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978-0-521-59334-2 - Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England

Janette Dillon

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This is the first major study in recent years to explore the language and staging of medieval and Renaissance English drama. In this book Janette Dillon analyses the relationship between English and other languages, which combined to create new and important kinds of performance in this period. Latin was especially evocative in English-language plays: until the medieval period it was regarded as the sacramental language of authority, but with the Reformation it became a potent symbol of the newly demonised enemy, Rome. Dillon examines why, from 1400 to 1600, other languages increasingly invade English plays and illuminates their significance by attention to developments in church and state within the context of the advancing Reformation and expanding English nationalism. In marked contrast to many related studies, Dillon focuses on drama as performance, employing a wide range of works, from the mystery cycles and morality plays, through early Tudor drama, to the plays of Shakespeare and many of his lesser-known contemporaries.

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JANETTE DILLON

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To my mother

Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| <i>Preface</i> | page xi |
| <i>Conventions and abbreviations</i> | xiv |
| 1 <i>Verbum Dei</i> and the rise of English | 1 |
| 2 Staging truth | 31 |
| 3 The voice of God | 51 |
| 4 The controlling state | 70 |
| 5 The value of learning | 106 |
| 6 Shaping a rhetoric | 141 |
| 7 English and alien | 162 |
| 8 Rebels and outcasts | 188 |
| 9. Conclusion | 220 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 222 |
| <i>Bibliography</i> | 246 |
| <i>Index</i> | 264 |

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[More information](#)

Preface

This book began with a set of related questions: why are other languages so conspicuous in English plays of the sixteenth century? what does their presence mean? and how do they address a range of different spectators, from those who understand only English to those with a smattering of foreign vernaculars from their travels and those who can understand, even converse in, academic Latin?

In attempting to answer these questions, this study aims to examine individual plays within their cultural context and to look at how changes in English culture from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century produce the need to keep reworking and restaging the interface between English and alien languages. Attitudes to alien language are closely tied up with religious change and developing nationalism, so that these are two dominant concerns of the book. Protestant England defines itself against both Babel and Babylon, the voices of other nations and other faiths, and at the same time seeks to strengthen its own position by collapsing distinctions between the two.

Chapter 1 begins by surveying attitudes to language in the fourteenth century and assessing the impact of the Lollards on linguistic thinking. Latin, until now the sacramental language of authority, becomes the potential enemy in the newly politicised linguistic arena of the late fourteenth century.

In chapter 2 I compare two mystery cycles, N-Town and Wakefield, in terms of how they stage English and Latin. N-Town, possibly monastic in origin, is reverent towards Latin, constructing it as the language of 'holy speakers', while in Wakefield plain English is the language of the virtuous, with Latin and other foreign languages the signs of corruption.

The next chapter turns to morality plays, offering an extended analysis of how English and Latin operate in one play which seems

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59334-2 - Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England

Janette Dillon

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Preface

particularly concerned with language use: *Mankind*. Written in late fifteenth-century East Anglia, at a time of renewed prosecutions for heresy in the area, it may be read as a plea for plainer language on the part of the orthodox church.

Chapter 4 moves forward to the early sixteenth century and the beginnings of Protestantism. As church and state become more closely intertwined, and England moves towards Reform, so Latin is increasingly demonised as the language of Catholic Rome. John Bale's drama, written as conscious propaganda for the English Protestant state, is the subject of this chapter's exploration of the urge to remake history in the image of Reformed belief.

The early years of Elizabeth's reign are the focus of chapter 5, which concentrates on the issue of learning, approached from the two directions of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and the classical interlude. Using three short plays on the subject of education, together with Wager's *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art*, I explore a peculiarly Protestant dilemma in relation to learning, which is simultaneously prized by Protestants for the access it gives to the written word, above all the bible, yet viewed with suspicion for its potential exclusiveness and elitism.

Chapter 6 examines the close interrelation between Latin and English in different cultural contexts, and especially in performance. In particular it looks at how a range of Elizabethan plays from the 1580s and early 1590s, including *The Spanish Tragedy*, exploit Latin for specific dramaturgical effects which operate in tension with the political framework of language use.

