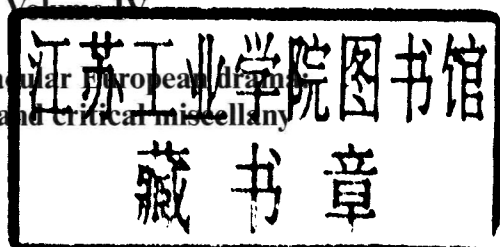# MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Edited by
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MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies

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Volume IV

Other vernacular European drama:
a cultural and critical miscellany

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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME IV

Situating vernacular European drama culturally

Vernacular European drama on the Continent flourished during the late Middle Ages. A great number of play texts have survived, along with abundant archival evidence documenting performances in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and elsewhere. In France alone, nearly 250 religious plays have come down to us from medieval times. Thus, it is a curious fact that, until fairly recently, medieval European drama has lain largely unremarked upon. Many texts have never been edited at all and much remains to be discovered about their contents or the local and national cultures that produced them. This is not to say that no one has paid attention to these early plays at all, or that notable scholars and critics are not currently exploring the field. Their numbers are decidedly few, however, when compared with the number of scholars and critics working on the English tradition of medieval plays. That said, it is also true that some of the work being done on continental drama – particularly the French – has been theoretically sophisticated, insightful and exciting. This volume brings together examples of the best recent work on European medieval plays from several countries, sampling what is now available and, it is hoped, presaging what is still to come. Ten of the essays in this volume contextualise medieval theatrical traditions in a variety of European national cultures; eight others offer probing explorations that should convey something of the critical possibilities still latent in medieval continental performances.

In the first essay (Chapter 44), 'History and fiction,' Alan E. Knight situates French medieval plays within an Augustinian philosophical paradigm that distinguishes between, on the one hand, liturgical and para-liturgical memorial acts of praise, petition and thanksgiving to God and, on the other, vernacular literary texts that emphasise exemplary behaviour to man. According to Knight, French medieval drama 'exhibited the same tendency to organise itself along the memorial exemplary axis' (p. 15). Mystery plays tended towards the universal and historical, while morality plays, farces and *sotties* taught individuals to know themselves through didactic or satiric

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criticism. All medieval French plays fall into the generic categories of history and fiction, which provide keys to understanding the power of these dramatic forms. The passion plays, for example, offered 'ritual repetition and reinforcement of the immanent collective memory of the community, while the fictional plays constantly changed plots and situations, but demonstrated moral truth' (p. 16). Accordingly, the mystery plays display a ritual core while morality plays function more like sermons. Knight marshalls his examples to show that the historical and moral mirrors that these plays hold up offer two different ways to render meaningful truth. To some extent, the forms interact and overlap in social and aesthetic function but their generic traits remain visible and critically useful.

Following Knight's essay is a classic formulation by Grace Frank (Chapter 45) on one of the most celebrated medieval French plays, *Le Mystere d'Adam*. In 'Transitional Plays: *Le Mystère d'Adam*', Frank examines this Twelfth-Century work as a 'semi-liturgical play that is still attached to the church' (p. 34). It physically uses the church as a stage and intellectually depends upon responsories belonging to the offices of Septuagesima. The play itself dramatises the stories of Adam and Eve's temptation and Cain and Abel but it also enacts a liturgical *Ordo Prophetarum*; a procession of prophets. Frank concludes that the playwright composed a play 'midway between church drama and laicized mysteries' (p. 40); one that brought live doctrine into a viable vernacular tradition.

The examination of the French medieval tradition of drama continues with Graham Runnalls' essay, 'Were they listening or watching? Text and Spectacle at the 1510 Châteaudun *Passion Play*' (Chapter 46). Runnalls considers this Sixteenth-Century passion play to test his thesis that 'spectacle was considered far more important than the text' (p. 43). The relative importance of these two aspects of drama forms the core of his investigation and he puts forward archival evidence to explore the 1510 performance of a passion play in Chateaudun. The play was organised and sponsored by the Duke of Longueville, the *seigneur* of Chateaudun. The performance was spread over eighteen days in a huge theatre built in the square of the main Chateaudun church. A full, detailed book of accounts associated with the performance has survived, consisting of around 250 folio pages. It lists both expenses and income, and provides information on virtually every aspect of staging the play. The text of the Chateaudun Passion – which has not survived – was an adapted and much expanded version of the Amboise mystery play. From entries in the account book, it is estimated to have occupied about 1,100 folios, with multiple copies of that being made for actors and the director. For its performance, an outdoor theatre structure was built in the shape of a gigantic oval, over 150 feet long and 100 feet wide, with a tent erected overhead. Spectators sat on benches and, above those, in box seats or *loges*. The preparations extended from January until August and the vast amounts of money spent on its elaborate staging covered, not only the building

