MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Edited by
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Volume III

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history and criticism

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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME III

Situating non-cycle plays historically and culturally

By definition, the category of drama known as medieval non-cycle plays includes a whole range of theatrical compositions unconnected with the vast cycle play tradition. Morality Plays, Saint Plays, Miracle Plays and Humanist Interludes all fall within the non-cycle rubric. Until recently, the cycle plays have enjoyed the lion's share of critical interest because of their size, complexity and easy availability of texts. Lately, however, it has become apparent that *non*-cycle performances were the rule rather than the exception in towns, villages and parishes throughout the country and these plays have now become the focus of searching inquiries extending well beyond their historical and social dimension. In this volume of cultural and critical studies, eight essays serve to contextualise these non-cycle plays, identifying traditions and common characteristics of surviving materials and indicating some directions of current studies. Eight more essays offer ways of seeing the plays through modern critical lenses.

In the opening essay (Chapter 28), taken from his early influential study *From Mankind to Marlowe*, David Bevington assembles a canon of popular professional drama that 'played to country as well as to town, to lower and middle classes as well as to the gentry' (p. 11). Intent on tracing the precursors of Marlowe and Shakespeare, he distinguishes between moralities and interludes, following the habits of travelling troupes of players across the land. Bevington considers how plays like *Mankind*, *Lusty Juventus* and the *Marriage of Wit and Science* epitomise plays of a popular theatrical tradition.

Following Bevington, Robert Potter's 'Medieval plays: the repentance drama of early England' (Chapter 29) provides a census of extant English medieval morality plays. Potter suggests that their shared common threads are an outrageous theatricality and a moral theme of penitence. In satiric presentations of man's fallibility, representative figures are tempted by Vices and protected by Virtues while the audience is 'drawn together on a religious and communal occasion to be entertained and frightened by the caricature

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of its own behavior' (p. 34). Potter's detailed analyses of plays conforming to this description offer some of the most reliable and sensitive treatments they have yet received.

A tradition of non-cycle plays that was clearly popular throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was that of the Saint Play. Like the morality plays that Bevington tracks forward, the Saint Play also provides a sturdy type of drama that carries over into Elizabethan times. John Wasson, in 'The secular saint plays of the Elizabethan era' (Chapter 30), considers the end of this long tradition of dramatised saint's lives, showing how the tradition continued and influenced some popular plays on the Elizabethan stage. Wasson discerns three kinds of Saint Plays: conversion plays, martyrdom plays and reenactments of miracles associated with saints. All contribute thematically to later drama and each provides character studies to inform it.

As Saint Plays moved their form and content onto the popular public stage by the end of the sixteenth century; a more privately-sponsored tradition in aristocratic households remained very much at home. Peter H. Greenfield gives us a glimpse of that tradition in his short but important 'Festive drama at Christmas' (Chapter 31). Greenfield claims that these private festivities – often associated with the twelve days of Christmas – carried serious cultural and political baggage and mirrored the power relations between local invited audiences and the sponsoring lord of the manor.

One kind of non-cycle play that did not survive the Reformation was the *Pater Noster* Play. In his essay, 'The Lord's Prayer, the seven deadly sins, and playing against evil' (Chapter 32), Clifford Davidson uses extra-textual evidence to suggest the nature and moral thrust of such plays. He explores the incantatory quality of the *Pater Noster* itself and, by extension, the plays related to the prayer. The organisation of the *Pater Noster* was understood to include protection against the Seven Deadly Sins through their opposites, the Seven Virtues, graphically represented in the Vernon manuscript held in the British Library. The fifteenth-century York *Pater Noster* Play may well have drawn upon this intricately patterned trope and parts of it still seem to have been performed well into the sixteenth century. The key to understanding the *Pater Noster* Play, then, is to follow the ways that the prayer, when said devoutly, served to counteract evil.

