MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Edited by
John C. Coldewey

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Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies

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Volume II

English cycle plays:
studies past and present
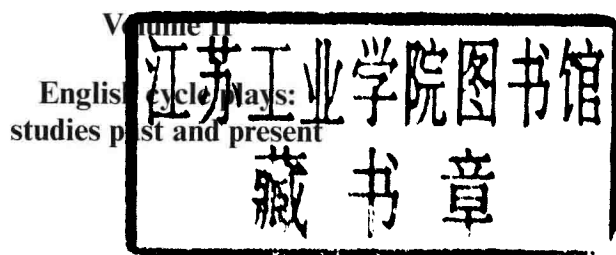
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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME II

Situating cycle plays historically and culturally

The tradition of medieval Latin plays under liturgical or secular sponsorship clearly undergirded, and coincided with the appearance of, vernacular plays well before the year 1300. Beginning in the Fourteenth Century, however, whole new forms of theatrical entertainment emerged, and the most notable of these was the English cycle plays. This second volume of essays gathers together studies crucial to an understanding of how English cycle plays developed, what work they performed as part of medieval town cultures and how we might best approach them critically.

The first essay in this volume, Carol Symes' important recent study, 'The Appearance of Early Vernacular Plays: Forms, Functions, and the Future of Medieval Theater', treats the transmission of Latin drama into various forms in the vernacular, taking account of manuscript evidence and historical circumstance. Symes argues that what we take for granted as a theatrical notation system simply did not exist in the scribal world where early medieval plays first appeared on the page and on the stage. Thus, it is time to reassess the manuscript evidence for plays that may not be signaled as such by the manuscripts that contain them and 'any attempt to fix the parameters of the medieval dramatic canon, even the narrower canon of early vernacular plays, should give us pause' (p. 11). Because plays share performative characteristics with musical, didactic, scholastic and poetic texts, the project of recovering them promises to be a large enterprise. Understanding the problems inherent in the transmission of play texts can help speed their recovery and one key to the project is seeing how manuscript and performance often play off each other. The role of music for Fourteenth-Century plays is a case in point, since 'the practical problems posed by the layout and rubrication of multicharacter verse dramas are analogous to those of polyphony' (p. 40). Conversely, the apparent increased incidence of plays in following centuries need not be 'the product of newly awakened theatrical impulses but the result of documentary innovation, coupled with a drive toward the retention and consultation of records in public archives' (p. 43).

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This is especially true where performances did not observe traditional boundaries between dramatic and non-dramatic texts, or even between the liturgical and the para-liturgical. Testimony from later centuries suggests that any number of medieval plays may yet be recovered if we can learn to recognise them. The apparent sudden popularity of theatrical performance in the later Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries – the heyday of the English cycle plays – may have to be rethought.

An examination of cycle play manuscripts may well speed along Symes' suggested project of recuperation. These plays were sponsored and co-ordinated by a surprising number of towns in England. How they fit into the ritual civic practices associated with the ecclesiastical feast of Corpus Christi, is the subject of Mervyn James' classic essay, 'Ritual, drama and social body in the late medieval English town' (Chapter 15). James offers some general historical contexts for the cycle plays, suggesting that they arose within a specific kind of community, 'one in which there existed a certain tension and free play of political and social forces, and in which order and unity needed therefore to be continually affirmed in terms of shared rite and shared ritual' (p. 81). Before the ritual aspects of town drama might come into play, however, material conditions for town productions needed to be in place. John C. Coldewey, in 'Some Economic Aspects of the Late Medieval Drama' (Chapter 16), surveys the economic underpinnings of medieval drama, noting how 'the economic circumstances of a town, village, or parish dictated the possibilities of dramatic entertainment and, sometimes, the purposes for which they were produced' (p. 99). National and regional fortunes played a large part in the emergence of theatrical activities across the land and local economic circumstances were instrumental in the origins, development, and eventual disappearance of much of medieval drama. Much of the evidence for this aspect of medieval theatre can be found in civic and ecclesiastical records, which offer rich sources of information about how widespread and important drama was as an expression of social and cultural values.

