

*Gender and
Medieval Drama*



KATE NORMINGTON

GENDER AND MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Katie Normington

D. S. BREWER

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Gender in the Middle Ages

Volume 1

GENDER AND MEDIEVAL DRAMA

The focus of this study is upon the Corpus Christi plays, supplemented by other performance practices such as festive and social entertainments, civic parades, funeral processions and public punishments. The main argument relates to the traditional approaches to women's non-performance in the Corpus Christi dramas, but other factors are considered and analysed, including the semiotics of the cross-dressed actor and the significance of the visual and spatial language of the processional stage to gender debates. In conclusion, there is a series of readings which reassess the dramatic portrayal of a selection of holy and vulgar women – the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mrs Noah and Dame Procula. The emphasis throughout the book is upon a performance-based analysis. Evidence from Records of Early English Drama, social, literary and cultural sources are drawn together in order to investigate how performances within the late Middle Ages were both shaped by, and shaped, the public image of women.

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Gender in the Middle Ages

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This series investigates the representation and construction of masculinity and femininity in the Middle Ages from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. It aims in particular to explore the diversity of medieval genders, and such interrelated contexts and issues as sexuality, social class, race and ethnicity, and orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

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For

Tim, Beatrice and Oliver

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AM	<i>Annuaire Mediaevale</i>
CD	<i>Comparative Drama</i>
CE	<i>College English</i>
CR	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
	ES Extra Series
	SS Special Series
JDTC	<i>Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism</i>
JPL	<i>Journal of Popular Literature</i>
JRMS	<i>Journal of Renaissance and Medieval Studies</i>
JWH	<i>Journal of Women's History</i>
MÆ	<i>Medium Aevum</i>
METH	<i>Medieval English Theatre</i>
MFN	<i>Medieval Feminist Newsletter</i>
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
NLH	<i>New Literary History</i>
NTQ	<i>New Theatre Quarterly</i>
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
PP	<i>Past and Present</i>
REED	<i>Records of Early English Drama</i>
RORD	<i>Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama</i>
SPCK	<i>Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge</i>
STP	<i>Studies in Theatre Production</i>

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INTRODUCTION

The breadth of dramatic activity within the Middle Ages is one of the most astonishing of any period of time. The records of performance that survive, through both extant texts and documentation of dramatic events, indicate that a huge number of theatrical events took place during the medieval year. The nature and purpose of medieval drama were far-reaching. Medieval drama included religious and liturgical plays, miracle plays, saints' plays, folk plays, mummers' plays, and interludes as well as more diverse performance events such as chivalric displays and love games. But there were many other ways in which performances took place. Events such as processions, dancing games, the Boy Bishop feast, masquerades and funeral corteges all formed part of the cultural practices of the Middle Ages. Itinerant performers such as troubadours and waits added another dimension to the dramatic events of the medieval year. Part of the reason for the large scope of dramatic activity is that it was not contained by a theatre building. The performances that this book discusses were executed on the streets or inside churches, halls and other public spaces. As Glynne Wickham points out, it takes 'an effort of imagination to rid our minds of the image of the normal modern theatre built deliberately to exclude daylight, and illuminated artificially by electricity'.¹

The plethora of dramatic events in the Middle Ages has provided critics with a problem of how to categorise them. Glynne Wickham separates events into three fields, that of worship, recreation and lastly commerce, but admits that they overlap and are 'never wholly distinct from one another'.² Other scholars have followed this pattern. William Tydeman introduces the subject by dividing it into 'drama of devotion' (church drama), 'drama of pastime and profit' and 'drama of salvation' (those with a religious purpose).³ Tydeman notes that previous academic fashion divided medieval drama into miracle plays, moralities, moral interludes etc. but that these were often arbitrary since there is 'a wide range of elements within a single piece, and similarities of staging that cut across generic boundaries'.⁴

It is of course beyond the scope of this volume to cover every form of medieval drama. Indeed to do so would risk turning this study into a general survey listing and categorising the appearances of any noteworthy gender matter. Although

¹ Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ William Tydeman, 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

I draw examples from a wide range of medieval performance events, the primary focus of the study is upon the Corpus Christi dramas. As outlined below, the choice of this is to do with the unique relationship that existed between the medieval community and these plays.

