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Edited by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher

Excerpt

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I

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An introduction to medieval
English theatre

In 1955, two books on early English drama were published. One, Hardin Craig's *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (36), was thought to be the summation of all that could be known about the subject. The second, F. M. Salter's *Medieval Drama in Chester* (241), struck off in an entirely new direction. Salter's fresh approach to external evidence for the drama – that is, not the play texts themselves, but evidence for play production and dramatic activity in municipal and guild records – coupled both with new scholarly editions of all the surviving play texts and with modern productions of these plays, have, fifty years later, revolutionised our understanding of dramaturgy from the late fourteenth century to the late sixteenth century. The fruits of this new understanding are reflected in the essays that follow, the majority of which are naturally concerned, in the main, with the surviving canon of medieval English dramatic texts. This introduction is intended to outline the religious and social context in which that drama had its being.

The beginnings

Although intensive research over the last few decades has clarified much about late medieval drama in Britain and Ireland, its origins and relationship to the liturgical mimetic ceremonies that preceded it and to the entertainment patterns of classical antiquity remain an area of scholarly uncertainty and contention. The old theories argued an evolution along Darwinian lines from mimetic tropes associated with the Mass, to representational Latin plays on religious themes, to a vernacular religious drama performed by the laity that became increasingly secularised until it finally yielded to the polemic drama of the sixteenth century. Such theories will not stand in the face of our increasingly sophisticated understanding of western medieval culture and the cross currents of the politics and theology of the western Church. But

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there is yet to emerge a consensus that constitutes a new ‘received wisdom’ of the mimetic traditions of the millennium between the fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of new vernacular dramatic forms.

O. B. Hardison’s *Christian Rite and Christian Drama*, published in 1965, went a long way to establish the context of what is generally called European liturgical drama. His emphasis on Honorius of Autun’s sustained metaphor comparing the Mass itself to a sacred drama with the officiating clergy as actors raised the question of what the medieval understanding of classical theatre was (44, pp. 39–40). The earliest apparent references to plays and playmaking in Western Europe come from reforming bishops and other clergy who condemn *ludi inhonesti* in language that (Lawrence Clopper has argued) had a specific connotation in late antiquity. Clopper contends that knowledge of the actual nature of classical drama was minimal in the High Middle Ages. It derived from occasional references in the writings of the Fathers of the Church and prohibitions issued by the Roman hierarchy to protect the purity of the priesthood once Christianity had become the official religion of Rome. These prohibitions came down to the High Middle Ages and were enshrined in the canon lawyer Gratian’s *Decretum*, where terms not unlike the prohibitions of the early Church were used. Clerics were forbidden to ‘attend on or observe *mimi, ioculatores et histriones*’ (34, p. 38). This formula, with some variations, was repeated in decretal after decretal issued by bishops all over Europe. The universally negative tone of these references seems to condemn drama out of hand. Moreover, it is at complete variance with the positive use of the dramatic metaphor by Honorius and others.

However, Clopper argues that, since the mimes, jesters and actors were essentially solo performers, associated with the leisure sphere of the laity, Gratian’s prohibitions have more to do with the separation of the clergy from the temptations of the secular life than with representational theatre. This reading is borne out by a similar formulation in the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 once more forbidding the clergy to attend secular entertainments: ‘(Clerics) should not watch mimes, entertainers, and *histriones*. Let them avoid taverns altogether, unless by chance they are obliged by necessity on a journey. They should not play at games of chance or of dice, nor be present at such games’ (34, p. 64, with the Latin). In English episcopal statutes, these formulations are often accompanied by the prohibition of *ludi* or games (undefined) in sacred spaces such as churches and churchyards, and at sacred times such as during the divine office and on special festivals. These activities and their location, Clopper suggests, have nothing to do with medieval drama as it has been commonly understood on the basis of the surviving texts. This conclusion seems to be in keeping with

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the later evidence of festive activity at the parish level all over England, a subject to which we will turn later.

