

Katie Normington 2009: *Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 177 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0-7456-3604 (Paperback)

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Katie Normington's *Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship* tackles a wide range of dramatic and quasi-dramatic performances that span a period from approximately the appearance of the Winchester *Regularis Concordia* (965-975) to the founding of the first permanent theatre around 1567. The author follows the works of scholars such as Pamela King (2006) and eschews a genre-based approach to medieval drama, stating that her aim is to study "the conditions that surround events rather than classify dramas into specific genres" (ix). More precisely, her innovative contribution to the field is her concern with the role played both by the dramatic space and the audience's cultural background with respect to the production and reception of the dramatic event. Under the concept of *material spectatorship*, which comprises the spectator's social, cultural and economic background, along with the influence of the Catholic Church, the author examines the conditions of spectatorship, which "played a pivotal role in shaping the dramatic practices of early England" (4). Nevertheless, the complexities of making accurate statements about a medieval audience's reaction to a given dramatic event are recognized. In order to overcome this obstacle, Normington focuses specifically on the different medieval 'performative' spaces in England—churches, streets, village greens, private halls, inns—in which a potential audience could congregate.

In addition, the book has a clear (on occasion overemphasized) focus on gender, particularly the position of women within Early Modern English society. To this end, special attention is paid to the role of women both in the private and the public space. In contrast to her previous work, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (2004), in which Normington deals specifically with women's participation in and reception of such dramatic activities as cycle dramas, in her present work she follows P.J.P. Goldberg (2004), claiming that studies concerning women's issues must not be separated from the main body of a book as a distinct chapter on gender, but should rather form part of the core of the study itself. In this sense, each chapter in this book balances references to both masculine and feminine dramatic activities of various kinds.

As regards structure, the book's preliminary pages comprise a preface (viii-x), an acknowledgements page (xi) and a list of abbreviations (xii). An Introduction (1-17) precedes a total of six chapters (17-113), followed by a Conclusion (130-35) and Notes (135-61). The pages on which the notes are found in each chapter are always indicated. However, this format can be tedious at times for the reader, who has to leaf back and forth between the main text and the endnotes, especially since each chapter's notes begin again with number 1. In general, the notes are clear and helpful, albeit mostly referring to works cited or to references for further reading. The quite comprehensive bibliography (161-73) consists of three parts: the first devoted to primary sources (161-

2), the second to secondary sources (162-72) and a final section listing helpful websites (172-73). The book ends with an index (174-77) of proper nouns and key words.

In the Introduction (1-17), the author tackles the thorny categories of theatre, drama, religious service and ritual in the Middle Ages. As no distinction between the different types of dramatic entertainments existed, the author proposes to approach them through the concept of *performativity*. *Performative* is used in this book in terms of the performing arts and, in Normington's view, denotes two different concepts: on the one hand, it is any act that takes place within a clear context of performance (that is, when a stage is required); on the other, it can refer to "an event that is planned, executed, and witnessed but may belong to a system of cultural expression other than that which is recognized as theatrical" (2). In short, the author states that by *performance* she refers to any act that has been self-consciously prepared for deliberate spectatorship. She furthermore claims that the book will not centre upon the complexity or simplicity of a given event but, rather, on "how the performance practices that were utilized were received by the audience, and in turn both affected and effected by the natural landscape of Early England" (3). Normington proposes to analyze the audience's reaction by means of what she calls "the material remains" of Medieval England, which include architecture, literary works, illustrations, paintings as well as archival material (5).

Chapter 1, 'Drama of Enclosure: Convent Drama' (17-33), examines the 'performativity' present in monasteries and their contribution to the growth of medieval dramatic forms. Without the pressure to analyze the so-called liturgical drama as belonging to any modern category (i.e. labeled by modern scholars), the author approaches the *Visitatio Sepulchri* recorded in the *Regularis Concordia* as a "pre-planned impersonation" (20). From the standpoint of gender studies, the author pays special attention to the role of the medieval nunnery. Normington states—and proves by means of manuscript evidence—that, in many cases, events devised by nuns were not exclusive to the convent community. On the contrary, they interacted directly with their parish members by means of processions, the enactment of Biblical episodes, such as the traditional *Visitatio Sepulchri*, and the like. Among the important results of her research are the different instances of European records which demonstrate that the *Visitatio* was enacted by women (specifically, nuns). In England, the only records are those from Barking and St. Edith, Wilton, which show that the original text was modified by the abbess to offer entertainment for the "congregation of people", thus suggesting a plausible spectatorship or parish audience (20).¹ Another interesting contribution is the author's description of a complex body language and gestural code used by nuns at Syon Abbey in Middlesex, established in 1415. Records clearly indicate that this interest in body language had a clear spiritual intention. Normington quotes, for instance, the mid 15th century 'Additions to the rules' from Arundel MS No. 146 BM, which read that "outwarde bodily menyng is ofte knowen the inward disposicion of the sowle" (25).

