

THE MAGI IN WESTERN ART AND LITERATURE: FORMS AND MEANINGS

Diane Speed

The Magi have held a remarkable fascination for people from early times to the present day. The Biblical account in Matthew 2.1-18 represents the Magi as the unwitting occasion of a shocking massacre of small children, but gives tantalizingly little information about them. They are an indeterminate group of exotic figures, appearing from an unspecified part of 'the East', from the world of 'the Other', then disappearing back into it at the end of the episode, yet they seem for the time being to know more of the mind of God than the chosen race themselves. Even their status as 'magi' approved by God and the narrator is puzzling, since the term is associated with non-Judaeo-Christian religious belief and practice, and other Biblical magi, Simon and Bar-Jesus (Acts 8.9-24 and 13.6-12), are distinctly disapproved. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Biblical narrative has been explicated and interpreted to the point of being effectively reinvented.

The Magi have always been attractive to people generally and to creative artists and writers in particular, but their popularity reached its peak in the Middle Ages, by which time a complex extra-Biblical legend had come into being.¹ Modern conceptions of the Magi are often re-Biblicized, but tradition remains influential. The journey of the Magi in the first five chapters of Lew Wallace's novel *Ben Hur* (1880), for example, relies almost entirely on the legend, as does T.S. Eliot's poem *Journey of the Magi* (1927). This paper summarizes the main narrative developments of the story in the West, identifies implicated generic transformations, and attempts to locate the special religious power in familiar representations.

An early narrative development was determination of number. In the West it was universally accepted that there were three men, basically because they brought three gifts. Other developments followed the understanding that certain Old Testament prophecies referred to the Magi when they spoke of 'kings' coming from 'the nations', the Gentiles, to worship and offer gifts to the Messiah: Psalm 72 (71).10-11, Isaiah 49.7 and 60.3-6. From Psalm 72 (71) and Isaiah 60 arose the further idea that the Magi came from different

nations and travelled on camels (but horses are more common in medieval paintings).

The eventual firming of belief that the Magi were kings can be associated with political considerations. In a general way, the belief that kings had paid homage to the divine founder of the Church set a pattern for Church-State relations that advantaged the Church, and the Church was the more important of the two as a source of early art and literature. A number of medieval paintings show particular secular rulers before Christ and the Virgin in an iconography which substitutes them for a Magus-King,² thereby indicating their own specialness amongst men, perhaps also the strength of their personal faith, but incidentally revealing acceptance of their subordination to earthly vicars of Christ. More specifically, however, the so-called 'legend of the three kings of Cologne' confirmed a kingly identity for the Magi in popular thinking. The apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* had told how the apostle Thomas went to India, and by the sixth century tradition had added that while there he baptized the three Magi-Kings, and thus admitted them explicitly to the Church via the official sacrament. Their sanctity was established by their legendary evangelization of India, but their bodies were not available for culting until they were 'found' in the chapel of St Eustorgius outside Milan, appropriately uncorrupted, in 1158, and moved inside the city walls for safety when the city was besieged by the German Emperor Frederick. When Milan fell in 1162, Frederick gave the bodies to the Chancellor of Cologne as a reward for services rendered, and they became an immensely popular object of pilgrimage, to the glory of Cologne. The earlier history of the bodies was 'recalled' after they were found: Helena, mother of Constantine, had come across them during the extensive travels which had led to her discovery of the True Cross, and she had brought them back to Constantinople, whence Eustorgius had taken them to Milan in the fifth century.³

The nation or nations from which the Magi-Kings were said to have come were variable, but one common idea was that they came from the three continents, inhabited by descendants of the three sons of Noah. Individual names were assigned to them from early times, those eventually established in the West being Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar. They also came to be distinguished by age, with Melchior usually old, Balthasar mature, and Gaspar young. From the late fifteenth century it became customary to make one of them, Balthasar or Gaspar, a dark-skinned African.

Finally, although Matthew implies that Jesus was nearly two years

old when the Magi appeared, their visit was commonly placed much sooner, either immediately after the visit of the shepherds (Luke 2.8-20) or twelve (thirteen) days later, on the Feast of Epiphany, 6 January. The setting of the Adoration is accordingly the animal shelter of Luke 2.7 or the house of Matthew 2.10. In a variation derived from the apocryphal *Protoevangelium* and *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, the Nativity occurs in a cave.