Honorius of Autun did not have such boisterous individual entertainments or communal celebrations in mind when he used mimetic metaphors to describe the unfolding story of the Mass. He was, instead, drawing on a common misunderstanding of the way in which plays were presented in classical theatres and of those *qui tragoedias in theatris recitabant* [who recited tragedies in theatres] (cited in 44, p. 39). Medieval scholars believed that representational drama had been presented in Greece and Rome by actors miming the action while a single voice read the text. During the Latin Middle Ages the words *mimi*, *ioculatores et histriones* did not refer to those participating in representational drama. Rather, they designated a continuing tradition of entertainers similar to the jugglers, jesters, singers and tumblers who performed in the taverns and courts of Rome and throughout Western Europe during the early Middle Ages. Our understanding of the official attitude of the Church to drama has been skewed by late nineteenth and earlier twentieth-century scholars assuming that the prohibitions condemned representational drama. It does however seem likely, as many have suggested, that mimetic traditions were recreated within the Church for reasons that were originally liturgical and ceremonial and which later became didactic and emotive.

Liturgical drama

The first example of what has come to be called 'liturgical drama', the *Quem quaeritis* ['Whom do you seek?'] dialogue of the angel addressing the Marys at the empty tomb of Christ, a scene represented by monks taking the roles of the Marys, is found in the *Regularis Concordia* or *The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation* of Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester. The work is a manual of regulations written down some time between AD 965 and 975, governing the houses of the Benedictine order. That it is a document of English provenance is not particularly significant because it is akin to similar codes of conduct created elsewhere in a period of monastic reform. However, that it is a *monastic* document *is* significant. Liturgical drama, always in Latin and usually in plainchant, flowered in the closed communities of monks and nuns. It was meant to embellish the great feasts, especially those of Easter and Christmas, and was performed by men and women in orders. The mimetic tropes 'were conceived of as aids to worship, not as vehicles of evangelism'.¹ For example, the mid fourteenth-century preface to a liturgical ceremony devised by Lady Katherine of Sutton, abbess of the nunnery in Barking, Essex, emphasised that her aim was 'to

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strengthen and stimulate faith among those already initiated into the mysteries, to eradicate spiritual torpor and to excite the ardour of the faithful more intensely' to the celebration of the Easter ceremonies (14, p. 8; 107, I, pp. 165–7, II, p. 411). The Barking ceremony required the entire convent to represent the Old Testament prophets. These prophet-nuns were confined in their own chapel (that for the purpose of the ceremony represented Hell) to await the moment when they should be set free at the Harrowing of Hell. This elaborate version of Eastertide embellishment was a communal ceremony that the nuns performed by and for themselves.

Liturgical drama was not originally conceived as a presentation for a passive audience of spectators. Some later Resurrection plays, still performed in Latin, seem, however, to have been intended to include such a congregation of lay people. Some German examples of this 'mixed' form end with the singing of the vernacular hymn *Christ ist erstanden* (107, I, p. 636). The process of transition from private liturgical ceremony to forms of drama conceived to be public, representational and didactic remains a scholarly conundrum. A truly representational vernacular play, the Anglo-Norman *Mystère* or *Jeu d'Adam*, has been dated between 1146 and 1174, and another Anglo-Norman play, *La Seinte Resurreccion*, to 1175 (44, pp. 253ff.). But most twelfth-century evidence of representational drama concerns plays written and performed entirely in Latin. It includes a lost Resurrection play in Latin performed in Beverley, Yorkshire,² and well known surviving texts such as the *Ludus Danielis* [Play of Daniel] attributed to the wandering scholar Hilarius (107, II, pp. 276–86). Latin plays of this kind seem to presuppose an audience, and it would appear to have been a monastic or learned one. Vernacular, didactic and emotive drama written for the laity had quite a different purpose. To understand this purpose we must look to the radical changes that were taking place within the western Church in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century.

The context of the rise of drama for the laity

There were three major, intertwined developments in the theology and practice of the western Church from the late twelfth to the early thirteenth centuries. These were, first of all, the consolidation of the new Eucharistic theology that emphasised the exclusive role of the priesthood in the performance of the sacraments, ensuring the salvation of the soul of each individual Christian; secondly, the convening of the seminal Fourth Lateran Council by Pope Innocent III in 1215, to consolidate the reforms of the twelfth century and set the course for the Church for the next four centuries; thirdly, the

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founding of the orders of mendicant friars, separate from the secular clergy, with their emphasis on evangelism, acts of charity, and emotive spirituality.

