Approaches to Teaching

Medieval English Drama

Edited by Richard Emmerson

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Richard K. Emmerson

The Modern Language Association of America
New York 1990

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Approaches to teaching medieval English drama / edited by Richard K. Emmerson.
p. cm. — (Approaches to teaching world literature ; 29)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-87352-531-0 ISBN 0-87352-532-9 (pbk.) :
1. English drama—To 1500—Study and teaching. 2. English drama—To 1500—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 3. Mysteries and miracle-plays, English—Study and teaching. 4. Mysteries and miracle-plays, English—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 5. Theater—England—History—Medieval, 500-1500—Study and teaching. I. Emmerson, Richard Kenneth. II. Series.
PR641.A8 1990
822'.1'07—dc20 89-78012

Cover illustration of the paperback edition: Two episodes in the life of Abrabam: (1) Abraham as host to angels who annouce the birth of his son and (2) the sacrifice of Isaac, mural mosaic, Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th century. Photograph: Alinari/Art Resource.

Published by The Modern Language Association of America
10 Astor Place, New York, New York 10003-6981

PREFACE TO THE SERIES

In *The Art of Teaching* Gilbert Highet wrote, "Bad teaching wastes a great deal of effort, and spoils many lives which might have been full of energy and happiness." All too many teachers have failed in their work, Highet argued, simply "because they have not thought about it." We hope that the Approaches to Teaching World Literature series, sponsored by the Modern Language Association's Publications Committee, will not only improve the craft—as well as the art—of teaching but also encourage serious and continuing discussion of the aims and methods of teaching literature.

The principal objective of the series is to collect within each volume different points of view on teaching a specific literary work, a literary tradition, or a writer widely taught at the undergraduate level. The preparation of each volume begins with a wide-ranging survey of instructors, thus enabling us to include in the volume the philosophies and approaches, thoughts and methods of scores of experienced teachers. The result is a sourcebook of material, information, and ideas on teaching the subject of the volume to undergraduates.

The series is intended to serve nonspecialists as well as specialists, inexperienced as well as experienced teachers, graduate students who wish to learn effective ways of teaching as well as senior professors who wish to compare their own approaches with the approaches of colleagues in other schools. Of course, no volume in the series can ever substitute for erudition, intelligence, creativity, and sensitivity in teaching. We hope merely that each book will point readers in useful directions; at most each will offer only a first step in the long journey to successful teaching.

Joseph Gibaldi
Series Editor

PREFACE TO THE VOLUME

Anyone who has attended the many sessions devoted to medieval drama at the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association and other organizations or who has witnessed a recent revival of these plays knows that medieval drama is alive and flourishing. This liveliness was particularly evident during two different yet related events that transpired in May 1985. The first event took place during the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University, when—at meetings on three sultry days in crowded unair-conditioned rooms and in competition with hundreds of other scheduled sessions—the several papers on the topic The Cycle Plays and the Critic: Reassessments and Recommendations drew large and intellectually engaged audiences. The use of historical, cultural, anthropological, and musicological research was extensively debated, and Theresa Coletti's call for a new generation of theoretical studies of the drama was rousingly supported. A few weeks later many appreciative spectators from all over North America gathered in Toronto to watch twenty-five companies perform the Towneley cycle.

This unique combination of scholarly energy and popular festivity is the driving force behind the phenomenal increase in the study of medieval drama. What has not always received so much attention, however, are the difficulties inherent in teaching these plays to even the advanced undergraduate. This is unfortunate, for, as John C. Coldewey rightly states in his contribution to this volume, students face "some daunting problems" when confronting medieval plays, and these problems are "not good news for the teacher who relishes a simple body of material or straightforward subject guidelines." This volume does not provide those guidelines, straightforward or otherwise. It does, however, offer help for the new teacher who must sort out this sometimes foreboding material, encourage the experienced teacher to rethink the classroom presentation of familiar plays, and suggest for us all new ways to integrate more medieval drama into undergraduate courses. As Kathleen M. Ashley notes, because medieval drama scholarship and criticism is still in its beginning stage, it is possible for teachers and students to be "in the exciting position of being toe-to-toe with the scholars." What follows is intended both to extend and to improve the teaching of medieval drama to undergraduates by helping make this possibility a reality.

The topic of this volume is probably the most challenging to date in the Approaches to Teaching World Literature series. Although the volume concentrates on the extensive cycle plays of the late Middle

Ages and pays scant attention to what Glynne Wickham in *The Medieval Theatre* calls "Theatres of Recreation"—folk festivals, mummers' plays, tournaments, and so forth—it nevertheless covers a wide spectrum of drama. The plays discussed here are drawn from England and the Continent. They were written over six centuries in Latin, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English; they represent a variety of dramatic genres staging an impressive range of religious topics; and they were produced by monastic and civic communities in numerous ways.

