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978-1-107-01548-7 - Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre

Philip Butterworth

Frontmatter

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ENGLISH THEATRE

How was medieval English theatre performed? Many of the modern theatrical concepts and terms used today to discuss the nature of medieval English theatre were never used in medieval times. Concepts and terms such as character, characterisation, truth and belief, costume, acting style, amateur, professional, stage directions, effects and special effects are all examples of post-medieval terms that have been applied to the English theatre. Little has been written about staging conventions in the performance of medieval English theatre, and the identity and value of these conventions have often been overlooked. In this book, Philip Butterworth analyses dormant evidence of theatrical processes such as casting, doubling of parts, rehearsing, memorising, cueing, entering, exiting, playing, expounding, prompting, delivering effects, timing, hearing, seeing and responding. All these concerns point to a very different kind of theatre from the naturalistic theatre produced today.

PHILIP BUTTERWORTH is Visiting Research Fellow in the Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Leeds. He was formerly Reader in Medieval Theatre and Dean for Research at the University of Leeds. In 2005 he took early retirement in order to concentrate on full-time research. His principal medieval publications are: *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre* (1998), *Magic on the Early English Stage* (Cambridge, 2005 and 2010: winner of the David Bevington Prize, 2006) and *The Narrator, the Expositor, and the Prompter in European Medieval Theatre* (ed.) (2007). He also co-authored with Joslin McKinney *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (Cambridge, 2009). He was a founder member of the renowned Octagon Theatre, Bolton and taught in the Drama Department at Bretton Hall for many years.

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Frontispiece: The York Crucifixion at the junction of Stonegate and Minster Gates, York (1992), by players from Bretton Hall. Directed by the author.

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107015487

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Butterworth, Philip.

Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre / Philip Butterworth, University of Leeds.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-01548-7 (hardback)

1. Theater – England – History – Medieval, 500 – 1500. 2. English drama – To 1500 – History and criticism. I. Title.

PN2587.B88 2014

792.0942'0902 – dc23 2014007605

ISBN 978-1-107-01548-7 Hardback

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For
Peter Meredith
mentor and friend
and
David Mills
scholar and friend
1938–2013

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in the meane whyle our comedy shall please the [&] shalbe acceptable or agreable vnto the, calle to thy mynde [&] remember (that we demaund no more of the) but that thou gyue a dewe reioysynge, accordynge to oure deseruynge [&] but that thou shewe the to be well apayde (with oure doinges by some outwarde sygne) as by clappyng of thy handes together, or by makynge of som gladsome shout, for our prologue [&] for our forespeakynge (to prepare your myndes to perceiue our matter here ensewinge, this is sufficient or enough.

*Ioannis Palsgravi Londoniensis, Ecphrasis
Anglica in Comoedian Acolasti. The Comedy
of Acolastus translated into oure englysshe
tongue . . . by Iohn Palsgraue
(London: Tho. Berthel, 1540), sig. Biv^v*

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Preface

Positions of explicit *stage directions* on the pages of the Huntington MS HMI, discussed in the Introduction, are identified by appropriately positioned arrows in Figures 1–6.

There are certain words and phrases used throughout the work that have been consistently italicised. The emphasis placed upon such terms occurs because the words are effectively employed as technical ones in medieval application. Where the same words are not italicised, then other, modern meanings are relevant.

The work makes extensive use of volumes in the *Records of Early English Drama* series published by the University of Toronto Press. Other than bibliographical and note use, the volumes are referred to as *REED* volumes and identified by their geographical location.

Acknowledgements

A work of this kind takes several years to bring to fruition. Its progress was helped with a generous award of a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust. The Trust, through its officers, has shown remarkable patience and professionalism in waiting for the outcome of this research. This sort of response demonstrates the kind of enlightened understanding for which the Trust is well known.

The book is dedicated to Peter Meredith and David Mills. Peter Meredith has offered much scholarly understanding, inspiration and advice over the years, and I am indebted to him. David Mills died in September 2013, and his scholarship remains for all to witness. I am grateful to both men for their friendship.

There are also many friends and colleagues with whom I have had discussions about the contents of this work – even if they had not always known it at the time! I would particularly like to thank Chris Baugh, Angela Bush, Jon Bush, Sarah Carpenter, Mike Casey, Max Harris, Sandy Johnston, Pam King, Sally-Beth MacLean, John Marshall, Joslin McKinney, David Mills, Joy Mills, Axel Müller, Jane Oakshott, Arthur Pritchard, Richard Rastall, Margaret Rogerson, Mike Spence, Vicky Spence, Elsa Strietman, John Surman, Meg Twycross and Greg Walker. I would also like to thank Joy Mills for her selfless help in paving the way for David Mills' assistance. All, in their respective ways, have contributed to my thinking in this work. Katie Normington read and commented on a late draft of the work, and I am most grateful for her contribution.

While this book has been in preparation, three further friends and colleagues have died. I would like to record my gratitude to Lyne Muir, Barbara Palmer and Robin Pemberton-Billing.

John McGavin, currently editing *Records of Early Drama: Scotland*, offered much support in my efforts to unscramble records in Lanark. I would like to thank him and Paul Archibald of Lanark Library for their generous help.

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Sections of Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 9 have been taken from previously published articles. They were first published as “Parts” and “Parcels”: Cueing Conventions for the English Medieval Player’, *According to the Ancient Custom: Essays Presented to David Mills, Medieval English Theatre*, Part II, 30 (2009), pp. 99–120; ‘Comings and Goings: English Medieval Staging Conventions’, *The Early Drama, Art, and Music Review*, 18:1 (1995), 25–34; ‘Timing Theatrical Action in the English Medieval Theatre’, *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama*, 4 (2001), 87–100. I would like to thank Meg Twycross, Clifford Davidson and Helen Ostovich for permission to reproduce some of this work.

For many years I taught in the Drama Department at Bretton Hall in Yorkshire, and during that time I directed some twenty-five of the thirty-two plays of the *Towneley Plays* (formerly referred to as the *Wakefield Cycle*). These productions took place in the exquisite grounds of Bretton Hall, Rievaulx Abbey, Fountains Abbey, Roche Abbey, and on the streets of York and Wakefield, and at the *S.I.T.M. Colloquium*, Groningen. Many talented students took part in these productions. I thanked them for their work at the time, but in the intervening years my gratitude has grown even more. Thank you all once more.

I have been offered considerable help by staff at the British Library, the Brotherton Library, the Huntington Library and the John Rylands Library. I would also like to thank all those unknown (to me) people who have made electronic resources available to contemporary researchers. Access to such material has changed and continues to change the nature of what is possible in research.

It has been a delight to work again with Vicki Cooper and Becky Taylor (née Jones) at Cambridge University Press. Their knowledge and experience as publishers shines through everything they do. I would also like to thank Fleur Jones, Samantha Richter and Chris Jackson, who have seen the book through its final stages.

Finally, I would like to thank my son, James, for our stimulating discussions as we pursue our respective research paths, and Sheila for her forbearance and equally stimulating discussions on all things theatrical.