CHURCH
AND CITY

1000–1500

Essays in honour of
Christopher Brooke

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Religious culture in town and country: reflections on a great divide

MIRI RUBIN

Christopher Brooke's work has been informed by two of the most fruitful areas of exploration of the medieval world: the study of town life and the study of religious practice.[1] The intersection of these interests produced notions of distinctive urban culture and urban religion, some of the most enduring ideas about medieval life: that it was experienced differently in town and countryside. This view emerged from prevailing materialist conceptions of culture which seek a strong grounding for ideas in the rhythms of work and in institutional determination, which unambiguously embed identity and experience in the physical expectations of work and leisure. This paper will question the degree to which medieval villagers and townspeople were separated in the realms of culture. It will do so through two approaches: one which will consider medieval religious culture as partly transcending or effacing such a divide; the other which will present urban and rural life as sharing some important characteristics rather than being divided, say, by the nexus of the market. Throughout the term 'urban' will become increasingly difficult to settle and define, as we move between 'town' as legal definition, as economic function, as a mystical fantasy, as the 'other'.

In urban history, the studies of the past within the framework of towns, economic history, cultural history, religious history, legal history, and recently women's history, have interacted more fruitfully than in any other area. The river-harbours, cross-roads and ancient markets which brought forth medieval towns have

[1] On trends in the study of medieval religion see discussion in J. Van Enghen, 'The Christian Middle Ages as a historiographical problem', *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 519–52.

also provided a meeting point for a wide range of disciplines and approaches to the past. As the project of urban history developed towns emerged as vibrant and intense places, where ideas travelled quickly, intrigues flared up and sometimes grew into civic wars, where frequent discussion prompted scepticism and rational scrutiny, where men's minds worked quickly: calculating the value of a keg of wine, of a length of cloth, of a slave, eyeing the sheen of a fur, seizing the most opportune moment for intervention in the deliberations of the town-council. To the modern imagination and the theorists of progress (and modernisation) which produced the urban history of the 1960s and 1970s, towns embodied the very essence of civilisation cast in the shape of modern values. Town life was rational, entrepreneurial, innovative, manipulative of its countryside and of its less adept partners and competitors. It was also the place where the finest institutions of human interaction were said to flourish; councils and guilds, fraternities and committees, in a brotherhood that was chosen, deliberated, rational, controlled and supervised. Town life was not a natural order, but a cultivated one, an effort of mind and intellect, not the legacy of soil and blood. The town which urban history set out to study was forward looking and future-orientated. Away from the atavism of kinship and the hold of tradition, away from the injustices of servility, it was seen as transporting men and women into the order of rationality, the freedom of the market (which Adam Smith called 'calm'). Towns have been deemed to be as progressive, as energetic and as free as western historians hoped their own cities and states would become or remain. Medieval towns were particularly attractive since they existed before the advent of factory chimneys, pollution or drug abuse; they were thus irresistible.[2]

Towns soon came to fill a mediating function between the historian and a host of new themes in social history: crime in Ghent, learning in York, prostitution in the towns of Languedoc, charity in Cambridge. An array of activities in towns was thus discovered, areas of study that even the prophetic Frederick Maitland, Henri Pirenne or Helen Cam would hardly have anticipated, far transcending the legal and economic confines

[2] On the uses of the medieval past in conceptualisation of the present see L. Patterson, *Negotiating the past: the historical understanding of medieval literature* (Madison, WI, 1987), pp. 3–39.

within which towns were traditionally observed. Worlds of rich
human and group experiences unfolded, in which the routines of
family life, workshop, market, ritual and ceremony could be
closely observed. Besides merchants, royal officials, bishops,
canons, and sometimes rebellious artisans, we gradually came to
learn of craftsmen and the labourers in their employ, servants, and
travellers, the poor, the studious, and women at all these levels, at
work, love and play. Outside the guild-halls and stone houses
of merchants a world was being revealed, of friendship and
competition, charity, poverty, crime, education and exchange,
in parishes, in craft-guilds, in prisons, in workshops, in poor
tenements, in hospitals and in taverns; a complex world ridden
with tensions and conflict, violence and pageantry.