For the most part, these traditions affect the iconography of the Magi and two scenes, their initial journey and their adoration of the Child. The episode in Matthew 2 may be schematized thus:

<i>Verses</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Length in verses</i>
1a	Setting in time	0.5
1b-2	The arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem	1.5
3-6	Herod's consultation with the chief priests and scribes	4
7-8	Herod's direction to the Magi	2
9-10	The journey of the Magi on to the house	2
11	Their adoration and presentation of gifts	1
12a	Their warning in a dream to avoid Herod	0.5
12b	Their journey home by another route	0.5

The narratorial perspective lies with the inhabitants of the Jerusalem area rather than with the outsiders, who exist in the text only insofar as they visit the area. Six of the twelve verses in the Biblical episode (3-8) have nothing to do with their quest. They do not instigate action, rather, they respond to the initiatives of divine and secular authority. Herod, on the other hand, does instigate action, and, although he is present in only in six of the twelve verses (3-8), he exists textually after the Magi episode, to slaughter the Innocents. The time setting is designated partly in terms of his reign, and partly with reference to the birth of Jesus, who is, of course, the protagonist of the Gospel. The Magi are of secondary interest. They are non-individualized supporters of the young 'hero', and the main point of their appearance is to reveal Herod and the Jewish leaders as his antagonists.

By contrast, the post-Biblical developments gave the main role to the Magi, their journey, and its achievement, effectively extracting the episode from its context and reconstructing it as the story of their quest. The generic change is from epic, with universal concerns, to romance, with individual concerns.

Another formal change occurs when the climactic scene of the Adoration, in visual art particularly, is extracted from the episode and becomes tableau instead of narrative. The meaning of the episode is then crystalized in the meaning of the scene.

The power inherent in traditional depictions of the Adoration is evidenced in the creative influence of the scene within the field of Christian art. Portraits and icons of the Virgin and Child probably owe their existence to a large extent to the Adoration of the Magi. Pictures of the seated Virgin and Child do not appear fundamentally distinguishable from their representations in the Adoration scene. The link is explicit in the Hours of Lorenzo de Medici (1485), at the beginning of the Office of the Virgin, where a large portrait of the Virgin and Child is accompanied by a modest Adoration scene. Again, it is accepted that the Adoration of the Shepherds, intimated in Luke 2.16, was modelled on the Adoration of the Magi.

The special attraction of the Adoration may lie in its relevance for all people and its accessible expression of essential Christian doctrine. These things are already potential in Matthew's account when read as fulfilment of Messianic prophecy, and the partnership of imagination and scholarship explicates the importance of the scene for individual Christians.

The decision that the Magi were three in number was encouraged by the potential symbolism of the Trinity, so that they became an emblematic comment on the identity of Jesus. When understood as kings they represented both the kings and the nations of the earth. This universality of reference was colourfully reinforced by traditions depicting them as coming from every corner of the world and spread across the age-groups (that males include reference to females here may raise other issues).

The elements in the scene which directly link the Child to the Magi are the gifts. The usual patristic interpretation was that gold signified kingship, frankincense divinity (or priesthood), and myrrh death. That these gifts are presented by the Magi implies the conviction of the world that these are the key elements of the Child's identity. That they are received by the Child signifies his acknowledgment of his roles as King, God (or High Priest), and Redeemer. These significances are often reinforced by emblematic representation: that of the gold, for instance, if one or more of the Magi is kneeling with his own crown removed before the King of kings; that of the frankincense, by the Child's nimbus, or by the presence of angels; that of the myrrh, by a cross in the nimbus. The Child is often depicted with two

fingers raised in the conventional gesture of blessing, reflecting his role as God (or priest). In later depictions he touches the head of the kneeling magus in an alternative gesture of blessing or puts his hand out for the first gift offered, normally the gold, and in an extraordinary English altarpiece from the second half of the fifteenth century he holds his arms out sideways, forming a cross.⁴ The tableau expresses the mutual giving on which Christianity depends—the sacrifice of God for his people and their proper response of worship.

Eliot's poem expresses concern at the presence of both birth and death on the occasion of the Adoration, and thus reflects the staying power of traditional understanding of the elements in this scene. There is colour and interest in an Adoration taken at the face value of the story itself. There may be an intellectual excitement in the presence of paradoxes like coexistent life and death, giving and receiving. Most importantly, however, I believe there is great religious power in a single scene which simultaneously informs of God's plan of redemption for humanity, instructs in worship, offers itself for contemplation as a stimulus to devotion, and encapsulates the reason for it all in the endless delight of God and Man in each other.

University of Sydney

REFERENCES

1. See, for example, Louis Réau, Iconographie de l'art chrétien, 2: Iconographie de la Bible, ii: Nouveau Testament (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), pp.236–55; Geoffrey Grigson, The Three Kings (Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1958).
2. Lorenzo dei Medici, for example, takes the place of the youngest king in the Adoration of the Magi by Gentile da Fabriano in the Uffizi, Florence. In the Wilton Diptych (ca 1395–97), in the National Gallery in London, a youthful Richard II kneels before Christ and the Virgin, with an elderly King Edward the Confessor and a mature King Edmund standing behind him, while John the Baptist presents him.
3. The legend is set out in the mid-fourteenth-century Historia Trium

Regum of John of Hildesheim, printed with the Middle English translation in The Three Kings of Cologne, ed. C. Horstmann, Early English Text Society OS 85, London, 1986.

4. Reproduced in Grigson, The Three Kings, Plate XVI.