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Katie Normington. *Medieval English Drama.* Cambridge: Polity, 2009. x + 177 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7456-3603-0; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7456-3604-7.

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Katie Normington's *Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship* promises a student guide to medieval performance that is easy to read and wide-ranging. It offers a variety of critical and theoretical approaches and, at only 134 pages, is of a suitable length for undergraduate readers. Normington also has designed the text to work with the most popular anthologies of medieval drama, including those edited by John Coldewey, Peter Happé, A.C. Cawley, David Bevington, Greg Walker, and John Gassner. In a field with few introductory works in print, Normington's text stands out as challenging and inventive in its organization: it avoids traditional genres ("Mystery" and "Morality") as critical categories and it moves beyond consideration of text and religious context to the particularities of performance (especially in terms of physical space and viewers). Finally, it investigates gender in medieval drama, hoping to remedy the assumption of maleness in clerical and guild cultures. However, Normington's approach promises more than it delivers; her book suffers from some serious argumentative failures, and has not been properly edited.

There are few critical introductions to medieval English drama currently available, and even fewer suitable for an undergraduate audience. Several of the anthologies have introductions, but these are generally highly limited (as in Greg Walker's *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* [2000]) or part of an extremely expensive volume (David Bevington's *Mediæval Drama* [1975], which costs about $150). In terms of critical works, Richard K. Emmerson's *Approaches to Teaching Medieval Drama* (1990) is more than twenty years old, and is primarily for the teacher rather than the pupil; the only recent, affordable, and accessible work is the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (2008). The *Cambridge Companion* boasts some extraordinary essays, arranged by genre, each handled by a different (well-known) critic of medieval drama. However, much recent criticism has challenged the usefulness of the genre approach. Normington's "absence of focus on genre" (p. ix) opens a number of other interpretive routes, which reflect the variety of classifications currently in use. Her primary principle of organization is the *space* of performance (her chapters discuss performance in the convent, the parish, and the city, as well as the household and other indoor playing spaces). This does not entirely eliminate the older generic order: the "Mystery" plays are primarily represented in the "City" chapters, while the "Morality" plays are generally in the "Household/Indoor Theater" chapter. However, her method encourages students to consider and compare the variety of performances available in each place. For instance, there are two chapters on the city as a place of performance. The first deals almost exclusively with processions, a topic rarely broached in anthologies. Her detailed discussions of the development of processions over time in both Bristol and Canterbury allow a much fuller encounter with the civic cycle plays that follow in the next chapter. The movement away from genre is one of the great strengths of the book.

Normington's focus on space is part of her general interest in the visual, in "spectators" rather than "audience." This approach potentially has tremendous imaginative power. Rather than presenting medieval drama as literary texts, *Medieval English Drama* explicitly offers the written records of performance as starting points for dramatic action and reaction. This challenges readers to consider how texts *work*, and by providing extensive social context, Normington locates these performances in a larger political and cultural landscape. Her experience with productions of medieval drama keeps this "imaginative" approach from becoming too facile. Her 2007 book, *Modern Mysteries: Contemporary Productions of Medieval English Cycle Dramas*, carefully examines modern productions of medieval drama, including design, rehearsal and performance; space is a primary category. In *Modern Mysteries,* she contends, "The challenge of playing the mystery plays raises questions about how to engage with the spatial relationship between the stage and action, how to present non-human characters

and epic events, and how to discover a playing style that will communicate the texts to a modern audience."[1] *Medieval English Drama* successfully communicates the performances of the Middle Ages to a modern audience, though, like a modern performance, tends to be quite speculative. For most texts, it works well: her speculations about *Mankind* are well supported and coherently integrated into a reading of the play (pp. 119-125). However, readers often get the outline of a very particular kind of production, as in her description of the Cornish *Ordinalia* (pp. 110-112).

Throughout *Medieval English Drama*, Normington introduces major voices in medieval drama criticism, and students reading her text receive a fairly wide view of the field. Nevertheless, the book lacks a strong authorial voice; as with her previous work, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (2004), there is not an easily identifiable argument. In a book serving as an introduction for undergraduates, however, this lack can be a virtue: students get a sense of the history of criticism. While Hans Robert Jauss and Mikhail Bakhtin are theoretically privileged in her approach, Normington supplies critical arguments from most of the major critics of the last twenty years. Some are particularly appropriate for the classroom. For instance, she begins the fourth chapter, "Drama in the City: Processional Drama and Hybridity," with an anecdote about Alexandra Johnston's discovery of important records from the York Mercers' guild, which eventually led to the founding of REED, the Records of Early English Drama. This might allow a fairly easy introduction to the massive resource that is the REED project. It also models academic ethics: in the anecdote, Johnston recognizes the importance of her discovery, and when another scholar (Margaret Dorrell) also requests the records, she forgoes the temptation to "hide" them, and instead collaborates with Dorrell (p. 68). However, the lack of a critical center can be detrimental as well: the same chapter is plagued by a completely underdeveloped concept of "hybridity." This term, which involves profound connections to postcolonial theory, is stripped of its multiple valences and used as a simple synonym for "heterogenous" or "composite." Her statement that the cycle dramas "are formed by the hybridity of the church, civic, and artisanal voices" (p. 75), a statement which does not engage or even reference the use of that term over the last thirty years of literary criticism, is a major fault of this chapter. In the paragraph that follows, she essentially replaces hybridity with "bricolage"; her weak grasp of the term is quickly revealed by a look at her references. She cites only one text, a ten-year-old introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*.[2] She might have done better to look to Bakhtin, whose work she uses often; the same article she references uses several of his arguments that could have produced much clearer results more harmonious with the rest of her text, especially her movement away from genre. Her uninformed use of "hybridity" as the title of a chapter serves only to confuse students who know the term, and to devalue it among those who do not.