structure, but filling it with sets and statues, elaborate pyrotechnics, a dragon-monster spitting flames and ridden by Lucifer, plus extraordinary machines and devices for marvellous effects. By contrast, what was spent on developing and copying the text amounted to barely ten per cent of the total expenditure. This, Runnalls claims, suggests the relative unimportance of the words versus the action of the play. For the medieval spectator of this play and others like it, Runnalls concludes, 'it was the spectacle that really counted' (p. 51).

John Wesley Harris fills out our picture of performance practices in other parts of medieval France. In 'Producing the cycles' (Chapter 47), he describes some of the sensational devices commonly used in plays staged all over the country during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries. Whether it was flying actors or scenery, tunnelling beneath the playing place, using vast ponds of water to float boats, incorporating fire and explosions or presenting animals on stage, there were devices to accommodate them all. The same was true for staging violent deaths and the torturing of characters in the plays, for incidental sound effects and music. Costumes were often spectacular as well; fashioned in contemporary mode or in a historical vein. Masks were common and some roles – that of the Virgin, for example – were frequently played by women. The popularity of these plays is signalled by the size of their casts, who could number hundreds, and that of the spectators, who might reach thousands every day. Oddly, the devotion of civic populations and officials to such theatrical ventures might well be measured by the fact that very few plays ever turned a profit.

The next essay (Chapter 48) turns from medieval France to the Netherlands. In 'The Drama of the Rhetoricians in the Low Countries', Elsa Strietman, one of the leading historians of drama in the Netherlands, offers an analysis of the widespread performance of plays sponsored by Chambers of Rhetoric. A well-known Fifteenth-Century example of such a play is *Elkerlijck* (which, of course, was translated into English as *Everyman*). As with religious plays in France, the number of surviving texts runs into the hundreds. Strietman suggests that the plays were part of a much larger humanist effort, that they addressed serious religious and class concerns and, in fact, can be seen as a mode of social engineering. In these plays, the emphasis shifted 'from the salvation of mankind towards the salvation of the individual, from the history of the world towards the history of the Low Countries, from the general to the particular and from the metaphysical to the actual' (p. 70). An inherent danger of such a drift towards topical themes made the plays suspect of unsuitable doctrinal and social themes and, during the Sixteenth Century, public distrust and censorship ultimately ended their career. Strietman notes that political elements should not eclipse the plays' theatrical qualities – the use of music, costumes, masks, movement and gesture – and she concludes with a telling example of the *Sinnekens*, allegorical embodiments of 'the evil side of human nature' figures that proved immensely entertaining and popular.

It is to schools rather than to Chambers of Rhetoric that one must look for drama in late medieval Denmark and, in ' "Unfaithful wives and weeping bitches": *Den Utro Hustru*' (Chapter 49), Graham Caie discusses the early Sixteenth-Century tradition in Odense, using as an example one of three plays in a manuscript from Vor Frue Kirke (Our Lady Church) school there. The play, *Den utro hustru* (*The Unfaithful Wife*), a Shrovetide play dating from around 1531, is a common European Wooer Play in which a wife is wooed by a series of men. In this play, she succumbs at last to the blandishments of a knight. The play illustrates a pre-Reformation tradition of Danish schoolboys performing sometimes crude and erotic fare for craftsmen and guildsmen of the town in order to raise money for their own subsistence. Further examples are not hard to find.

The robust medieval theatrical traditions in France, the Low Countries and Scandinavia contrast with those of Spain, where plays of any kind were relatively thin on the ground. Melveena McKendrick, in 'The birth of the drama' (Chapter 50), suggests that the liturgical drama was practically non-existent outside of Catalonia, where life had an essentially French rather than Iberian caste to it. 'Effectively', in fact, 'the history of Spanish theatre begins at the close of the medieval period' (p. 95). Because of the nature of court patronage, presumably, the playwrights to emerge in this era are named. In the late Fifteenth Century, we can track the careers of Juan del Encina and Lucas Fernandez, both of whom wrote for the court of Alba. Their plays reveal 'the dual stimulus of private patronage and religious celebration' (p. 103). The Portuguese playwright, Gil Vicente (1465?–1536?), must also be counted here, since he wrote eleven of his forty-four plays in Castilian, and also Baartolome de Torres Naharro, who seems to have lived and written in Italy and shows all the earmarks of a humanist scholar. The Spanish tradition of medieval drama, sponsored in the main by court patronage, thus offers a strikingly different profile from that of the French.