A subject of critical attention for some time has been the stage areas where the action of medieval plays was performed. One of the only stage plans to have survived for these plays is found in the manuscript of *The Castle of Perseverance*, the most elaborate English morality play to survive. In his classic study, *Medieval Theatre in the Round*, Richard Southern makes use of this plan in an elaborate and imaginative re-creation of the play. Southern observed that a performance of the *Castle* would in all likelihood be based upon a metaphorical and practical understanding of the playing spaces designated in the plan and a sympathetic use of the directions found there. He spells out the logic of such a production in 'The references to "place" on the

plan' (Chapter 33), contending that a circular ditch drawn in the plan was filled with water to function as a border defining the theatrical space, or 'Place'; enclosing paying customers and separating them from others. 'Place', or *platea*, thus acts as a technical theatrical term and a key to the contemporary performance of *The Castle*.

Using theatrical space metaphorically was one of the great achievements of medieval plays, according to Martin Stevens in 'From *Mappa Mundi* to *Theatrum Mundi*: the world as stage in early English drama' (Chapter 34). Stevens argues that medieval stages regularly represent medieval geographic concepts based on theological, mythical and historical readings of the world. He notes how the physical staging areas of medieval plays replicated the Noachic map, the 'T-O' map of the world (p. 104). In urban festival drama, the circular stage serves as a cosmic *mappa mundi* and, whether performed on wagons or in a fixed space, the plays constituted liminal events that acted as thresholds between secular and sacred. Examining the widely celebrated thirteenth-century Hereford Map and the later stage plan for the *Castle of Perseverance*, Stevens explores how cartographic imagery symbolised a sacred scheme, with the east as the zone of heaven (usually at the top) and Jerusalem at the centre. Mapping this onto the stage plan for the *Castle of Perseverance* provided useful associations for the audience. Similarly, the plays themselves call attention to their ritual spaces that use town settings as replications of the universe. Such uses of the stage arena appear at Lucerne in the sixteenth century. The concept of stage as world carries forward onto the Elizabethan stage where it became a commonplace.

Pamela M. King, in 'Spatial semantics and the medieval theatre' including a recent update (Chapter 35), presses the issue of theatrical space further, noting its metaphorical, allegorical and cultural meanings. The action of a play, or the movement of a character from scaffold across the 'place', generates meaning all on its own in medieval plays. Especially in *The Castle of Perseverance*, the allegory of the play conforms to the use of space in performance. The ditch filled with water, as others have suggested, flows around the Castle scaffold stage, not around the audience, an arrangement that allows for the spatial semantics of figural identity to play itself out.

In 'The theaters of *Everyman*' (Chapter 36), David Mills explores the notion of theatrical space beyond the stage – however symbolically rich the associations might have been – that occurs in the mind of a spectator or reader. Considering the play of *Everyman* – the English translation of the Dutch play *Elckerlijc* – Mills suggests that 'the impulse behind the translation was literary and devotional and that the text was intended for private reading, not for theatrical performance' (p. 144). He argues that the play's appeal and power depend upon a 'metaphoric strategy' drawing on a flexible use of acting spaces and allegorical modes. As a pilgrimage moving towards the grave, Everyman's journey represents an individual's movement through time towards final judgment. Thus, 'Everyman is Anyman among the audience

gathered in the space before God, and the actor Death might draw any one of them into the play' (p. 152). The theatre of the world becomes a theatre of memory and salvation before returning the audience to the everyday world where they carry on their own lives.

