REVIEW ESSAY

MUMMINGS, DUMBSHOWS, VICES, AND CRAFTS: NEW WORK IN EARLY ENGLISH DRAMA

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Schreyer, Kurt A. 2014. *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft: Remnants of the Mysteries on the London Stage*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. $49.95 hc. 280 pp.

Sponsler, Claire. 2014. *The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. $65.00 hc. 320 pp.

Steenbrugge, Charlotte. 2014. *Staging Vice: A Study of Dramatic Traditions in Medieval and Sixteenth-Century England and the Low Countries*. Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi. $75.00 sc. 264 pp.

Many studies of early English drama, including Gail McMurray Gibson's *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (1989), Sarah Beckwith's *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (2001), and Theresa Coletti's *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (2004), have established illuminating connections between drama and religion in late medieval

COLLEGE LITERATURE: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL LITERARY STUDIES 44.2 Spring 2017
Print ISSN 0093-3139 E-ISSN 1542-4286
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culture. Such connections have also been explored in a recent wave of early modern drama scholarship committed to rethinking categorical divisions like "medieval" and "early modern." John Parker's *The Aesthetics of Antichrist* (2007), Beckwith's *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (2011), and Heather Hirschfeld's *The End of Satisfaction: Drama and Repentance in the Age of Shakespeare* (2014) all situate religious drama written and performed from the late Middle Ages through the sixteenth century in dialogue with the post-Reformation dramas of Marlowe, Shakespeare and their contemporaries. These revisionist approaches to periodization encourage a fresh exploration of historical, literary, religious, and political questions raised across the medieval/early modern divide.

This review essay examines three recent studies of early English drama that participate in these conversations and also take them in new directions: Claire Sponsler's *The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater* (2014); Charlotte Steenbrugge's *Staging Vice: A Study of Dramatic Traditions in Medieval and Sixteenth-Century England and the Low Countries* (2014); and Kurt A. Schreyer's *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft: Remnants of the Mysteries on the London Stage* (2014). This body of work reveals renewed interest in working across generic and geographic boundaries, unsettling conventional definitions of dramatic performance, and exploring connections between different kinds of drama written in different historical periods. By thinking about painted verses, tapestries, and edible confections as dramatic entertainment, by suggesting points of comparison and contrast between English and Dutch Vice characters, and by examining how material artifacts from the mystery plays are transformed on the post-Reformation stage, these studies widen the canon of early drama at the same time that they open familiar texts to new scrutiny. Moreover, in refocusing historical, literary, and social perspectives on English drama, they rethink critical concepts that have been grounded in totalizing, often oversimplified grand narratives.

In *The Queen's Dumbshows*, Claire Sponsler calls into question a widely accepted history of medieval English literature—a history that "enshrines a written (in verse) canon fashioned in the fifteenth century around the works of a group of (male) London writers who followed in Chaucer's footsteps" (1)—by presenting a subtle and trenchantly researched account of the intersections between written script, live performance, and manuscript history in the works of John Lydgate. Sponsler's important book commands a wide readership that includes not only scholars of Lydgate and fifteenth-century

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literature, but also those who work on English drama in all forms and periods. Sponsler considers how texts that do not look like dramatic performances indeed function as such, often with significant literary, political, and religious consequences. This book also invites us to rethink commonly held assumptions about drama, performance, and entertainment. "Drama" does not require actors on a stage, Sponsler suggests, but rather manifests "the interdependence of poetry and performance, of reading and spectating, of textuality and orality, and of permanence and ephemerality" (15). By reassessing the relation of script to performance, of archive to repertoire, and of manuscript history to theater history, Sponsler makes the case that "the generic definition of a play was in flux throughout the premodern period" (30).

Writing with an energetic prose style that captures the local and global details of an impressive array of archival research, Sponsler surveys several of Lydgate's "dramatic entertainments" (7). These include mummings, like the *Mumming for the Mercers* and *A Mumming of the Seven Philosophers*, which are the focus of chapters two and eight, respectively; as well as tapestries, tableaux, city spectacles, and murals, which "shared structural, affective, and aesthetic features with drama" (69), as Sponsler argues in chapter three. These shared features are illustrated by Lydgate's *Daunce of Poulys*, a dance of death painted in a church cemetery in Paris, as well as in the verses from his *Testament*, which were painted in the chantry chapel in the Church of the Holy Trinity in East Anglia. One of these verses refers to "shrift, hosyl, repentance"—the sacraments of Eucharist and penance that, along with unction, were administered at the time of death—and recurs throughout the poem. As presented visually on the chantry ceiling, this reminder of the final last rites—the same rites, we should note, that are denied to Old Hamlet and mentioned specifically by his Ghost in Shakespeare's tragedy—"engage[s] the viewer in the act of visualized and performed penance" (81).

