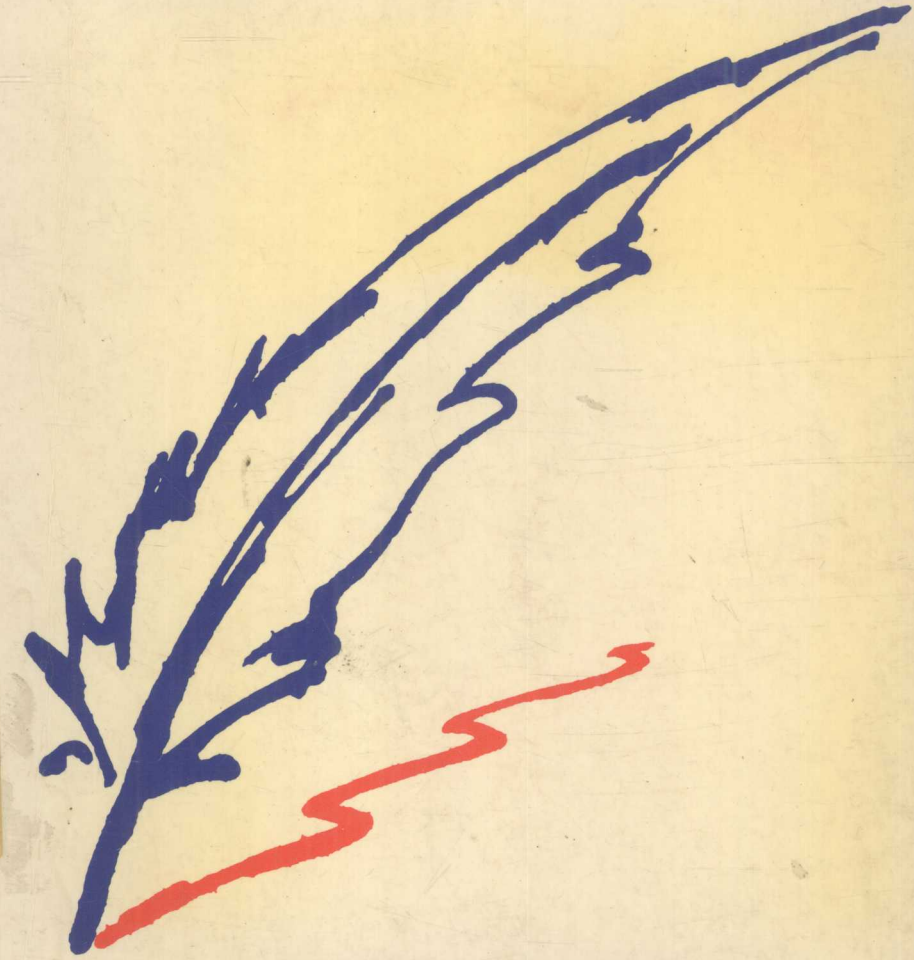
CASEBOOK SERIES
GENERAL EDITOR A. E. DYSON