The twelfth century developed what Miri Rubin has called ‘a robust theology of sacramentality’, affirming that salvation was to be obtained exclusively through the sacraments of the Church, particularly the Eucharist, and that only ordained priests could perform the rite of consecration through which the bread and wine were transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ.³ On the one hand, this doctrine of transubstantiation prompted a veneration of the Host that led to the formal establishment in 1311 of a new feast of Corpus Christi. This feast was celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday (a Thursday falling between 21 May and 24 June inclusive, according to the date of the preceding Easter), and in some English cities, such as York and Coventry, it also became the occasion of annual cycles of Biblical plays. On the other hand, the doctrine of transubstantiation and the need for priestly intercession to create the ‘mystery’ elevated the status of the priesthood beyond anything understood by the early Church or by the early Middle Ages. The priestly role in the cure of souls now took on a crucial importance and one of the major actions of the Fourth Lateran Council was to regulate the behaviour and education of the priesthood. We have already seen that the Council repeated the earlier prohibitions against clerical involvement in *ludi inhonesti*. A far more important action of the Council lay in its educational reforms for both clergy and laity. It initiated a movement to provide ‘a better educated clergy who could bring the laity to a reasonable understanding of the essentials of Christian belief and practice.’⁴ The Council was followed by the decree of *Omnis utriusque sexus*, which made ‘annual confession to the parish priest and annual communion at Easter obligatory on all Christians;’ the confessional was to be used not only for confession but also for instruction, since the ‘confessor was expected to cross-examine penitents on their religious knowledge.’⁵ The significance of this decree for didactic vernacular literature was immense. First of all, both clergy and laity had to possess sufficient knowledge of the faith for such confession to have any meaning. The clergy, therefore, had to be provided with instruction in the Bible and the elements of moral theology, and the laity furnished with a rudimentary knowledge of the faith. The response of the English Church to the decrees of Lateran IV is best represented by the tract *Ignorancia Sacerdotum*, issued by John Pecham, archbishop of Canterbury, in 1281. John Thoresby, archbishop of York, in turn reissued Pecham’s tract for his province in 1357. The Latin letter that accompanied Thoresby’s text was ‘Englished’ and has come to be known as ‘The Lay Folk’s Catechism’. It contains six separate doctrinal and moral sections: the fourteen articles concerning the faith, the ten commandments of the Old Testament and the

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two of the New Testament, the seven virtues, the seven sacraments, the seven acts of corporal mercy and the seven deadly sins. About the same time efforts were made to ensure that the laity knew the Lord's Prayer (Pater Noster) and the Creed. Mnemonic rhymes of these were devised and, by 1376, York had a play on the Pater Noster (194). There were also long vernacular poems largely devoted to the story of the Incarnation and Passion, designed to be read aloud to the laity, such as the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, the *Cursor Mundi* and the *Northern Passion*. In the visual arts, stained glass windows that depicted key episodes in the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary, as well as wood and alabaster carvings and wall paintings, became commonplace in churches, and were all part of the same large design to educate the laity in the scriptural basis of the faith.

Other texts also told the story of the life and Passion of Christ with a more meditational emphasis, taking a more emotive approach than the purely narrative compositions. These elaborated versions reflect the movement of 'affective piety,' cultivated particularly in Franciscan spirituality, that deliberately set out to engage the emotions of the readers with the humanity and suffering of Christ as a means to stimulate their devotion and penance. The most important among these meditative English texts, Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessyd Lyf of Jesu Christ*, came late in the tradition. Written in the first decade of the fifteenth century, it was based on a widely-disseminated thirteenth-century Franciscan text, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. In his prologue, Love makes the didactic purpose of his work clear. He is writing for the 'symple creatures' who cannot understand the subtleties of theology but can relate to the 'contemplacion of þe monhede [humanity] of cryste'. His purpose 'is pryncipally to be sette in mynde þe ymage of crystes Incarnation passion & Resurreccion so that a symple soule' who responds to simple things can be presented with something with which he 'maye fede & stire his deuocion.' Love's intention, like that of all other religious writers of the affective tradition, is to make the events of the life and Passion of Christ so vividly real before the mind's eye that they are experienced vicariously. In his discussion of the Crucifixion, Love appeals to the heart, rather than to the head, of his reader:

Take hede now diligently with alle þi herte, alle þo þinges þat be now to come, & make þe þere present in þi mynde, beholdyng alle þat shale be done a3eynus þi lorde Jesu & þat bene spoken or done of him.⁶

As the painful details are recounted, the reader or hearer is to make him or herself 'þere present in þi mynde'. By an act of the imagination, carried away with devotion, believers are to feel themselves present during the events as they unfold. English vernacular drama appeared in the late fourteenth

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century in the context of these didactic and affective campaigns by the Church. Mimetic representations of the events of the life of Christ were conceived as an effective way to bring believers to feel ‘pere present in þi mynde’ the Incarnate Christ as he taught, suffered, died and rose again (272).