One of the most significant aspects of the English cycles is the relationship that the dramas held with their producing communities. The Corpus Christi cycles, performed annually in a number of towns between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, were staged by amateur actors and enacted in front of the townspeople. The local community undertook all aspects of the production of the pageants: producing, staging, acting, costuming, financing. It is a testimony to the popularity of these vernacular religious dramas that they continued to be performed in some form for over two hundred years.

One reason for the longevity of the cycles is that they are, in the words of Bakhtin, 'heteroglossic'.⁵ The cycles, which tell the story of the history of salvation, contain a number of differing voices. Of course one of the primary 'utterances' is that of the religious narrative. But the extant texts also reveal that contemporary medieval concerns were reflected alongside the dramatic illustration of biblical history. For example, as well as relating salvation history many pageants took the opportunity to explore medieval institutions. The shepherds in the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Pageant* bemoan the harshness of the poll tax and the vestiges of the feudal system.⁶

In addition to these two textual threads, there are other voices which comprise the heteroglossia of the cycles. Since these biblical festive dramas were played out upon the stage of the medieval streets, the voices of the producers, actors and audience form an important part of the discourse.⁷ The impromptu adlib of an actor, the lending of a piece of costume and the jibe of an audience member all helped to construct meaning in these public dramas. The cycles, therefore, illustrate a complex interplay between producing civic structures, the religious subject matter and the concerns of urban medieval audiences. The relationship between the production and reception of meaning within the cycles was intricate. As Gail McMurray Gibson notes: 'vernacular religious drama[s] were not only shaped by local facts and expectations, but served an active function in shaping them as well'.⁸

⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 11.

⁶ *The Towneley Plays*, eds. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, EETS, SS 13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pageant XIII, ll. 14–26.

⁷ It is likely that York is the only cycle which was performed in the streets. It is possible that Chester and Towneley were played in a fixed place. The old quarry pit at Goodybower Close, Wakefield has been suggested as an amphitheatre. See William Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 133. Cawley argues that High Cross was used as a place for stationary performances at Chester (A.C. Cawley, ed. *Medieval Drama*, *The Revels History of Drama in English*, vol. 1 [London and New York: Methuen, 1983], p. 6). The N-Town plays were probably staged using place-and-scaffold in a fixed location (Christine Richardson and Jackie Johnston, *Medieval Drama* [London: Macmillan, 1991], p. 31). Such variation in the performance mode has led to speculation as to whether processional drama existed (Alan Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974], p. 14).

⁸ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 40.

Within this heteroglossia I will focus upon the issue of gender representation. It is not surprising that the cycles highlight gender, for as Theresa Coletti notes:

A drama that commandeered the attention and the resources of any medieval people for a long period of time and that was deeply embedded in the culture's prevailing modes of social organisation, in its dominant myths, and in its ceremonial and festive life must surely bear important relations to thinking about gender.⁹

But at first glance it is difficult to perceive how the dramas might contain material which pertained to women. The majority of the voices that formed the heteroglossia of the cycles were under male control. The producing civic and guild organisations were predominantly male, and the Christian antecedents of the cycles are misogynistic in their outlook. But as Coletti points out, the dramas were influenced by a matrix of factors which included social concerns, mythic/ideological influences and festive practices.

Although the cycles are on first glance the product of male institutions it is worth noting that these were not stable, fixed organisations, but 'the sites of many competing discourses of piety and politics, subject to change over times, locations of conflict even within small communities'.¹⁰ The control that men held over the representations of women was therefore less stable than might be assumed. As Bartlett points out, 'this process shapes female subjectivity in complex, sometimes self-contradictory ways and provides appealing alternatives to the traditional, and often misogynistic, identities constructed for women'.¹¹ Thus, if the cycles are viewed as the product of a fluid rather than rigid social structure, an alternative reading of women's representation within medieval drama may be possible.

