

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-68254-1 - The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, Second Edition

Edited by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH THEATRE

The drama of the English Middle Ages is perennially popular with students and theatre audiences alike, and this is an updated edition of a book which has established itself as a standard guide to the field. *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, second edition, continues to provide an authoritative introduction and an up-to-date, illustrated guide to the mystery cycles, morality drama and saints' plays which flourished from the late fourteenth to the mid sixteenth centuries. The book emphasises regional diversity in the period and engages with the literary and particularly the theatrical values of the plays. Existing chapters have been revised and updated where necessary, and there are three entirely new chapters. After a new general introduction there are chapters devoted to the York, Chester, Towneley (Wakefield) and N-Town cycles of biblical plays. Attention to the contribution of different regions is developed in a chapter on East Anglia, and continued in essays on the morality drama and the saints' plays. Two illustrated chapters are devoted to the performance of medieval plays, both in their own time and in recent modern revivals. A new chapter on the cultural significance of early drama has been added. A thoroughly revised reference section includes a guide to scholarship and criticism, an enlarged classified bibliography and a chronological table.

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PREFACE

‘Medieval English theatre’ is an expression which possesses more the virtues of custom and convenience than those of strict descriptive accuracy. Of its three components, the least satisfactory is undoubtedly the first, and it is with good justification that many prefer to speak of ‘early’ English theatre, since the major genres of dramatic composition that came into being during the later medieval period – the cycles of biblical drama (or ‘mystery plays’), the moralities and the saints’ plays – all sustained a vigorous life until well into the sixteenth century; indeed, in one or two remoter places, where the mandates issuing from the Protestant centres of control and censorship may have been less diligently heeded, that life continued until well into the seventeenth century. ‘Medieval’ drama, then, remained a potent cultural force through many decades of what many now tend to call the ‘early modern period’ (formerly ‘the Renaissance’). The second component of our heading, ‘English’, whether understood geographically or linguistically, also has its limitations, since we have plays from both Scotland and Ireland that follow this banner, as well as a substantial body of texts in the Cornish language which have a natural claim to be regarded as ‘English’ drama of the period. The most significant word of our heading, however, is the last one, ‘theatre’, for it is intended to convey the sense that, more than in any subsequent period, the plays composed in that time were intended to be seen and heard, not read. As ‘quick [living] books’, they were designed for an audience more accustomed to hearing their literature read aloud, rather than reading it silently to themselves as we do; and it is essential to grasp that both the conceptual substance and the imaginative qualities of such plays are inseparable from their theatricality. This is something we may seek to recover partly through traditional means, by a combinative study of the dramatic texts themselves, documentary ‘external’ records relating to dramas and their performance, music and iconography; but it may also be sought by re-creating performances, in a spirit of authenticity, as best we can across the gap of some four

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or five centuries. Much of what will be found in the chapters that follow is informed by this new spirit of practical enquiry into medieval stagecraft, and two, chapters 2 and 11, are devoted specifically to it.

This second edition of *The Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, must, like the first, still content itself with being something of an interim report on a field of knowledge and interpretation which has changed beyond all recognition over the last three decades or so, but yet continues to develop. The major shifts and expansions have been taking place in three areas: editorial and textual activity; the accumulation of 'external' documentary information about early plays and playing; and the completely new insights generated from modern attempts to perform the plays in the light of what is increasingly becoming known of early theatrical conditions. Advances in each of these areas are being made at different rates and at different levels, and it remains likely that some years will yet have to elapse before a convincing new synthesis emerges to replace the traditional but flawed 'evolutionary' account of the early drama, that outmoded but easily taught approach to the subject outlined briefly in chapters 1 and 12 below. In the meantime, one of the main lessons of the second edition of this Companion is that critics of medieval literature and historians of the drama, and likewise their students, will need to find the means to respond intellectually and imaginatively to circumstances of far greater complexity than prevailed less than a generation ago.