Now the study of urban communities has produced in the last
two decades some illuminating knowledge, an acquaintance with
religious practices which had hitherto remained out of sight.
Attention to towns and to the lives of their humbler folk focused
attention on groupings in which townspeople habitually took
initiatives and assembled for social and religious action. An
institution which cried out for attention was the religious
fraternity (or religious guild),[3] a corporation of members com-
bined in efforts for the increase of social and religious opportunity,
which offered mutual help, maintained an elaborate system of
commemoration of dead members, pooled resources and merit in
a wide range of commercial, religious and political activities.
Fraternities varied enormously in almost every aspect: some were
town-wide, others limited to a parish, some were strongly
associated with certain crafts, others were not; they varied in the
degree of integration offered to wives of members, and to family
in general. They differed in the level of payments required from
members and in their social complexions: thus Venice had the
scuole grandi as well as *arti minori*,[4] and a city like Norwich had the

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[3] Following problems laid out in the classic article of G. Le Bras, 'Les Confréries chrétiennes:
problèmes et propositions', *Revue du droit français et étranger*, ser. 4, 10–20 (1940–1), 310–63.
On early guilds and the question of continuity throughout the Middle Ages see G. Rosser, 'The
Anglo-Saxon gilds', in *Minsters and parish churches: the local church in transition, 950–1200*, ed. J.
Blair, Oxford University Commission for Archaeology Monograph 17 (Oxford, 1988), 31–4.

[4] The former studied in B. Pullan, *Rich and poor in Renaissance Venice: the social institutions of a city
state, to 1620* (Oxford, 1971), and the latter in R. C. MacKenney, *Tradesmen and traders: the world
of the guilds* (London, 1986).

patrician fraternity of St George, as well as humble parish bodies like St Augustine's fraternity 'for the poor of the parish'.[5] Some fraternities recruited regionally and even nationally: famous fraternities like Corpus Christi of York attracted members from all over England, and some merchant fraternities offered membership and the related benefits to substantial merchants from other towns.[6] Fraternities invested communal funds in the maintenance of liturgy and celebration, and sometimes participated as a group in large urban ceremonial affairs; they commissioned and received works of art: altar-pieces, fine chalices and drinking vessels, monstrances for the eucharist, hangings and canopies given to them by well-to-do members for eternal memory. Fraternities appeared quintessentially urban, embodying the urban spirit of cooperation, the habits of extended trust learned in business, the discerning eye for organisational forms developed in the administratively complex towns.

Fraternities have thus revealed areas of town life which could only have been discovered once the close attention to urban social life was under way. They raise important questions about the contours of popular religion, since they often transcended parochial obligation and were thus able to reflect fashion, taste and religious sensibility. Yet once our acquaintance with fraternities is turned in a comparative mode to the rural sphere, we find striking similarities. Rural fraternities provided all the services that urban ones did, albeit on a smaller scale: they commemorated, buried, celebrated feast-day masses, offered help in poverty, and recognised the prerogative of kin in offering relief. Rural fraternities just like urban ones attempted to identify a certain respectable and capable element in a village, as shown in Charles de la Roncière's work on the fraternities of the Florentine *contado*; like urban ones they tended to include the 'effective' parish, what Gabriel Le Bras called 'la paroisse consensuelle'.[7] Not all male parishioners were fraternity members, but only those who were effective, respectable, productive: usually men of between thirty

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[5] M. Rubin, 'Fraternities and lay piety in the later Middle Ages', *Städteforschungen* (1992), 1–14: 5.

[6] G. Rosser, 'The town and guild of Lichfield in the late Middle Ages', *Transactions of the South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society* 27 (1987), 39–47.

[7] Le Bras, 'Les Confréries chrétiennes', 35.

and fifty-five years of age. Dedications of rural fraternities did not differ widely in the spread of patron saints or devotional motives: they had their predominance of dedications to the Virgin and to the Trinity, and a noticeable preference for Corpus Christi in the fourteenth century.[8] The comparative gaze confirms Susan Reynolds' claim that 'guilds were originally religious and social associations with no particular urban connotations'.[9] Indeed, why should the discriminating and knowing cooperation with neighbours – or even with strangers become brothers and sisters – for the extension of sociability, for provision of intercession, in the hope of relief, be an urban prerogative?