In ' "All the world was a stage": Records of Early English Drama' (Chapter 17), Alexandra F. Johnston gives some idea of the range of documents that tell us about medieval theatre, from Churchwardens and Chamberlains' accounts to all manner of court records. In the absence of play texts especially, these records attest to places of performance, including churches and private houses, and tell us something about the kinds of plays actually performed. Johnston concludes that

> the world of the Church from the great cathedrals to tiny parish church, the world of the merchant towns, the world of the gentry and royal court drew both life and a sense of unity from plays commonly performed and commonly enjoyed. (p. 134)

How cycle drama fared under the administration of both religious and civic interests is explored by Lawrence N. Clopper in 'Lay and Clerical Impact on Civic Religious Drama and Ceremony' (Chapter 18). Tracing the development of various kinds of theatrical activity in the medieval town of Chester during the course of nearly two centuries, Clopper considers how regulation by either the civic or the ecclesiastical establishment seems to have developed in other towns where records have survived. In the end, governing bodies of the towns themselves co-operated to bring about the demise of medieval plays after generations of performances. In the following essay (Chapter 19), 'Bury St. Edmunds, Lydgate, and the *N-Town Cycle*', Gail McMurray Gibson examines the historical evidence linking the N-Town Cycle of plays, previously known only as plays with an East Anglian provenance, to the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk and to the Fifteenth-Century author John Lydgate, a monk there. Along the way, using evidence from local records, other accounts of the monastery, the N-Town manuscript and the works of Lydgate, Gibson illuminates a great deal about the plays themselves. This triangulation of historical, literary and biographical sources suggests that one way to negotiate medieval plays is by understanding their contexts as fully as possible.

Historical contexts for medieval drama may be useful but, as John Wesley Harris reminds us, it is crucial to know what is in them. In 'The structure of the cycles' (Chapter 20), Harris considers the selection of themes and stories displayed by the surviving cycle plays, noting that two main lines of biblical interpretation lay beneath the materials chosen by medieval dramatists. The first kind of selective process depended upon biblical exegesis – that is, understanding that, by linking analogous events in Christ's life and other events in the Bible, a further set of meanings could be generated allegorically. The second selection process involved seeing history as a series of successive 'ages', with spiritual guides and teachers. Beyond these two conceptual frameworks, some playwrights used the figures and events mentioned in the Creed as a means to choose which biblical stories to dramatise, fastened upon events in the Passion or milestone moments in the life of Mary.

Critical paths for understanding cycle plays

Rosemary Woolf, in 'Attitudes to Drama and Dramatic Theory' (Chapter 21), taken from her early and brilliant book on *The English Mystery Plays*, traces the low esteem in which theatrical practices were held from late antique Roman times. The message often mirrored the messenger: ecclesiastical officials were particularly anxious about costuming, especially men in women's clothing, and about performance as a sign of the degeneration of monastic life. In the Thirteenth Century, hostilities towards even liturgical drama continued to surface in church writings. Christmas plays and Easter ceremonies evinced criticism for clerical neglect of duties and Woolf suggests that such

opposition may have been instrumental in shifting vernacular play responsibilities to guilds for performance. Still, opposition continued, as exemplified in *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (a late Fourteenth-Century tract, here characterised as a Lollard text). Cycle plays, which also seemed to come under attack in the *Tretise*, acted like speaking pictures and the images themselves were suspect in Wycliffite thought. Although images and plays were defended as educational or as spurs to meditation in memory, Woolf notes that, by the Sixteenth Century, such defences of the stage lead directly to a consideration of the plays as art, like a sequence of frescoes, or, when viewed antagonistically, as heretical. The arguments for or against images and plays had roots in ancient aesthetics and the winning defence turned on the notion of performed drama being an important living book for the laity, *libri laicorum*.