In chapter 7 *The Spanish Tragedy* is approached through its staging of alien vernacular languages rather than Latin. The chapter surveys attitudes towards foreigners first, across a number of plays, from the perspective of Londoners learning to live with alien immigrants, and then from the perspective of England as empire, as mediated through Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

Chapter 8 focuses on outsiders endemic to England: witches, rogues, vagabonds, Catholics and traitors, categories regularly overlapping with each other. Using 2 *Henry VI*, it supplements the previous chapter's focus on race and empire by looking at the making of the nation in terms of the 'internal' discourses of class and domestic politics.

As the conclusion indicates, the book's subject is much bigger than the book. I have chosen to draw the study to a close at the end of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59334-2 - Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England

Janette Dillon

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

sixteenth century not because the staging of Babel ceases to become an issue then, but because the parameters of the study shift markedly at that point. The babble of other languages continues to make itself heard in English drama until the closing of the theatres, but to cover those cultural shifts properly would take another book.

I would like to thank the friends and colleagues who helped this book along the way: Simon Shepherd willingly read the whole thing in draft and made helpful suggestions at every stage. Thorlac Turville-Petre and Alan Fletcher commented on early chapters, and Andrew Gurr and A. J. Hoenselaars willingly responded to queries. My thanks are due too to Sarah Stanton, Audrey Cotterell and the readers of the manuscript at Cambridge University Press. Errors remaining are of course my own.

Writing the book would have taken much longer had it not been for the support of the Department of English Studies at Nottingham University, which granted me a period of study leave in order to begin work on this subject. The University also supported my work by giving me a travel grant to enable me to make the necessary visits to other libraries.

Versions of material now incorporated into parts of chapters 1, 3, 6 and 7 of this book have appeared in *Medievalia et Humanistica* 1993, in *Research Opportunities in English Drama* 1995 and in *English and the Other Languages*, ed. A. J. Hoenselaars, forthcoming. I am grateful to the editors and publishers concerned for permission to publish revised versions here.

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Conventions and abbreviations

Quotations from plays are regularly taken from the collected editions listed in the Bibliography except where otherwise noted. Where no collected edition is cited, quotations are from the individual editions listed. Quotations from the works of Shakespeare are taken from the Riverside edition. Plays are dated according to the third edition of Alfred Harbage's *Annals of English Drama 975–1700*, revised S. Schoenbaum and Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) unless otherwise indicated.

References are in the standard form of act, scene, line where such divisions are available, but for some plays the only available numeration is that of scene and line, or sometimes of line only. In some editions there is no lineation at all, and here I have had to cite page references.

I have retained the spelling of the texts or editions from which I quote, but have modernised typography, substituting modern equivalents for obsolete characters, expanding contractions and rationalising conventions such as u/v spelling. I have also placed all quotations from other languages in italics, regardless of whether they are italicised in the source. In chapters 2 and 3 I have retained a regional spelling which may look especially unfamiliar to modern readers: 'x' for 'sh' (as in 'xall/shall' and 'xuld/shuld'). I have also anglicised American spellings in my quotations from the *Riverside Shakespeare*. Old-style dating has been emended in accordance with modern use.

I have normally translated Latin, except where the focus of the discussion is on what the author does or does not choose to translate. In such contexts, to supply translation would be to undercut the effects under discussion. Inserted translations are mine where not otherwise specified.

The only abbreviations used in the text of the book are OED (for

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59334-2 - Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England

Janette Dillon

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Conventions and abbreviations*

xv

the Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition), MED (for the Middle English Dictionary, ed. Hans Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956–) and *Revels* for *The Revels History of Drama in English*, cited in full in the Bibliography. Abbreviations in use only in the bibliography are MSR, for the Malone Society Reprints, and EETS, OS, ES, SS, for Early English Text Society, Original Series, Extra Series and Supplementary Series. Journal titles are cited in full except for *English Literary History* (*ELH*), *English Literary Renaissance* (*ELR*) and *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (*PMLA*).