Book Reviews

Sarah Beckwith. *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Pp xviii, 294.

Sarah Beckwith has presented us with an elegantly argued book that navigates the labyrinth of the original context of the York Corpus Christi Plays to discover an underlying sacramentality. This is a learned exposition that makes us ponder ways in which we remember a past that we have never experienced. Its main argument is for the pervasiveness of sacramental ritual in the social construct of medieval York. Even at its most complex, this argument is articulated in such an easy, conversational manner that the appreciation of its meticulous detail and accompanying discursive footnotes is by no means a chore. Its broad theoretical base and its adept inter-disciplinarity are an engaging challenge to the reader.

Four of the eight chapters have already appeared elsewhere and may well be familiar to those working in the field of early drama studies. In this volume they have been fashioned into a seamless whole, augmented with new material. There is an extensive discussion of the Passion sequence in which Beckwith argues that the York Corpus Christi Plays 'constitute a complex kind of para-liturgy'(135). The liturgical associations of the York plays and others that belong to this intriguing genre of religious theatre have been remarked by others, but Beckwith has presented us with a clearer vision of the actor = priest metaphor than previous commentators through her consistent cross referencing of the performance of the plays with the performance of the eucharist.

Beckwith also invites us to revisit the question of the suppression of religious theatre in England along with its many uncertainties and contradictions. Yet she does more than present us with additional insights into a site that has been visited before; she again deftly turns her discussion of the suppression into her discussion of the sacramentality.

The work is framed with comments on modern 'revivals' of medieval theatre. It opens with some reflections on the 'revival' theatre peculiar to the city of York itself. Here and in the final 'Revival' section Beckwith speaks of the 'challenges and difficulties of revival' and affirms a truism that applies equally to adaptations/replayings of the theatre of any former age, that 'our

recovery of these plays will always transform what we find, each finding will be a refounding' (190).

The final chapter is perhaps the one I enjoyed most, for the simple reason that it points the way for future discussions of the revival – or 'refounding' – of medieval theatre in modern texts of various kinds. Here she considers Barry Unsworth's novel *Morality Play* (1995) and the Denys Arcand film *Jesus of Montreal* (1989). Beckwith has chosen well, since both the novel and the film demonstrate the actor = priest metaphor and form persuasive parallels with the York ritual for which she is arguing. These are texts that teachers of medieval theatre (and medieval crime fiction) will have used in the classroom and it is high time that they took a more formal role in the academic discourse. Beckwith's attention to them will open the way for future dialogue.

Inevitably the book has left room for some corrections. For example, Beckwith claims that in York the Crucifixion was not included in the inaugural revival production in 1951 (59). This was certainly not the impression that was given to the public at the time. The reviewer for the *Manchester Guardian* commented 'the actual raising of Jesus to the Cross (was) wisely hidden by the grouped banners of the soldiers' (5 June 1951), but the audience nonetheless heard the sound of the hammers and some coarse dialogue from the soldiers and were horrified by 'the tremendous sudden jeer' at the 'sight of Jesus on the cross' (*The Times*, 5 June 1951). To this audience, the Crucifixion was a dramatic highpoint of the play and commentators waxed lyrical as 'a blackbird sang triumphantly through the Crucifixion' (*Punch*, 27 June 1951). Beckwith herself has encouraged greater scrutiny of the local revival history with her comment that the 'integrity' of the 'signs of Corpus Christi in contemporary York' awaits judgment based on more thorough analysis than she has been able to undertake here (19).

Her investigation of the recent Bill Bryden (National Theatre) and Katie Mitchell (Royal Shakespeare Company) productions of *The Mysteries* also marks out an area for further investigation. New 'Mysteries' continue to make an impact on audiences around the world, with the South African Broomhill Opera's adaptation of the medieval plays from Chester, *Yiimimangaliso – The Mysteries*, an excellent example. This production was first developed as a collective (community) effort by the cast for the annual arts festival on the Spier Estate outside Cape Town in the year 2000. In 2001 it amazed audiences at Wilton's Music Hall; in February 2002 it was part of the Perth Festival; and it returned to fill Wilton's Music Hall in London again in spring 2002 and autumn 2003.

Beckwith's concerted focus in her argument has some drawbacks. Her central section argues strongly for the sacramentality of the Passion sequence, but while the Passion accounts 'for half of the cycle' (23), there is another half without which this play is incomplete. This other half will undoubtedly come in for closer scrutiny. Here it will be useful to look back to an earlier argument for sacramentality in the Towneley Plays by Lauren Lepow, *Enacting the Sacrament: Counter-Lollardy in the Towneley Cycle* (Rutherford, NJ, 1990). Lepow propounds a thesis that intersects with Beckwith's at numerous points and gives a broader coverage of the Creation to Last Judgment story. She argues, for example, that the 'priest … is the hero of the *Mactacio Abel*' and that 'priest figures like Abel contribute to the drama's counter-Lollard force' (63). In the Old Testament sequence as a whole, Lepow concludes that the 'frequent evocation of the audience's liturgical experience points ahead to the contemporary priest's centrality and the Word's sacramental fulfillment' (79). It will now be a matter of interest to see if a similar broadening of Beckwith's central thesis extends into the Old Testament sequence of the York text. *Signifying God* is as important for its invitation to further discussion as it is for its insights and should prove to be a milestone in the scholarly debates in the fields of early theatrical and cultural studies.

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David M. Bergeron. *Practicing Renaissance Scholarship: Plays and Pageants, Patrons and Politics*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000. Pp x, 221.

In this wide-ranging collection of essays, Bergeron addresses a number of loosely-related topics – from Shakespeare to royal entries to women patrons of drama – collected under the four broad rubrics of his subtitle: plays and pageants, patrons and politics. These diverse essays are intended to exemplify an approach to Renaissance scholarship that Bergeron calls 'interrogative metonymy'. In response to Gerald Graff's call for contextualization and interdisciplinary work, Bergeron worries that 'such ambitious theories and interdisciplinary generalizations risk taking the place of the hard, disciplined work that scholars must do' (1). He praises Wayne Booth's attitude toward scholarship as a process of association and affiliation with scholars past and present, which starkly contrasts with what Bergeron perceives as Graff's market-driven notion of scholarship. Such affiliations with scholarly past and present, or 'metonymy of scholarship' (4), need also be interrogative or