In chapter 2, 'Drama of Inclusion: Church and Parish' (34-46), the author approaches the church as a 'complex space' subject to be separated into different zones.

¹ For this version of the *Visitatio*, refer to Karl Young (1933: 167).

The assumption is that the architecture of the church and its boundaries affected the liturgical events and performances that it housed. To carry out her analysis, Normington eschews a chronological approach, as well as the traditional twentieth century evolutionary approach, according to which the so-called liturgical drama gave rise to other more sophisticated dramatic forms. The latter view proposed that church drama became redundant at a certain stage, and that it eventually gave rise to the 'mystery plays' when it moved outdoors. Even though she is aware of the fact that many documents were destroyed during the Reformation, the author supports her point with historical testimonies, as well as the works of scholars such as Alexandra Johnston (1996), arguing that a considerable number of dramatic activities might have taken place in parishes. The purpose of many of these events may have been the raising of money to help maintain the church facilities. The exact way in which these activities were accomplished remains unknown, as references to them are scarce. However, what the author examines is "how spatial practices linked the churches and parishes of medieval England [and] developed codes of production and reception which affected the cultural matrix of the milieu" (35). This chapter also assesses how the parish, as the religious, geographical and social centre of a community, could also link different sorts of spaces, such as that between town and country. Normington illustrates this idea convincingly with examples of a series of processions from the town centre to the country and back, such as the Norwich St. George's Rides (41-42).

Chapter 3, 'Drama and the City: City Parades' (47-67), and Chapter 4, 'Drama in the City: Processional Drama and Hybridity' (68-93), are devoted to performative practices in the city. The author pays special attention to the urban space as a way to create civic identity by means of public performances such as processions and pageants. This was especially possible during the visits of public figures or royal entrances. Normington at this point raises the question of who was in charge of these events and what their real purpose was. She rejects the traditional view which argues that the merchant class, rather than the nobility, was in charge of dramatic production. According to Normington, these performances "provided an opportunity for an interaction between the place, its inhabitants, and the visitors" (51). However, she concludes that, while the citizens and lower ranks may have been involved in the arrangement and the technical display of a given dramatic event, the projected identity was that of the aristocracy. In order to shed some light upon this idea, she compares a funeral ceremony within the same noble family before and after the Reformation. Her study reveals that, while the pre-Reformation ceremony was unquestionably a public event, after the Reformation bereavement became a more private activity. As a result, she concludes, the aristocracy was able to manipulate the urban space even more effectively to its own benefit in order to achieve a desired public image (65).

The author also analyzes various forms of cycle plays and seems to agree with the fact that growing merchant classes sought the construction of their identity by means of this kind of cultural expression. Normington points out that the cycle plays probably sprang to life thanks to city elites' funds. An interesting point in which she coincides with scholars such as Happé (2004) is the twofold purpose these biblical plays seemed to fulfill: on the one hand, the city elites would use these performances as a means of social control; on the other, the plays allowed the Church and the trade guilds to have

the opportunity to project an image of themselves to the audience. An interesting contribution, although perhaps slightly overemphasized in her book, is her study of the active participation of (wealthy) women in the production of the 'Assumption pageant' at Chester, an example which, according to the author, demonstrates that women could indeed exercise some influence and power in city events (77).

The book includes a comprehensive discussion of plays from the Chester, York, Towneley and N-Town collections, and pays homage to scholars such as Alexandra Johnston for their lifelong work in the field of medieval drama. The main focus of Normington's approach to the plays is on hierarchy and labour in order to highlight the main goal of performances, which was none other than to provide social control and organization. When approaching the evolution and production of the cycle dramas, she follows the ideas of two scholars (R. B. Dobson and Kathleen Ashley), although a more personal slant would have been appreciated in this discussion. When judging the possible evolution of the plays from the Corpus Christi procession in cities like York, she supports what R.B. Dobson calls the *big bang hypothesis* (1997: 100), "in which the city elite are credited with establishing the plays as a method to control the commercial transactions of the city" (70). The reason for attributing these plays to the city elite, rather than trade guilds, is that there are not enough records to prove the existence of trade guilds in the city of York before 1349. However, it seems likely that by 1376 York had a Corpus Christi play, although guilds could not possibly have been responsible for the pageant production, as they were not yet established. If this theory is indeed correct, the pageants "must have been built upon a pre-existing text or commissioned by a playwright" (71). A less convincing point in the book is Normington's approach to the production of cycle dramas. The author agrees with scholar Kathleen Ashley in her approach to the production methods as "heteroglossic" (71). She comments that the production method should be understood not as the product of one authoritative body but as the result of the iterations of a number of them. In other words, Normington suggests that the plays had more than one producer and more than one social function, and that they elicited a wide range of responses and served multiple social needs (71).