Chapter four continues this religious focus in its astute reading of Lydgate's *Procession of Corpus Christi*, which Sponsler notes is the only known poetic description of a Eucharistic procession in London. She reads the *Procession* not as a dramatic script for liturgical performance but as an extended textual glossing—a veritable history of theological controversy that unfolds in poetic stanzas, each of which draws on Biblical and patristic writings on the sacrament. Sponsler then connects the mixed generic form of Lydgate's *Procession* to its sacramental content: "Lydgate plays at the borderlands

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of genres and forms, drawing together performed and written representation in a way that is especially apt for a text focused on the eucharist, which bears a complex material and symbolic status of its own that was the basis of theological disputes over transubstantiation in the later medieval period" (103). By conjoining spectacle and hermeneutics, Lydgate transforms a liturgical event into an enduring textual history of theological controversy with which readers can continually engage.

Chapters five, six, and seven focus on related aspects of political ceremony associated with the reign of Henry VI. Chapter five looks at Lydgate's *Triumphal Entry*, which takes as its subject Henry VI's royal entry and reveals performance and textual inscription to be mutually constitutive. The poem, writes Sponsler, "was commissioned not just to provide a lasting record of the pageantry . . . but, more important, to transcribe theatrical spectacle into vernacular poetry" (138). Chapter six turns from the royal entry to Henry VI's coronation banquet, which featured decorative confections known as "subtleties," or foodstuffs made from sugar or marzipan, on which three ballads written by Lydgate were inscribed. Sponsler shows not only how Lydgate's poetry intersects with culinary entertainment but also how food itself enters the shared domain of textual creation and dramatic performance. "Raising foodstuff to the level of showpiece," Sponsler argues, "subtleties deceive us into taking sugar and dough for miniature pageants, converting the fleeting materiality of pastries into the enduring symbolism of art" (154). In chapter seven, Sponsler turns her focus from Henry VI to his mother, Queen Catherine of Valois, and focuses on the role of women in medieval performance by surveying Lydgate's *The Disguising at Hertford*, *Mumming at Eltham,* and *Mumming at Windsor.* These are complex political performances that stress the importance of Queen Catherine to Henry VI's reign at the same time that they suggest the limits of her power. "Within the space of the royal household," Sponsler writes, "Lydgate's dumbshows for the queen offer glimpses of the manipulation of cultural symbols and of the struggle to come to terms with Catherine's anomalous position" (189). Here, as elsewhere in the book, Sponsler does not attempt to resolve the ambiguities or paradoxes raised by her study but instead sees them as part of the performances that are themselves politically and aesthetically complex.

In drawing attention to "poems that were visually displayed outside of the codex," (67), *The Queen's Dumbshows* raises important new questions about Lydgate's prolific dramatic compositions at the

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same time that it shows how the blending of generic categories frustrates commonly held oppositions (then and now) between literature and theater. This book also testifies to the centrality of manuscript history to medieval writing and performance, as evidenced both by scribes and copyists like John Shirley, who selected and compiled Lydgate's performance pieces (as described in chapter one), and antiquarian collectors who retained and preserved manuscripts over time (discussed in chapter eight). In the final assessment, *The Queen's Dumbshows* should make us more curious about what we categorize as "performance" and more astute in how we address the conjunction of the poetic and dramatic in constructing a narrative of medieval English literary history.

If Sponsler's study challenges the opposition of "literature" to "theater" in Lydgate's dramatic entertainments, Charlotte Steenbrugge's *Staging Vice* takes a more local focus—a descriptive analysis of the Vice character in early drama—but situates it in a more global context: a comparative study of the English Vice and the Dutch *sinneken* in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century drama. Several succinct chapters survey the function of the Vice and *sinneken* (chapters one and two), the development of these characters in the context of theatrical institutions and dramatic conventions (chapter three), their relation to meta-theatricality (chapter four), and their involvement in religious reformation (chapter five). Each chapter compares and contrasts the Vice and *sinneken* and contextualizes these relations within a generous variety of examples from English and Dutch drama. The dramas surveyed include John Bale's *Three Laws* and *King Johan*, John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*, Ulpian Fulwell's *Like Will to Like*, and William Wager's *Enough is as Good as a Feast* from the English corpus, and Jan Smeeken's *Play of the Holy Sacrament of Nyeuwervaert* (a Eucharistic miracle play), *Antichristspel* (an Antichrist play), *Appelboom* ("The Play of the Apple Tree"), and *Pyramus ende Thisbe*, all from the Dutch. Steenbrugge keeps this vast amount of dramatic evidence organized by providing helpful summative paragraphs at the end of subsections and entire chapters.

