

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 Bevington'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 adaptation 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

Bevington, David (ed.). [1975] 2001. *Medieval Drama*. Wadsworth Publishing. UBC Library online.

http://ubc.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/search?bookMark=ePnHCXMw42JgAfZbU5lBE6PA2ht8_jgbg6iGX4ZzcqRTgGZ-ch6wEjQDzaYZcTLwgaYjQOdaK6QUJeYm8gA1A3te3AxSbq4hzh66pUnJ8dBhjHhLQ2DRaQK6VkgZUxI2VRNvaWIB6vQY4zUCAJ9LLR8

Sample Critical Editions of Plays

Beadle, Richard (ed.). 2013. *The York Plays: Volume 1 The Text* (Early English Text Society Supplementary Series Book 23). Early English Text Society.

Beadle, Richard (ed.). 2013. *The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290, Volume 2* (Early English Text Society Supplementary Series Book 24) Critical Edition. Early English Text Society.

Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley (eds.). 2001. *The Towneley Plays: I: Introduction and Text* (Early English Text Society Supplementary Series Book 13), Revised Edition. Early English Text Society.

Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley (eds.). 2001. *The Towneley Plays: II: Notes and Glossary* (Early English Text Society Supplementary Series Book 14), Revised Edition. Early English Text Society.

Coletti, Theresa (ed.). 2018. *The Digby Mary Magdalene Play* (Middle English Texts) New Edition. Medieval Institute Publications.

Critical Editions of The Bible

Wycliffe New Testament 1388: An Edition in Modern Spelling. 2002. Ed. by William Cooper. British Library/ University of Toronto Press.

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

Secondary Scholarship

Beckwith, Sarah. 2003. *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays*. University of Chicago Press.

Duffy, Eamon. 2005. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*. 2nd ed. Yale University Press.

King, Pamela M. 2006. *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City (Westfield Medieval Studies)*. D.S. Brewer.

Kolve, V.A. 1966. *A Play Called Corpus Christi*. Stanford University Press.

Norton, Michael Lee. 2017. *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theater*. Medieval Institute Publications.

Pfaff, Richard. 2012. *The Liturgy in Medieval England: A History*. Cambridge University Press.