

Alexandra Johnston, *The City and the Parish: Drama in York and Beyond, Shifting Paradigms in Early English Drama Studies*, David N. Klausner (ed). Variorum Collected Studies Series. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp 353. Hardback £105.00. ISBN: 9781472478887.

KATIE NORMINGTON

Royal Holloway University of London

Four recent publications in the Variorum Series have enabled the work of leading twentieth- and twenty-first-century medieval English drama scholars to be more readily accessible. Only one of these scholars, David Mills, published extensively in the monograph form, whilst Peter Meredith, Meg Twycross, and Alexandra Johnston frequently placed their writing in journals or edited collections which are not easily available. The fact that the Variorum Series exists is a nod to a bygone academic age prior to the dominance of the needs of the English University Research Excellence Framework (REF) or even its predecessor the RAE, and to more thoughtful tenure methods in North America. The scholars that followed Johnston, Meredith, Mills, and Twycross have, as Pruffrock might have noted, careers measured out with monographs.

Notwithstanding the irony that, in the age of digital and open access publishing, the Variorum Series has collected and republished essays by the authors in a hardback volume to ensure their accessibility, the volumes offer an opportunity to serve as both a festschrift (albeit self-authored) and barometer of the changing shape of scholarship on medieval English drama. The collection of Sandy Johnston's work has been edited by David Klausner to reflect her writings over four decades from the 1970s to 2010. The chronological span offers insight into both her scholarly journey but also that of the historiography of medieval English drama during this time. Such is Johnston's influence that these two paths are generally one and the same, for she has shaped much of the direction of medieval scholarship throughout her career.

The volume fittingly begins with Johnston and Margaret Dorrell (Rogerson)'s seminal article on the York Doomsday pageant. Their discovery of the Mercer's indenture in 1971 has been a landmark in medieval English drama. The essay not only provides detailed insight into English medieval staging but also signalled a paradigm shift from a scholarship based primarily on literary and textual study to the advent of a focus on the context and practice of medieval performance. The indenture was the seedling that began the serious collection of all records that pertain to early English performance which continue to be published in the

Records of Early English Drama (REED) series of which Johnston is founding editor.

Much of the first section of this volume relates to writings in the early 1970s inspired by the Mercers' indenture and other documentary discoveries. These cover the staging of the Doomsday play, the pageant route around York, and the religious guilds' plays such as the Creed play and Pater Noster play. However, in organizing the material by theme Klausner avoids a simple chronological approach and in doing so allows the contiguous placing of a 2002 piece by Johnston, 'The York Cycle and the Libraries of York', first published in Caroline Barron and Jenny Stratford's festschrift to Barrie Dobson. Against Johnston's earlier business-like factual writing on performance records, this essay shows the ability to control a grand sweep of ideas drawing on work by guild historians, art historians, and the fields of theology, biography, and literary history. The ease of the tone and mastery of the argument are to be admired and in its multi-disciplinary approach the essay feels very fresh today, although it was written some fifteen years ago.

The second section of the volume focuses on Johnston's interest in 'Other Records', here represented by Easter plays, Thames Valley, Robin Hood, and the West Country. These are a rather disparate set of essays written in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Their inclusion is an interesting antidote to the dominance of scholarly critical interest in York and its Corpus Christi plays and shows how far Johnston has been a dynamic part of that realignment. As she states, 'The term "Corpus Christi play" in the records represents a rich and eclectic tradition of mimetic performance that included every possible type of late medieval play' (145). It might have been possible, however, to give this section more of a focus on parish drama — given this is part of the title of the book — and include more of Johnston's influential work in this area such as her contribution to her own collection *English Parish Drama* (1996), co-edited with Wim Hüsken.

The third section, 'Suppression and change', examines the decline of the York Corpus Christi plays, the first essay noting that 'To conceive and foster drama such as the city of York had sponsored for two hundred years demanded a commonality of purpose, both doctrinal and civic. When the common ground of doctrine was swept away by the reformers, the civic purpose alone could not sustain the plays' (201). She notes in a following essay that 'The suppression of the civic religious drama of the North was a deliberate campaign' (220). Johnston's commitment to understanding the theological doctrines, particularly those of Augustinian roots, which influenced medieval drama is showcased in three decades of her work in the book's fourth section 'Theory/Theology'. Here Johnston brings

together her ability to work with historical, philosophical, and textual tools to build her arguments.

The final section on 'Performance' looks at what modern-day recreations of early drama have taught us through the work of the productions of the Toronto-based *Poculi Ludique Societas* with which Johnston has been associated since 1974. Extrapolating early conditions from contemporary performance work is a notoriously difficult task because of the distance between medieval and modern culture, spectatorship, and performance conventions. Johnston's influence in this area is shown in 'York, 1998: What We Learned', which assesses the outcomes from the University of Toronto staging of the York plays. The essay is a pithy piece which cuts to the core of the practical outcomes of the modern-day staging. I have never been quite as convinced by the following piece, Johnston's account of performing Mary in the N-Town plays: the currency of emotional realism has a debatable value in these dramas which operated in a different stylistic mode.

The volume fittingly ends with 'English Drama Before 1642 Revisited', first published in 2010 for *The Southern African Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*. The retrospective article summarizes the distance travelled during the last four decades of medieval scholarship, noting that 'Social and cultural history is not easily divided into neat boxes — it is messy, it spills over time and varies from place to place' (339). She cogently argues that medieval theatre provided the theatrical foundations on which Shakespeare could build his skill. The interesting thing about this retrospective is how autobiographical the piece is, with Johnston reflecting on her own role, noting, 'It is at this point that I become part of the story' (335). Very infrequently does writing about theatre history include contemporary autobiography.

Klausner brings out the narrative of Johnston's career well in the volume, capturing the importance of her paradigm-shifting work in shaping how records of performance have been used to interpret medieval drama. The book not only demonstrates Johnston's personal interests as they grow and develop over her career (and it is her post-Millennium writings that shine here with their elegant tone and careful mastery of multiple sources and nuanced argument), but also shows how Johnston's scholarship has affected the modern-day historiography of medieval theatre itself, how she herself 'became part of the story'.