Following Woolf, the late C. Clifford Flanigan, in 'Liminality, carnival, and social structure: the case of late medieval biblical drama' (Chapter 22), addresses the critical issue of reading individual dramatic texts in light of recent anthropological and narrative theory. He suggests that the social and communal functions of cycle plays has been ignored and, following Victor Turner, notes that the ritual aspects of the plays lend their performances a kind of cultic sacramental quality. If critics of medieval drama have been concerned with the shading of ritual into theatre, Flanigan points to Turner's understanding that theatre can shade into ritual. Since it is a kind of social text, drama can also be characterised as carnivalesque. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of the carnivalesque allows Flanigan to consider political and economic discourse in the plays, mediated by 'the monological and authorized discourse on one hand, and liberating ideological popular discourse on the other' (p. 266). The ideological edges of the plays are places where Turner and Bakhtin's notions of social performance converge for fruitful analysis.

The essay by Peter Travis, 'The Credal Design of the Cycle: Paginae XVII–XXI' (Chapter 23), excerpted from his highly-regarded book on the Chester Cycle, examines how the Resurrection Group of the Chester Cycle presents dynamics similar to those of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* plays of Holy Week. Yet, the Chester plays go beyond the transformation of doubt into belief, offering a series of episodes that serve as integral parts of the entire cycle. Doubting Thomas, in particular, can represent the spiritual illumination that takes place between the audience and the play; just as the disciples celebrate the Chester Resurrection lyric and the Creed, the structure of the Chester Cycle follows an expansive credal design, which Travis maps out. The achievement of the playwright, according to Travis, is no less than artistic perfection.

Beyond their aesthetic and theological appeal, however, the Chester Cycle was also received as a loaded political and religious construction. That is the subject of Richard K. Emmerson's 'Contextualizing Performance: The Reception of the Chester *Antichrist*' (Chapter 24). Suggesting that 'medieval

audiences probably responded to "the multiplicity of signifying systems" constituting theatrical performance in as many ways as do modern audiences' (p. 305), Emmerson argues that the meaning of the cycle varied each time the plays were mounted. He uses the example of the Chester *Antichrist* to show how one play in the Chester Cycle certainly participated in history during the final seventy-five years of its performance, 1500–1575. Following Emmerson's lead, John C. Coldewey, in 'Thrice-told tales: renegotiating early English drama' (Chapter 25), claims that historically situating the English cycle plays offers even further kinds of understandings for both medieval and modern audiences. Using the N-Town Cycle as an example, Coldewey focuses upon the Noah play and its strange interpolated scene featuring old Lamech with his bow and servant. Traditional biblical exegesis offers a traditional interpretation but other voices in the culture offer an understanding of the plays participating in Sixteenth-Century political discourse and the foregrounding of marginal figures reinforces the main narrative to give a sense of our own participation in the interpretive process.

One of the ways that medieval plays continue to participate in history can be seen in the field of gender studies. Ruth Evans' essay, 'Body politics: engendering medieval cycle drama' (Chapter 26), explores ways in which gendered readings of the cycle plays can help us identify 'what kind of supports are used by various patriarchal structures at specific historical moments and thus to challenge their claims to "naturalness" ' (p. 354). Evans examines the York *Crucifixion*, using a set of medieval *topoi* – metaphors of the body that disclose important social narratives. These in turn offer means of understanding the cultural and historic shifts marked out by the plays themselves. Evans' work called for further gendered readings of medieval drama and that call is answered by Christina M. Fitzgerald in the final essay here, 'Manning the ark in York and Chester' (Chapter 27). Fitzgerald offers a masculinist reading of the Noah plays in the York and Chester Cycles, suggesting that the narratives detail 'the frustrations and fantasies of being male in the Middle Ages, particularly being an urban, mercantile, or artisan guildsman in late medieval and early modern York or Chester' (p. 373). Situated historically in these urban cultures, the plays acted also as social scripts for producing male behaviour and identity formation.

