

Pamela M. King and Clifford Davidson, eds. 2000: *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*. Michigan: Western Michigan University. Pp. x, 326. ISBN: 1-58044-055-X (casebound), 1-58044-056-8 (paperbound).

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The edition of medieval texts is always an exciting piece of news, especially today and in the field of English studies. In fact, at a time when most scholars seem to be absorbed in such rewarding tasks as the study of contemporary fiction from feminist, gender, post-modern, post-colonial, ethnic, marginal viewpoints, and the like, it is surprising to find that there are still those who, like Pamela M. King and Clifford Davidson, burn their midnight oil poring over old, difficult, challenging texts and manuscripts in an attempt to rescue them and make them available to the general reading public. In this sense, this particular edition of *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* should be doubly welcomed, for not only does it reproduce a text that has not been edited or printed for many years, but it renders a new, detailed, scholarly and highly critical edition of the two famous extant Coventry plays.

Apart from the four well-known English mystery cycles —York, Chester, N-Town and Towneley— a series of plays and fragments have also been preserved. The two mysteries or pageants that are assigned to the lost cycle of Coventry are in fact two lengthy plays known by the names of the guilds that used to undertake their performance, namely, “the Shearmen and Taylors” and “the Weavers,” respectively. They have come down to us in two separate texts: *The Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors* has survived only as a printed text —first published by antiquarian Thomas Sharp in 1817— because the original sixteenth-century manuscript was destroyed in a fire at the Birmingham Free Library in 1879; *The Weavers' Pageant*, on the other hand, has been preserved in a manuscript dated 2 March 1535, kept at the Coventry Records Office and identified as CRO Acc. 11/2. There is, however, evidence of performances of the Coventry mystery cycle as early as 1392 and the last recorded performance dates from 1579 (King and Davidson 2000: 57).

The Shearmen and Taylors' text consists of 846 lines plus three songs with their scores, while the Weavers' has 1187 lines plus two songs. Each of the two plays amounts in fact to a collection of different episodes about the Nativity and Childhood of Jesus. The first of those two plays opens with the messianic prophecies, then goes on to the Annunciation, Joseph's doubts, the Nativity, the

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adoration of the shepherds and the Magi, and the slaughter of the Innocents. Incidentally, King Herod appears here as the great ranting tyrant who would become a literary commonplace caricature that Shakespeare himself would allude to in *Hamlet*: "I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-Herods Herod" (3.2.14); for instance, when he is informed that the three Magi have gone back home through a different route, he bursts out: "Hath those fawls traytvrs done me þis ded?/ I stampe! I stare! I loke all abouwt! " (lines 723-24); the well-known stage direction "Here Erode ragis in þe pagond and in the strete also" (line 728) comes from this scene too. The second play also enacts a similar prologue of prophecies, after which follow the episodes of the Purification of Mary and Christ and the Doctors.

Although both pageants deal with subjects and events that are also found in the four English mystery cycles, the songs and scores of the Shearmen and Taylors are unique, as they represent an exceptional record of medieval English music, especially in the case of the already popular lullaby, sung by the mothers of the slaughtered children of Bethlehem: "Lully lulla, þow littell tine child,/ By by, lully lullay, þow littell tyne child, / By by, lully lyllay" (110).

On the other hand, the Doctors episode in the Weavers' pageant entails a rare case of theological discussion on the Ten Commandments which sheds significant light on contemporary English society, for, as the editors explain, "the major concern with the exposition of ideas reflects contemporary preoccupations about education in the vernacular" (29). Another outstanding scene of this same play shows a domestic quarrel as Mary and Joseph are planning their visit to the Temple for her Purification: since two turtle-doves are needed, Mary suggests that Joseph goes and catches them, but he complains, arguing that he is too old and weak to go hunting: "Myne age ys soche I ma not well see;/ There schall noo duffues be soght for me" (lines 422-23), fulfilling thus his characteristic role as the hen-pecked husband.

An edition of the Coventry plays such as this was badly needed, as the only other full-text edition available is that by Hardin Craig, published in 1902 (first edition) and in 1957 (second edition) by Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society. Different sections of either of these two plays had appeared in different anthologies of medieval English drama such as those by J. Quincy Adams (1924), A. C. Cawley (1956 and 1977) and Peter Happé (1975). Alfred W. Pollard's edition (1890) is particularly misleading, as a pageant from the N-Town cycle—formerly known as *Ludus Coventriae*—is wrongly identified as a Coventry play (see 1890: 44-48).

Editors King and Davidson, excellent specialists on the field of medieval studies, with ample didactic and theatrical experience and innumerable publications, have no doubt taken into account and relied upon the aforementioned edition by Craig, and like him, they have worked on the available sources and have produced a neat, reliable and very readable text—with bigger and more distinct print—which has retained its original spelling. Speech headings are clearly indicated too. Like

Craig, the new editors have included textual notes, though much more extensive and accurate ones; they have also added a long commentary on linguistic, cultural, historical, dramatic and biblical matters, which makes this new edition extremely enlightening, as it facilitates the understanding of such a difficult and complex text.

This book's most important contribution in the field of medieval studies is no doubt its introduction (81 pages), which covers not only detailed philological and critical aspects of the two plays, but also a history of medieval Coventry, its guilds and pageants and their involvement in the Corpus Christi processions. It outlines the social and literary context of the performances that gave rise to this cycle, and more specifically to these two plays, supporting every argument with well documented archival evidence. The editors provide precise and invaluable information about various aspects of the Coventry performances, such as the fact that professional actors were sometimes hired by the guilds (22, 31), the ban on the Marian plays in 1547 (40), the interpretation of the Messenger's affected French in the Herod episode (Shearmen and Taylors) as a satirical attack on courtly manners (19), a detailed description of the lost Assumption pageant, which is incidentally compared with the extant Spanish Elche mystery (43), and so on. At the same time, they track with precise documentation the existence of all the now lost plays through the civic records connected with the guilds that once produced them.

An important section of the book is taken up by a useful list of end-notes ("Commentary"; 217-85), arranged by line number, which either gloss or explain numerous words, lines and passages. In spite of its great value, it would have been desirable if the editors had indicated one way or another which of the items in the text are provided with an explanatory note.

Unlike Craig's book, the present edition provides a "Select Bibliography" (286-96) which lists some of the most relevant manuscripts of the dramatic texts and records of those two plays, and then a series of books and articles on the Coventry pageants and related subjects.

It also includes a highly valuable "Glossary" —much longer and detailed than the one provided by Craig— indicating the play and line in which each lexical item occurs. Nevertheless, it would have made the reader's task easier if the different lexical items had been printed in bold type, as there would have been a clearer distinction between each word and its gloss. At the same time, a wider gap between the different alphabetical sections would have been convenient.

Notwithstanding such minor flaws, this is an essential work that will appeal to all scholars and students of medieval English literature and, particularly, of medieval English and European drama, as it will no doubt become a compulsory item in the corpus of printed medieval dramatic texts.

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