To produce these plays, the Church joined forces with an educated and devout section of the laity whose piety manifested itself in many ways. Religious guilds were established to honour saints or the Sacrament. Charitable institutions such as hospitals were founded. Special chapels sustained by the pious offerings of individuals or guilds began to be included in cathedrals and parish churches. Craft organisations in cities such as York and Coventry had parallel religious guilds that included the wives and family of the guildsmen. For example, the powerful Mercers of York, who formed the civic oligarchy, were also members of the Guild of the Holy Trinity. The city council of York became the producer of the longest and most complex series of Biblical plays which it affirmed were performed ‘en honour & reuerence nostre seignour Iesu Crist & honour & profit de mesme la Citee’ [in honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and the honour and profit of the same City] (200, p. 11). And that ‘profit’ was financial as well as spiritual. The annual productions of the plays in the northern cities were occasions of festival and the profit to be made by attracting visitors was significant. Similarly, smaller and rural communities came to use plays as major fundraising events to help maintain, extend or decorate the fabric of parish churches. Although the majority of the surviving texts dramatise episodes from the Bible, there were also plays that explicated doctrine, such as the Creed and Paternoster plays, and others that have come to be known as morality plays, dealing with the fortunes of the individual soul rather than with universal salvation. Some saints’ plays were also didactic in nature, though others, such as the St George and St Nicholas plays, could also have elements drawn from folklore and popular culture.

The nature of the surviving evidence

Before we turn to a more detailed discussion of the drama that became ubiquitous in England from the late fourteenth century, we must clearly understand the nature of the evidence on which our understanding of the genre is based. We are reliant on written records that include, on the one hand, the texts of the plays that have survived from the medieval period and much later, and on the other, references to dramatic activity in external sources, such as civil and ecclesiastical prohibitions, civic ordinances and, most frequently, financial accounts. Both sources of information do not provide the full picture, however. Nearly all medieval play-texts were ephemeral

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objects, scripted for performance purposes only, and the idea of preserving plays in written form did not become common in Britain and Ireland until much later. If medieval plays did come to be written down for long-term preservation it was usually for reasons that had little to do with practical performance. The earliest surviving text of the complete Chester cycle, for example, was committed to manuscript in an antiquarian spirit twenty years after the last date on which it is known to have been performed. The extant canon of early drama in Britain and Ireland is much smaller than that from most Continental countries, partly because so few of the early plays from the British Isles were written down in permanent form, and partly because those which were became liable to destruction on doctrinal grounds at the Reformation.

External evidence of early drama has survived in a completely random pattern. We do not always know why the records of one city are virtually complete and those of another non-existent. Similarly, some parishes carefully kept their financial records while others did not. Early histories of medieval drama, like Hardin Craig's, were based almost entirely on the surviving play-texts. To correct the balance, the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project has been uncovering, editing and publishing the external evidence from documentary sources over the last thirty years. Although the survey is not yet complete, it has now accumulated sufficient new information about performance patterns on which to base a more rounded account of mimetic activity. Marrying the two different types of source information is not always straightforward, but it enhances what we can know from each separately. However, our knowledge will always be tentative and fragmentary because of the incomplete nature of both textual and documentary evidence.

It was long thought that four English biblical play 'cycles' survive. Many earlier scholarly studies treated the four apparent cycles as four examples of the normative form of English medieval drama – that is, long episodic plays that cumulatively told the story of salvation history from Creation to Doomsday (36, 47, 168, 176). Any apparently independent surviving play that treated a single narrative episode was thought to have once been part of a longer sequence or cycle. Some scholars have now come to believe that the texts of only two such play cycles survive, the civic and craft plays from York and Chester. There is a growing tendency to regard these as exceptions, rather than the norm, though there is fragmentary textual or documentary evidence of similar long sequences from other towns, such as Coventry, Newcastle and Beverley. We know about them because civic records have been preserved where other records, such as those of parishes and religious guilds, have not. We also know about the plays of York and Chester because the civic authorities, for reasons of their own, caused their plays to be written