Finding that even small rural parishes contained within them a multiplicity of extremely small and rudimentary fraternities or groupings, humble affairs where people with a shared interest congregated around an altar, a light, an image of a saint, makes the point even more emphatically. Thus the churchwardens' accounts of Ashburton (Devon) show that there were discreet if humble groups of the 'wives' – married women of the parish; of bachelors – young unmarried men; and of 'maidens' – young unmarried women;[10] in other parishes there may be groups of 'upland' and 'lowland' bachelors. The impulse to socialise was constructed along numerous lines of identity: stage in life-cycle, age, gender, important distinctions in lives lived in towns or in villages.[11] The scope of such action clearly depended on the availability of resources and of leisure, on institutional constraints, but it cannot be analysed, in any useful way, as being *either* urban *or* rural. An institution found in urban life, has led us to discover similar formations in rural society, and perhaps ultimately to the dissipation of any necessary difference between the rural and urban types of perception and aspiration which fraternities might betoken in the members.

[8] J. Chiffoleau, *La Comptabilite de l'au-delà: les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d'Avignon à la fin du moyen-âge (vers 1320-vers 1480)*, Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome 47 (Rome, 1980), 448–53; M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the eucharist in late medieval culture* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 232–43.

[9] S. Reynolds, 'Medieval urban history and the history of political thought', *Urban History Yearbook* (1982), 14–23, at 19.

[10] M. Rubin, 'Small groups: identity and solidarity in the later Middle Ages', in *Enterprise and individualism in the fifteenth century*, ed. J. Kermode (Gloucester, 1991), p. 141.

[11] For 'maidens' gatherings' in the late medieval parish of St Margaret, Westminster see G. Rosser, *Medieval Westminster, 1200–1540* (Oxford, 1989), p. 272.

Another area of religious/cultural activity brought to our attention through closer scrutiny of urban social life is the institution of chantries. In England these were popular forms for the endowment of what were rather optimistically designed to be perpetual commemorative arrangements for the souls of founders and their relatives and friends.[12] The impulse towards commemoration after death is familiar from the multiplication of provisions in late medieval wills. This mode of provision was flexible and responsive: they could be the great chantries of bishops in cathedrals, magnificent edifices in stone and marble, serviced by an army of chantry priests, or they could be humbler affairs, founded by merchants or members of the gentry; even collective efforts, as a group of people pooled resources for the maintenance in perpetuity of an income for the support of a chantry priest. It has been suggested that this form of provision for the soul in the later Middle Ages betokens a type of new 'rationality', reason, which for so many writers is the essence of the urban mentality.[13] Only a decade ago Jacques Le Goff suggested that there was something particularly urban about the type of preoccupation with settling the debts of the soul which induced the elaboration and refinement of the idea of purgatory in the twelfth century. The multiplication of intercession, that hard-headed calculation of sums and numbers and frequencies of prayer and masses, enshrined into chantry formation, the shrewdest investment of all, has been firmly located by historians in notions of rationality. Yet when we look into the countryside, the practice of the gentry, or the funerary provisions of the rural parish, we find the same sort of impulses, the provision of commemorative prayer, the distribution of food on anniversaries, and the attempt to multiply, diversify and secure as far into the future as possible routines of commemoration even for the soul of the peasant man or woman. Rural folk were as adept as towndwellers in arranging and computing the welfare of their souls.

But it is above all in the creativity and precocity of cultural

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[12] On chantries see C. Burgess, '"For the increase of divine service": chantries in the parish in late medieval Bristol', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), 46–65; Burgess '"By quick and by dead": wills and pious provision in late medieval Bristol', *English Historical Review* 102 (1987), 837–58; B. Dobson, 'The formation of perpetual chantries by the citizens of medieval York', *Studies in Church History* 4 (1967), 22–38.