Medieval English Drama



A SELECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS
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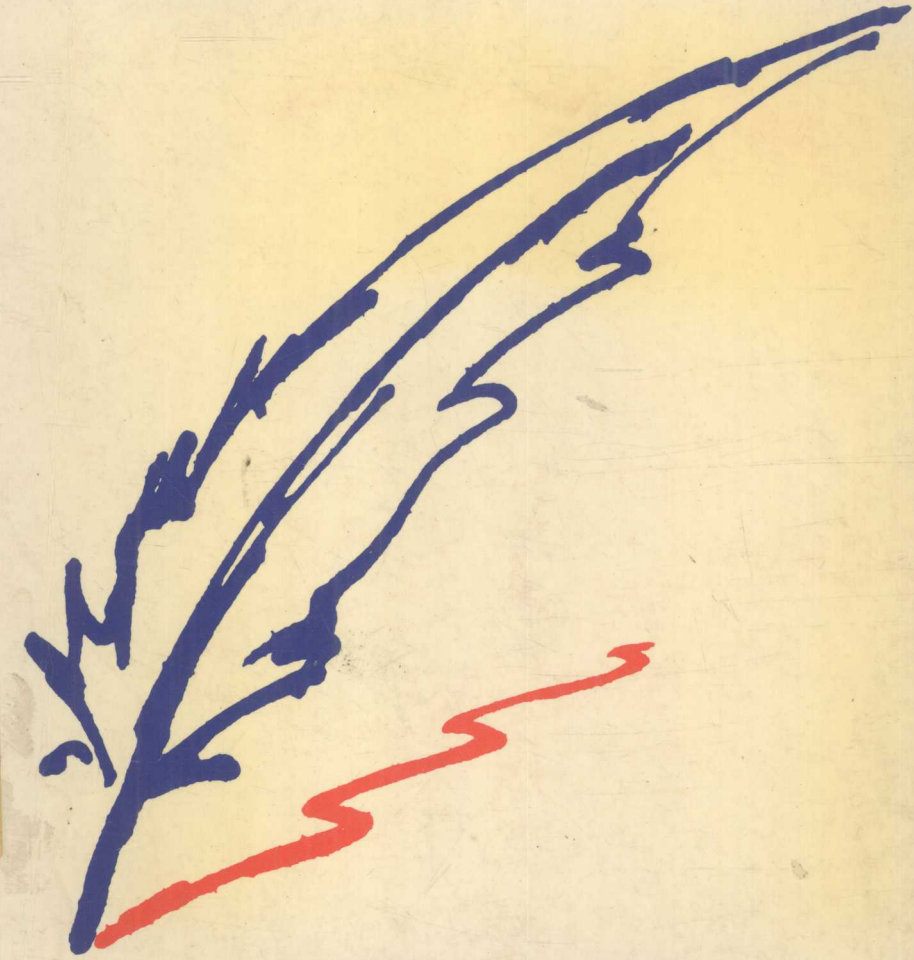

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MEDIEVAL ENGLISH DRAMA
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This volume presents critical appraisals of Medieval Drama, particularly in regard to structure and technique, and the appreciation of theatrical qualities. The selection reflects the marked changes in approaches to pre-Renaissance drama, influenced by new perceptions among both scholars and stage-interpreters.

Following Part One (*Early Documents*), the main body of the book (Part Two) groups the material in the relevant categories – Mystery Plays, Morality Plays and Interludes, and Aspects of Performance. The Editor's Introduction provides a general survey of criticism and scholarship in this field. Preparatory to examining the major elements in the recent studies represented in his selection, Dr Happé outlines and appraises the pioneering work done in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century.

Contributors to Part Two include David Bevington, Sarah Carpenter, T. W. Craik, Clifford Davidson, Stanley J. Kahrl, Joanne S. Kantrowitz, V. A. Kolve, Sheila Lindenbaum, David Mills, Paula Neuss, Robert A. Potter, Eleanor Prosser, Bernard Spivack, William Tydeman, Meg Twycross, Donna A. Vinter and Rosemary Woolf.

The volume-editor, **Peter Happé,** is Principal of Barton Peveril College, Hampshire. His publications include edited texts of *The Winter's Tale, Tudor Interludes, English Mystery Plays* and *Four Morality Plays,* and he has in preparation *The Complete Plays of John Bale.*

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A. E. Dyson, general editor of the series, is Honorary Fellow of the University of East Anglia, where he has taught for many years. His publications include *Yeats, Eliot and R S Thomas* (1981).

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Medieval English Drama

A CASEBOOK

EDITED BY

PETER HAPPÉ

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Casebook series, launched in 1968, has become a well-regarded library of critical studies. The central concern of the series remains the 'single-author' volume, but suggestions from the academic community have led to an extension of the original plan, to include occasional volumes on such general themes as literary 'schools' and genres.

Each volume in the central category deals either with one well-known and influential work by an individual author, or with closely related works by one writer. The main section consists of critical readings, mostly modern, collected from books and journals. A selection of reviews and comments by the author's contemporaries is also included, and sometimes comments from the author himself. The Editor's Introduction charts the reputation of the work or works from the first appearance to the present time.

Volumes in the 'general themes' category are variable in structure but follow the basic purpose of the series in presenting an integrated selection of readings, with an Introduction which explores the theme and discusses the literary and critical issues involved.

