

Michael O'Connell. *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm & Theater in Early Modern England* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp viii, 198.

Most scholars of early English drama fall into two categories: those who concern themselves with the religious plays associated with the middle ages and those who concern themselves with the secular theater of the Renaissance. Among the valuable contributions of Michael O'Connell's new book is that it reminds us of the artificiality of this division of labor.

O'Connell situates both biblical drama and public theater in a religious context through his innovative analysis of Elizabethan anti-theatricalism. Whereas contemporary critical attention has focused on gender issues in the tracts by Gosson, Stubbes and company, O'Connell emphasizes instead that these tracts charge the secular theater with idolatry. The strange accusation of idolatry aligns the tracts with the nearly contemporaneous official anti-theatricalism directed against the cycle plays; it thus 'stands as a curious bridge between' the religious drama and the secular stage (33). Despite the attempts of civic authorities to bring cycle plays in conformity with reformed doctrine, the biblical drama aroused implacable hostility from Protestant officials. O'Connell contends that 'the final sticking point was not Marian, ecclesiastical, or eucharistic dogma but the physical portrayal of the divine' (27). What made the biblical drama vulnerable to the charge of idolatry, in other words, was its status as a visual art. And the secular stage shared this vulnerability. Anti-theatrical writers were suspicious of the theater's appeal to the eye; to them, theatrical embodiment was a way of making images, of rendering a false 'illusion of presence' (9). Viewed in this manner, Elizabethan anti-theatricalism becomes a manifestation of reformation iconoclasm.

According to O'Connell, the tension between word and image inherent in Western Christianity shaped the entire English dramatic tradition. Drawing on an impressive range of materials – sixth- and seventh-century treatises, continental and English drama, humanist and protestant polemics – he argues that this tension reflects disagreements about how the sacred is to be experienced. A 'new understanding of the humanity of the incarnate Christ' emerged in the twelfth century, which generated 'an *incarnational* sense of religious experience, a mode of apprehension and an aesthetic in which the spiritual is incarnated in forms immediately accessible to human senses and emotions' (47). The visual became not just a mode of devotion but also a means of discerning the divine; under the sway of this aesthetic, medieval artists and playwrights presented the sacred in terms of the local and the particular.

Reformation iconoclasts, influenced by new printing technologies and the concomitant humanist privileging of text, found this identification of the sacred and the profane intolerable, distrusted the affective dimension of appeals to the eye, and insisted that only texts could ensure reliable access to the divine presence. In short, they sought to replace the medieval culture of the image with a culture of the word.

Reformation logocentrism generated a crisis for English theater, O'Connell suggests, because the drama depended for its effects on attitudes towards the body that derived from the medieval incarnational aesthetic. In response to the Cathar heresy, medieval theologians like Hugh of St. Victor had insisted on Christ's carnality and humanity; because 'humanity's existence as *caro* ... ties it to Christ' (69), the body became an authoritative site of affective engagement with the divine. O'Connell generates a new account of the 'origins' of medieval drama by identifying the privileged status of the body in medieval religious thought as the impetus for the development of the drama. The incarnation was not just thematic to medieval biblical drama, he claims, 'but its intellectual root'; moreover, 'impersonation, the phenomenology of drama ... can be understood as intimately tied to this concern for the corporeal' (64). A sensitive reading of the York cycle, in which the authority of Christ's body results from the visual enactment of its capacity for pain, documents this claim. Witnessing the extended scenes of Christ's torture, citizens experienced a union with their God through an 'imaginative acceptance' that 'the pain portrayed as felt by another body may be experienced by one's own body' (85). O'Connell persuasively suggests that this theatrical approach to the body is one of the medieval drama's legacies to the public stage. As the scene of Gloucester's blinding in *King Lear* amply demonstrates, Shakespeare engages his audience affectively by portraying the human body in pain as a source of moral authority.

Granted O'Connell's thesis regarding the connections between 'the origins and practice of dramatic embodiment and the incarnational aesthetic of medieval culture', reformation anti-theatricalism indeed appears 'virtually inevitable' (89). One response to the crisis of the image was the attempt of reformation playwrights to render biblical drama suited to Protestant purposes by emphasizing the 'textualization' of the divine. Rather than aiming for affective appeal, for example, John Bale's *Christ* argues the case of reformed doctrine by citing scripture. As the century wore on, biblical dramas evinced 'a common wariness about the stage embodiment of God' (101). Plays about saints or biblical figures were few in number and tended to present their heroes not as effective mediators of the sacred but merely as moral exempla. By the

time the biblical drama enjoyed a brief 'revival' in the 1590s, the incidents depicted were selected with an eye to popular taste and treated in the manner of historical material. Lost from these plays were the emphases on embodiment, on the incarnation, and on the affective bond with the audience. These concerns would instead be transferred to the secular stage.

For Elizabethan playwrights, an anxiety about visual representation complicated the legacy from the medieval theater. O'Connell's conclusion considers the effects of this anxiety on Jonson and Shakespeare, both of whom used meta-theatrical devices to reflect on the visual aspect of theater. Despite his defenses of the theater in works like *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson's insistence on his plays as poems reveals his humanist privileging of text and his ambivalence about visual effects. Although *Much Ado* also stages the reformation distrust of the idolatrous eye through its central courtships, Shakespeare's other plays provide more confident accounts of the visual image and its power to mediate truth. O'Connell reads the final scene of *A Winter's Tale* as a 'legitimation of a way of knowing asserted against the humanist claims for an exclusive, or near exclusive, truth in language' (144). What is most compelling about this interpretation is that it enables O'Connell to suggest that, in the end, Shakespeare embraced his status as a visual artist.

Closely argued, clearly written, and winningly confident in its mastery of its subject, *The Idolatrous Eye* makes important connections between religious and secular drama, and between religion and drama more broadly speaking. The book's major flaw is that it leaves us wanting more: its brevity prevents it from always doing justice to the breadth of its topic. This reader, for one, would have appreciated a more leisurely substantiation of the central claims.

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John Pitcher (ed). *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, vol 14. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001. Pp 319.

The lead-off article in the latest volume of *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* is a model of scholarship. In 'Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the Anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*', Macd. P. Jackson systematically and meticulously presents evidence to demonstrate that *Thomas of Woodstock*, generally regarded as a source for *Richard II* (1595), was actually written later