[13] Chiffoleau, *La comptabilité*, pp. 344–56, 429–35.

forms, in their pageantry, ceremonial, drama and art, that towns
have championed as the conduits of civilisation, as seats of new
learning which emerged in Europe from the eleventh century.[14]
Townsmen, and sometimes townswomen, have been seen as
having enabled the creation of new modes of thought and new
forms of representation and self-understanding. Eager to display
their wealth and subtle distinctions in status, they also relished self-
display in ritual and ceremonial. Historians have followed this
rich vein of urban life: Richard Trexler examined the ceremonial
and processional life of late medieval Florence, Edward Muir
studied Venetian civic ritual, and in England Charles Phythian-
Adams' pioneering studies introduced us to the rhythm of civic
ceremonial in Coventry.[15] The latter is a classic study of urban
life, one which wove together men's experience in the spheres of
work, public life, sociability, mutual help; a striking study of the
reaction of such a community to economic change, and ultimately
to the decline in the trades which had previously sustained its
prosperity. In Phythian-Adams' analysis of ceremonial life, civic
and religious rituals inhabited different spheres of the citizen's
year. Crafts and fraternities were shown to be deeply embedded
in the political institutions of the town and displayed and reflected
these links through ritual and sociability. The town was thus
discovered to be constantly ritualising and representing itself, in
ideal-types which expressed the wishes of the patrician élite to
establish an understanding of its rôle as the head and leader of a
healthy town which comprised many interdependent parts. In this
view, ceremonial had a vital rôle in town-life, bringing the
different parts together, and it was experienced by multitudes in
the enclosed spaces of streets and market-places, bounded by
town-houses from the windows of which fine cloths and tapestries
hung on ceremonial occasions, and from which flowers were
strewn onto the processing bodies. Towns were thus set, in the

[14] See for example the analysis offered in E. Werner, *Stadt und Geistesleben im Hochmittelalter, 11.
bis 13. Jahrhundert* (Weimar, 1980).
[15] R. C. Trexler, 'Ritual in Florence: adolescence and salvation in the Renaissance', in *The pursuit
of holiness in late medieval and Renaissance religion*, ed. H. Oberman and C. Trinkaus (Leiden,
1974), pp. 200–64; E. Muir, *Civic ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, NJ, 1982); C.
Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the citizen: the communal year at Coventry, 1450–1550',
in *Crisis and order in English towns, 1500–1700*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (London, 1972), pp.
57–85; Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a city: Coventry and the urban crisis of the late Middle Ages*
(Cambridge, 1979).

works of Mervyn James as of Jacques Heers,[16] as natural ceremonial spaces: the artificial nature of town-life coincided well with the dissimulations of mimes, *tableaux vivants*, vernacular drama, of processional portrayal. Towns were thus seen as fitting sites for the playing out of a reality which was richer and more intense than anything experienced in the mundane rural time and space.

We can now challenge such claims about urban specificity and compare processes of symbolisation which developed in towns and villages. The underlying assumption of much of the work on religion and culture in towns, much of which was conceived in the wake of explorations into popular culture, imputes to town-dwellers a certain urban mentality, or a *structure mentale*. This is supposed to be a world-view which prefers gradation to dichotomy, variety to uniformity, cooperation to isolation, perhaps even change to continuity, a culture where chances are assessed and solutions to problems are willingly devised. Yet when we look closely at villages some of these very activities are encountered: in self-government, sociability, political action, and cultural creativity.[17] Let us examine the possibilities of cultural action around a new late-medieval religious feast, Corpus Christi, in towns and villages.

Corpus Christi was founded as a universal feast in 1264 by pope Urban IV who had been in earlier life an archdeacon in the diocese of Liège; he became involved in the foundation of a eucharistic feast in that diocese in the 1240s. He died very soon after the publication of his bull *Transiturus* and the feast thus remained practically unknown except in Liège and its surrounding area, and in a small number of religious houses and towns. The feast was refounded by John XXII, and published in the new collection of canon law, the *Clementines*, which was dispatched from Avignon all over Christendom in 1317.[18] From the following year we have evidence of celebration of Corpus Christi

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[16] J. Heers, *Espaces publiques et espaces privés dans la ville: le Liber Terminorum de Bologne (1294)* (Paris, 1985); M. James, 'Ritual, drama and the social body in the late medieval town', *Past and Present* 98 (1983), 3–29.