A single volume can represent no more than a small selection of critical opinion. Some critics are excluded for reasons of space, and it is hoped that readers will pursue the suggestions for further reading in the Select Bibliography. Other contributions are severed from their original context, to which some readers may wish to turn. Indeed, if they take a hint from the critics represented here, they certainly will.

A. E. DYSON

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used for works frequently cited in notes to the Introduction and to the critical studies in Part Two.

I PLAYS

Chester, Diemling	*The Chester Plays*, ed. H. Diemling & Dr Matthews, 2 vols, EETS, e.s. 62, 115 (London, 1892, 1916).
Chester, Mills	*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R. N. Lumiansky & D. Mills, EETS, s.s. 3 (London, 1974).
Corpus Christi Plays	*Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. H. Craig, EETS, e.s. 87, 2nd edn (London, 1957).
Digby	*The Digby Plays*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS, e.s. 70 (London, 1896).
Dodsley	R. Dodsley (ed.), *A Select Collection of Old Plays*, 12 vols (London, 1744).
EETS	*Early English Text Society* (publications)
Macro	*The Macro Plays*, ed. M. Eccles, EETS 262 (London, 1969).
Magnyfycence	John Skelton, *Magnyfycence*, ed. R. L. Ramsay, EETS, e.s. 98 (London, 1908).
Non-Cycle Plays	*Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. N. Davis, EETS s.s. 1 (London, 1970).
Towneley	*The Towneley Plays*, ed. G. England & A. W. Pollard, EETS, e.s. 71 (London, 1897).
Wakefield Pageants	*The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester, 1958).
York	*The York Plays*, ed. L. T. Smith (Oxford, 1885).

II CRITICISM

Anderson	M. D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge, 1963).
Chambers	E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), 2 vols.
Coogan	M. P. Coogan, *An Interpretation of the Moral Play 'Mankind'* (Washington, D.C., 1947).
Craig	H. Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1955).
Frank	G. Frank, *The Medieval French Drama* (Oxford, 1954).
Hardison	O. B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, Md. 1965).
Kolve	V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, Cal., and London, 1966).
Prosser	E. Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays* (Stanford, Cal., 1961).
Salter	F. M. Salter, *Medieval Drama in Chester* (London, 1956).
Southern	R. Southern, *The Medieval Theatre in the Round* (London, 1957).
Wickham	G. Wickham, *Early English Stages, 1300–1660* (London: vol. 1, 1959 [rev. edn, 1980]; vol. 2 Pt 1, 1963; vol. 2 Pt 2, 1972; vol. 3, 1981).
Woolf	R. Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972).
Young	K. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford, 1933), 2 vols.

NOTE ON EARLY LETTERS

Readers not acquainted with Early and Middle English texts may find two letters unfamiliar:

Þ þ ('thorn') stands for the voiced and voiceless sounds now represented by *th*, as in *these* and *think*.

Ȝ ȝ ('yogh') stands for a sound now represented by *y*, as in *year*; and also for a sound now lost in English, (roughly equivalent to that in the German *ich*), which formerly appeared in words like *nyȝt* (night).

INTRODUCTION

The criticism of English medieval drama has not, on the whole, attracted the attention of major writers, or indeed of major critics. Perhaps the main reason for this is that the texts of medieval plays have proved singularly difficult to determine. In order to establish the material upon which the critic has to work, it has been necessary to carry out a complex and prolonged process of definition and reconstruction which appears to be a work appropriate to scholarship rather than to criticism, in so far as these two activities can be separated. The mystery cycles were performed for nearly two centuries from about 1375 with extensive civic support in many towns and cities, but in spite of this there is virtually no contemporary critical comment upon them. On the whole they were treated with some suspicion by the Church, and yet it seems that they were written and revised by the clergy. In the first years of the sixteenth century, until the break with Rome, the cycles had flourished, and indeed were still developing. The Reformation saw a curtailment, particularly in the reign of Edward VI. Under Mary they were again in favour, but by 1575 they were virtually extinct.[1] The decline is apparent to us by events rather than by written analysis, and its objective was ideological rather than aesthetic.

