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Enacting the Bible in Medieval and Early Modern Drama

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Drawing on the theme of "The Bible in Medieval and Early Modern Drama" conference held at Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg in 2017, the volume discussed in this review presents a series of contributions concerned with the dramatic appropriation of the Bible in the Middle Ages and early modern era in England and on the continent. "The Bible" is understood in the volume neither in a broad sense as the universal Book of Books, nor in a restricted sense as referring to its concrete recension, such as the Vulgate or King James Bible. Instead of representing a "monolith", the Bible in this volume appears as a variable that, as Cathy Shrank states in her chapter on scriptural quotations in the early modern English morality, can differ in language (Latin, vernacular), modes of reception (read, performed) and pragmatics (Bible in the liturgy, Protestant Bible) over the time. Last but not least, the broad understanding of the scripture comprises also the late antique apocrypha and the significant influence they exerted on medieval and early modern religion in general and the Biblical drama in particular – as testified in the volume especially in Lawrence Besserman's examination of the figure of Noah's wife in the English mystery cycles.

Individual studies in the book reflect, for the most part, the very up-to-date tendencies in research of theatre history and drama as presented, for example, in a recent synthetic work, *A Cultural History of Theatre* (vol. I–VI, editors Christopher Balme and Tracy C. Davis, Bloomsbury, 2017), covering issues from Antiquity up to this day. While the present volume inevitably concentrates on the component of theatrical production that the authors of the *Cultural History* tend to deprioritize, i.e. the dramatic text, both publications nevertheless share a similar concern in shifting focus from a text- and aesthetic-oriented approach to the assessment of social, political and cultural contexts of dramatic (and theatrical) production. This re-evaluation and recontextualization of the medieval and early modern drama based on the scripture is applied consistently throughout the volume, sometimes to impressive and thought-provoking ends.

In his comprehensive study of Elizabethan Biblical drama, Paul W. White challenges some of the previously unquestioned commonplaces in scholarship that tended to prioritize the study of mystery cycles over the religious plays staged at schools, and theatre played in London over the much less documented theatrical events organized in the country that, in reality, far outnumbered the former. Similarly, Greg Walker, Silvia Bigliazzi,

and Monika Fludernik draw, in their respective chapters, attention to plays that have either found themselves on the fringe of scholarly attention for some reason, or certain important aspects of which have not yet been satisfactorily treated. Exploring the hypothetical connection between John Heywood's interlude *The Pardoner and the Friar* (printed 1533), which represents verbal and physical violence committed by two clerics, Catholic and Reformed, against each other, and a similar incident from the previous year that occurred in a parish church of All Hallows in London, Walker discloses the dramatic strategies adopted by the playwright to the effect of constantly disorienting the spectators as to with which of the two figures they should sympathize and whose case the playwright is actually backing. Walker demonstrates how this strategy was adopted in the play for religious and political reasons, taking into consideration the turbulent atmosphere prevailing in early Reformation Parliament about confessional issues. Bagliazzi, in her turn, reveals a political agenda behind a dramatic text on a rather isolated instance of a collective lament included in late sixteenth-century English Biblical drama. George Peele's *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe*, while grounded in the tradition of Senecan tragic lament and medieval Planctus Mariae, "radically resignifie[s]", Bagliazzi argues, this previous tradition of female mourning "to stress individual male agency in dialogue with divine transcendence" (69). Yet another type of political gesture is traced by Fludernik in early modern English biblical drama featuring martyrdom. Fludernik shows how, on the model of medieval hagiographic literature, plays by Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger parallel the "holy" suffering of the saints with the sacrifices necessary to be made for the protection of the Britons against the enemies abroad (Rome, that is).