[17] See the activities of self-government and regulation in Havering (Essex), M. K. McIntosh, *Autonomy and community: the royal manor of Havering, 1200–1500*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought Fourth Series 5 (Cambridge, 1986).

[18] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 164–212.

in southern England, and by 1322 in the province of York. Although the bull explained the meaning of the feast, a joyful celebration of the eucharist as a source of hope of redemption, a thanks-giving through veneration of Christ's body in the eucharist, it did not prescribe a particular form of celebration. Yet rapidly all over Europe, in town and countryside, processions with the eucharist developed. Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the processional mode had been adopted in the context of eucharistic practice, as a suitable form for its veneration: processions brought the eucharist to the sick, and in some English dioceses a eucharistic procession recreated the moment of Christ's entry to Jerusalem in the drama of Palm Sunday.

Now, Corpus Christi's liturgy for mass and office was disseminated from Avignon, but its celebrations were devised locally, in the form of processions which displayed and exalted the eucharist, kept in a monstrance and carried in the hands of the clergy. Very soon, by the second half of the fourteenth century, we find that urban processions had evolved in which the clergy surrounded and carried the eucharist, but corporations and town officials, as well as religious orders, friars and fraternities also ordered themselves around the eucharist. The processions became increasingly elaborate and in towns they gradually came to be controlled by town-officials. These out-door summer events (Corpus Christi could then occur between early June and early July) offered a clear ordering logic: proximity to the eucharist betokened privilege and power. Thus mayors and members of town councils came to process in the positions closest to the eucharist and the clergy, and although they were never allowed to handle the eucharist, the iconography of Corpus Christi soon developed an element which looks almost as if it had been invented for them: the canopy over the eucharist, that symbol of royal majesty, which was usually carried by select members of the town patriciate. The processional route of Corpus Christi often marked important relations between the town parishes, and demarcated its boundaries: thus in Marseille, Aix-en-Provence and Avignon, studied recently by Nicole Coulet, town walls and ancient ramparts provided the processional trajectory, moments in collective memory of the town history which were here

ritually recreated.[19] Processions often started at the cathedral, passing through parishes and returning to the cathedral, sewing the whole town together with a processional thread. They created an important sacred trail in the urban space, and it was often heralded by the pure voices and bodies of children, sometimes dressed up as angels, who sometimes strewed flowers on their path. What then followed in most towns was an ordered hierarchy of corporations, mostly by single craft, or – as in Ipswich – in groups of crafts, carrying a distinctive banner or symbols of their trade. Along the processional route stood those who were outsiders in one of many possible senses: women, foreigners, youngsters, journeymen, visitors from the countryside, and on the Continent Jews, all those who did not and could not take part in the display of political might and spiritual privilege.[20] When considering the claims of the urban élite which organised and designed these celebrations – that such events displayed the whole body of the town – one must bear in mind the exclusive nature of such processions and the adversarial feelings they might inspire in some of those observing from the sidelines.

Corpus Christi has been studied almost exclusively as an urban phenomenon, and it offers a good example of the tendency to take as given the specificity of certain ceremonial and cultural forms to the urban milieu. The examination of churchwardens' accounts from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many of them from rural parishes, shows that almost all the elements which were found in urban accounts, ordinances and descriptions of the feast, existed in the rural settings, too, albeit on a smaller scale. Children were used to announce the beginning of the processions, walking at the front, cross-bearers and bell-ringers were paid to excite the processing crowd, the monstrance was a grand and beautiful object, the costliest vessel owned by many parishes in towns and villages. Rural parishes possessed and often repaired their processional canopies, and like their urban counterparts often chose to sit and eat together at the end of a hectic ceremonial day. Village processions do not seem to display the formal hierarchy of a town full of corporations, but the symbols of power were never far off: the monstrance was often the gift of a local gentry family, and

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[19] N. Coulet, 'Processions, espace urbain, communauté civique', *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 17 (1982), 381–97.   [20] On procession see Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, pp. 243–71.