The transmission and reception of the cycles was through a heteroglossic matrix, which included the female citizen. The pageants were not, and could not be, under the sole control of patriarchal forces. I therefore postulate that there are three direct ways in which women shaped, and were shaped by, the Corpus Christi cycles: through their discourse as spectators; by their assistance with the production of the pageants; and last, through visual signals created both by the appearance of women characters on stage and the semiotics of stage production.

The response of women as audience members was important. Medieval town audiences were heterogeneous in their composition: men, women and children from a variety of ranks viewed the pageants. In fact, because the roles within the pageants were enacted solely by men, it is arguable that in some small towns, for example Wakefield, women and children comprised the majority of the audience.¹² I will examine the difficulties that are associated with determining the possible response that such a diverse audience may have had to watching the cycles

⁹ Theresa Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach to the Corpus Christi Plays', *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson (New York: MLAA, 1990), p. 79.

¹⁰ Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹² In 1377 the population of Wakefield was 567. Even if doubling occurred a vast percentage of the male population would have taken part in the pageants, leaving predominantly women and children in the audience (Martial Rose, ed. *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* [London: Evans Brothers, 1961], p. 28). This does not allow for the considerable influx of 'tourist' spectators, that doubtlessly accompanied dramatic activity.

later. However, women's involvement in the production of meaning was not limited to their spectatorship. Though women did not normally perform within the cycles, they fashioned the plays through their involvement in the production process. Women undertook a number of backstage tasks, such as the making or loaning of costumes, stage accessories and properties.

The last way in which women were represented on the medieval stage was through the appearance of female characters. The women characters, though played by cross-dressed men, offered a representation of various images of womanhood. Many of these characters were of biblical origin and were influenced by the prevalent iconography which surrounded such 'holy women'. It is important to examine the breadth of these representations in order to understand how the enactment of these plays helped to construct an image of gender.

The biblical source material, of course, influenced the portrayal of women characters on the medieval stage. Much of this material is hostile to women, and places women at the margins of the central action. Theresa Coletti suggests that this marginality can be found within the cycles:

The women who people the Corpus Christi cycles' texts and stages are helpmates and servants; they attest to events more often than they participate in them; they are, in many instances, marginal to the central action.¹³

It is true that many of the women characters who populate the pageants are marginal. However, it is important to note that amongst these 'marginal' women are the figures of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, these two iconographic women were moulded by the cycle dramatists to form a varied representation of womanhood. On the one hand, they are icons shaped by religious and cultural forces to represent remote and unattainable images of womanhood. On the other hand, they are humanised through their public presentation in the dramas and demonstrate concern with aspects of medieval women's daily life. For example, the Virgin Mary's relationship with Joseph is frequently highlighted within the pageants. Through such scenes as *Joseph's Trouble with Mary* spectator attention is drawn to the construction of gender relationships within the pageants, and by implication, to contemporary medieval society. The cycles significantly manipulated the images of holy women that they inherited from salvation history.

Set against these humanised, holy icons are the ordinary, vulgar women who populate the cycles. Coletti's comment might be taken to suggest that these are the 'helpmates and servants' of the dramas. However, this is far from the case. The most memorable cluster of secular women within the cycles are anything but helpful and servile. Mrs Noah, Mak's wife, Gyll in the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Pageant*, Dame Procula and the Mothers of the Innocents are all rebellious. These women wail against the conditions of their marriages, mothering and their status as workers.

These female characters of the cycle dramas are substantially developed from their biblical antecedents. The creators of the cycles present images of womanhood which were shaped by cultural, social and historic influences. By examining

¹³ Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', p. 80.

the function of the women who perpetuate the cycles it is possible to reveal the way in which women's roles within medieval society were reflected within the cycle dramas. In this light women characters provide an opportunity for new meanings to be tested.

This book will examine the role that women played within the Corpus Christi cycles. Though medieval women are silent within the production of the cycles, they are not absent.¹⁴ I will investigate how the holy and vulgar women characters formed a discourse on gender issues for the medieval spectator. In turn, and in keeping with Gail McMurray Gibson's comments, I will analyse how the portrayal of the female characters was shaped by social and economic concerns regarding women in late medieval England.