Critical paths for understanding non-cycle plays

How else the medieval audience might have considered what they were doing when they attended a play is the subject of Glending Olson's 'Plays as play: a medieval ethical theory of performance and the intellectual context of the *tretise of miraclis pleyinge*' (Chapter 37). Olson contends that medieval intellectuals thought of a play as a form of social play, applying ethical criteria concerning motive, purpose and propriety. Extending his explorations beyond the cycle play traditions, Olson finds that the fourteenth-century *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* offers a 'medieval vocabulary in regard to performance' (p. 168). The ethical vocabulary was neo-Aristotelian, following Robert Grosseteste's translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*, and addresses the morality of entertainment and entertainers. The commentary derived from such a vocabulary was not primarily aesthetic or formal. Thus, some plays, whether *ludi* or *specatacula*, were regularly categorised as wicked, morally beneficial or (the most general classification) three-part, borrowed from Aquinas. The latter distinguished between wicked plays, human or recreational plays (judged case by case) and spiritual plays (always virtuous). In the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, this scholastic play theory can be seen in the condemnation of any physical representation of spiritual truth. According to the *Tretise*, performances were to be judged by the same moral terms as other playful actions and vernacular drama was found particularly wanting, even if intended for spiritual enlightenment. A more tolerant attitude appears in the roughly contemporary *Dives and Pauper*, where religious entertainment is defended. Still, for understanding opposition to medieval plays – cycle plays and other representations as well – as part of the larger category of social play, Olson offers the possibility of more complex understandings of performance than have been available before. Appended entries from contemporary treatises buttress Olson's contentions and offer starting points for further studies.

In fact, in the following essay, 'Ritual, church and theatre: medieval dramas of the sacramental body' (Chapter 38), Sarah Beckwith argues that the cultural work performed by the strange and interesting *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* may well have been to complicate the moral visions offered by such works as the *Treatise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. Beckwith claims that this play constructed 'a world so totally incorporated and encompassed by the body of Christ that to be outside is no longer conceivable' (p. 199), although serious ambiguities remain. The power of the consecrated host as the physical body of Christ and as the symbol of all Christian society is affected by

the miracle occurring after the Jews torture the host in the play. Rather than seeing the *Croxton Play* confirming the pieties of the age or opposing them, Beckwith offers an analysis of how the grotesque, ritualistic and liturgical play off one another in the imagined world, then and now.

Following Beckwith's lead, in 'Mischievous governance: the unruly bodies of morality plays' (Chapter 39), Claire Sponsler suggests that for some time theatrical activity was seen at least potentially 'to act as a spur to misgovernance, reversing discipline and inciting improper behavior' (p. 224). Because of the association of performance with the body and money, early anti-theatrical writings like the *Treatise of Miraclis Pleyinge* were constructed with analogies that embodied class and gender subordination. Thus, plays that such works railed against could perform 'destabilizing and transgressive cultural work' (p. 226). Enshrined in the carnivalesque, the morality plays are full of 'flamboyantly bad behavior' that could outflank repentance (p. 227). Sponsler examines three morality plays – *Mankind, Interlude of Youth* and *Mary of Nemmegen* – to track how performed misbehaviour and misgovernance negotiated the relationship between individual desire and social control. Her critically nuanced and suggestive analyses offer strong evidence that older understandings of the morality play tradition need to be revised.

Like Sponsler, Theresa Coletti follows Sarah Beckwith's lead in the next essay (Chapter 40), exploring the ideologies of representation in the East Anglian Saint play, the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. 'Bodies, theater, and sacred mediations' deals with the relationships between theatricality, theology and aesthetics in the play. Its emphasis on the sources and interpretation of sacred knowledge help us understand the play's construction of Mary Magdalene as contemplative and visionary. At the same time, it exploits spectacular 'shewings' as meta-theatrical counterpointing. Like the Chester Cycle *Play of Antichrist*, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* generates distrust of deceptive images, idolatrous spectacles. The tension between theology and aesthetics lies behind the figure of Mary Magdalene, symbolically mediating between sacred and profane realms. Her character literally embodies and echoes her connection with Jesus. The character never transcends her physicality but that very fact allows the play to render her spiritual change in material form.