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down in authoritative ‘registers’. Who commissioned the other two major collections of plays arranged in cyclic form – the N-Town plays, in an East Anglian dialect, and the Towneley pageants, in a manuscript which came to light in Lancashire, but appears originally to have been associated with Wakefield and south-west Yorkshire – is still obscure, and the histories of the two collections are still hotly contested (see below, Chapters 6 and 7). It is now however thought that these manuscripts are compilations from a variety of sources, and that some of their component plays (and sometimes sequences of plays) represent dramatic traditions different from the enormous and expensive extravaganzas of the northern cities. Among the plays in the N-Town manuscript, for example, are a two-part Passion Play to be played over two years; a five-part play on the early life of the Virgin Mary; a separate play on her Death and Assumption; a very brief Pentecost play (35 lines) that seems designed for a modest parish setting at Whitsun; a Creation sequence that brings Cain back on stage in the Noah episode to be shot by the blind Bowman Lamech; and several well made single ‘one act’ plays such as the Trial of Mary and Joseph and the Woman Taken in Adultery. The Towneley manuscript has possibly as many as eight guild plays that were extracted from the York cycle before the surviving York versions were recorded in the York Register at some time between 1463 and 1477 (see below, chapter 4). Once these borrowed plays left York some were edited for new purposes. The Towneley collection also contains the famous plays of the so-called ‘Wakefield Master’ – Noah, the two Shepherd plays, Herod the Great and the Buffeting of Christ, each in its own way a superb single-episode play.

Besides the N-Town manuscript, two other substantial play manuscripts to survive from East Anglia are the Digby Plays (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 133, 121), and the Macro Plays (Washington DC, Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V.a.354, 120), the latter (like the Towneley manuscript) named after a former owner, in this case an eighteenth-century Bury St Edmunds antiquarian called Cox Macro. Both contain versions of the lavish moral interlude called *Wisdom* – the one play of all those that survive from East Anglia that seems unlikely to have been produced in a parish context. The Digby manuscript also contains the two surviving English saints plays, *Mary Magdalen* and *The Conversion of St Paul*, together with a pair of stand-alone plays on the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Purification of the Virgin. The Macro manuscript also contains two other moralities, *Mankind* and *The Castle of Perseverance*. Modern editions of the Digby plays also include the *Burial and Resurrection* (extant in Bodleian Library, MS e Museo 160), a play in the Easter tradition. Finally, there is an assortment of plays from various manuscript sources edited under the title *Non-Cycle Plays and*

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Fragments (122), notably the spectacular *Play of the Sacrament*, associated with the Norfolk village of Croxton, near Thetford, and two versions of the Abraham and Isaac episode, one in a manuscript from Northampton, and the other from Suffolk. The plays gathered in this collection were once thought to be the sweepings of the genre but are now more and more consulted in attempts to arrive at a more holistic understanding of all the different kinds of evidence of early dramatic activity. From Cornwall, and in the Cornish language, we have two large biblical plays, the Cornish *Ordinalia* (135) and the *Creacion* (136), a large-scale saint play on the life of St Meriasek (138), a newly discovered manuscript that contains a play on St Kea, and a sequence involving King Arthur's argument with Emperor Lucius (139). Though there are significant documentary records of drama in Scotland from before the end of the fifteenth century, no texts survive that can be associated with them. Ireland, on the other hand, besides a considerable body of documentary material, has the text of the earliest extant morality play, *The Pride of Life* (382).

Playmaking at the parish level

Over the last thirty years, scholars associated with the Records of Early English Drama project and others have been discovering widespread evidence of playmaking at the parish level. It is now possible to understand how the larger-scale plays preserved for us in some of the surviving texts could have been mounted in a parish context. Earlier scholarship was baffled to understand what the sponsorship of such major undertakings as the *Castle of Perseverance* may have been. It has thirty-three speaking parts, an elaborate set, and spectacular special effects that include gunpowder burning in the ears and arse of Satan, and a siege (see the noted staging diagram accompanying the text, reproduced on p. 51 below). It is now clear that individual parishes, or groups of parishes, could produce such lavish plays. Parishes were frequently coextensive with the often substantial market towns where they were located. In Bodmin, Cornwall, for example, the accounting details for the Passion Play presented in the town are found in the town Receivers' Accounts but the inventory of the costumes is found in the records of the parish of St Petroch (78, p. 473). In his analysis of the records of the Passion Play of New Romney, Kent, James Gibson makes it clear that in the minds of the organisers the parish and the town were the same.⁷ This is also true in East Anglia where wealthy wool towns had a single parish church, or in the West Riding of Yorkshire where the parishes were often geographically very large. Financial support also often came from external sources. There is evidence from Wymondham in Norfolk and Louth in Lincolnshire, for