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Medieval English Drama

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Performance and Spectatorship

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For Beatrice and Oliver

Preface

This book has been written to explore dramatic activity in England in the Middle Ages. Where possible the performance examples chosen are those that are readily available in medieval anthologies such as: *Early English Drama: An Anthology*, ed. John Coldewey (Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1993); *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, ed. Peter Happé (Penguin, 1975); *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Dent, 1974); *Mediaeval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Houghton Mifflin, 1975); *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Blackwell, 2000); *Medieval and Tudor Drama*, ed. John Gassner (Applause Books, 1987). In choosing material from these anthologies I hope that the examples discussed are accessible to students. Where material is not readily accessible in print I have suggested internet editions.

The scope of this book is from roughly 1000 to 1576; a time that stretches from the laying down of the Winchester *Regularis Concordia* between 965 and 975 to the establishment of the first permanent theatre building.[1] The time included within this framework comprises periods often referred to as Old English, Middle English, late medieval, Tudor, Henrician, Elizabethan, and Renaissance. For ease of reference, and in order to acknowledge the considerable cross-over between these terms, I shall refer to the drama of this period collectively as 'early English'. This strategy is a deliberate attempt to dislodge the barriers that such periodization produces. The boundaries that have been set between terms such as medieval and renaissance have been created for the ease of scholarly study rather than as absolute markers of one set of values or another. In between any paradigm shift lies a 'grey' area where facets of the former epoch bleed into the

later, or conversely aspects of the later can be found springing up in isolated patches far earlier than is commonplace. It is only necessary to look at the development of Renaissance art to see the inadequacy of absolute boundaries: it is often argued that the Renaissance began in the early fourteenth century in Italy, while it did not occur in England until some two centuries later. It is hard, therefore, to make a case that the 'Renaissance' occurred at a particular moment in time, or that it is fruitful to study history via particular epochs.

It is worth drawing attention to two distinctive features of this study: the absence of focus upon genre, and a concentration on the representation of gender. In attempting to approach early drama through the context of its performance this study offers an alternative approach to that of genre which has influenced much research in the area. The issue surrounding genre-based approaches has been outlined by Pamela King:

> English medieval drama has been understood throughout most of the modern period to consist chiefly of two dominant categories of play. The categories 'mystery play' and 'morality play' – also known as 'moral interlude' – were devised from the evidence of the few scripts which survive ... This simple convergent model has come under increasing pressure, particularly since the work of the Records of Early English Drama project has revealed a plethora of dramatic activity in late medieval England which does not conform to the binary model derived from surviving scripts.[2]

The categorization of early drama into distinctive genres has marked much previous study, however, this book acknowledges the plethora of performance that existed within the period and attempts instead to retrieve the performance conditions that surround events rather than classify dramas into specific genres. As King acknowledges, part of the reason for the dependence on genre classification is due to the priority given to extant play texts. The more recent availability of a wide field of performance records has done much to challenge this theory, and the use of these within this book questions the appropriateness of a genre-based approach.

There is one final distinctive element of this study to be noted and that is the focus upon gender. The position of women in early modern England is often absent or obscured within modern-day social, historical, and dramatic studies. This state of affairs is due to the relative invisibility of women within extant records and the fact that on the early stage the parts of women characters were usually played by men. Over the past thirty years the potential influence of women in

early England has received increasing attention. Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser, writing in 1988, noted the disparity between 'our own growing knowledge of women and their activities both past and present, and the almost total absence of women from the pages of history books'.[3] Since then there has been a growth of interest in finding a place for women in early modern studies. Attention has been paid both to the more housebound and often invisible activities that women undertook, and to cases where women held important public roles.

My previous work, *Gender and Medieval Drama*, explored the participation and reception of women within early drama, and in particular within the cycle dramas. However, this book follows the lead taken by P. J. P. Goldberg in *Medieval England: A Social History 1250–1550* in which he advocates that women's activity should be included within the main body of the book rather than segregated within a separate chapter outlining gender issues. In this way, gender becomes the mainstay of a study rather than a marginalized concern.