At least one medieval Spanish theatrical tradition seems to have flourished from early on and is still being performed in Catalan festivals today: processional dances and pageants featuring hobby horses. In 'A Martyrdom with Hobby Horses (Barcelona, 1424)' (Chapter 51), Max Harris traces this tradition as it appeared in Barcelona in the early Fifteenth Century. Here, the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* was staged as a confrontation between Islam and Christianity. The show used elaborately constructed hobby horses that were wood-framed, skirted and strapped around the waist of the performers. The representation of the *Martyrdom* involved two separate pageant wagons and a cast of about fifty-five. Nearly twenty years later, in 1442, the performers seem to have gone on tour to Naples, without the *Martyrdom* play, and further evidence suggests other venues closer to home in later years. Some of these dances with hobby horses are, in fact, still performed. Drawings and the melody for the festive dance as it was performed during the

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Twentieth Century still survive – although the representation seems to have roots stretching back for hundreds of years.

In 'Agata, Apollonia and Other Martyred Virgins: Did Florentines Really See These Plays Performed?' (Chapter 52), Nerida Newbigin turns to the Italian tradition of *sacra rappresentazione* and confraternity plays in late Fifteenth-Century Florence. Here, the theatrical tradition is complicated by the advent of a print culture and Newbigin conducts an inventory of virgin martyr play texts that survive from the late Fifteenth Century, mainly in pamphlet form. She suggests that an alternative way of experiencing the plays was by *reading* them rather than seeing them. Unconstrained by the material conditions of performance and decorum, the plays revel in violence and closely described torments at the same time that they trade in comedy and heavy irony. Something like stage directions appear in the printed text but the fact of their actual performance has still to be established.

By all accounts, medieval drama in Germany was widely staged and popular. Edelgard E. DuBruck, in 'German Carnival Comedies: Strategies of Entertainment' (Chapter 53), outlines the long tradition of *Fastnachtspiele* – farces celebrating the carnival season – as they were performed in Fifteenth-Century Nürnberg. Carnival farces seem to have been staged from the Fourteenth Century on in as many as fifty-seven cities besides Nürnberg, although the only extant plays (about 120 of them) are from Nürnberg and these are found only in a Nineteenth-Century printed edition. Written in Middle High German decasyllabic couplets, the short plays feature married life and adultery as favourite themes and they depict the expected variety of farcical characters. Filled with sexual humour, the plays were sometimes performed on public stages but ordinarily took place in houses or inns where the actors could collect entrance fees. Despite their sometimes grotesque distortion of character and situation, the plays act as mirrors of Fifteenth-Century German society. DuBruck catalogues some of the narrative lines these plays followed, noticing that the plays focus on the usual butts of humour in late medieval society: errant husbands and wives, corrupt clergy, doctors, clever or foolish peasants.

Critical paths for understanding vernacular European drama

Returning to the French tradition, Konrad Schoell, in 'Actor, Scene, and Audience of the Fifteenth-Century French Farce: The Farce in Light of the Semiotics of Performance' (Chapter 54), traces out something of the way in which the stage itself, the actors and the audience participate in the production of meaning through sign systems. Theatrical signifiers function in different ways: at a *pragmatic* level for the spectator, a *syntagmatic* level for the narrative plot and at an *aesthetic* level which is more widely shared in the culture. For medieval French farces, the space of performance adds an important dimension, as do the iconic signifiers of costume and gesture.

At the heart of Schoell's brief outline of performance semiotics is the understanding that plays take place within a society and that they necessarily represent, in one form or another, the culture that begot them and first performed them. Sometimes, as Glenn Ehrstine maps out in 'Performing the Protestant Reformation' (Chapter 55), theatrical representations and the controversies they excited suggest the intellectual milieu out of which they sprang. Ehrstine describes the underpinnings of the Sixteenth-Century Swiss theatrical tradition in Bern, outlining ways that reformists theorised the very performances they were putting on. In Bern, biblical plays – mainly from the Old Testament – were amazingly popular and attracted huge casts and audiences. Beginning with Martin Luther's comments in his Wittenberg correspondence, which show him to have been an ardent supporter of religious theatre, Ehrstine traces the controversy surrounding an early Bernese play to find 'the nearest approximation to a theory of a Protestant theater found in contemporaneous documents' (p. 198). The upshot of the controversy seems to have been that unless the figure of Jesus was represented on stage, such plays were theologically neutral; that they were better than sermons for instruction and that they were rooted in a sign-like visuality. Since they were written and performed using the foundations of pre-Reformation Catholic traditions, theatrical performance was naturally suspect but the new thinking allowed 'a host of Protestant schoolmasters, doctors, pastors, and civil servants' to compose plays for their communities (p. 208). In Bern, then, the Reformation drama built a single community of actors and audience united with Protestant reformers, a ploy familiar in politically charged theatre down to the present day.