Editorial activity in relation to the familiar body of medieval English dramatic texts has recently been more intense than at any time since the manuscripts and early prints first received critical editorial attention in the nineteenth century, and there has been a substantial yield of often complex bibliographical and textual evidence, some of which must of necessity be taken into account by those who wish to study the plays from the point of view of their literary and cultural interpretation, as well as their theatrical values. Chapters 4 to 7 below, devoted in turn to the York and Chester cycles, and to the cycle-like compilations of plays in the Towneley and N-Town manuscripts, are as much intended to convey a solid idea of these new responsibilities as to impart a sense of the fresh interpretative possibilities that they open up. Part of a responsible critical approach to these texts relies upon the possession of some knowledge of their modes of transmission, each of which differs radically from the others. Newly-published ancillary sources of a kind often unfamiliar to many students, such as facsimiles of the manuscripts, are invoked here with some frequency, for they prove to have a role which is integral with, rather than prior to evaluative processes.

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Re-editing of the textual corpus has gone hand-in-hand with a vigorous and now well-established campaign of renewed research into the nature and extent of the ‘external’ documentary evidence for late medieval and early modern theatrical activities of all kinds. These ‘records’ of early English drama have given their name to a series of publications (generally known as REED), cited frequently in the following pages, and especially in the Introduction by one of the newcomers to this second edition, Alexandra F. Johnston. These publications provide authoritative scholarly accounts of crucial materials that, before the late 1970s, were sometimes only haphazardly available, if at all, in early antiquarian or amateur publications. Though here, too, demanding problems of context and interpretation have emerged, the positive yield has been a strong impression of marked local and regional differentiations in theatrical practice across the country, once again displacing convenient but reductive pedagogic generalisations of the kind found in older textbooks on the early drama. Illustrations of the complex interplay between textual and ‘external’ documentary information in the study of the drama in York and in Chester will be found in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 8 is devoted to the most striking new instance of the development of a regional sense in medieval dramatic activity, focusing on East Anglia as a case-study in the assimilation of textual and documentary evidence to a broader social, cultural and economic matrix. One chapter along similar lines that appeared in the first edition, on the Cornish drama, we have, with regret, had to sacrifice in order to make space for new material; but we have done so in the knowledge that its author, Brian Murdoch, has since published a much fuller account of the same subject in the more illuminating and appropriate context of his book *Cornish Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), to which readers are warmly referred.

The most innovatory aspect of current research on the early drama has continued to take the form of modern productions of some of the plays themselves, usually under academic auspices, aimed at recovering at least some of the authentic sense of the original theatrical occasion in terms of *mise-en-scène*, acting styles, costume, properties, special effects and so forth. The journal *Medieval English Theatre* (1979–) was founded partly as a forum for those most intimately concerned in this kind of work, and it is probably cited more frequently in this book than any other periodical. As well as textual and ‘external’ documentary sources, iconographic information has continued to contribute more significantly than hitherto, and most of those now studying the early drama do so with the sense that it was as much a visual as a literary art of the period. Nearly all medieval plays involved music, and some included dance, the theatrical impacts of which can only

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properly be assessed in the context of performance. Modern revivals aimed at authentic production values, so far as they can be reliably recovered from textual, 'external' documentary and iconographic sources, propose a variety of delights, insights, questions and problems which previous studies of the early drama have seldom sought to address in any systematic way, even where they have been aware of them. A number are taken up specifically in several of the chapters below, and the entire project is placed under critical review by another newcomer to this second edition, John McKinnell, in chapter 11. He brings to the task a wealth of practical experience as an actor in and producer of early drama.

Needless to say, the chapters of this second edition of the Companion have been revised to engage with the latest assessments of the plays that they investigate. Many topics familiar from the first edition have been revisited and, where necessary, renovated. Nevertheless, this second edition is far from being a mere updating: aware of current influential trends in critical thinking, its editors thought it appropriate to invite a new chapter on the cultural work performed by early drama, and this has been ably provided by the Companion's third newcomer, Greg Walker.

The accumulated bibliography of secondary material relating to early theatre now in print is very large, and reference to it in a book of this kind must necessarily be selective. As in the first edition, so here in the second, chapter 12 outlines how scholarship and criticism of the subject have developed, and where current contributions fit into this existing framework. The select bibliography towards the end of the book provides for references made within the texts of the chapters, but it has also been arranged in such a way as to be of use as an instrument of study and research in its own right. A guide to the arrangement of the bibliography will be found at its beginning.