I want to highlight three cardinal points from Steenbrugge's comparative study that will be most useful to the reader of *College Literature*. First, both the English and Dutch dramas represent iniquity in the form of "negative conceptual characters" (27) that embody temptation, greed, and ill will. But this representation is paradoxical. "The theatricality of the Vice and *sinnekens,*" argues Steenbrugge,

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"has a dual effect in that it showcases as well as undermines the allure of sin" (145). These immoral characters, it turns out, show that vice is dramatically enchanting in plays whose moral instruction is directed to the contrary. Second, the dramatic history of the "Vice" is complex and its development takes different forms in English and Dutch contexts. In the English tradition, the term "Vice" was used long before the dramatic character emerged, whereas the Low Countries witnessed a converse movement: the *sinneken* existed as a dramatic type prior to use of the identifying term. Steenbrugge concludes that such a difference may be explained by conditions of print culture. Because the Dutch plays were not printed for a wide readership as were the English plays, identifying the character in the dramatic script may not have been necessary.

The third major point of *Staging Vice* concerns the crucial institutional differences that shape English and Dutch vice characters—a point that shapes one of the book's more invigorating discussions. The Dutch *sinneken* evolved within aesthetic and political conditions of performance markedly different from those that characterized the development of the English Vice. In the Low Countries, the dramas evolved under the auspices of middle-class rhetoricians—jurists, teachers, merchants, doctors, and the like—who organized intellectual competitions that included serious and comic dramatic interludes. These competitions, Steenbrugge explains, centered on broad questions about moral and civic responsibility and were intended to showcase both individual talent and collective civic pride. The English counterparts, by contrast, were performed by professional actors. These institutional differences, Steenbrugge concludes, render the English Vice "more outspoken" and the Dutch *sinneken* "more moderate" (22) in their theatrical performances. This qualitative comparison resurfaces in each chapter. It seems that whatever the topic at hand—personification, metatheatricality, rhetoric, or politics—the English Vice is almost always more verbally robust, theatrically vivid, and politically aggressive than the Dutch *sinneken*.

Though wide-ranging and ambitious, *Staging Vice* is more descriptive than argumentative. Moreover, the book does not develop fully a theoretical, literary, and historical rationale for bringing English and Dutch drama together in a single study. Steenbrugge herself claims that the Vice and *sinneken* "are the products of their own peculiar dramatic traditions and [are] in no way influenced by one

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another" (25). One is left to wonder, then, about the critical consequences of an extensive comparison and contrast between these two dramatic traditions and their respective Vice characters. Even at the level of individual chapters, the delineation of Vice/*sinneken* is illuminating but does not pursue an overall argument. With that said, I want to stress that the book still brings to our attention several understudied plays (not only in the Dutch tradition but in the English corpus as well) and provides a more nuanced descriptive analysis of a key dramatic character than we would otherwise have. *Staging Vice* will thus provide a welcome reference for those who teach these fascinating, but much underrepresented, dramas at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

Whereas Steenbrugge discusses similar kinds of drama written in different geographical and cultural contexts, Kurt Schreyer, in *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft*, examines dramas written in the same place—England—but at different moments across the medieval/early modern divide. In a searching, persuasive, and often refreshing study, Schreyer argues that medieval mystery plays are vitally influential to the plays of Shakespeare, specifically *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet,* and *Macbeth*. The book's chapters are well researched and solidly argued, and they achieve balance between historical context and close textual analysis of both the mystery plays and Shakespearean drama.

Over the course of the book, Schreyer boldly critiques models of periodization and secularization that degrade the mystery plays as aesthetically inferior to the early modern commercial theater. He argues that "it was nearly impossible for an early modern author not to be influenced (whether positively or negatively) by medieval objects" (19). He unites the mystery plays and Shakespearean drama principally by showing how material artifacts from the earlier dramatic tradition resurface with a difference in London's commercial playhouses. In chapters three, four, and five Schreyer explains how Shakespeare reimagines three props: the ass's head; the stage cosmography of heaven, hell, and purgatory; and the sound of knocking at the Last Judgment—in *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet,* and *Macbeth*, respectively.

