

Robert S. Sturges, *The Circulation of Power in Medieval Biblical Drama: Theaters of Authority*. (The New Middle Ages.) New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. xvi, 230. \$95. ISBN: 978-0-230-11578-1.

This illuminating book makes a strident case for developing modern, deconstructive interpretations of early religious drama. Too often, says Robert Sturges, scholarship in the field has been mired in a model of historicism verging on antiquarianism. One possible corrective lies in an expanded notion of so-called “medieval” drama that encompasses histories of performance beyond the Middle Ages. While making some gestures in this direction, however, Sturges is ultimately less interested in issues of post-medieval performance than in the potential of the texts themselves to generate what he calls “resistant” readings. Rejecting a methodology that would, for example, promote as its primary goal the recovery of meanings associated with historical artefacts in the time of their creation, several chapters filter the plays through the lens of overtly present-day concerns.

True to its title, the book’s main focus is the circulation of power in early religious drama. Conventionally these texts have been understood as exemplifying the hierarchical nature of medieval society—a world structured around the authority of, say, heaven over earth or male over female. Taking stock of Foucaultian principles, however, Sturges sets out to excavate sites of resistance to these dominant power structures. Chapter two, for instance, briefly surveys the legal status of Jesus in late medieval passion plays. Representatives of sovereignty within the plays repeatedly position Jesus in a “state of exception” outside the law, effectively reconstituting him as (in Giorgio Agamben’s terms) “bare life.” But opposing this structure is the fact that—at least from a Christian viewpoint—Jesus’s power represents a passive, sacrificial,

and possibly even “antisovereign” alternative to the power exercised by figures such as Pilate and Herod Antipas.

In chapter three, Sturges explores the resistant power of objects in passion plays, notably banners in dramas representing Christ before Pilate, which miraculously lower themselves in reverence before Jesus. Taking up Bruno Latour’s ruminations on the mediating role and agency of objects in social networks, the chapter initiates a lively dialogue between medieval drama and contemporary thing theory. Chapter four takes up questions of gendered agency, investigating portrayals of mothers in dramatic renditions of the slaughter of the Innocents and Marian laments. Inspired by Julia Kristeva, who perceives in the “semiotic” qualities of maternal language a challenge to the paternal-symbolic order, Sturges makes a compelling argument for interpreting mothers’ voices in the plays as exemplifying resistance to earthly or divine authority. Although the book gravitates toward readings of plays in Middle English, here, as in other chapters, Sturges successfully integrates comparative perspectives, citing materials in Latin, French, German, and Italian.

Next the book turns to representations of class conflict in biblical plays, concentrating especially on works attributed to the Wakefield Master. This and the following chapter, which focuses on socio-legal concerns, are less obviously rooted in contemporary philosophy or literary theory than previous sections. In chapter five, Sturges sets out to develop the implications of David Aers’s now classic critique of an idealized “harmony-model” of medieval society for interpretations of religious drama. Chapter six applies insights derived from Richard Firth Green’s work on medieval English legal history to dramatic adaptations of the Cain and Abel story, exploring the extent to which these plays register tensions between “folk law” and royal, written law. Although less theoretically nuanced than previous chapters, these analyses are

underpinned by a series of intricate close readings that bring into view further sites of opposition to dominant power structures.

Finally, in conclusion, Sturges investigates theories of performance and audience, notably Antonin Artaud's much-debated notion of a "theater of cruelty." Citing previous work on this topic by Jean Duvignaud and others, Sturges seeks to understand the audience's responses to events depicted in biblical drama in terms of affective piety and the violence of theater. What if spectators refused to subscribe fully to the essentially religious orientation of these dramas? What if the audience were itself a potential locus of resistance to Christian propaganda?

The rhetorical "what ifs" posed in the book's final chapter echo a formulation in a 1997 article on crossdressing in early drama by Robert L.A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, cited briefly in chapter four, which speculates on the ability of medieval spectators to perceive "queer, discordant variations on the dominant tune." Approaches derived from queer studies are, indeed, a major source of inspiration for Sturges, as laid out in his introduction. Appeals to temporal queerness by scholars such as Carolyn Dinshaw can usefully be taken up, he suggests, as a means of rendering our experience of the plays more directly meaningful.

These frameworks are not developed systematically, so that readers seeking a survey of queerness in early religious theater will come away disappointed. Intermittently, however, Sturges alludes to issues that touch a nerve in contemporary queer sensibility. Analyzing mothers' laments, for instance, he concludes with an anecdotal reflection on a panel in the NAMES Project's AIDS memorial quilt; a passing reference to the incoherent status of same-sex marriage in modern America is used to frame the discussion of law in Cain and Abel dramas. These impassioned attempts to connect power relations in early religious drama with their putatively modern counterparts offer a key to unlocking the potential of texts to generate

multiple meanings beyond what is often held up to be their “original context.” More such efforts to disrupt the business-as-usual of medieval cultural studies are eagerly awaited.

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