In ' "Strange and exotic": representing the other in medieval and renaissance performance' (Chapter 41), Kathleen M. Ashley returns to the subject of the 'other', the topic that C. Clifford Flanigan and Rainer Warning (Chapters 8 and 9, respectively) explored with regard to the Cycle Play tradition. Ashley focuses on a wide range of exotic figures, grounding her analysis in cultural anthropology to explore how English and continental plays displayed 'the exotic other for purposes of aesthetic pleasure and cultural reflection during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries' (p. 288). Costumes and movement, for example, help Jews and 'Orientals' in Lucerne perform with attractive and dangerous fascination as exotics – a liminal category

representing both known and unknown simultaneously and one that can be extended to representing the black or the Indian. Each is viewed as a kind of *objet d'art* and the visual arts of the period are useful to help us perceive such characterisations. Looking at the Old Testament figures in the English Towneley Plays, Ashley concludes that the costuming and gestures may well override verbal systems of meaning altogether.

Perhaps the most exotic action on stage is death. Margaret E. Owens, in ' "The head will bounce three times": pre-Reformation performances of bodily fragmentation' (Chapter 42), considers the strange phenomenon of staged violence and death. Owens begins with the most famous (and perhaps apocryphal) story of violent theatrical spectacle; that of Philip II witnessing an actual execution as part of a biblical play of Judith and Holofernes at Tournai in 1554 (examined further in the next volume by Jody Enders). True or not, the story suggests 'the peculiar mix of fantasy and anxiety aroused by theatrical trends favouring "naturalistic" representation of violence' (p. 301). Owens examines the detailed and vivid stage directions in French and Spanish texts, which lead her back to the staging of violence in the stage directions and archival evidence surrounding English performances. Her purpose is 'to map a historical and discursive terrain' (p. 302), taking into account hagiographical plays and narratives. Along the way, Owens discovers strange stage conventions, like the use of dummies and entrails to achieve verisimilitude or the use of horrific histrionics to exaggerate cruel action. In British medieval drama, only three examples of Saint plays have survived, compared with over a hundred in French. Despite the evidence being much slimmer, many local references to Saint plays suggest the popularity of staging violent martyrdoms. Beyond the events staged in hagiographic drama lie many violent episodes in biblical plays, like those dramatising the beheading of John the Baptist, the Slaughter of the Innocents, staged violence in Miracle plays associated with the Virgin Mary, in the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* and in many forms of early English folk drama. Often the performances of beheadings and mutilations carried particular political or religious meanings and Owens notes that 'The slippage between the real and the fictive' (p. 318) in staged incidents suggests that theatricalised power upped the stakes in the use and interpretation of visual symbols.

In the final essay in this volume (Chapter 43), 'Into exiled hands: Jewish exegesis and urban identity in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*', Ruth Nisse lays out how the play challenges Christian tenets of belief, mediates the interpretive crisis through Christian exegesis and, finally, resolves it by revelation and miracle. Nisse's starting point is that the play is in fact a 'unique and elusive cultural document, one that confounds the traditions that it supposedly continues and refines' (p. 327). Mapping the historical position of Jews in Europe from the thirteenth century onto the grid of the play, Nisse explores how, in this East Anglian play, the dramatic narrative is sustained by and resistant to the counternarrative of medieval Jewish

exegesis. In the end, the play parries the large-scale urban dramatic model – exemplified by the N-Town Plays – where literal Jews ultimately disappear, as they did from Norwich in 1290. One result of opening up the frame in this way is to understand the rise of a discourse of English self-definition in the Fourteenth Century, spinning forward to undermine the hermeneutic and ideological claims of the contemporary urban theatre. Actual Jews are gone, but the phantasmic diasporic Jews are at once everywhere and nowhere, and with them 'the Croxton Play constructs a kind of communal identity *outside* the city by contrast to an alien and increasingly remote Other' (p. 338). The symbolic working out of spectacular and miraculous events within the play finally operate to present a kind of apocalyptic vision as the Jews, Christian merchant and the players also leave. At the end of the play, the city is desolate but, while the play has been enacted, the Jews 'return to East Anglia's historical and exegetical memory at great cost to Christian society' (p. 347).

Part 5

SITUATING NON-CYCLE PLAYS HISTORICALLY AND CULTURALLY