Book Reviews

Jessica Dell, David Klausner, and Helen Ostovich (eds). *The Chester Cycle in Context, 1555–1575: Religion, Drama, and the Impact of Change*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012. Pp ix, 230.

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The Chester Cycle in Context, 1555–1575 is the first major volume on the Chester cycle for a number of years and is both timely and a welcome addition to the field of early drama studies. The volume embraces both well-established methods of enquiry and new approaches to the study of the Chester cycle in a way that speaks to current critical trends in early drama research and to wider debates in medieval and early modern literary and historical studies. As the title states, the volume discusses the major contexts of the Chester cycle; most of the contributions deal with specifically Cestrian issues rather than national policy and politics, though inevitably these do come into play at various points. The volume is structured into four parts framed by an introduction and an afterword dedicated to Professor Frederick Millet Salter, one of the pioneers of research into the Chester cycle. The different sections are, on the whole, successful in gathering the essays into key thematic groups, but the structure does to some extent restrict the ability of the later chapters to speak to those in the earlier parts. This weakness, however, neither negates the importance of those later essays nor indeed the significant contribution this volume makes to the field.

While a more explicit statement of the aims and intentions of the volume was perhaps needed, the editors' introduction firmly establishes the main contexts for the Chester cycle and in doing so highlights the continuities, changes, and dialogues between late medieval and early modern English culture, politics, society, and religion. The introduction also briefly discusses David Mills's important discovery of a 1572 letter by the Protestant reformer Christopher Goodman to Archbishop Edmund Grindal outlining a list of perceived 'absurdities' in the performance of the cycle that year. References to Goodman's letter recur throughout the volume with each of the essays

mentioning it at least once, usually in the introductory paragraphs. A disparity results between the weight given to Goodman's letter in the introduction and that granted it through the repeated references in each of the essays; its importance as a context for the Chester cycle might have been better served with a chapter dedicated solely to Goodman and his letter.

The introduction also positions the Chester cycle firmly alongside other early Tudor drama, with which it is rarely compared. While a few of the essays compare Chester with the other cycle dramas of York, Towneley, and N-Town, the editors' discussion of Tudor drama as a vehicle for both religious debate and propaganda aligns Chester ideologically with the interlude form and emphasises the co-presence of both dramatic genres in sixteenth-century English culture. Such discussion is in itself important; it stresses the overlap between medieval and early modern dramatic traditions but also underscores early drama's 'middle period' (between the reign of Henry VIII and the early years of Queen Elizabeth I) as a crucial stage in theatre history in its own right, and not merely as a prelude to later Elizabethan drama or as a link between the late-medieval religious and moral plays and later playhouse drama.

Part 1 of the collection, 'The Chester Script', begins with Alexandra Johnston's 'The Text of the Chester Plays in 1572: A Conjectural Re-Construction'. This essay raises the problems of working with the Chester cycle's extant manuscripts, especially in relation to performance, both past and present. Few early play manuscripts (including Chester's) can be considered as either records of performance or as scripts or prompts to be used by actors. Instead most play manuscripts are 'more artefacts than living theatre — monuments of the past to be preserved rather than guides for performance' (21). A troubled relationship exists, then, as Johnston points out, between the manuscripts and the performance histories of most early plays that calls into question the emphasis on performance and the practice-based research of the last forty years. This new emphasis has encouraged some scholars to once again approach the plays as literary pieces to be read rather than as scripts to be performed. But Johnston resists this trend, emphasizing instead the continued importance of performance-based research as a means of coming closer 'to an understanding of [the drama's] power to teach and to move an audience' (35), a pertinent statement given the explosion (and popularity) of early drama productions in recent years.[1]

Part 2, 'Faith and Doubt', and part 3, 'Elizabethan Religion(s)', however, really distinguish this volume and make it a particularly important

contribution to early drama studies. The sustained attention in these sections to the fluidity of religious faith in Chester, the acknowledgement of a plurality of devotional practices, and the various ways in which the Chester cycle accommodates, explores, and questions the validity of those practices further extends the impact of the collection to include research in literature and the history of popular devotion. Erin E. Kelly's essay is of particular note, as are the chapters by John T. Sebastian, Margaret Rogerson, Paul Whitfield White and Kurt A. Schreyer. Kelly's excellent essay explores how the Chester pageants responded to different concepts of faith in Protestant and Catholic thought, arguing that it was not only 'anti-Catholicism, iconoclasm, iconophobia, or a shift in the material conditions' (51) but the dramatic form itself that made Protestant reformers hostile to religious drama. Sebastian's study of salvific blood in the Chester *Ascension* looks across medieval and early modern period boundaries to illustrate how an iconographic motif usually associated with late-medieval affective piety (Christ's freely bleeding wounds) speaks directly to the Protestant rhetoric of salvation. Sebastian sees this motif as a continuation of a regional literary tradition, which includes the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* and John Mirk's *Festial.* Margaret Rogerson likewise discusses the relationships between literature and drama, this time in the context of late-medieval devotion. Affective piety's 'central technique of imaginative meditation' (93), Rogerson suggests, could provide Chester's pre-Reformation actors with a method for preparing for dramatic roles. An interesting and appealing suggestion, Rogerson's proposal invites further inquiry into the inter-relations between devotional, literary, and dramatic practice. It also reinforces the critical discourse between modern and medieval/early modern performance studies with which many scholars are now engaged.