Before turning to the plays, however, the book opens with two chapters on material objects and cultural memory. Chapter one looks to exemplarity, palimpsest, and anachronism as three related ways to think about the transformation of objects as they are represented over time. Chapter two provides Shakespeareans with a

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much-needed survey of the Chester Cycle's own complex performance and manuscript histories, both of which span the Reformation divide. Many of the biblical mystery plays, we come to realize, have significant—and quite interesting—early modern afterlives; they are not separate from, but part of, the culture of post-Reformation England. Drawing on the work of Lawrence Clopper, Richard K. Emmerson, and Theresa Coletti, Schreyer discusses the development of the Chester Cycle from a shorter passion play performed in the fifteenth century to its first dramatization as a cohesive "cycle" after 1521. He then reads the Late Banns (written ca. 1575) as a document that reconfigures the mystery play as an artifact of Chester's civic history. The Banns "argue that the mystery plays are worthy of performance in front of post-Reformation audiences because they are part of Chester's unique historical past" (54). Schreyer shows that by separating the mystery plays from the time of their performance and identifying their religious content as part of an older history, the Banns ensure the cycle's survival in post-Reformation England.

Schreyer's emphasis on the dynamic relation between past and present organizes his three main chapters on Shakespeare, which together testify to the "present vitality" of the mystery plays "even in the face of the crisis of Reformation iconoclasm and antitheatricality" (69). Chapter three, on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, shows how the ass's head—an object that initially features as a talking ass in Chester's *Moses and the Law* play and then comes to be associated with anti-Catholic sentiment and liturgical parody—functions as "a carryover from sixteenth-century drama, ritual, and craft yet also a means of mocking old-fashioned artisanal performance" (102). In chapter four, on *Hamlet,* Schreyer explains how Shakespeare recycles the sights and sounds of purgatory as represented in *Last Judgment* plays—namely the under stage space that was part of the tripartite cosmography used in medieval drama. In producing "a Senecan ghost from a medieval purgatory," Shakespeare "intermingles medieval and classical conventions in an already polychronic English dramatic tradition" (133) at the same time that he reimagines the conventions of Senecan revenge tragedy. Finally, in chapter five Schreyer turns to an auditory rather than a tactile remnant: the knocking at the Porter's gate in *Macbeth*, which recalls the soundscape of the *Harrowing of Hell* plays. As a dramatist who "could recycle the stage properties, costumes, and sound effects of the mystery play pageant wagons and refashion them to suit his purposes" (161), Shakespeare employs the

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knocking in the context of Jacobean politics in order to "provoke and unprovoke the king's fantasy of godly rule" (158).

In drawing attention to how these props, soundscapes, costumes, and scenic elements from the mystery plays resurface on the Shakespearean stage, nowhere does Schreyer suggest that they shape distinctly religious readings of Shakespeare's plays. Instead, this book moves us beyond questions of Shakespeare's own religious beliefs and challenges us to question how his plays draw on the mystery plays as part of their own theatrical labor and craft. To bring religious discourses to bear on Bottom's dream, Hamlet's revenge, or the knocking at the Porter's gate is not to convert Shakespeare's plays into religious allegories but instead to further appreciate the art of *imitatio*—the assimilation, transformation, and reinvention of texts and traditions—for which Shakespeare and his contemporaries are known. Schreyer's imaginative reappraisal of Shakespeare's engagement with religious drama also reminds us that the compulsion to keep religious discourses at a comfortable remove from Shakespeare studies—even in spite of a robust turn to religion over the past two decades—risks subsuming the dominantly religious culture in which Shakespeare wrote to the attitudes and biases of our own secular age.

Readers of *College Literature* will find in these three studies diverse, engaging, and original approaches to early English drama. Once we dismantle prevailing boundaries—between written script and embodied performance, as Claire Sponsler suggests in *The Queen's Dumbshows*; between English and Dutch representations of iniquity, as Charlotte Steenbrugge explores in *Staging Vice*; or between periodic categories like "medieval" and "early modern," as Kurt Schreyer demonstrates in *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft*—early English drama studies will benefit from sustained cross-cultural and trans-historical dialogue. All three authors, moreover, present us with many texts that deserve renewed scholarly attention. When such texts are more readily engaged in conversation, students and scholars will further redefine their assumptions about the performance traditions, historical patterns, and theatrical institutions that shape English drama from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century.

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