In order to examine gender in the Corpus Christi cycles, it is necessary to explore the production and reception of meaning within the plays, the use of characterisation and staging within the cycles, and the cultural and historical influences which shaped the image of women within society.

PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION OF MEANING

Much twentieth-century scholarly thinking about the production of meaning within the cycle dramas has been influenced by E.K. Chambers's 1903 study. Chambers argues that the cycles were derived from Church Latinate drama and formed part of an evolutionary march towards Elizabethan theatre.¹⁵ This view was upheld by Craig who went so far as to argue that the cycles could only be studied from a theological point of view, and that using the criteria 'of specialists in the technique of the modern drama or of drama in general is to bring the wrong equipment'.¹⁶ Chambers and Craig both emphasised the importance of the institution of the Church in the production of meaning within the cycle dramas. These views suggest that the most important function of the cycles was the dissemination of religious doctrine.

During the latter parts of the twentieth century, critical opinion questioned the reliability of Chambers's thesis.¹⁷ The cycles are now viewed as products of festive,

¹⁴ Tracy Davis points out that informal modes of women's resistance must be examined. She notes that 'silence is not absence' (Tracy Davis, 'Questions for a Feminist Methodology', *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, eds. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989], p. 65).

¹⁵ E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903; reprint, 1967), p. 126. Martin Stevens notes that Chambers's readings are based on a Darwinian influenced notion of evolution and progression. See Martin Stevens, 'Illusion and reality in the Medieval Drama', *College English* 32 (1971), pp. 448-64.

¹⁶ Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 4.

¹⁷ R.W. Vince draws attention to Hardison's point that Chambers and Young collected their historical evidence with an interpretation already in mind (Ronald W. Vince, 'Theatre History as an Academic Discipline', *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, eds. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989], p. 13). John Wasson argues that evidence from professional acting shows that drama did not simply leave the Church and take to the streets. Records show that until the end of the sixteenth century Churches continued to host professional performances (John Wasson, 'Professional Actors in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*. An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism and Reviews, no. 1, ed. J. Leeds Barroll [New York: AMS Press, 1984], p. 7). Kolve argues that Latinate drama is not an antecedent

civic and religious practices, rather than the property of the medieval Church. It is generally accepted that the cycles developed from the feast of Corpus Christi, which was held annually to celebrate the Eucharist and the act of transubstantiation. Miri Rubin places the feast's origins in the 1208 vision of Juliana of Mont Cornillon, a prioress of a Praemonstratensian community in Liège.¹⁸ Despite a dogged start, the feast of Corpus Christi was officially adopted by 1311, and was celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday (a moveable date between 21 May and 24 June – notably close to Midsummer's Day).

It is difficult to suggest how the feast developed into the cycle dramas in England. It appears that festival days were soon marked by clerical processions along petal-strewn streets. The focal point of the procession was a central figure-head representing Christ.¹⁹ Gradually these celebrations were accompanied by civic dignitaries. During the fourteenth century the processions are thought to have become more elaborate: tableaux were now placed on moving waggons and sponsored by prominent crafts. It is probable that music and a few short lines of dialogue accompanied the processions by this stage.²⁰

It is most likely that guild competitiveness encouraged the original pageants to become increasingly complex until they had to be presented as a separate spectacle.²¹ At Chester, for example, the Corpus Christi festivities were originally held on one day, until expansion forced the cycle to be separated from the procession and performed on a second day.²² At York the celebrations were enacted on one day until in 1426 Franciscan William Melton moved the feast to a separate day.²³

The difference between viewing the cycles as developments of Latin drama and acknowledging the festive and religious antecedents of the dramas is important. The control of production no longer lies with one institution, the medieval Church. Instead, as I outlined at the beginning, the dramas are shaped by many voices. These include the producing guilds, civic authorities and the community of spectators.²⁴

In order to construct a hypothetical audience response we might turn our attention to the most tangible legacy of the Corpus Christi cycles – the extant texts. The twenty-first-century researcher must avoid the trap of treating these

of the cycle dramas since it does not share a cyclical form (V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966], p. 34).

¹⁸ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 170.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²⁰ William Tydeman, 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre', p. 21.

²¹ William Tydeman uses evidence from Spanish drama to support this theory of development (*ibid.*, p. 97).

