

## Book Reviews

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**Tamara Atkin.** *The Drama of Reform: Theology and Theatricality, 1461–1553.* Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies, volume 23. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. Pp x, 198.

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*Early Theatre* 18.1 (2015), 133–5  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.18.1.2577>

Tamara Atkin states that her book is ‘about the polemical use of drama in the century before the opening of the theatres’ (9). Her initial premise is that reformed theology, which was gradually incorporated into state policy, had direct impact on playwrights as well as being disseminated by them, and that a dominant criticism of the Catholic church — its theatricality — presented paradoxical challenges to those who would advocate reform through drama. Atkin acknowledges her debt to the work of Paul Whitfield White and Greg Walker, and also inevitably engages with the vexed question of the relationship between liturgy and drama, most specifically at the mass; her introduction includes a summary of this controversy from Honorius Augustodunensis to William Prynne, along with the analysis of Hardison and Chambers, and its discussion by various more recent scholars. Atkin then sensibly notes that, because of the ‘fragmentary’ nature of the evidence of Reformation drama, ‘this book does not purport to offer a master narrative about the impact of religious change on drama’, but rather offers ‘bore holes’ through which to observe the interaction between theology and theatricality (11).

These ‘bore holes’ are five plays: the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, John Bale’s *King Johan*, and his *Three Laws*, Lewis Wager’s *Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene*, and *Jacke Jugeler*, which as she notes is commonly attributed to Nicholas Udall. Presented as volume 23 in Brepols’ ‘Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies’ series, Atkin’s book demonstrates afresh the importance of crossing the divide between ‘medieval’ and ‘early modern’ in understanding early theatre. The plays here discussed are consistently mutually illuminating, and have publication and/or performance histories which indicate adaptation to varying contexts throughout the Tudor period.

To allocate them to one exclusive date would be to miss their rich significance as texts written and then adapted to address the development of contemporary reforming concerns.

Indeed, Atkin's attention to dating — or re-dating — these plays in relation not just to their dates of composition but to their multiple moments of manuscript and/or print transmission, as well as their possible performance, is one of the most important aspects of her book. The *Play of the Sacrament*, for instance, although possibly composed at the end of the fifteenth century, survives in a manuscript copied in the mid-sixteenth century, when 'miraculous' icons such as the Boxley Rood and the blood of Hailes were being debunked by reformers who publicly demonstrated the theatrical devices by which their 'miracles' had been staged. In such a context, the Croxton *Play's* theatrical special effects could well have been designed to encourage scepticism, for all that, around fifty years earlier, their staging could have been intended to build Eucharistic faith. Atkin pays useful attention also to Bale's revisions of both *King Johan* and *Three Laws*, both of which, she argues, were written in the 1530s and then adapted by the playwright to reflect changing concerns in the 1540s and in the early years of Elizabeth's reign. She emphasizes the Wolseyan satire of *Three Laws* as evidence of its early composition, along with the influence of Tyndale in his reformed teaching on the Eucharist. A revised 1562 edition highlights 'the extent to which the Elizabethan Settlement provided a suitable context for the secondary reception of Bale's dramatic polemic' (76), an interesting suggestion which could be developed further. Atkin's contextualization of the plays with extensive quotations from non-dramatic writers like Tyndale will make her book a useful reference point for scholars of early drama who feel the need of a firmer grounding in Reformation theology. Her reading of the pre-Reformation Croxton *Play* in the light of Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* is likewise helpful and suggestive, indicating as it does one 'possible source for the Croxton play's idiosyncratic treatment of the original host libel' (30). Atkin enriches understanding of Wager's *Mary Magdalene* by placing the play in the context of iconoclastic attacks, a context she describes with subtle care: the richly dressed pre-conversion Magdalene 'resembles nothing so much as an abused image that is idolized' (112), and in the play's conversion sequence Wager shows the triumph of a new, pious mode of playing.

This book is about 'Theology and Theatricality', but it is attentive to theatrical theory more than to the specific dramaturgy of the plays it treats. This is of course perfectly valid as an academic approach, but it might

occasionally create readings which, while recognizing the problems facing religious dramatists, do not do full justice to the sophistication of the devices they deploy. For example, Atkin raises the question of how a playwright may represent Christ's descent into hell, given Aquinas' assertion that 'Christ's body remained entombed while His soul harrowed hell' (66): how can an actor be in two places at once? She suggests that 'Christ's words in the N-Town pageant on the harrowing of hell, "I am the sowle of Cryst Jesu", are contradicted by the dramatic necessity of the actor's bodily presence' (67). It is true that an actor's presence is called for, but crucially not *the* actor: the words are not given to *Christ*, but to Anima Christi, who is represented by a different actor. So, the problem is not making Christ appear in two places at once, but rather the much more general challenge of representing a soul through a body; the playwright is crucially aware of Aquinas' line of argument and creates a new role in order to ensure the proper theology is maintained. There is perhaps a useful continuity here with the reformist Bale's creation of the character of Vindicta Dei in *Three Laws*: one of the ways in which he responds to the challenge of presenting an effable God is to dramatize instead one aspect of divine operation. Attention also to the extraordinary nature of the props which Bale demands might do more justice to his theatrically sophisticated distinction between Catholic and reformed practice. And why read the apparent power of Infidelitas's corrupted tail rhyme to debase Naturae Lex's speech from rhyme royal to rhyme couée as proof that the distinction between pious and impious stagecraft is 'less stable than Bale might have hoped' (94)? Atkin appears to imply that the play is getting out of Bale's control, but surely he has consciously deployed changing verse patterns to demonstrate vice's power to corrupt the laws. Perhaps the difficulty for an audience of distinguishing between reformed truth and Catholic corruption is even part of Bale's point.

The book began as a doctoral thesis, and this shows: it is very thoroughly footnoted and makes its arguments carefully, but on the other hand it is sometimes a little weighed down by its references and the fresh arguments are as a result underdeveloped. Nonetheless, this book is a stimulating and thoughtful approach to an important topic, helpfully insisting on close attention to the contexts in which some neglected examples of Tudor theatre must be considered. These contexts are intellectual, in terms of Reformation theology, and material, in terms of manuscript and print transmission. The reader is sure to gain fresh insight into the connection between theology and theatricality in the early Tudor period.