Graduate Seminar  
Spring 2019  
L. Arnovick

**Medieval English drama: Bible stories for a English-speaking audience.**

*Course Description*

This seminar confronts the problem of an untenable disconnect between the language of the church and the language of the people by tracing the biblical sources and language of several late medieval English dramas. In an age when both worship is performed and Scripture is heard in Latin, a language that most people did not understand, English drama plays a central role in religious education and expressions of piety for the laity. Often staged in celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi, cycles of pageants re-enact sacred history from Creation to the Last Judgment. Together in this course we ask, what gets lost, added, or emphasized in the translation from Biblical narrative into popular entertainment?

After reading a wide selection of plays from the Corpus Christi cycle and the Saints or Conversion plays (using Bevinton’s anthology), each student will select individual plays for further analysis (using individual critical editions). In the first half of this seminar, students will trace the sources and analogues for each play analyzed, asking how the biblical narrative is adapted for enactment in the medieval pageant.

Just as students trace plot developments, they will also examine biblical language as it is rendered from Scripture into popular entertainment. While the clerics responsible for the script of certain plays relied on the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible (available online), laity may have known the Middle English Bible (edition by Cooper) which used to be attributed to the Lollards (school of Wycliffe). By comparing and contrasting the two versions of each biblical source, students will explore the extent of English familiarity with the Bible. By comparing and contrasting sources with pageants, students will identify the literary strategies (e.g. narrative structure, stereotyped characters, humor, anachronism in contemporary setting – as explicated by Kolve, colloquial diction) employed in the vernacular drama. Student research will show how the use of colloquial spoken English plays a key role in the adaption of biblical material for the medieval stage (or pageant cart).

In the second half of this seminar, students will situate the English dramas in larger cultural context. Using the work of Duffy and Pfaff, students will familiarize themselves with the centrality of liturgy in the English Middle Ages. While scholars like Beckwith and Lee have examined medieval theater as enactments of liturgical drama or as “Sacramental theatre,” students will contribute original research by asking how the Middle English language of the plays, which they have elucidated, factors into particular aspects of religious and social life during the period of their performance.

*Prerequisite*

While a working knowledge of Middle English (ME) would be ideal, a willingness to immerse oneself in this late medieval language (practically Early Modern English) is all that is necessary.
Texts are glossed with Modern English equivalents and explanatory notes are provided in the edition ordered for class.

Course Requirements
Students will lead a seminar meeting on their research and submit a 20 page paper on that research due at the end of the term (worth 75% of total mark). In addition to their required participation in class, students will be responsible for leading a discussion of the reading assignment for at least one class meeting (worth 25% of mark).

Readings
Anthology of Medieval Drama
http://ubic.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=ePnHCXMr42JgAIfZbU51BE6PA2hS8_jgbg6iGX4ZzczRTpgZ-ch
6wFJeQDzaYzcTLwgaYjQ0Dak6QJ3Ym8gA1A3te3AxSbq4zh66pUnJ8dBjHhLiLQ2DRaQK6VkgZUxl2VrNvaWIB6vQY4z
UCAJ9LLR8

Sample Critical Editions of Plays


Critical Editions of The Bible

The Vulgate Bible. Douay-Rheims: http://www.drbo.org/

Secondary Scholarship