Lutheran theoretical speculations regarding the doctrinal correctness of late medieval theatrical performances, or their pedagogical utility, ironically carry with them a whiff of the controversies surrounding the performance of liturgical drama some six hundred years earlier. However, they also look some five hundred years forward to current theoretical conversations regarding the performativity of medieval drama. One of the most thoughtful and inventive of modern theorists to explore and distinguish late medieval theatre from other literary activities such as poetry, singing, monologues and dialogues is Paul Zumthor. In 'Dialogue and Theater' (Chapter 56), he suggests that we must first understand how important language and action were to the reception – the hearing and seeing – of early literary works. Facial and bodily gestures, for example, were clearly part of the declaiming of epics, the singing of *pastourelles* or even the public readings of romances. This makes more difficult the task of defining 'what may have corresponded even approximately to our idea of theater in medieval tradition, and the further back we go the harder the task' (p. 242). Indeed, in medieval times, 'all poetry belonged more or less to what we call theater' (p. 243). By 1350, however, the genre of theatre is unmistakable and its signs go well beyond readerly directions. Using examples from medieval France, Zumthor weaves together considerations of community,

discourse and the non-linguistic elements of costume, props and movement to define essential characteristics, both of older liturgical drama and of more recent religious plays that reached towards transcendental performance. By the second half of the Thirteenth Century, he insists, 'it became possible to put anything on stage', and 'theater provided a language into which anything could be translated' (p. 255) making possible previously unimaginable experiments in form and scale.

Helen Solterer, in 'The Waking of Medieval Theatricality: Paris 1935–1995' (Chapter 57), picks up the story where Zumthor leaves off. Beginning with Roland Barthes' recognition that acting offered a means to connect with the dead, Solterer throws into sharp relief the French fascination with medieval theatricality during the early Twentieth Century, studying 'the overlap between intellectual history and performance practice' (p. 263). She traces Barthes' memories back to the Sorbonne and 1930s Paris, to Gustave Cohen's student troupe of *Théophiliens*, who excitedly revived medieval plays then, attempting to re-embody the passion of the distant past. The affective quality of performance, Solterer notes, allowed the theatrical and the religious to co-mingle, as did the contemporaneous but differently inspired 'theater of cruelty' that Antonin Artaud was busy staging on the other side of Paris. The political energies and rising militancy of the times embraced theatrical performance on both the left and the right and the revival of medieval performance seemed to promise the resurrection of purer sensibilities for both as well. In the end, neither side prospered but the emphasis on fervent incarnation in theatrical performance spawned distant critical descendants. It is particularly apparent in recent preoccupations with privileging performance over the text it represents and in a trust in the body as a primary means and metaphor for interpretation. How healthy these tendencies may prove in the future has still to be seen.

Indeed, how effectively medieval theatrical representations flirt with or appropriate physical reality is the subject of Jody Enders' essay, 'Medieval Snuff Drama' (Chapter 58). Enders examines reports of a biblical play of Judith and Holofernes performed in 1556 in Tournai, France (also examined by Margaret Owens in Volume III). In this performance, according to sources with more or less veracity, a convicted criminal played the part of Holofernes and was actually executed on stage during the performance as part of a royal entry celebration for Phillip II. These reports have excited a good deal of modern critical commentary. Enders draws on that and on similar controversies concerning snuff films and Jan van Brunvand's work with urban legends, to interrogate what seems to have happened – or not – in Tournai. By the end of the essay, she suggests why and how theatrical representation of violence has always mattered. Witty, illuminating and smart, Enders successfully bridges the gulf that separates the proverbial them from us.

The critical concern with violence continues in Sally Joyce Cross' essay on 'Torturers as Tricksters in the Cornish Ordinalia' (Chapter 59). Cross

suggests that the torturers who cruelly celebrate violence in the Passion scenes of the *Ordinalia* can best be comprehended as a species of the trickster figure found in primitive cultures and described by psychologists like Carl Jung or cultural anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss. The trickster is a violator of taboo, of socio/cultural codes, or of natural law. Here, torturers as tricksters function as 'mediators of the paradox inherent in the Redemption, that only through the shedding of Christ's blood will man be saved' (p. 331). As such, they enable Christ's final position as 'both warrior-king *and* suffering man, . . . both as a physically defeated yet triumphant sovereign' (p. 332). Cross offers a literary, metaphorical answer to the puzzle that performed violence presents to an audience.