Following the series' model, this volume is divided into two major sections. Part 1, "Materials," draws on the wealth of information supplied by teachers of medieval drama who participated in the survey that preceded the preparation of this volume. Throughout, this section relies on the experienced advice of these teachers concerning the selection of textbooks, the assignment of student readings, and the recommendation of significant works of scholarly research and critical commentary.

The section "Editions and Translations" concentrates on the most important and widely used anthology, giving both an overview and a critique of its selections and their classroom use. Other anthologies and editions are also discussed in relation to the courses in which medieval drama is taught. Because I believe that a teacher should be a coach whose foremost responsibility is to help students wrestle with primary texts, "Required and Recommended Readings for Students" briefly discusses helpful primary materials, as well as some secondary works that have been successfully assigned as background reading and for class reports. The much longer section, "The Instructor's Library," discusses in depth important scholarly works and specialized secondary studies helpful in preparing to teach medieval drama. "Aids to Teaching," which concludes the first part of this volume, is limited to audiovisual aids easily available to teachers.

Part 2, "Approaches," surveys the various genres of medieval drama and the rich array of approaches and teaching strategies that have been pursued successfully in the classroom. Although reflecting the individual perspectives of their authors, the essays share a common faith in the value of interdisciplinary study and an insistence on both the literary and the theatrical elements of medieval drama. These essays are intended less to describe paradigmatic courses than to offer critical perspectives, structures, and methods that may be borrowed and modified by those wishing to teach everything from a single medieval play in a survey course to an entire genre in a graduate course.

The volume's introduction and afterword, by two distinguished scholars who have contributed greatly to the study and the teaching of medieval drama, are personal meditations on the rewards enjoyed by an increasing number of teachers who are devoting their energies to

guiding students through these demanding texts. The volume concludes with a list of participants in the survey of medieval drama instructors, a bibliography of works cited in "Materials" and "Approaches," an index of dramatic texts, and an index of names.

In conclusion, I am delighted to acknowledge my gratitude to numerous scholars for what they have taught me concerning medieval drama and for their assistance with this volume. I particularly value the continuing support of my colleagues in the National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar on Medieval and Renaissance Drama (University of Chicago, 1978-79), especially David Bevington—the seminar director—and Michael Hall and Pamela Sheingorn, whose encouragement of and help with this project have been especially valuable. For specific assistance at key moments, I am also pleased to thank Jane Chance, Barbara Palmer, Milla Riggio, and Jerry Ward, as well as the staff of Georgetown University Library and of the Folger Shakespeare Library. For their good-natured patience when they were first subjected to my experimenting with many of the volume's approaches and strategies, I am grateful to the students of my medieval drama courses at Georgetown University. I also appreciate the help of Joseph Gibaldi, who, as a fellow medievalist, provided expert advice, and the good judgment of the manuscript's readers and the members of the MLA Committee on Teaching and Related Professional Activities, whose suggestions at various points improved this volume. Most important, for their unflagging understanding and loving sustenance, I thank my wife, Sandi, and my daughter, Ariel.

The volume is dedicated to the memory of Grosvenor Fattic, who introduced me to medieval drama and whose untimely death is mourned by his many friends.

RKE

INTRODUCTION

V. A. KOLVE

Thirty years ago, a series devoted to teaching the major monuments of our literary tradition would not have assigned a volume to the drama of medieval England. In comparison with *The Canterbury Tales*, the *Divine Comedy*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to name only works that have already found places in the MLA Approaches series, the drama seemed remote and difficult in its Latin liturgical traditions, rough and primitive in its vernacular manifestations. Its history was thought interesting, to be sure, for scholars saw in these texts a steady, almost inevitable movement from ritual to drama, from Latin to the vernacular languages, and from simple to complex dramatic forms. Describing the drama's migration from monastery and cathedral to the streets and open places of towns, scholars charted a parallel movement from religious themes austerely expressed toward increasingly secular invention and interpolation. And they saw all this as culminating (with an assist from the Protestant Reformation) in the great drama of Tudor and Elizabethan England. The end redeemed the beginnings.