Normington's handling of "gender" might also have benefited from a more coherent theoretical perspective. She states in her introduction that *Medieval English Drama* will involve "a concentration on the representation of gender" (p. ix). She here draws upon her project in *Gender and Medieval Drama*, in which she attempted to "reassess the women of the Corpus Christi cycles" by "utilizing medieval social history."[3] In both that book and her *Medieval English Drama*, there is little discussion of the representation of masculinity, and rather than analyzing the dynamics of gender representation, Normington often only identifies representations and participation of women. Thus, she misses some profound opportunities in her discussion of the ways in which both the Chester *Noah* and Towneley *Second Shepherds Play* "heighten gender difference" (p. 85). On the other hand, because most anthologies are centered upon texts, and since anonymous texts are almost always assumed to have male authors, undergraduate students of medieval drama would generally have little discussion of women's roles in the production of drama, beyond perhaps a reference to Hrotsvitha. Normington remedies that, even in places one might not expect. Her opening chapter, "Drama of Enclosure: Convent Drama," starts with the *locus classicissimus* of medieval performance, the *Visitatio Sepulchri* (often called the "*Quem Quæritas* Trope"), from the late tenth century. While she uses this moment to discuss what constitutes "drama," especially in relationship to the ritual performance and liturgy, she "does not offer these performative practices as part of a progressive history" (p. 19). Instead, she looks across time, and relates the short text of the *Visitatio*, to which a student would have easy access, to the female performances in Barking Abbey, which rarely appear in anthologies. What follows is an engaging discussion about the possibilities of dramatic female performance, though much of it is admittedly quite speculative. Using rather than displacing the older master narrative of medieval drama, Normington suggests alternative histories, challenging the received knowledge that the *fons et origo* of medieval drama was the all-male cloister. She also introduces students to important English cultural centers like Syon Abbey, where men and women interacted in a performative religious

environment.

Medieval English Drama is written for use in the classroom, paired with one or more anthologies. Unlike the *Cambridge Companion*, Normington's book does not follow the generic and progressive order of most anthologies, though it does not completely disrupt it. However, if one has already been teaching a medieval drama course, the use of Normington's book will most likely require some serious rethinking of the syllabus. *The Cambridge Companion* has the great advantage of being modular: for instance, if one does not read Cornish drama, one can skip that chapter. Readers of *Medieval English Drama* cannot skip around as effectively. Normington discusses a number of performances that do not appear in anthologies, and leaves out *Everyman*, which is often part (if not the climax) of many medieval drama anthologies and classes. Her work in recentering English drama on spectator and space has the effect of removing focus from texts, and there is little textual analysis in her book. For instance, her section on the York "Last Judgment" considers the culture of the guild (the Mercers), potential aspects of production and costume, music, and spectatorship, but works little with the text itself. Her approach will not hand students a "reading" of the plays, but it will prepare students to read criticism. A student writing a research paper will be able to quote little from Normington's book, but will not find the work of Pamela King, Kathleen Ashley, Victor Scherb, Claire Sponsler, or Gail Gibson foreign, or be unfamiliar or intimidated by REED. She generally avoids academic jargon, but uses Middle English (untranslated) throughout the text.

However, there are several factors that recommend against its use with undergraduates. Normington's organizational method leads to diffuseness in both logic and style. Transitions are sometimes very awkward, and connections tenuous, and she also tends to shorten discussions of complex historical agency by overusing the passive voice. The main issue, which I hope will be corrected with the next printing, is the many serious errors: titles of plays are misspelled; dates are wrong, and there are sometimes problems telling whether an argument is Normington's or paraphrased from a critic. These problems are compounded by the high cost of the book. I would recommend that teachers of medieval drama read Normington's book, for it is full of excellent pedagogical ideas, but I can recommend it for use by undergraduates only with reservations.

Notes

[1]. Katie Normington, *Modern Mysteries: Contemporary Productions of Medieval English Cycle Dramas* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), 148-49.

[2]. Deborah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999): 239-53, 240.

[3]. Katie Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 20.

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