Two arenas of recent critical work now receiving a good deal of attention are race and gender. Both of these are implicated in Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler's 'Othered Bodies: Racial Cross-Dressing in the *Mistere de la Sainte Hostie* and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*' (Chapter 60). Clark and Sponsler propose to examine instances of racial cross-dressing, especially racial cross-dressing involving Christian impersonation of Jews, in late medieval performances from England and France. They want to demonstrate how such representations of difference operate within 'late medieval hegemonic (heterosexist, Christian, masculinist, white) culture' (p. 334). Racial attitudes heralding blood racism of the modern kind were sharpened from the Fourteenth through the Sixteenth Century with the theatrical representation of racial others, particularly the figure of the Jew. A ritualised, ludic aspect of the Jewish other appears in plays of Host desecration that are recorded in France, the Netherlands, England and Italy during the Fifteenth Century. The English example, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, foregrounds the Jewish identity of the characters who buy and desecrate the Host and who are converted at the end of the play. Their literal attempted dismemberment of the Host reflects on their own fragmented and destructive state, the otherness that cannot be fully redressed by their conversion. The French example, the *Mistere de la Sainte Hostie*, involves a Jew who, despite the ocular proof offered by the Host's endurance, obstinately clings to his own law and perishes, even as his wife and children convert to Christianity and take Christian names. The Jew's house is pulled down and a monastery erected in its place. What these examples suggest, according to Clark and Sponsler, is that 'contrary to what we might expect, Jewishness in these plays is not dismissed' (p. 348). Instead, it can be seen to signal a curiosity with 'rehearsing an alien, proscribed, and demonized other' (p. 351). Because they ground racial difference in the body, and bodies can be transformed, the racial cross-dressing introduces 'a much more complicated and ambivalent attitude toward racial otherness, one which does not deny the complicities between Christian and Jew', so that the function of the Imaginary Jew in these plays ultimately contributes to a fictive cultural coherence (p. 351).

Cross-dressing in medieval theatre offers rich opportunities for playing up gender as well as racial transgression. In 'Joseph as Mother, Jutta as Pope: Gender and Transgression in Medieval German Drama' (Chapter 61), Stephen K. Wright begins with the fact that, in medieval German drama, all female roles were played by men, and he explores how the notion of gender itself might have been perceived by an audience of both women and men. Wright is particularly interested in what happens when dramatic characters on stage imitate the behaviour of the opposite sex. He uses the examples of the role of Joseph in the *Kindelweigen* (cradle-rocking) episodes in four Nativity plays dating between 1420–1511, and sets that against the role of Jutta (the legendary Pope Joan) in Dietrich Schernberg's *Ein schön Spiel von Frau Jutten*, performed in Mühlhausen around 1480. The Nativity plays depict Joseph as the central figure performing a number of tasks typically understood to be women's work, including rocking the cradle. In one of the *Kindelweigen* plays, a chorus of Jews serenade Joseph, ridiculing his unmanly uxoriousness and timid willingness to perform household chores. He has effectively taken over the role of mother for the new babe, transgressing and perhaps extending gender roles. But, Wright asks, when such a play is performed by nuns at a convent, as seems clearly to have happened, the role introduces a different and problematic transgressive behavior: 'a chaste woman pretending to be a man (Joseph) who is married to another chaste woman (Mary), and whose behavior is an imitation of maternal nurturing for a son that the man knows he did not father' (p. 367). In the second example, a male actor cross-dresses as a female character (Jutta), who cross-dresses as a man. Further, Jutta's career as 'John of England' (the name she takes for herself in the play) involves disguising herself as a student, a professor, a cardinal and a pope. She lives as 'John of England' with her male lover Clericus and 'because of her disguise a (false and public) homoerotic relationship is created in order to mask a true and secret heterosexual relationship' (p. 369). At the same time, the audience knows that the actors of both Jutta and of Clericus are in fact male. 'In a startling twist, the play forces heterosexual behavior into the closet and foregrounds same-sex companionship in both the fictive and the meta-theatrical realm'. As Wright shows, the play complicates the action further and further, investigating 'the unmapped interstices' between religious and social ideologies. The actions of the cross-gendered performers act as effective reminders that 'gender itself is always and everywhere a kind of performance in its own right', that it can be both pious and subversive, that it can act to enable personal and social transformations (p. 373).