That history, it seems fair to say, had greater appeal for many than did the dramatic texts themselves. The essays in this volume offer vivid testimony to how much all that has changed. The evolutionary account of the drama's development, so deeply influenced by nineteenth-century Darwinist theory, has been discredited on many grounds, but most especially for its cavalier attention to actual chronology. The Latin drama of the church was in fact performed and valued throughout the medieval period; different in kind from the vernacular cycles, it neither evolved into them nor was superseded by them. Latin plays from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries moreover are often longer

and artistically more ambitious than those from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, reversing another evolutionary tenet, the expectation that development is always from simple to complex. Other aspects of this history have come to seem problematic or deficient as well. Because we no longer distinguish so confidently between ritual and drama as modes or between sacred and secular as categories, simple narratives of change (to say nothing of "progress") from one to the other have lost their authority. Above all, we have learned to pay closer attention to the texts themselves, drawing on other disciplines (theology, music, art history, cultural anthropology) and other medieval genres (sermons, lyrics, Gospel harmonies, universal histories) to recover a sense of the power and the place these plays once held within clerical and popular devotion.

We have, in sum, come a long way toward learning to prize the achievement of the early drama for its own sake, quite apart from what it led to in Elizabethan times; and we have done so most specifically by recovering the interest of its religious action—respecting, but not privileging, the secular within it. A lot of work is being done. The texts are being scrupulously reedited in the light of recent codicological theory; the drama records are being searched anew and published in uniform, accessible editions; the iconographic context of the drama is being reconstructed, civic center by civic center, in subject lists of both extant and lost art; the music that carried or enhanced this drama is being published and quite extensively recorded; and the texts are once again being staged—in churches and theaters and dining halls, on village greens and city streets. I know of no other field in medieval literary culture that has been so extensively recolonized, so extensively remapped.

In learning to read this drama better, we have discovered one further use for it that has brought it into the mainstream of our teaching. To modern students, often so ignorant of the Bible that even the story of Abraham and Isaac is new, it offers fundamental access to large areas of medieval culture, both lettered and visual. Anyone who has ever studied this drama and its contexts will visit parish churches and medieval cathedrals no stranger to the art they display or the functions they serve. Such students will listen to medieval plainchant and polyphony sensitive to the expressive potential of medieval music. They will bring to medieval religious lyric that knowledge of sacred story on which its emotional power depends, just as they will read Langland, Chaucer, Gower, Julian of Norwich, even medieval fabliau, alert to much that might otherwise remain hidden or inaccessible. Medieval drama offers useful background to all these other texts and genres—the list could be readily extended—precisely because it occupies culturally central ground.

That is of course no accident. Although the major dramatic forms—

cycle play, moral play, miracle play—shared with many medieval genres a wish to celebrate the mystery of God's love for humankind, they added an intention specifically pedagogical. They sought to instruct their audiences in the stories central to the Christian faith, in the sacraments necessary for their salvation, in the schemata (such as the seven deadly sins and the ten commandments) that are at the heart of Christian moral teaching. One of the reasons these plays were staged for more than two hundred years is that they taught so well. And we have found that they teach our graduates and undergraduates no less usefully still, for an imaginative experience of what it was like to be a medieval Christian is approachable through these works. The teaching of medieval drama, like the staging of it in its own time, is community building; but whereas the drama once linked church to town and guild to guild and God to humankind, in this secular age it serves chiefly to restore communion with something essential in the human past. Ruth Wallerstein, the great teacher who first quickened my love for literature, rebuked the skepticism some of us brought to her classes in seventeenth-century religious poetry with an aphorism: "The truth of the Bible," she used to say, "doesn't *depend* on the credibility of Judges or the edibility of Jonah." And she was surely right. Whether we choose to receive the Judeo-Christian story as historical myth or sacred history, there is significant human witness at its center. Because medieval drama drew on the resources of an entire culture to mirror the human condition and to imagine its transcendence, the texts lay continuing claim to our attention and respect.

And so I have taken a teacher's pleasure in reading an early version of this book, exhilarated by the view it offers of what is happening in other people's classrooms. David Bevington's splendid anthology, *Medieval Drama*, published in 1975, has transformed what we can do in those rooms, most of all because it makes accessible to students (through its facing-page translations) a rich selection of the Latin and vernacular drama of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. I agree with C. Clifford Flanigan's claim in these pages that the high Gothic drama—imbedded in the ritual of monasteries and cathedrals, learned in its theology, subtle in its artistic means—poses a great challenge to our present scholarship and critical understanding. But if we conceive of the cycle drama, the drama of the towns, as richly as Kathleen M. Ashley urges in her contribution to this collection, that drama too remains only partially understood. We must do more, she tells us, than correctly read a text. We must make some effort to stage it in our minds; we must reconstruct its festival occasion, its place in the communal year, its relation to cycles of work and play and worship; we must investigate its political subtexts, its implicit assertions of class and civic and national identity, its role in popular devotion; and we must understand better the anarchy that is occasionally set loose within its

orthodoxy. Though there is much to be done before this synthesis can be achieved, it is a project abundantly detailed in the essays that follow.