Paul Whitfield White introduces part 3, 'Elizabethan Religion(s)'. Concerned with 'religion on the ground in early Elizabethan Chester' (112), White argues for a more fluid, flexible concept of local, popular religion. The Chester pageants, he suggests, did not appeal exclusively to either Catholic or Protestant ideologies but to a broad cross-section of the Cestrian community (113), the majority of whom probably practiced a little of both faiths. In taking this focus, White's chapter aligns with current debates on regionalism in devotional practice, heterodoxy, and pluralities of faith in medieval and early modern England, and so contributes to the religious historiography of the period. In addition to arguing for a new methodology in early drama studies (143–4), Schreyer's piece compares the famous annotations in Chester's Harley 2150 playtext and the Late Banns, which he suggests prove both that 'late

sixteenth-century audiences could and did look back across the Reformation divide to the mystery plays' and that the documents 'express an unmistakable sense of the present vitality and material efficacy of the cycle even in the beleaguered days of the late sixteenth century' (143).

After the unity and coherence of parts 2 and 3, part 4, 'Space and Place in Chester', seems isolated and the essays within it rather at odds with the section's title. *Space* and *place* come loaded with a very specific group of theoretical notions and questions; inherently bound with the work of theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Yi-Fu Tuan, the two terms have become synonymous with theories of cultural geography, the anthropology of space, and the techniques and approaches of site-specific art and performance. All of these have contributed to the 'spatial turn' of recent years in early drama studies.[2] Despite this existing and influential body of work, none of the essays within part four make use of such theories or even mention them in passing. Mark Faulkner's interesting contribution is the most explicit in its exploration of the relationship between the plays and Chester's urban topography, comparing *De laude Cestrie,* 'a late-twelfth century urban ecomium' (162), and the Chester cycle 'as urban texts that use exegesis to educate and edify' (163). Sheila Christi's consideration of how Chester's Roman heritage affects the representation of its Roman characters and Heather S. Mitchell-Buck's exploration of the fluidity of Cestrian religious identity (and the subsequent 'feyning' performance that many adopted in order to conform with the new national Protestant agenda) are less obviously linked with the theoretical frameworks implied by the terms *space* and *place.* Indeed, Mitchell-Buck's essay seems to have more in common with the essays in part 3 where its similarities with White's chapter in particular would open up further dialogue. The three contributions in part four are linked together through their broad concern with the 'city' and in themselves offer important insights; the issue is rather with the misleading terminology used in the section title which doesn't do them justice.

Such flaws are nevertheless minor in comparison to the value of this volume. *The Chester Cycle in Context* breaks new ground in relation to the Chester plays and will reinvigorate research on the cycle. It is also a collection that speaks across early drama studies, encourages cross-period and interdisciplinary enquiry, and highlights drama as central to the religious and political negotiations of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England.

Notes

1 Matthew Gager's *Dido* and Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (Early Drama at Oxford and Edward's Boys, Christ Church Banqueting Hall, Oxford 21 September), the *Chester Mystery Plays* (Chester Cathedral, 26 June–13 July), *A Satire of the Three Estates* (Staging and Representing the Scottish Renaissance Court project, Linlithgow Palace, 7–9 June), the Chester *Noah Play* (Liverpool University Players, Liverpool Maritime Museum, 4 May) and *Gorboduc* (Read Not Dead, Inner Temple, 28 April) are just a sample of early drama performed in the UK in 2013.

2 See, for example, Janette Dillon, *The Language of Space in Court Performance, 1400–1625* (Cambridge, 2010) and *Theatre, Court and City, 1595–1610: Drama and Social Space in London* (Cambridge, 2006); Julie Sanders, *The Cultural Geography of Early Modern Drama,* c. *1620–1650* (Cambridge, 2011); Michal Kobialka, 'Staging Place/Space in the Eleventh-Century Monastic Practices' and Donnalee Dox, 'Theatrical Space, Mutable Space and the Space of Imagination: Three Readings of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*', Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka (eds), *Medieval Practices of Space* (Minneapolis, 2006), 128–48 and 167–98.

Christopher Marlow. *Performing Masculinity in English University Drama, 1598–1636*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. Pp 186.

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In the introduction to this new study of early modern English drama, Christopher Marlow rightly emphasizes the neglected state of academic drama, university drama in particular, and his own study is a welcome contribution to the field. Constructing his argument around the idea of 'scholarly masculinity' (7), Marlow develops this concept in various directions to demonstrate the 'range of versions of maleness performed by university students' (16) and to explore the world of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century higher education both on and off the stage. The idealism of scholarly rigour in tension with the reality of human frailty produces many interesting effects on the academic stage, and readers will find Marlow's volume rewarding. One