In order to follow the integration of gender issues where possible each chapter makes reference to the representation of women. In examining the context of spectatorship in the Introduction reference is made to men and women's experiences. The first chapter on monastic drama focuses specifically on performative practices within the convent. Aspects of the experiences of women are included in the discussions on parish drama, street drama, and within private settings. The figure of Mary Magdalene receives particular attention in chapter 5. It is the intention of this book to provide a comprehensive examination of the social practices of early England and to depict the heterogeneity of that community.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

EETS   Early English Text Society
      ES Extra Series
      SS Special Series
EDAM   Early Drama, Art and Music
ELH   English Literary History
JMEMS Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies
METh   Medieval English Theatre
PMLA   Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
REED   Records of Early English Drama
RORD   Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama

Contents

Introduction

Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship examines how the playing spaces of early English drama and the cultural context of the audience within that space shaped the nature of the production and reception of the event. One of the most striking features of drama of this period is the sheer variety of places where performances took place. In an age before permanent theatre buildings, drama seeped into a variety of spaces: churches, streets, village greens, private halls, inns – in fact anywhere that an audience could assemble. Few of these performance spaces were controlled in the manner that is familiar to us from modern-day indoor theatres. There were no attentive audiences sitting quietly in the darkness, often no seating, and no politely silent spectators. Instead the performances analysed in this book had to attract their audiences and hold their attention, often above the distractions of outdoor noises and that of fellow spectators. In fact the distinction between everyday life and performance was less marked than it is today. In early England life and performance bled into one another so that as a guild or parish member citizens might participate in entertainments but were simultaneously enacting their roles as workers or members of a community; the distinction between work and leisure, which is commonplace within modern society, was absent.

What is Performance?

It is clear that there is a need for some definition of what constituted performance within the Middle Ages. Within contemporary society

the term 'theatre' is used to describe that which happens within a theatre building, while 'drama' is synonymous with the practice or study of the subject. There are a great number of other terms used in modern-day society to embrace a range of performance activities such as ritual, entertainment, show, or sometimes even game. The Middle Ages offered no such distinctions between types of dramatic entertainment. While there is evidence of separate terminology for what today would be distinguished as drama and music, or players and musicians ('ludentes' or 'histriones',[1] and 'ministralli' respectively), it is difficult to determine how early performances were categorized by contemporary audiences, or if indeed they were. This book includes reference to a broad range of entertainments. Although some written texts have survived from the period it is important to acknowledge that within Medieval England there was a huge variety of festivities which included summer games, festive processions, and ritual practices for which no spoken texts exist.

One major difference between performance in the Middle Ages and that of the modern-day was the influence of religious practices and beliefs. As shall be shown in the chapters that follow, early drama held a close relationship with liturgical practice both through the services conducted within the Church and the celebration of the ecclesiastical calendar within the parish. While some critics have attempted to separate the use of drama within the Church from that of the sacred world, Dunbar Ogden sensibly argues of the Middle Ages that: 'A clear dividing line between theatre and worship cannot be drawn at this point.'[2]

Given the difficulty of distinguishing between theatre, drama, religious service, and ritual the parameters of the events included within this book are more usefully defined through the use of the term 'performativity'.[3] Performativity is used here to denote both that which happens within a clear performance environment (such as an act which requires a stage) and an event that is planned, executed, and witnessed but may belong to a system of cultural expression other than that which is recognized as theatrical. For example, a Lord Mayor's parade through the city of London or a public scolding to punish a woman for inappropriate speech were pre-planned events which were deliberately constructed in order to affect the audience and participants in particular ways. The definition of performance used within this book, then, is an act which has been self-consciously prepared for deliberate spectatorship. The preparation of this event might be as little as the changing into a garment for dancing to raise money for the parish, or it might be as extravagant as the building

of stages or scaffolds to entertain the entry of a monarch into a city. Whether these events are elaborate or simple is irrelevant, for this book is concerned with how the performance practices that were utilized were received by the audience, and in turn both affected and were affected by the cultural landscape of early England.

The relationship between cultural practice and everyday life has been examined by theorists such as Michel de Certeau who suggest that the two are inextricably linked. He postulates that though culture may be produced by the elite, it is important to look at how the 'users', the 'common people', shape that culture through their everyday practices. De Certeau argues that 'We must first analyze its [a representation] manipulation by users who are not makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization.'[4] De Certeau's comments are pertinent to an analysis of early dramatic activity for he suggests that the importance of dramatic representation lies not only in the artefact that is produced, but also in the way that the practice is received and how it is 'used' by the audience that witness or participate in the event.

