandy, and David were moved, to varying degrees, in the way observed by the sisters. The experience helped Guillaume feel more in touch with his "spiritual side" and make peace with some of his negative impressions of the Catholic Church. Both Sandy and David said that the performance engaged their faith. However, others, such as Christoph, did not describe this performance as an emotional or spiritual experience. Lay audience members were not interviewed and could therefore not attest to whether their devotion had been encouraged. Yet their reaction at the end of the first per-

96 E, C.

97 She felt that the chants had been the opposite of the sometimes stiff, note-by-note singing found in certain monasteries.

98 C. These observations led C to ask me whether our actors were Christians or believed in God. I answered that I had not enquired but that some had expressed their faith.

99 E.

formance showed their understanding of the liturgical nature of the ceremonies and their uncertainty as to how to respond to it. As the actors bowed and left the choir, we expected audience members to clap but they did not. A long silence followed, until the nuns started clapping and were then followed by the rest of the audience. We were first surprised but suspected—a fact confirmed later by several spectators—that they felt uneasy applauding what had looked like liturgy, particularly in the presence of the nuns. While faith, language barriers, or lack of interest prevented some of the lay actors and spectators from being moved or devotionally engaged by the performances, most of them seem to have recognized the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s liturgical nature.

Although not always exact or historically informed, the nuns of La Maigrange's opinion presents us with the valuable views of women religious on the performance of such ceremonies. It is therefore particularly intriguing to see them attribute to the ceremonies the same effects as the Barking Ordinal had. Despite the differences between our performance and those given in Barking Abbey church, the nuns of La Maigrange perceived some of the ceremonies' probable intentions and believed in the efficiency of dramatic liturgical ceremonies in fulfilling these intents.

Apart from their mentions of the laity, the sisters of La Maigrange also spoke of the effect our performance had had on them. When they did, they described their experience as devotional but in a way different from the one they had discussed in relation to the laity. Watching the *Elevatio* and the *Visitatio* was a moment of recognition or involvement for them. The first cause of this involvement was music. B reminded me that she had been *à la maison dans le grégorien* (at home in gregorian chant) since her childhood and acknowledged, along with D, A, and C, that she knew some of the texts and melodies we had sung.¹⁰⁰ Knowledge of the chants, and/or of the scriptural passages on which many of them are based, led C and A to *se retrouver* (to find oneself) in those chants, to feel a personal connection to them. D even stated that she could almost have sung along with us.¹⁰¹ Our performance reminded them of various known liturgical services and, by creating a sense of involvement, it allowed the nuns to live some of these services once more. Such a feeling was expressed by C, whom the performance had brought back to her abbey's Easter ceremonies. Seeing the *Confiteor* similarly recalled for

100 B, D, A, C.

101 C, A, D. During our performance of the Huy *Nativity* plays (December 2017) in the Carmelite convent of Le Pâquier, the sisters did join the actors in singing the liturgical chant *Nunc Dimittis* at the end of the play.

A the *Confiteor* said on Maundy Thursday in the La Maigrange church and moved her deeply.¹⁰²

Yet the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* also differed from the nuns of La Maigrange's usual Divine Office. Their dramatic quality, in particular, provided the sisters with new, different, and, it seems, more emotional perspectives on familiar texts and ceremonies. Such a perspective recalls the compassionate devotion evoked in Chapter 1. The sisters of La Maigrange observed that our production of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* contained, for instance, more movement than was usual in their liturgy. D believed movement could increase the effect of certain texts: "certaines choses peuvent plus parler en bougeant" (some things can speak (move) more with movement). She then mentioned the dialogue between Christ and Mary Magdalen, which she found striking. She had sung it twice on the day before the performance, but it took a new dimension when performed by two moving figures. As for B, both the musical and visual aspects of these ceremonies made the scriptural texts *vivants* (brought them to life) and helped her *vivre mieux les textes* (live them better). The result was an intense emotional experience, which, while differing from that of the laity, was equally conducive to devotion.¹⁰³

The comments of the nuns of La Maigrange thus emphasize the devotional aspects of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. Modern nuns saw the ceremonies' striking but also engaging mixture of the familiar and the unusual as efficient in encouraging piety. As explored in Chapter 1, this same opinion may have been held by the sisters of Barking Abbey. The Fribourg nuns' comments on the 2018 production further highlight the multiplicity of the ceremonies' devotional effects. They evoke these effects on the laity, who seem to have been the target audience for the ceremonies in the Middle Ages: the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* can inspire compassionate devotion, help lay people live the liturgy better, and make them begin a reflection on faith. But they also evoke their effects on religious women: the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* can remind them of other liturgical ceremonies, help them experience these in a different way, and they encourage their affective devotion.