We are grateful to both our existing and our new contributors for their patient cooperation in bringing the second edition into being, and especially to John McKinnell and Meg Twycross for assistance in the choice of new and additional illustrations. Special thanks are again due to Peter Happé for his continued bibliographical labours, and we are also indebted to Linda Bates for valuable help with checking and indexing the bibliography. Finally, the editors would like to thank each other, while also gratefully celebrating the world of emails and file attachments in which their task was accomplished with all possible efficiency. As was remarked in the preface to the first edition, scholars, critics and performers of early plays constitute a particularly congenial and productive group amongst those devoted to medieval studies, even where they differ in approach, or over interpretation. Readers of the second edition will find these differences reflected in many details of

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the revised and new chapters below, which are nonetheless united in their sense of the importance of continued cooperative activity in this complex and rapidly developing field of enquiry.

Richard Beadle
Alan J. Fletcher

ABBREVIATIONS

CD	<i>Comparative Drama</i>
EDAM	<i>Early Drama, Art and Music</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
	es Extra Series
	os Original Series
	ss Special Series
ELH	<i>English Literary History</i>
ELN	<i>English Language Notes</i>
EMD	<i>European Medieval Drama</i>
ET	<i>Early Theatre</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
JMEMS	<i>Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies</i>
LSE	<i>Leeds Studies in English</i>
MÆ	<i>Medium Ævum</i>
METH	<i>Medieval English Theatre</i>
MLN	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
MLR	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
N&Q	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
PMLA	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
PQ	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
REED	<i>Records of Early English Drama</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
RORD	<i>Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama</i>
SATF	Société des Anciens Textes Français
SITM	Société Internationale pour l'étude du Théâtre Médiéval
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
TN	<i>Theatre Notebook</i>

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SYSTEM OF REFERENCE AND EDITIONS OF PLAYS CITED IN THE TEXT

Documentary sources, editions and secondary works, cited by bracketed italicised numerals within the text and in the endnotes to the chapters – for example (314) – are keyed to the serial numbers in the select bibliography.

Quotations from and references to plays within the text are from the following editions, full details of which are given under the respective serial numbers in the bibliography:

The York Plays, edited by Richard Beadle (108)

The Chester Mystery Cycle, edited by R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills (110)

The Towneley Plays, edited by Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley (112)

The N-Town Play, edited by Stephen Spector (115)

The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays, edited by Pamela M. King and Clifford Davidson (118)

The Macro Plays [*The Castle of Perseverance, Wisdom, Mankind*], edited by Mark Eccles (120)

The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 [*The Conversion of St Paul, Mary Magdalen, Killing of the Children*], edited by Donald C. Baker and others (121)

Non-cycle Plays and Fragments [including *The Pride of Life*, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, the Norwich Grocers' *Creation and Fall*, the Newcastle Shipwrights' *Noah's Ark* and the Northampton and Brome plays of *Abraham and Isaac*], edited by Norman Davis (122)

Everyman, edited by A. C. Cawley (124)

The Plays of Henry Medwall [*Fulgens and Lucre, Nature*], edited by Alan H. Nelson (125)

Youth and Hick Scorner in *Two Tudor Interludes*, edited by Ian Lancashire (126)

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LIST OF EDITIONS OF PLAYS CITED

John Skelton, *Magnyfycence*, edited by Paula Neuss (127)

The Cornish *Ordinalia: The Ancient Cornish Drama*, edited by Edwin Norris
(135)

The Cornish *Creacion of the World*, edited by Paula Neuss (136)

The Cornish *St Meriasek*, edited by Whitley Stokes (138)

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

Most of the dates given in the following table cannot be expressed precisely. This is usually because, in the absence of specific records or firmly established facts, they are based on scholarly judgements relating to various kinds of evidence (palæographic, linguistic, internal, etc.). Current opinions about the dates of texts will be found in the editions cited.