That does not mean our enterprise is all new. The books we have been drawing on, supplementing, and arguing with over the past thirty years—E. K. Chambers's *Mediaeval Stage* (1903) and Karl Young's *Drama of the Medieval Church* (1933)—are great books still, richer and more sophisticated by far than the simplified version of drama history that later books drew from them. Young's texts remain trustworthy, furnishing an archival resource of extraordinary scope; and Chambers's extensive exploration of folk drama and custom, his publication (in an appendix) of all the records of performance he had been able to discover, his profoundly learned account of the Feast of Fools, and his frequent recourse to the most interesting anthropological theory of his own time (that of the Cambridge "school")—all anticipate the questions, emphases, and publishing projects that have distinguished the scholarship of the past three decades. And there is much in *The Mediaeval Stage* and *The Drama of the Medieval Church* that awaits modern reformulation still; the value of those books has not been exhausted.

We have, to be sure, begun some inquiries Chambers never imagined. The feminist reading of these texts, here outlined by Theresa Coletti, is genuinely new and full of promise. A semiotic reading of the kind provided by Peter W. Travis can reveal powerful unities at the center of these cycles. The iconographic inquiry described by Pamela Sheingorn is still largely before us. Marxist theory (though it finds no singular advocacy in these pages) likewise throws a powerful light on the history of drama and its relation to political and economic power. But we would do well to recognize that much in our program for the future (especially that part so persuasively outlined by Kathleen M. Ashley) in fact continues Chambers's own.

That we shall do it better seems a reasonable hope, for there are many of us, building on past scholarship with new kinds of theoretical and methodological refinement. We have certain practical advantages, not to be underestimated: copying machines and word processors, sometimes even research assistants and research grants. We have seen these plays in performance—a crucial experience unavailable to our learned predecessors—in York and Chester and Wakefield and London, in Toronto and Irvine and places between. And we have our many classrooms, where students share with us in the work of recovery. We ought indeed to do better than Chambers and Young, though none of us is likely ever to do so much alone.

This book, then, celebrates a communal enterprise; and I value it especially because it presents teachers talking to teachers about medieval drama at its vital center, in ways not deformed by the need to

publish something (marginally) new or perish. The authors of these essays have felt free to address the things that matter most in this drama, the things that speak to us in the name of all we share with the past. These days, it is clear, we seldom think of our subject as theater history merely.

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Part One

MATERIALS

Richard K. Emmerson

Editions and Translations

Teaching an Anthology of Medieval Drama

The textbook most widely used by those who participated in the survey of medieval drama teachers is David Bevington's *Medieval Drama*, which is recommended as the basic anthology by virtually all teachers whose courses focus specifically on medieval drama. Described by one participant as "the best overall survey of all major forms," it receives praise for its excellent essays introducing the various types of medieval drama, its helpful headnotes, and its presentation of the plays in their original languages. Latin and Anglo-Norman texts are accompanied by translations in parallel columns, whereas the Middle English texts are printed in standardized spelling and are generously glossed in the margins or, for those passages where students may need greater assistance, translated in the footnotes. The footnotes also include thoughtful explanatory notes. Most important, its presentation of the plays shuns the old evolutionary model that characterized drama scholarship through midcentury and that influenced Joseph Quincy Adams's *Chief Pre-Shakespearian Dramas*, the anthology that *Medieval Drama* replaced. Among the criticisms directed against Bevington's anthology as a textbook are that its bibliography is meager, that its introductions tend to place literary over theatrical concerns, and that it is expensive. Some survey participants also questioned whether assigning any single-volume textbook was the best way to teach medieval drama, but even they praised the scope and the value of Bevington's textbook.

The anthology's sixty-four selections are organized into six sections. The first two sections are particularly helpful because they provide English translations of texts not otherwise easily available for classroom use. As C. Clifford Flanigan points out later in this volume, the first part of *Medieval Drama*, "Liturgical Beginnings," hints at something like the traditional evolutionary view of drama, but the selections Bevington edits are key documents and plays that serve as background for students, rather than as the early links in a Darwinian chain. Classroom discussion can compare selected texts—for example, the *Quem quaeritis* from the *Regularis concordia* with the *Visitatio sepulchri* from the Fleury manuscript—not to trace how the drama "developed" but to consider the nature of the dramatic in the liturgy and the liturgical in the drama. The selections in this first part are limited by the liturgical focus, which necessarily, though unfortunately, excludes the works of Hrotsvitha, a tenth-century nun whose six plays are increasingly gaining attention in the undergraduate classroom, especially in women's studies courses. Hrotsvitha's *Dulcitius* and