Another way in which the nuns discussed the 2018 production related to their view of and connection with their abbey's history. Watching the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* created, for many of the sisters of La Maigrange, a link between the Barking ceremonies and their abbey's traditions. The interviewees never mentioned the original English context of the ceremonies,

102 C, A.

103 D, B.

but instead associated the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* with their own community's medieval past. C, for instance, spoke of the connection she felt between the current nuns of La Maigrange and past sisters when she sang chant she imagined her predecessors had also sung. Because of her knowledge of the chants we sang, she felt that this connection continued in our performance. This performance made the nuns of La Maigrange reflect on their communal history, on their predecessors, and led them to feel a sense of continuity between previous and current conventual traditions.¹⁰⁴

Connecting to the Past

Performing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* therefore had the ability to connect past and present. For actors such as Christoph, Guillaume, and Sylvia, it evoked the past and forced them to try to understand the people who had been involved in the Barking ceremonies in the Middle Ages. In the case of Sandy, it made her remember the nuns of the past and place herself, as well as the nuns of the present, in this tradition of women religious. For David, it had the same effect as liturgy and allowed him to live scriptural moments. The sisters of La Maigrange also experienced these connections between past and present. They felt a certain belonging to the performance, which led them to reconsider some of their current liturgical ceremonies. This sense of belonging moreover drew their attention towards their own conventual history.

In addition to our performance containing familiar chant, it made use of the Cistercian abbey's medieval church and sepulchre, which further encouraged the sisters of La Maigrange to associate the Barking ceremonies with the history of their house. Some nuns remarked that their interest in our project had arisen due to the medieval foundation of their abbey and to the artifacts found in their church: sister A felt *concernée* (involved) in our project for this very reason and A, B, and D spoke at length of the sepulchre of La Maigrange. This sepulchre dates from the fourteenth century; it is made of wood, painted, and contains a wooden sculpture of Christ (Figure 2.5).¹⁰⁵

It is one of the rare extant medieval mobile sepulchres in Europe and is the oldest complete one to have survived. It used to be kept in the abbey church where it was one of the house's most precious artifacts but, more than that, it was deeply connected to the sense of identity and history of

104 The recognition of this continuity deeply moved B, D, and A.

105 Its dimensions are 188 cm (width) × 101 cm (height) × 51 cm (depth). See Aballéa, "Le saint sépulcre de la Maigrange," 60–61.



Figure 2.5. Sepulchre of La Maigrage, 1345–1360. Spruce and willow, 188 cm (width) × 101 cm (height) × 51 cm (depth). Reproduced by permission of the Musée d'art et d'histoire Fribourg / Primula Bosshard.

its nuns.¹⁰⁶ According to sister D, the sepulchre was part of the community: every previous sister had venerated it. This object was thus perceived to store the devotions and even the presence of past sisters. In 1902, the sepulchre was sold to the State of Fribourg due, as remembered by the sisters of La Maigrage, to pressure from the State. In 1997, the nuns had to agree to its removal from their church and preservation in the Fribourg Museum of Art and History. According to sister B, this was painful for them. Sister D also remembered the nuns' efforts to keep the sepulchre within their community and their subsequent struggle to obtain a copy (which they obtained in 2009).¹⁰⁷ This copy seems to now function as a stand-in for the sisters of La Maigrage, who—while still upset about the loss of the original—treat it like a devotional object and have to a certain extent transferred onto it the

106 B remembered how the nuns were unable to use or even touch the sepulchre from the seventeenth century until 1984 (in 1984, the church was renovated and the nuns' stalls placed on the floor of the nave again). The sepulchre had been enclosed in a protective glass container since 1902 and was situated in the space dedicated to the laity, far from the nuns whose stalls were located on a platform.