Reading the Event

The focus on the performance and spectatorship of drama of early England creates a number of problems, since it is difficult to envision what watching these events might have been like. There are very few eyewitness accounts of the time and those that do exist are difficult to interpret with any surety since there are no foolproof systems for objectively documenting and analysing audience reactions. However, theorists such as Hans Robert Jauss have attempted to disentangle the issue of audience response within the reception of literature and some of his ideas can be expanded in order to appropriate them for the use of dramatic analysis.

Jauss suggests that reader response can be imagined through the use of what he terms a 'horizon of expectation'. In order to construct reader response Jauss suggests that three criteria are employed: comparison with the norms of the genre; other literary and historical references, and the opposition of fiction and reality.[5] As Jauss admits, and this is a point pertinent to much of the material covered in this book, when the identity and therefore intentions of an author is unknown it is difficult to determine the relationship that was held with the 'norms of the genre'. In these cases, Jauss advises that it is

best 'if one foregrounds it (the work) against those works that the author explicitly or implicitly presumed his contemporary audience to know'.[6] Jauss's other two categories, that of literary and historical references within a work and the relationship held between the social reality and the fiction created within a text, can provide helpful pointers in ascertaining the response an audience may have had to an entertainment. The importance of the social milieu in forming an audience's response is returned to later in this introduction when the factors that shaped their reactions are discussed further.

Of interest to this study is the developing body of approaches to reclaiming theatre history that have been advanced by dance and theatre history specialists. Each of these historians has suggested ways in which methodologies can be more directly linked to the nature of performance. Any performance is, as theatre director Peter Brook has declared, 'a self-destructive art, and it is always written in the wind'.[7] The performative moment is bound by the event itself; it happens in a very specific time and place. This is perhaps best evidenced by the comments made about theatre visits today. Frequently, actors and audiences alike declare that it was 'a good night', 'the audience were great', or conversely 'it didn't go as well'. Such comments support the notion that performance is specific to the time it is enacted and that no two performances will be quite the same. Given the ephemeral nature of drama, it is important that methodologies address the peculiarities of performance.

The new methodologies suggest how non-traditional 'archives' might be used to retrieve theatre history. While traditional archives house records of churchwardens' accounts and the like, which are useful in giving evidence of parish celebrations used to raise money for the church, new methodologies look to the importance of buildings, bodies, gestures, embodied knowledge, and oral practices.[8] The use of oral practices in the investigation of performance is highly appropriate for this study since many traditions of performance utilize oral knowledge in passing skills from one generation to another, and in the largely pre-literate society of early England orature would have been an important mechanism through which to pass knowledge of performances from year to year or place to place.

Material Spectatorship

The argument of this book is that the conditions of spectatorship played a pivotal role in shaping the dramatic practices of early

England. As has been suggested above, one of the over-riding influences on how spectators saw performance events was the issue of how the social, economic, and cultural circumstances of the milieu affected audience response to an entertainment. Included among the factors that shaped the beliefs of the medieval world are those of religious outlook, social networks, private economies, and national stability. In discussing these four issues I will refer to the trail of 'material remains' left by early English architecture, writers, illustrators, and painters, as well as more traditional archival records that survive from parishes, towns, and courts. Life in the Middle Ages was different from that of today; it intertwined notions of religion, the state, economy, and rank. It is to these areas that this study now turns.

Religion

The strength of religious belief within the Middle Ages and the effect that this had on the everyday lives of citizens was one of the greatest differences between medieval life and that of modern-day society. In pre-Reformation England, Catholic belief shaped the behaviour, daily lives, and yearly pattern of its inhabitants. Central to the beliefs were concerns with salvation (freedom from punishment of sin), redemption (forgiveness of past sins), meditation (achieved through prayer), the importance of the sacrament (rites, in particular the Eucharist), and the notion of an omnipotent God. These principles, as Eamon Duffy notes, permeated the whole of medieval life:

> The Christian calendar determined the pattern of work and rest, fasting and feasting, and influenced even the privacies of the bedchamber, deciding the times of the year when men and women might or might not marry, when husbands and wives might sleep together or must abstain. Everyone, in principle at least, subscribed to the Christian creed. This taught that the world was not a random heap of blind circumstances, a cosmic accident, but that it was a meaningful whole, which had been created out of nothing by a good God.[9]