²² By 1572 the cycle had moved to Midsummer's Day. (See David Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 116).

²³ Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 2, pp. 400–1. The irregularities of the playing day of the Corpus Christi cycles has led Alexandra Johnston to state that the genre of the Corpus Christi dramas did not exist. Instead she recognises 'a form of episodic drama telling the story of salvation history' (Alexandra, F. Johnston, "'All the World Was a Stage': Records of Early English Drama", *The Theatre of Medieval Europe*, ed. Eckehard Simon [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], p. 118).

²⁴ Tracy Davis debates whether there is such a thing as 'communal' reception or production (Tracy Davis, 'Questions for a Feminist Methodology', p. 70). I would certainly support the idea there might have been a difference between the way male and female spectators observed the action. High and low ranking women may have also seen the cycles in a different light.

texts as reliable, or as stable sites for the construction of meaning. There are several problems which must be addressed. First, there is a difficulty in interpreting the cycle texts as fixed records. The existing copies are in manuscript form, and may not be a very accurate record of the performances.²⁵ In addition, the cycles played for a period of two hundred years yet most manuscripts date from the fifteenth century.²⁶ It is difficult to know how much performance texts changed during that time. Some manuscripts do reveal later amendments.²⁷ As George Szanto suggests, flexibility of the performance texts must have been a key to their continued popularity:

The plays were successful precisely because they were the product of a plural and evolutionary authorship, able to address itself to the material needs of the changing audience.²⁸

The multiple 'authors' of the texts were able to shift the dramas to suit the differing demands of each generation of viewers.

The notion of authorship within the dramas is problematic. Chambers's interpretation of medieval drama supposes the Church maintained authorship and control of the texts. However, the situation does not appear to be this simple, and certainly no single author can be associated with any cycle.²⁹ I find Tony

²⁵ Martin Stevens believes the manuscripts could be so far from performance texts that scholarly study should only be conducted from a literary, rather than a dramatic, perspective (Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987], p. 12).

²⁶ The York register dates between 1463–77 (Richard Beadle, 'The York Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 90). The N-Town plays are dated as 1468. This is the date written at the end of the Purification play on the folio of the N-Town manuscript (Alan Fletcher, 'The N-Town Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 164). The Towneley manuscript dates from the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century (Peter Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 139). The Chester manuscripts post-date their production. For example, the Huntington MS was written in 1591 (Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 110).

²⁷ Peter Meredith has identified many later changes made to the N-Town plays (Peter Meredith, 'Scribes, Texts and Performance', *Aspects of Early English Drama*, ed. Paula Neuss [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1983], pp. 13–29 and the Introduction to *The Mary Plays from the N-Town Cycle*, ed. Peter Meredith [London: Longmans, 1987]). Martial Rose believes that the alterations made to the Towneley manuscript are evidence of Protestant revision; the words 'correctyd and not playd' appear in the *John the Baptist* play; the word 'Pope' was removed from the Herod sequence; and the *Ascension* and *Judgement* pageants were shortened by twelve pages (Rose, ed. *The Wakefield Pageants*, p. 15). The 1519 Coventry City Annals salute the 'New Plays at Corpus Christi tyde which were reatly commended' (Coventry: REED, ed. R.W. Ingram [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981], p. 114). This entry shows that the plays were ever-changing.

²⁸ George Szanto, *Theater and Propaganda* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 104.

²⁹ The issue of 'authorship' is further complicated by the borrowing of pageants from another cycle. David Staines suggests that five pageants were borrowed by Towneley from York. See David Staines, 'The English Mystery Cycles', *The Theatre of Medieval Europe*, ed. Eckehard Simon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 80. Recent editorial work has, however, argued that for some cycles there appears to be a single, authorial scheme at work. Lumiansky and Mills's edition of the Chester manuscript shows such a practice at work, while the N-Town 'author' appears to be a skilful adapter, making a coherent series of plays out of what appear to be two sequences, the life of the Virgin and the Passion (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, vol. 1, *Text*, eds. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS, SS 3 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974]). The Towneley cycle, despite its diverse origins, is seen by some to have