107 D. See Aballéa, "Sépulcre pascal," 194.

meaning of its predecessor. They have also created ways to incorporate it into their own worship, integrating it into their celebrations of Good Friday. We used this copy when performing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*.¹⁰⁸

While the sepulchre is meaningful to the nuns of La Maigrange, its exact use by medieval sisters remains a mystery because a fire destroyed most of the abbey's documents in the seventeenth century. When watching our performance, which incorporated this object specific to their house into medieval ceremonies performed in their medieval church, the sisters thus had the possibility of visualizing a way in which their sepulchre may have been used in the Middle Ages. This potential version of their past was at once different from their modern practices and familiar. Different because the sisters do not have any kind of performative ceremony comparable to the *Visitatio* or *Elevatio* today, but familiar because the sepulchre is well known to them and because some of the chants used in the *Visitatio* and the *Elevatio* alongside their sepulchre were recognizable to the sisters.¹⁰⁹ The use of the sepulchre in this climate therefore involved both present and past La Maigrange nuns, as well as their devotions, in our performance. It connected current sisters with a possible version of their past, former sisters with modern uses of the sepulchre, and it united them through their similar traditions. It moreover led the modern sisters of La Maigrange to feel an association with and, possibly, a sense of ownership of the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. Finally, the sepulchre had the benefit of bringing us lay actors into closer connection to the conventual community: D thought that our use of this object created a joyful bond between past and future, between the La Maigrange late and living nuns and us, younger people. According to D and C, we both connected with the community's history through our performance and continued its practices surrounding both the sepulchre and liturgical chants.

Such ties with the past are also attested at Barking Abbey. Nuns and abbesses were buried in the house's church; past sisters and benefactors were celebrated in the *vitae* sponsored by the house and in the feasts specific to the abbey.¹¹⁰ As a Benedictine nunnery, Barking would also have per-

108 Sisters A, B, and D spoke at length of the sepulchre. B said that the copy they own is used after the liturgy on the evening of Good Friday. The body of Christ is put inside the sepulchre. They do this after the liturgy since the liturgy celebrates the *mise en croix* (crucifixion) and taking Jesus down from the cross chronologically happens afterwards. For more on the sepulchre, see Steinauer, "Saint sépulcre de la Maigrange."

109 C, B, D, and A.

110 The principal feasts of St Ethelburga (October 11) and St Erkenwald (April 30),

formed the necrology daily. The Ordinal and Customary itself shows a certain aspiration to remember past nuns and past practices: it refers, for instance, to the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s modifications under former abbess Katherine of Sutton. For the sisters of Barking, performing the *Visitatio* and *Elevatio*—two ceremonies created in their house at least more than thirty years earlier—in a twelfth and thirteenth-century abbey church, with furnishings that were not all brand new, might have reminded them of and connected them with the many sisters who had taken part in the ceremonies before in that same space: it was a moment of remembrance. The performance of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio sepulchri* can therefore be understood as another commemorative practice, continuing to strengthen the sense of the house's community, and informing the nuns' sense of identity.

Learning from Modern Performance

As different as our modern performances were from those given in the abbey church of Barking, they supported some of the ideas suggested by the text, its historical context, and the house's literary and liturgical culture as to the ways in which medieval spectators and performers might have perceived the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. The discoveries made and questions raised through these performances significantly informed the previous sections of this book.

First, this experience illuminated for me the question of the terminology to use when discussing the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. The two ceremonies were perceived by the nuns of La Maigrange, by actors, the crew, and many spectators as liturgy. Even when performed by lay actors as part of an academic project, their liturgical nature seemed obvious. The 2018 performances thus foregrounded the importance of liturgical "costumes" and "props," of liturgical music, and of the liturgical space in influencing the effect of the ceremonies on their spectators and performers.