The way in which Christianity shaped life can be seen in a variety of material remains from the period. One such testimony is that of Margery Kempe, a fourteenth-century wife of a Norfolk burgess, who was illiterate and dictated her biography to a priest. Within the book she details her call to a spiritual life, and her pilgrimages in England,

Europe, and the Holy Land. In recounting these journeys she reveals details of the medieval religious year, practices within parish churches, and her visionary experiences. The centrality of the religious calendar is often in evidence as events are marked by the day on which they occurred: for example, her journey to Sheen takes place three days before Lammas Day;[10] in Aachen she stays for St Margaret's Day to witness the relics and she processes with her local church congregation on Holy Thursday, seeing a vision of Saint Margaret, the namesake of the church. *The Book of Margery Kempe* offers an insight into the religious practices of an individual in early Europe.

Beyond the annual pattern established by the Church calendar, religion affected the daily practices of citizens. On Sundays they were expected to worship three times (Chapter 6 depicts the desolate Mankind who refuses to walk to church to worship), while Holy Days (which numbered around fifty per year) were times when lay people were excused their labours in order to worship. It has been noted that during the fourteenth century there was an increase in the use of ceremonial and public processions and that the Church began to use these public means to strengthen its position and promote locally based devotion.[11] As well as the use of festive practices the Church employed a variety of methods to inspire and teach; the ceremony of the liturgy was at the centre of these practices.

The liturgy, the ritual of worship followed by the Catholic Church, was pivotal in promoting and reflecting the central belief systems of the Church. In England there were constant attempts to regularize the practice of the liturgy within parishes, and a number of methods were used whereby the Church tried to standardize the systems. For example, in 1281 John Pecham, the archbishop of Canterbury, laid out an educational programme for the laity and clergy called the *Ignorantia Sacerdotum*. Within this scheme, a priest was expected to teach his parishioners the following four times annually: the fourteen articles of faith, Ten Commandments, the Gospels, seven works of mercy and seven deadly sins, seven virtues, and seven sacraments.[12] Indeed within *The Book of Margery Kempe* Kempe finds herself being quizzed on aspects of religious orthodoxy as she undertakes her travels; it is her possession of this knowledge which identifies her as a good parishioner rather than a heretic. When Margery visits York she is accused of heresy. She is threatened with prison and is saved only by passing the Archbishop's test of her knowledge of the Articles of the Faith.[13]

The growth in interest in the liturgy at this time was also due to the rise in popularity of the notion of purgatory. The early Middle

Ages projected the belief that salvation was for a minority of devout believers. But by the later medieval period salvation was offered to a greater proportion of the population through the notion that their souls may initially rest in purgatory, a place between heaven and hell where they could be purged of their sin, and thus pass to heaven. The belief that the purification of the soul after death could affect the chances of a final resting in heaven gave rise to a growth in prayers for the dead and gifts to parish churches. It is a point picked up in William Langland's fourteenth-century allegorical poem *Piers Plowman* where the author offers biting criticism of the donations being sought by churches and the readiness of the congregation to buy themselves salvation:

> Ac God to alle good folk swich gravynge defendeth –
> To written in wyndowes of hir wel dedes –
> An aventure prode be peynted there, and pomp of the world;
> For God knoweth thi conscience and thi kynde wille,
> And thi cost and thi coreitise and who catel oughte.[14]

In parishes gifts often stretched beyond new stained-glass windows and included bequests for endowments, funeral expenses, and anniversary masses.[15] As will be seen in Chapter 3, the notion of purifying the soul led to elaborate funeral practices in England.

A further significant aspect of religious practice involved the use of meditation, and this custom was important for it gave way to the liberal use of artistic representation. In meditation parishioners were encouraged to ponder upon images of the life of Christ in order to reach a deep spiritual experience. A number of treatises, such as the early fifteenth-century *Dives and Pauper*, a vernacular guide to the Commandments, advocated the use of mental images to inspire religious piety. This focus on the importance of image also played a part within the liturgy. A central aspect of this involved the elevation of the Host during communion. Gazing upon the Host carried with it a sense of receiving a blessing. The use of image in carrying religious meaning is, of course, pertinent to this book. Performance practices outlined here utilize both the word and the image, and in some cases, such as that of religious processions, little time was afforded the spoken word and the image became the central icon.

Given the argument that local customs were important in establishing religious practices it is clear that the parish structure needs some discussion. As has been noted, 'it was in the medieval parishes, not the great cathedrals, that most people in the Middle Ages