Besides the emphasis on political, social and performative aspects of medieval and early modern Biblical drama, the editors, Eva von Contzen and Chanita Goodblatt, point out in the Introduction three nodal points that, in their perspective, align all the individual contributions in the volume. They are the multitemporal, transnational and performative/formal aspects of the plays under discussion. While the performative perspective seems to be adopted systematically throughout the volume, referring mainly to the sensitivity towards the employment of props and costumes and the actor–spectator communication in the performance, it is not always the case with the other two. The transnational aspect, carefully taken, for instance, by Pavel Drábek in his treatment of the early seventeenth-century Central European drama, and by M. A. Katritzky in an intriguing assessment of the visual sources attesting to the possible modes of performing the spice merchant episode in medieval and early modern religious drama, is suppressed at several instances to the detriment of the argumentation. This is the case, less importantly, with an otherwise extremely illuminating study of the role of the Fool in the late medieval and early modern dramatizations of the Book of Esther by Chanita Goodblatt. In her chapter, the depiction of a female-role reversal in popular literature is mentioned in relation to English and German culture, omitting any reference to similar tendencies, probably even more prominent, in the French farce of the time (239). More importantly, while the title of the volume

advertises it as comprising the whole of "medieval and early modern drama", a great part of the material discussed in the individual chapters is, in fact, of English origin only. With truly regionally comprehensive publications on the shelf, such as the *Performance and Theatricality in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (edited by Mark Cruse, Brepols, 2018), it would be perhaps to the benefit of the volume to indicate its insular inclination more openly.

Similar doubts arise in relation to the declared multitemporal perspective. With a timespan ranging from the twelfth to seventeenth century, the research presented in the book renders Biblical drama as an ideal representative of the concept of the *longue durée* as developed, in the first place, by Fernand Braudel as a tool for investigating cultural processes that overlap the canonical boundaries of historical eras and could, thus, escape scholarly attention. A paragon of such heterogenous phenomena is the complex of texts, performative practices and modes of transference named by a much contested term, *liturgical drama/theatre*. As M. A. Katritzky's chapter points out on account of the spice-merchant scene, the discussion of the theatrical and dramatic nature of medieval liturgical practice and the crucial question of how to know where to draw the line between the "liturgy" and "theatre" in medieval performative culture is wide-ranging, sometimes even labyrinthine (though the line of argument cultivated by O. B. Hardison, Richard McCall and Michael Norton seems to present a number of rather strong points; HARDISON 1965; McCALL 2007; NORTON 2017). These complications aside, Latin (later Latin-vernacular) drama performed from the tenth to as late as seventeenth century in some regions during, or at the close vicinity of, the medieval/Catholic liturgy is sometimes absent as a point of reference, which seems to cause some misapprehension and confusion. Elisabeth Dutton in her discussion of plays by Protestant playwrights, John Bale and Nicholas Grimald, thus presents as unique to them features that are symptomatic already of the liturgical drama (or whatever we call this type of ecclesiastic performance), e.g. the representation of the emptiness of Christ's tomb, hence of his resurrection, by his grave clothes left in the tomb, their presence emphasized either by words or stage action. According to Dutton, these clothes were considered simply a relic in the medieval performance of the *Visitatio sepulchri* without any apparent reference to the resurrection – an assertion impossible to justify under the current state of knowledge (see, for example, the publications cited above). (Surprisingly, Dutton disregards also Katritzky's illuminating argumentation about the replacement of thuribles by apothecary pots in the representation of the three-Marys scene by the late Middle Ages, coming consequently to unsustainable conclusions [168, cf. 89–90]). Similar demurs raise with the argumentation in the chapter about the concept of embodiment and joint attention in the performance of mystery cycles by Eva von Contzen. Besides offering a rather simplified understanding of the theatrical illusion (56 et passim) and regarding as peculiar the aspects of the performance of the cycles owing, in fact, to the nature of theatre as a medium (esp. 48–50), von Contzen seems to disregard in her argumentation the fact that in the heart of medieval ecclesiastical performativity lay the concept of the Real Presence (mentioned

elsewhere in the volume) that informed the gradual theatricalization of the liturgy in the medieval period, including the performance of religious drama and the development of realism and mimetism in the high-medieval affective devotional objects and practices, all of which in turn informed some of the features of the late medieval vernacular performances von Contzen describes (on p. 50 and later).

Despite these minor caveats, the volume brings together an impressive amount of highly relevant textual material, making it the object of careful analyses that not only shed light on dramatic texts written a long time ago, but occasionally also uncover unsettling analogies relating them with the present, such as when Walker describes the circumstances of the performance of *The Pardoner and the Friar* as "the uncer-

tain, post-truth world of the early Reformation, in which contradictory preachers and the claims of rival polemical texts left many individuals unclear about what was authentic belief and what was corrupt innovation or abuse" (132).

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