Part 3

SITUATING CYCLE PLAYS HISTORICALLY AND CULTURALLY

THE APPEARANCE OF EARLY VERNACULAR PLAYS

Forms, functions, and the future of medieval theater

Carol Symes

My title signals a twofold interest in appearances: the physical appearance of plays on their manuscript pages and the historical circumstances in which medieval drama made its appearance on the European stage. In brief, I argue that the unfamiliar guises and settings in which many early plays appear should invite the revision of current theories about the forms in which dramatic activities were handed down and enrich our understanding of how such activities functioned within a culture increasingly characterized by the give-and-take between what was written and what was performed. The sources to which I will refer constitute the entire canon of vernacular drama from the period before 1300, according to the current methods used to identify certain texts as "plays." But a systematic overview of the evidence will not only challenge the parameters of that canon, it will broaden the horizons of theater generally speaking, with respect both to vernacular plays and to those in Latin, whether worldly or liturgical. This is because the artifacts upon which the study of medieval drama has hitherto been based are preserved in manuscript books alongside an array of materials usually classified as "nondramatic," yet the plays share the formal characteristics of those materials. In most cases, then, the ambiguous appearance of a given text may have little to do with whether or not it was performed or regarded as a play.

For the most part, the formats of plays were as flexible as those of other texts, which were routinely tailored to conform to the overall presentation of the parent codex. In some cases, different versions of the same piece reveal that it could be altered or annotated to suit changing conditions of performance

or the needs of different readers. Still other, more fundamental variations in layout and rubrication indicate that the generic definition of a play as such was in flux for most of the Middle Ages. As I shall demonstrate in the following pages, there was no foolproof method for transmitting the nuances of performance practice, at least prior to the fourteenth century. Plays were recorded using techniques borrowed from sources musical, didactic, scholastic, and poetic. Many of them, as a result, do not look very much like plays. Conversely, many texts currently considered to be unlikely candidates for performance are either juxtaposed with plays or laid out and rubricated in similar ways. And because all of these texts—even those now designated and widely accepted as "plays"—do not conform to modern dramatic paradigms, they have always been subject to a high degree of scholarly intervention. Critical editions and literary analyses present them as isolated entities, surgically removed from their settings and provided with stage directions, character designations, and other aids.[1] This means that the vestiges of medieval theater have been measured and shaped by critical tools fashioned in later eras, beginning with the advent of print, with the result that valuable clues provided by the plays' positions within their own manuscripts have been obscured, further deepening the mystery surrounding the circumstances of their composition, performance, and preservation.

A collective analysis of the earliest vernacular play scripts will therefore prove that the criteria used to find, extract, classify, and edit the surviving artifacts of medieval theater are inadequate, even gravely flawed. Rather than looking at individual plays as unusual examples of an emerging art form, or as the remnants of two divergent aesthetic traditions, the sacred and the secular, an assessment of features or practices common to the texts as they were originally transcribed will reveal both the protean quality of medieval plays and their tendency to take on protective coloring in manuscripts; it will also reveal some of the mechanisms whereby more visible and specialized performance pieces began to appear in the last decades of the thirteenth century. While a nuanced understanding of the myriad ways in which information for performers could be encoded—and lost—in transmission shall require further investigation and a broader temporal scope, the argument presented here questions both the basis and the agenda of medieval theater studies. On the one hand, the indeterminate appearance of a representative set of medieval plays strongly suggests that there are many more such texts still to be recovered; on the other, their very indeterminacy exemplifies the degree to which theatrical documents should be viewed as integral to their manuscripts and to the conditions that produced them. Most urgently, the appearance of early vernacular plays indicates that the study of medieval drama is not the study of rarefied literary monuments but the study of a vital performative element within the surrounding culture. The new foundation of theater studies must be, consequently, a historical one. At the same time, the serious study of plays must begin to inform the work of scholars whose