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The Current State of Research on Late-Medieval Drama: 2007–2008. Survey, Bibliography, and Reviews

Edelgard E. DuBruck

This article is a regular feature of "Fifteenth-Century Studies." Our intent is to catalogue, survey, and assess scholarship on the staging and textual configuration of dramatic presentations during the late Middle Ages. Like all such dated material, this assessment remains incomplete. We shall therefore include 2008 again in the next listing. Our readers are encouraged to bring new items to our attention, including their own work. Monographs and collections selected for detailed review will appear in the third section of this article and will be marked by an asterisk in the pages below.

During the last decade, critics of medieval drama have demonstrated a propensity to move beyond emphasizing written texts and turned to the social and political circumstances of theatrical performances, and the skills of actors. This new attention is visible in a collection by Evelyn Birge Vitz,* N. F. Regalado, and M. Lawrence (*Performing Medieval Narrative*). Excellent also is the book by Philip Butterworth* (although restricted to England): *Magic on the Early English Stage*, which highlights the activities of *jongleurs*, their sleights of hand, skills, and deceptions. Another groundbreaking book is Julie Stone Peters's *The Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe*. Peters contributes here to the history of communication; she defines theater, the authors' involvement, and their position within society. The study remains weak on the history of actual performances. Lynette R. Muir* penned a companion volume to her 1995 *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe*, entitled *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and Their Legacy* (2007), but left matters of performance undiscussed.

One part of Timothy J. McGee's *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* is devoted to activities before 1700. Rich in improvisation were the Quack episodes in German and French Easter plays and, of course, in the farces. Two other works showing general research are Tracy C. Davis and T. Postlewait's *Theatricality* (the theater relates to politics, societies, cultures, and religions, and may be thought of as providing melodramatic aspects of the *real* world); and Erika Fischer-Lichte's *History of European Drama and Theatre* (trans. Jo Riley). Vol. 10 of *European Medieval Theater*, ed. Jelle Koopmans,* with rich offerings, has appeared, but is replete with editing and spelling errors.

Finally, we include here two works on the ancient stage: Rush Rehm's *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* (the modern stage, Rehm says, has lost the power of ancient tragedy; Greek theater was aggressively

public; human and divine forces are responsible for an individual's actions). Laurie O'Higgins wrote the enlightening *Women and Humor in Classical Greece*.

Six studies are devoted to English stages. Clifford Davidson proves that in spite of many difficulties, the York cycle has never ceased to attract spectators. In the fifteenth century, the city was in decline, had bad harvests, epidemics, guild resistance, and a low birthrate. Nevertheless, local art contributed to the themes of the passion story, and guilds still regarded the York plays as a means of self-identity. Another approach to York is chosen by Jefferey H. Taylor in a study of allegory on four levels of meaning in the York cycle of plays. Barbara I. Gusick penned an essay on Christ's Healing of the Lame Man in York's *Entry into Jerusalem*: "Interpretive Challenges for the Newly Healed."

The Digby *Mary Magdalene* Play, especially the protagonist's dream in a *locus amoenus*, is Joanne Findon's topic. Her essay is heavily indebted to Lawrence M. Clopper's *Drama, Play, and Game* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); she neglects, however, the continental influences of the Mary Magdalene story (Jean Michel), and her study suffers from duplications. Karl Tamburr* investigates the *Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England*, whereas Ruth Nisse examines the politics of interpretation in English drama of the fifteenth century: vernacular plays addressed social concerns; Wycliffite theology, female and male mysticism, Franciscan ideals, and anti-semitism are discussed on the stage, as well as in other genres of English medieval literature.

As for theater research on France, we have an excellent work by Jean Frédéric Chevalier* about theatrical activity in the world of Guillaume Coquillart (c.1450): his sense of humor; skill in showing debates; alluding to and criticizing society during his life. On passion mysteries, Véronique Dominguez, Élyse Dupras,* and Véronique Plesch* have contributed important monographs. Dominguez comments on the work of actors; Dupras highlights the role of devils on the stage; and Plesch explains the frescoes of Giovanni Canavesio and their rhetoric (an *Ars praedicandi* on the imminence of spiritual death for unbelievers) at Notre Dame des Fontaines in La Brigue. A new approach to *Maistre Pierre Pathelin* (the first French comedy), where unethical contents is usually a source of laughter, is given by Noah Guynn: the playwright, Guynn says, moralizes emphatically about justice and righteousness — at the end of time. Alan E. Knight* published vol. IV of his *Les Mystères de la Procession de Lille* (the New Testament).

Relatively few contributions were made to German and Dutch theater research. Guy Borgnet translated German Passion Plays into French. Edelgard E. DuBruck wrote on "Hans Sachs's *Tragedy of the Last Judgment* (1558)," a subject finding a ready audience, as the text combined all eschatological genres, whether played on stage or recited. At the time, priests spoke from their pulpits of a senescence of the world. Heidi Greco-Kaufmann chose to show peasants on the stage: comical, yet realistic, and often revolutionary

(Lucerne: the clodhoppers indeed followed the example of Wilhelm Tell, the legendary Swiss hero, and would kill tyrants). Finally, Elsa Strietman and P. Happé edited *Urban Theatre in the Low Countries, 1400–1625*.

Celestina topics were investigated by three scholars of the Spanish stage. Peter Cocozzella gave a profile of Fernando de Rojas's authorial persona as a writer both sensitive and learned. The "vale of tears" (thus circumscribed by Melibea's father, as the daughter fell from glory to hell) at the end of this tragi-comedy may be compared to the messages of Psalms 83/84. Whether by witchcraft or carnal temptation, Melibea is seduced and must die, Jaime Leños concludes. An interesting subject is approached by Denise K. Filios, who describes women (performed by men) who recited lyric poetry about sex and gender in Iberia. Some speakers were prostitutes or *serranas*. Finally, Claire Sponsler shows that medieval drama was "imported" in many forms into the New World, where they created Spanish identity and cultural agendas. Among the first theater here was ritual dance drama; mummeries; saints' plays; and American passion dramas. In conclusion, it is obvious that late-medieval stages, theatricality, and the art of performance are inexhaustible topics.

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- Butterworth, Philip. *Magic on the Early English Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. 295.

After a short introduction into the terminology of sleight of hand (dexterity), illusion, and magic on the medieval and early English stages, Butterworth considers all aspects of pretence designed to persuade witnesses that “the appearance of something is indeed the reality” (1) within the acting area. Missing here is at least an attempt to ponder why audiences would accept pretence and are attracted by magic (Richard Kieckhefer’s *Magic in the Middle Ages* [1989] should have been quoted to provide context — but the book is not even mentioned in Butterworth’s bibliography). Other facts might have been emphasized here as well, namely that juggling and tumbling may also have appeared on other European stages, and certainly already had during early medieval times or late latinity (according to Peter Dinzelbacher’s *Sachwörterbuch der Mediävistik* [1992]: 401–402).

These facets of the study of magic, although missing, do not diminish the overall interest of B.’s compendium. In chapter one, “Jugglers: the Creators of Magic,” the author illustrates staged trick phenomena and explains how these stratagems were brought about. A list of terms is given on page 2: tregetry, prestigation, legerdemaine, jugglery, feats of activity, and sleight of hand (and, of course, more terms are given in chapter nine). “Tricks involve knives, daggers, wounds, blood, hanging, snakes, and water effects” which appear in stage directions as well as in so-called eyewitness accounts (6).

Chapter two treats “Feats of Activity: Juggling, Tumbling, and Dancing on the Rope,” acrobatics which require specific skills. Juggling is mentioned