10-1-2012

Book Review of Margaret Rogerson, ed. The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City (York Medieval Press, 2011)

Kurt Schreyer
University of Missouri-St. Louis, schreyerk@umsl.edu

Margaret Rogerson, ed., *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City.* Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: York Medieval Press, 2011. Pp. 266. $90. ISBN: 9781903153352. doi:10.1017/S0038713412003685

"Medieval Corpus Christi theater," Sarah Beckwith observed in *Signifying God* (2001), "understood scripture as intrinsically intertwined with the communities who performed it" (187). With its inclusion of the voices of local participants and international academics, this fine collection of essays edited by Margaret Rogerson understands this fundamental link even as it daringly imagines a community that stretches from medieval York to modern-day Siena, Toronto, Tel Aviv, and Sydney. I shall address those far-flung locations momentarily. While it is true that the contributions of academics outnumber those of guilds and civic authorities, the volume is true to its goal of broadening the scope of authoritative voices as it records the productive exchanges between scholars and local participants in the 2007 "Performing the Mystery Plays" conference in York. The reader is the decided beneficiary of these conversations. From traditional manuscript study and performance approaches to cognitive theory and organizational psychology, this volume brings a striking array of methodologies to bear on the various collaborative communities, present and past, under consideration.

Anchoring the collection is an essay by Richard Beadle proposing, based on material textual considerations, that the composition of the *Ordinacio pro Ludi Corporis Christi* of April 1476 prompted the compilation of the Register of the York Corpus Christi Play (London, British Library Additional MS 35290). His narrative of the duke of Gloucester's intrigues in the city's administration and, above all, his suggestion that the York cycle, as it survives in MS 35290, bears the stamp of Ricardian enterprise, are seductive if somewhat circumstantial and will no doubt provoke lively debate.

Sheila Christie's essay, like Robert Barrett's work on Chester, is sensitive to topographical considerations as it asserts that the participation of the effectively nonresident Masons was coordinated by lodge (not guild) organizations from within the religious liberties. Her localized approach thus entails social rather than jurisdictional categories of civic identity, a claim in productive tension with Pamela King's subsequent study of Siena's *contrade*.

Mike Tyler's contribution notes that women were active members of the Fishers craft, but rather than offering a gender-based reading of Uxor Noah alone, he argues that the behavior and dynamics of the extended, multi-generational family group in *The Flood* may be better grasped through the work of organizational psychologist Edgar Schein. With its careful close reading, I find Tyler's essay a gem, a provocative piece worth serious consideration.

Some scholars may find Jill Stevenson's application of cognitive theory terminology to early drama inapt, yet I would argue that it allows her to write eloquently not only about ideation and understanding but also (and rather paradoxically) somatic phenomena. Carefully attuned to stage properties, costumes, and spectacle, Stevenson's notion of "embodied medievalism" explores how various devices in the York cycle are ripe with devotional meanings and medievalisms that impinge upon the bodies of spectators past and present. This insight supports the volume's efforts to marry academic study with practical experience. Her essay likewise meshes with the work of several other contributors, notably Alexandra Johnston's suggestion that modern productions create communities with the past from the historic continuum of technology even as they celebrate present shared experiences, skill, and ingenuity.

Chapters 5 through 8 are edited transcripts of 2007 conference presentations by local participants and authorities on the practicalities of modern productions. Detailing the

logistical challenges of organizing the pageants and recalling the travails of wagon productions—including hilarious anecdotes involving trees, potholes, and barn owls—these contributions breathe life into the study of the Records of Early English Drama. Like the pageants themselves, they both testify to and celebrate the incredible labor invested in the York mystery plays. Paul Toy's reflections will interest music scholars as well.

Following a casual preliminary reading of the table of contents, I was doubtful that contributions incorporating recent productions in Tel Aviv and Sydney, not to mention a Sienese horse race, would sufficiently address the titular theme of "Performance in the City"—meaning, presumably, York itself. And, in fact, by the time I had completed Johnston's essay there seemed, as has so often been the case with her scholarship, to be nothing left to say about the communities of the York plays. Yet subsequent contributions proved not to misdirect but to focus the collection's study of York's rich theater history.

The essays by Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, King, and Rogerson are not only engrossing and informative, but are themselves conscientious in their efforts to understand how medieval York actors and audiences may have experienced the production and performance of the plays. King, for instance, proposes the cognate living tradition of Siena's *Palio* with careful circumspection in order to, among other things, explore the tension between collaboration and competition for both participants and audiences in a recurring ceremony. Aronson-Lehavi's work with a student production at Tel Aviv University has sparked her insight that the surviving text of the *Crucifixion* reflects the accumulated stage experience of medieval guildsmen with the difficult and dangerous task of raising the cross. Bringing to bear her study of a dramatized version of the Stations of the Cross at the 2008 Catholic World Youth Day in Sydney, Rogerson argues that the affective piety of medieval actors conditioned their approach to their respective roles, whether divine, human, or demonic, and that this method of dramatic preparation, contrary to V.A. Kolve's views, bears significant resemblance to Stanislavskian technique.

The volume is richly illustrated with production photos of various pageants, a map of the York pageant route and jurisdictions, and a plan of the *Crucifixion* wagon for the 2006 performance. A brief glossary of Middle English words included at the end of the volume will be helpful to novice readers. This eclectic collection of essays has something to offer anyone—academic, theater professional, or local participant—with an interest in early English drama, and though not every theater historian may wish to own a copy, they would do well to consult it before teaching, and certainly before performing, any of the York pageants.

Kurt Schreyer, University of Missouri, St. Louis

Jessica Rosenfeld, *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love after Aristotle*. (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 85.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. viii, 248. £55. ISBN: 9781107000117. doi:10.1017/S0038713412003697

Jessica Rosenfeld's compact book journeys through a wide range of philosophical and literary material. "Enjoyment" in the title refers not to its modern meaning but to medieval *fruitio* and related ideas of happiness and pleasure. "After Aristotle" means after the introduction of Robert Grosseteste's complete Latin translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Rosenfeld's thesis is that Book 10 of *Nicomachean Ethics,* which presents philosophical contemplation as the highest human happiness, challenged the Christian view that only heavenly blessedness provides true enjoyment and thus triggered a variety of questions and concerns that animated subsequent philosophical and literary work, including stories of romantic love, a subject *Nicomachean Ethics* says very little about.