people often observed the great processions of monastic houses in their vicinities. Corpus Christi fraternities abounded in the countryside. The eucharist was a symbol of power and authority and similarly to urban usage, its itinerary marked boundaries and sanctioned their legality. Thus the common route for a rural Corpus Christi procession was along the hedges surrounding the village fields. In towns and villages alike we find the eucharist brought out at moments of crisis and misfortune: during a visitation of the plague, or war, to ward off crop failure, storms or drought, the eucharist was used as a focus for supplication, as protection against evil. It seems that the eucharist's message prompted some extremely similar usages in town and countryside, responses which varied in scale or elaboration, but which do not lead us to consider the urban person and the rural person as apprehending authority and the sacred in fundamentally different ways.

Many English towns had by the later fourteenth century famous town-wide processions: York, Chester, Beverley. A number also produced the quintessential art form for Corpus Christi, the Corpus Christi cyclical drama, of which four whole versions have survived, and many sections of others.[21] These cycles were vernacular renditions of the Christian story from Creation to the Last Judgement in separate episodes which could range from the comic to the farcical, from the high drama of Crucifixion to the boisterous mass scenes of the Resurrection. For a long time they were seen, following the lead of V. A. Kolve, perhaps their most inspired and influential interpreter, as important reflections of the impulse provided by the new eucharistic feast.[22] The view prevailed that the eucharistic feast possessed an inherent drive towards wholeness and universality, beginning and end, multiplicity under the structure of the narrative of salvation. Kolve distinguished between what he took to be the basic components of the dramatic tale, scenes which would be told in every Corpus Christi drama, and those scenes which towns could choose according to their wish, need and most importantly – size. The drama was understood to be a product of

[21] For a summary of surviving material on Corpus Christi drama in English towns see A. H. Nelson, *The medieval stage; Corpus Christi pageants and plays* (Chicago, IL, 1974).
[22] V. A. Kolve, *The play called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966).

a particular urban structure, which tends to create cultural products reflective of variety and of cooperation. This was an analysis of great beauty and force. Local research into the context of production has now revealed that the picture was far from being so simple.

Recent attention to the materials surrounding the context of dramatic production shows a variety in practice and a flexibility in financing and performance of the plays that was scarcely suspected by Kolve.[23] It showed that not all towns which staged drama on Corpus Christi displayed the drive towards universal Christian cycles, not all towns which produced cycles performed them wholly every year, and many towns chose one great extravaganza, or even to have no drama at all, or to have a traditional play of some other form.[24] Moreover, looking into the countryside, we encounter very familiar dramatic responses to Corpus Christi and its celebration. Whereas in towns guilds came together to produce a play or a cycle of plays, villages, like a number of Cambridgeshire villages around Bassingbourn, came together to commission the composition of a cycle of biblical tales which were to be performed intermittently when funds allowed, and often by companies of players who travelled the region.[25] Cambridge with its many fraternities chose to perform the story 'of the Children of Israel', while Norwich, only fifty miles away, chose a short cycle as more fitting. The reason for the different decisions may well have to do with the size of communities and the degree of guild autonomy within them; close examination will reveal some telling patterns. Great schemes which separate the urban experience collapse under comparative scrutiny.

A number of similarities in response and interpretations of religious impulses lead us to believe that urban/rural, like literate/illiterate, like élite/popular, is a dichotomy which illuminated early research but which now encumbers rather than

[23] The Toronto based project of publication of archival material related to the production of early English drama, *Records in Early English Drama (REED)*, has produced regionally based volumes of transcripts accompanied by introductions since 1979.
[24] See H.-J. Diller, 'Städtegeschichte und dramatische Formgeschichte: Die *Records of Early English Drama* und ihre Bedeutung für die Erforschung der mittelenglischen Fronleichnamszyklen', in *Zusammenhänge, Einflüße, Wirkungen*, ed. J. O. Fichte, K. H. Göller and B. Schimmelpfennig (Berlin and New York, 1986), pp. 145–53.
[25] H. R. L. Beadle, 'The medieval drama of East Anglia: studies in dialect, documentary record and stagecraft', 2 vols. (York University Ph.D. thesis, 1977).