c. 970	<i>Visitatio Sepulchri</i> (The Visit to the Sepulchre), in the <i>Regularis Concordia</i> of Æthelwold
c. 1146–74	<i>Le Mystère</i> (or <i>Jeu</i>) <i>d’Adam</i>
c. 1175	<i>La Seinte Resureccion</i>
c. 1272–82	MS of <i>Dame Sirith</i>
c. 1300	MS of <i>Interludium de Clerico et Puella</i> (The Interlude of the Clerk and the Girl) MS of ‘The Cambridge Prologue’ MS of ‘The Rickinghall (Bury St Edmunds) Fragment’
c. 1350?	Composition of <i>The Pride of Life</i> (extant text first half of the fifteenth century) Barking Abbey liturgical <i>Visitatio Sepulchri</i> and <i>Harrowing of Hell</i>
c. 1375?	Composition of Cornish <i>Ordinalia</i> (extant text mid-fifteenth century)
1377	First mention of York Corpus Christi pageants (extant text 1463–77)
1377	First mention of Beverley Corpus Christi pageants (no text extant)
1392	First mention of Coventry Corpus Christi play (extant texts early sixteenth century)

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

c. 1400–25	Composition of <i>The Castle of Perseverance</i> (extant text mid-fifteenth century) MS of <i>Dux Moraud</i>
c. 1400–25	MS of Cornish ‘Charter Fragment’ MS of ‘The Shrewsbury Fragments’ MS of ‘The Durham Prologue’ MS of <i>The Pride of Life</i>
1415	The York <i>Ordo Paginarum</i>
1421	Chester Corpus Christi play first mentioned (no text extant)
1424–30	John Lydgate’s mummings
1427	Newcastle Corpus Christi play first mentioned (extant text of Noah pageant only, probably sixteenth century)
Mid 15th century	MS of the Cornish <i>Ordinalia</i> MS of ‘The Winchester Dialogues’, including <i>Occupation and Idleness</i> , an early interlude
c. 1460–70	Composition of <i>Wisdom</i> ? (extant Macro text late-fifteenth century, Digby fragment early sixteenth century)
c. 1461	Composition of the <i>Play of the Sacrament</i> ? (extant text c. 1520) MS of the Northampton <i>Abraham and Isaac</i>
1463–77	Compilation of Register (MS) of York Corpus Christi Play
c. 1464	Composition of <i>Mankind</i> (extant text later fifteenth century)
1468	Date mentioned in N-Town MS (extant text of whole collection late fifteenth century)
mid–late 15th century	Composition of Wakefield pageants in Towneley cycle (extant text early to mid-sixteenth century) MS of the Brome <i>Abraham and Isaac</i>
late 15th century	MS of the N-Town plays Macro MSS of <i>Wisdom</i> and <i>Mankind</i> Cornish <i>Beunans Meriasek</i> (Life of Meriasek; extant MS dated 1504) MS of ‘The Reynes Extracts’ MS of ‘The Ashmole Fragment’ Robin Hood plays
c. 1490–1500	Composition of Henry Medwall’s <i>Nature</i> (printed 1530–4?)

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1496–7	Composition of Henry Medwall’s <i>Fulgens and Lucres</i> (printed 1512–16?)
c. 1500?	Composition of Digby <i>Mary Magdalen</i> and <i>St Paul</i>
c. 1507–8	Composition of <i>Mundus et Infans</i> (The World and the Child) (printed 1522)
1512	Date given in MS of Digby <i>Killing of the Children</i> ; other Digby plays (<i>Mary Magdalen</i> , <i>The Conversion of St Paul</i> , <i>Wisdom</i> fragment) from about this date or somewhat later
1515–16?	<i>Hick Scorner</i> printed (composed c. 1514?)
1510–19?	<i>Everyman</i> printed
c. 1520	MS of the <i>Play of the Sacrament</i>
from c. 1521	Chester Whitsun plays (i.e. the Chester cycle, possibly based on the earlier Corpus Christi play; extant texts late sixteenth–early seventeenth century)
1530?	John Skelton’s <i>Magnyfycence</i> printed (composed c. 1519–20?) Norwich pageants and plays in Pentecost week, including extant text of the Grocers’ <i>Adam and Eve</i>
1532–3	<i>Youth</i> printed (composed c. 1513?)
c. 1535	Extant texts of two Coventry Corpus Christi plays
1562	Chelmsford records suggest possible revival of Digby plays
1575	Last performance of the Chester Whitsun plays
1576	Plays at Wakefield banned
1580	Last (unsuccessful) attempt to stage the York Corpus Christi Play