

Helen Cooper. *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*.

Arden Critical Companions. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2010. xiii + 272 pp.
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This volume, a welcome addition to the Arden Critical Companions series, engagingly explores medieval influences on the plays of Shakespeare as well as on Renaissance drama more generally. As Cooper points out in the first very line, “The world in which Shakespeare lived was a medieval one” (1). Employing

a multitude of examples, the introduction points to medieval elements just beneath the veneer of Reformation reform and gently explodes the notion that *medieval* means backward or ignorant. Cooper reminds us, for example, that the alphabetical index, double-entry bookkeeping, mechanical clocks, a cash-based economy, and universities were all medieval, while medieval sports like jousting or genres like allegory live well into the Renaissance. In seven chapters, she traces medieval English antecedents and influences on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama.

The widely ranging first chapter looks at (among other subjects) medieval survivals in London architecture, the movement from manuscript to print (and their long-lived coexistence), and the medieval origins of the English language; the writing of plays in blank verse for the first time “was the great Elizabethan innovation” (40). The second chapter considers “cosmic theatre,” or the whole universe as the fitting subject for the stage on which virtually anything might be shown, as “unique in England to medieval and Elizabethan traditions of drama” (43). Here Cooper makes a strong case for the influence of the cycle plays and religious drama as more directly influential on later English theater than classical theatrical forms. Religious drama was still played after the Reformation, of which she cites several salient examples; many of the cycle plays persist in sixteenth-century playtexts. Violence, which occurs offstage in classical drama, is shown in medieval and later English theater, another important difference. Her reading of the scene where Lear carries the dead Cordelia in his arms as a rendering of the Pietà is not entirely fanciful, as this image was popularized both in devotional woodcuts and in play cycles that “kept it in front of the eyes of thousands of playgoers for decades after it had officially been eliminated from the churches” (68).

The next chapter elaborates on this thesis in its discussion of the representation of God, angels, devils, and other immaterial figures. Even props may have been reemployed: the gilded mask, used in the costume of God in the cycle plays, for example, turns up in the wardrobe of pagan gods later. The *deus ex machina* was used on the medieval stage, and the same (or descendants of the same) winches and pulleys were later employed to produce similar effects. And English theater traditionally ignored the classical unities, with plots ranging from place to place; time was also expansive, most noticeably in the history plays. The eight history plays “make up a single working out of prophecy across time,” a secular mirroring of salvation history represented by religious drama (98). The fourth chapter considers the influence of allegory and morality plays on Renaissance drama, ending with an examination of three social types: the king (whether tyrant or benevolent monarch), the shepherd (with its pastoral and biblical resonances), and the fool (again with its biblical as well as historical connotations, there having been fools in the English court since the Norman Conquest), which Shakespeare to some extent modeled on medieval prototypes.

Fortune and the falls of princes, popularized first in England through medieval sources, are the subjects of the next chapter, which discusses the tragedies. Medieval narrative not only contributes plots, but also imagery, and suggests “a way of

conceiving the world and presenting it on stage” (169). Comedy is the subject of the sixth chapter, and Cooper again persuasively argues that Shakespeare is drawing more directly on medieval romance, the popular fiction of the Middle Ages, than on classical comedy. In the final chapter, Cooper discusses Chaucer’s work as providing the main inspiration for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, though there are “signs of Chaucerian influence across the Shakespeare canon” (208). The evidence for medieval influence is presented elegantly throughout, and this book is highly recommended reading for students and scholars alike. Some plays are mentioned repeatedly, though always interestingly (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the Henry plays), others not at all (one wonders what Cooper makes of the partial frame that opens *Taming of the Shrew*, for example); but no book of this length could be entirely comprehensive nor can a review this brief fully speak to the pleasures of reading arguments and examples so beautifully laid out.

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