Whilst the disappearance of the mystery plays, though regretted by many, was accomplished in a few years, the morality plays proved capable of further adaptation and development. Though they were performed through roughly the same period – the earliest to survive is the *Pride of Life* (c.1350) – we have very few plays upon which to base conclusions, and this has no doubt inhibited criticism. As the subject matter was at first concerned with religious didacticism and inspired by devotional intent, their dramatic qualities were not perceived. From the moralities there developed in the first half of the sixteenth century the rather shorter and more topical interludes. These plays, which were mostly polemical, allowed greater versatility in subject matter and dramatic technique, but they became an object of scorn to the professionals of the Elizabethan theatre. Shakespeare offered a touch of ridicule in his treatment of the Vice:[2]

CLOWN I am gone, sir, and anon, sir,
I'll be with you again,

In a trice, like the old Vice,
Your need to sustain;
Who, with a dagger of lath, in his rage and his wrath,
Cries 'Ah, ha!' to the devil:
Like a mad lad, 'Pare thy nails, dad.
Adieu goodman devil!' [*Twelfth Night* IV ii 125–32]

After the Restoration, we are left with two principal activities by critics: a cultural rejection of medieval plays as inept, not to say barbaric, because they were thought not to match later achievements, especially Shakespeare's; and a historical process of recovery which in itself is motivated by cultural considerations, but which adopts for its methodology an antiquarian or even an encyclopaedic approach. It is perhaps only of recent years, when the reconstruction of performance has been based upon the fruits of scholarship, that we can see the beginnings of a critical theory, and a disposition to appreciate the quality and richness of what has come down to us, fragmentary though it it.

The construction of this collection reflects these considerations. As a preliminary there are four short pieces from medieval and Tudor times. Two of them, the Wycliffite sermon and the translation by Robert Mannynge, are concerned with religious controversy over the enactment of holy subjects. The other two are about the pageant waggons used for the mystery cycles: one from the York Mercers' Documents of 1433 detailing the pageants and their furnishings and some costumes, and the other from the *Breviary* of Archdeacon Robert Rogers (who died in 1595) describing the procession of pageants at Chester, and giving some details of their shape.

The preoccupations of scholars during the next three hundred years are described in the following section of this Introduction, which incorporates some short extracts. The context of the main collection in the period of modern scholarship is reviewed in the concluding section.

Some aspects of the earlier criticism of the medieval plays have but limited interest today because they were so intimately associated with the standards of taste of their own times and were concerned with the development of theatre only as it might be seen to anticipate the greatness of Shakespeare. In a few cases, however, we shall find that some modern preoccupations, like the interest in dramatic records, folk analogues, and civic processions, are foreshadowed.

It is in the former category that we should place Thomas Warton.[3] He was partly concerned to characterise the types of medieval plays,

and he helped to establish the terms 'morality' and 'mystery play', neither of which were in general use before the eighteenth century. His criticism, however, was part of the age of enlightenment, and he wrote from an assumption of a superior standard of civilised manners. Whatever the basis for this in general, it is not now clear that Warton had adequate grounds for his claims in respect of drama. The tone of the following passage reveals this air of superiority, and it also shows how comedy was held to degrade religious experience:

> . . . It is certain that these Miracle-Plays were the first of our dramatic exhibitions. But as these pieces frequently required the introduction of allegorical characters, such as Charity, Sin, Death, Hope, Faith, or the like, and as the common poetry of the times, expecially among the French, began to deal much in allegory, at length plays were formed entirely consisting of such personifications. These were called Moralities. The Miracle-Plays, or Mysteries, were totally destitute of invention or plan; they tamely represented stories according to the letter of scripture, or the respective legend. But the Moralities indicate dawnings of the dramatic art: they contain some rudiments of a plot, and even attempt to delineate characters, and to paint manners. From hence the gradual transition to real historical personages was natural and obvious. It may also be observed that many licentious pleasantries were sometimes introduced in these religious representations. This might imperceptibly lead the way to subjects entirely profane, and to comedy, and perhaps earlier than is imagined. . . . It is certain that our ancestors intended no sort of impiety by these monstrous and unnatural mixtures. Neither the writers nor the spectators saw the impropriety nor paid a separate attention to the comic and the serious part of these motley scenes; at least they were persuaded that the solemnity of the subject covered or excused all incongruities. They had no just idea of decorum, consequently but little sense of the ridiculous: what appears to us to be the highest burlesque, on them would have made no sort of impression.[4]

The key here seems to be an offence to good taste, stressed by expressions like 'monstrous and unnatural mixtures', 'incongruities' and 'burlesque'. One must also suspect acceptance of Neo-Aristotelian decorum in the expectation of a division between comedy and tragedy.