The author speculates on the question of the acting styles in medieval times, and agrees with scholars such as Meg Twycross, Sarah Carpenter or Donna Smith Vinter, who describe the acting style as highly representational, to the extent that she refers to it as *Brechtian*. This is so because, in her opinion, it was most unlikely that an audience in medieval times would have been able to identify with the actors, as would be the case today. According to Normington, the reason for this was that there was a lack of consistency with regard to the enactment of characters, since actors would be replaced in each new pageant. In other words, a given spectator would not see a unique impersonation of God, Mary or Christ, but many. Again, she admits that it would be difficult to determine exactly how the plays were performed and, as tends to be the case with so many aspects of medieval drama, speculations seem to prevail over factual evidence in this part of her work.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this chapter is Normington's approach to the concept of *hybridity* with regard to the process of production and reception of the dramas she examines. With this term, borrowed from biology, Normington claims that the process of putting on a play was rather heterogeneous, a mixed style which the

author compares to 'bricolage'. As she puts it, "the 'bricolage' of the cycle dramas was formed through the hybrid voices of the city, church and guilds" (75). Therefore, pageants were attempts on the part of the city to keep its power, or of the Church to maintain authority and to teach the faithful. Finally, these religious performances revealed the concerns of the producers and actors in transmitting their interest and position to the audience.

The final two chapters (5 and 6) assess the transition towards the modern conception of theatre. In Chapter 5, 'Fixed-Place Drama: Place-and Scaffold' (94-112), Normington conceives 'place and scaffold staging' as a mere method of staging, although she clearly differentiates between the two: the place or *platea* would be understood as an open space, while scaffolds would act as *loci*, which would stand for specific locations. Once again, much of this information is based on the author's speculation, since it is not entirely clear exactly where the audience was placed. In her view, individuals watching this modality of 'fixed drama' were actually assigned more specific placements than in previous modalities, and her assumption is that the 'fixed' dramatic space is used in a more complicated manner and with more overtly dramatic intentions. Normington supports her point with a set of examples to help her reader envisage these dramatic spaces, namely *The Castle of Perseverance*, *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, the N-Town *Mary Play* and, finally, Cornish drama. For instance, *The Digby Mary Magdalene* play arranges its protagonists alone in the *platea* in front of the audience in order to stress Mary Magdalene's desolation. On the other hand, the open space allowed the characters to walk in different directions, which most likely stood for the journey of life, a recurrent metaphor in medieval drama. Normington's point here is that, little by little, performances turn into greater 'spectacles', as the addition of devices such as music or even lighting effects seem to suggest. These new additions reveal the level of sophistication the dramatic production was gradually acquiring.

In the final chapter, 'Indoor Drama: Private Entertainment' (113-34), the author is concerned with the movement from outdoor to indoor drama. From the standpoint of performativity, Normington covers a number of indoor dramatic entertainments that include itinerant players (minstrels or acrobats) who might have also performed outdoors, chivalric practices, masking and proper plays such as *Mankind* or Thomas Heywood's works. The distinction between 'indoor' and 'outdoor' performances is, according to the author, metaphorical "so that the sense of 'indoor' is created within settings which control and restrict their audiences by charging them or inviting them to the spectacle" (113). In other words, whether the performative space was a private household, a royal palace, an Inn of Court, a guildhall or the like, the audience was 'controlled'. Normington also focuses on the level of sophistication of the plays. In order to illustrate her point, she uses *Mankind* to exemplify the increasing focus on linguistic sophistication by means of wordplay and metatheatricality. In this latter case, Normington comments that the Vices, for example, would pass through the audience to collect money, while the organizers of the event might also request the participation of the audience in the singing of choruses.

Katie Normington's book is an enlightening introduction to the intriguing and often enigmatic field of medieval drama. From a didactic point of view, this work is clear and accurate, and there is internal cohesion from beginning to end. Nonetheless,

the chapters can be read independently, as they each focus on different aspects of medieval performances. The focus on performances instead of genres is a quite innovative perspective, as it allows for the analysis of a wide range of dramatic practices. The author consistently draws attention to the 'performative' dimension of the events she discusses with an emphasis on their production and the role of the audience. However, Normington's observations at times seem to be speculative and lack convincing factual evidence, as in the case of her discussion of the participation of women or the exact place where people gathered to watch the plays. Moreover, when she approaches the descriptions of acting spaces such as wagons, scaffolds or buildings, some sort of visual aid would have been appreciated. A timeline listing the most significant events related to medieval English drama might also have been of help to the reader. Nonetheless, despite these minor flaws, Katie Normington has produced an essential, well-structured, precise and lucid work, which will surely entice her reader to delve further into the fascinating world of pre-Renaissance drama.

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