These modern performances showed in practice that the Barking liturgical ceremonies could affect various kinds of people—lay or religious. The comments of actors and spectators were instrumental in making me realize how influential the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* may have been not just for their

for example, celebrate, respectively, the first abbess and the founder of Barking abbey. *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 1:10, 4 and 2:221, 319. For burial practices, see *Ordinale and Customary*, ed. Tolhurst, 2:361–62. See also Blanc and Robinson, "The Huy Nativity," 92–96; Brazil, "Performing Female Sanctity," 86; Findlay, *Playing Spaces in Early Women's Drama*, 149–51.

spectators—their target audience according to the Ordinal—but also for their performers. According to modern performers and spectators, the ceremonies' devotional aspect was especially overwhelming: their statements both support the Ordinal's claim that the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* were undertaken to improve the devotion of the local laity and also show how impactful they could be for their participants. The nuns of La Maigrange, as well as David, spoke of the ceremonies' affective effect on them, and many of the actors interviewed commented on their own emotional response to them. The sisters and David also evoked the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*'s ability to help people both understand the way in which liturgy works and live liturgy better. When the performers were spiritually engaged, their performance was a moment of prayer, but also a time when they thought about their place in the Church. Finally, both David and the nuns of La Maigrange felt that the ceremonies could change the lives of performers and spectators, encouraging them to re-evaluate their behaviour as Christians. The work undertaken in the spring of 2018 further began a reflection on the question of memory: while the chants were difficult to learn at the time, they now seem unforgettable. To this day, the ceremonies—at least part of them—are stuck in the memory of some of the performers because of how unfamiliar they were. The scriptural story that they tell thus remains with them. The comments collected after the performance and the notes made during rehearsals therefore prompted some of the reflections in Chapter 1 on the diversity of the ceremonies' devotional effect: interviewees felt that the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* had the ability to contribute to the compassionate devotion of performers and spectators, to bring them a better understanding of the liturgy, to help them know and remember Scriptures, and to guide them towards a more Christian way of life.

The significance of women, the second major theme discussed in Chapter 1, was also on display during our performances of the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. Women's voices dominated, especially during the *Visitatio*, where they were much more visible as well. Sandy's comments on the history of women religious and women in the Church showed the association that seems to have taken place between her, previous nuns who performed liturgy in the church of La Maigrange, and Mary Magdalen herself. The question of identification and of going back into the past, evoked in different ways by all actors, drove some of the reflections on acting explored in Chapter 1: some medieval religious performers may have felt this sense of association, which may also have extended to their religious community. Community itself seems to have been encouraged by the performance of the two liturgical ceremonies: this was discussed by various actors, and the con-

nections between the ceremonies, the scriptural story, and the local abbey were mentioned both by Sandy and by the sisters of La Maigrange.

Finally, while these two modern performances dealt with their lay audience in a way much different from that of medieval Barking, the research undertaken to prepare them led me to question their potential for intimidation and for displaying the authority of the religious house.

Many of the effects on modern spectators and participants were achieved—and seen to be achieved by the interviewees—because of the dramatic features of the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*. What seems to emerge from the 2018 performances is therefore a strong impression of their liturgical nature, but also a feeling that they were able to affect those watching and performing them because they were dramatic. Drama and liturgy do not clash here, but “drama” instead supports liturgy. Through it, liturgy is able to have a more “tangible” effect—as discussed by the nuns of La Maigrange; it reaches spectators in a more immediate, understandable, and emotional way. The Medieval Convent Drama production thus seems to suggest, as do recent studies, that drama and liturgy do not need to be at odds but can coexist within one performance.

Our production also made clear that much was and would remain unknown about the medieval performances of these ceremonies. While I have not explored all of these unknown elements in the previous chapter, due to a lack of textual or historical evidence, the unknown should be kept in mind when researching the *Elevatio* and *Visitatio*, and especially the effects of their performance. Staging the Barking ceremonies forced us to include these elements unseen on the page. Experimenting with various options led us to reflect on the ways in which these would have affected spectators and participants. Such an inclusion also generated new leads about the potential effects of the medieval ceremonies: the wearing of the habit, for instance, informed performers as to how they ought to move; the costumes they wore made them see each other differently; the presence of light led to reflections on the Resurrection; music had a strong impact on both spectators and performers. Rehearsing and performing the Barking *Elevatio* and *Visitatio* therefore raised the awareness of the numerous possibilities available when staging the ceremonies and encouraged the exploration of the multiplicity of potential reactions to them; it helped direct my research in Chapter 1 by providing leads to investigate using textual, archeological, and historical evidence.