It is perhaps not surprising to find that a few years earlier Robert Dodsley had offered a firmly critical attitude. In the Introduction to his collection, which became the chief access to these texts for scholar and gentleman alike until the mid-twentieth century, he writes:

> This period one might call the dead sleep of the Muses. And when this was over they did not presently awake, but in a kind of Morning Dream produced the Moralities that followed.[5]

He adds later:

I hope the Reader will not imagine I give any of the pieces in the Volume as good: but only as Curiosities to show from what low beginnings our stage has arisen.[6]

He notes with satisfaction 'the Progress and Improvement of our Taste and Language'.[7]

Edmund Malone, to whom much is owed as a collector and preserver of early printed texts, had hardly a better opinion in 1800:

The drama before the time of Shakespeare was so little cultivated or so ill understood that to many it may appear unnecessary to carry out theatrical researches higher than that period.[8]

Later in the nineteenth century the antiquarian interest became stronger, and the cultural attitudes less dismissive. We find among the topics raised themes and material that are still of great interest, particularly in connection with the mystery cycles. William Hone offered lengthy extracts from texts linked by paraphrase, especially from *Ludus Coventriae*.[9] But he was interested in the Apocryphal Gospels and some folk analogues, especially in the case of Joseph and Mary. He derived his historical framework from Warton, but showed a notable disinclination to condemn the plays. On the other hand, he did not positively advocate their virtues. It is of interest, too, that he was curious about public shows and processions, including the Lord Mayor's Show. Thomas Sharp, equally enquiring, turned his attention specifically to the Guilds themselves, and quoted from their records many details of staging and costuming, an activity in which he is an important forerunner of current interest. For the most part he eschews comment on quality, though he does not deny himself a quotation from J. Brand: 'They [the Mystery Plays] are reported to have been many of them very indelicate and obscene.'[10]

J. P. Collier has been seen as one whose scholarship is somewhat unreliable, yet his work was both comprehensive and influential. He followed Warton in the matter of the origin of the Mystery Plays, but proposed a continuous development from miracle plays (he rejected the term 'mysteries') to moralities:

. . . by the gradual intermixture of allegory with sacred history until Miracle-plays were finally superseded. This view of the subject does not seem to have occurred to anyone who has gone before me.[11]

He recorded methodically the annals of the stage item by item. He did betray some critical interest: the *Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play* is 'singular, novel and humorous', and he quoted extensively from it, but this observation was not developed very far.[12] His judiciousness is well seen on *Mankind* which was

. . . mixed up with the grossest obscenity, and seems calculated for an audience of lower rank . . . The piece contains a good deal that is curious and some characters are introduced that have much individuality about them.[13]

But such comment is rare, and his work is more remarkable for the accumulation of information.

Thomas Wright, an industrious antiquarian, studied early texts and associated documents (including the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*). His Introduction to the *Chester Plays* reviewed a familiar collection of factual material. Occasionally he struck the lofty tone of his eighteenth-century predecessors, illustrating the divide between him and the playwrights;

Mysteries and Miracle Plays . . . possess an interest not only as illustrating the history of the stage in its infancy, but as pictures of the manners and conditions of our forefathers, and also as indicating the quality and peculiar character of the religious knowledge inculcated into the populace in Catholic times.[14]

Nevertheless his scholarly interests led him to accumulate a wide variety of material from non-dramatic literature and from records and related documents.

In accepting the role of critic and historian, A. W. Ward acknowledged debts to Collier and Sharp, and attempted to create a more comprehensive narrative. This need not greatly concern us here save that he discussed the evolution of vernacular drama as against the liturgy,[15] and was concerned with the movement of drama outside the churches, and the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi. As a critic he defined his view of drama:

Strictly speaking dramatic literature is that form of literary composition which accommodates itself to the demands of an art whose method is imitation in the way of action.[16]

He firmly curtailed his field to what is purely literary:

The use of words is necessary not to every kind of drama but to every kind of drama which falls within the range of literature.

The point is very much in question today, as there are attempts both through iconography and through performance to explore non-verbal elements in the semiotics of the medieval drama.

Ward's criticism of the Wakefield Shepherds' plays was caustic:

The low humour – and it is very low – of these two plays doubtless constituted their special attraction for their audience.[17]

He accepts an increasingly important historical concept which

depended upon this low view of the plays, and the change which the Renaissance was to bring:

> What seems to us so profane in the readiness of our forefathers to allow the highest conceptions of religion to be associated with the crudest attempts at reproducing them in bodily form, was the result of an aesthetic rather than a religious deficiency; and if the mystics prepared the growth of a more spiritual age of religious life, the Renascence made impossible the continued depression of the sublimest subjects to the level of a treatment satisfactory only to the uncultivated and unrefined.[18]

John Addington Symonds was closely concerned with the canons of literary or dramatic taste, and with an historical model which saw the medieval drama as leading up to Shakespeare. This meant that he tended to measure the success of the medieval plays by qualities which he conceived to be present in Shakespeare:

> The authors of the Moralities had not advanced beyond the point of personification and dramatic collocation. To take the further step and display the reciprocal interaction between persons was beyond them.[19]

Though he condemned 'colossal rudeness' and the structural deficiency of unrelated parts, he brought formidable ingenuity to bear in seeking out virtues which he could demonstrate to extend into Shakespeare's works. The Miracles he found contained the tragic, the pathetic, the melodramatic, the idyllic, the comic, the realistic, and the satiric. He also found them 'emphatically popular and national',[20] a theme followed up by E. K. Chambers. Though Symonds's critical judgements do not have wide acceptance today, it appears that he did to some extent free himself from the purely narrative or antiquarian approach. Nevertheless, like his predecessors, he was not able to appreciate the characteristic conventions and, through them, the qualities of medieval drama, and he tried instead to impose the conventions of the Shakespearean stage.

The developments of modern critical thinking about the medieval theatre which are represented in the main part of this collection have taken place in the last twenty-five years. From the late 1950s it has become more a matter of looking at the plays in their own right as exhibiting qualities which reflect skill in the art of play-making. This has obvious difficulties since it implies a good deal of historical speculation, but it is clear that although most of the extracts do reflect historical considerations there is also an attempt to reveal the aesthetic qualities – whether literary or dramatic – which they embodied. In view of the pejorative nature of so much earlier

comment, this has required some courage, but the process has been very strongly supported by the growing success and popularity of the performance of the early plays by modern acting companies, amateur and professional, often guided by scholarly opinion.[21] This has enabled the relationship between play and audience to be more deeply felt by means of the actors' interpretative skill.

Between the nineteenth century and this fundamental change in critical appraisal the work of historical scholarship has continued, impressively comprehensive, but in general avoiding comment upon the qualities of the plays. Because of this the work of a number of significant authorities – indispensable in other ways – is not appropriate to the selection. There is no doubt that O. B. Hardison's introductory chapter[22] identified definitively some outstanding trends in the work of E. K. Chambers, Karl Young and Hardin Craig, all of whom assembled and considered a great deal of primary source material. Hardison was especially concerned to show that these scholars followed an evolutionary model in their researches, depending upon the idea of smooth development of drama from simple and crude beginnings to the sophistication of the Shakespearean stage. He directed attention to the weakness of refusing to discuss the meanings of the plays, or to consider what appeal they might have, either in medieval times or since. He also indicated that the concept of drama upon which their work was based – chiefly impersonation, action and dialogue – was too narrow.[23]

Chambers, in dealing with origins, placed a good deal upon the folk analogues of the drama and the widespread popularity of the folk festivals. It is interesting, though, that he did not take individual plays and show in any detail how these elements could be illustrated. He was very critical of religious attitudes, and made little attempt to trace the close integration between the religious and the dramatic.[24] By contrast, Craig was a little more successful in this, stressing the religious, and showing that the absence of realism was not a handicap but a characteristic which made for a more effective presentation of religious ideas:

> It might make the matter clearer to say that the pageant stage had no realism, and the absence of any attempt to be realistic on the part of the players and of any expectation on the part of the spectators of seeing the actual thing tended to put stress on action and event, for action and event were the bases of interest. The pageant stage was thus adequate for the purpose it sought to serve.[25]

One might wish to increase the force of 'adequate'.

Hardison's contribution to the development of criticism was of