

Jessica Dell, David Klausner, and Helen Ostovich, eds. *The Chester Cycle in Context, 1555–1575: Religion, Drama, and the Impact of Change*.

Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012. xiii + 230 pp. \$99.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-4137-3.

This collection of sophisticated and up-to-date essays sheds a great deal of new light both on the Chester Cycle as it was performed in its last years and on the attendant cultural and political intersections of divergent religious pressures and practices in late sixteenth-century Cheshire. Leading off part 1, “The Chester Script,” Alexandra F. Johnston focuses with authority on the text of Chester’s 1572 Whitsuntide performance; Johnston’s edition of this manuscript served as the acting-text for the cycle’s pageant-wagon dramatization in Toronto in 2010. Another major scholar in the field, David Mills, follows with a brief essay on the stage movements of Deus in Chester pageant 1, the *Fall of Lucifer*.

Part 2, “Faith and Doubt,” comprises four essays, each an impressively original contribution. Erin E. Kelly addresses a compelling question: how did late medieval viewers — Catholic, Protestant, and all those in-between — believe in their biblical plays, and how did religious dramatic belief in general undergo a transformation during the early years of the Reformation? Matthew Sergi, reading the Chester *Passion* with the acumen of a stage director (and gambling expert), correlates the artificiality of the torturers’ game of dice with “aggressive Henrician reforms of recreation” (66). John T. Sebastian, relying on Carolyn Bynum’s *Wonderful Blood*, focuses on the theological symbolism of the “persistent freshness” of Christ’s blood as it is displayed in the Chester *Ascension* and the *Last Judgment*. And Margaret Rogerson, deploying Stanislavski’s celebrated theories of method acting, interrogates the probable influence of late medieval affective piety as it might have informed actors’ ways of identifying with their sacred roles on stage.

Part 3, “Elizabethan Religion(s),” opens with a tour de force essay that serves as a keystone to the entire collection: Paul Whitfield White’s “The Chester Cycle and Early Elizabethan Religion” covers a host of matters, and concludes, “Early Elizabethan Cesterians had ceased to be Catholic, but . . . a good part of their religious sensibility drew on many features we tend to associate with the old church: the importance of the visual in religious devotion, a deep-rooted fascination with the miraculous, a love of sacred music as an expression of praise for the divine, and a privileging of biblical story over doctrine” (130). While White covers the cycle in its entirety, Kurt A. Schreyer provides a close reading of one key manuscript, the Late Banns, wherein boxed-in brackets added by the seventeenth-century antiquarian Randle Holme II to stanzas describing “liturgical and Marian elements” (136) are, Schreyer suggests, not mere marginalia: they are in fact symptomatic of the Cestrian’s changing valorizations of their religious past and of their present civic identity.

Part 4, “Space and Place in Chester,” opens with Sheila Christie’s appreciation of Chester’s “fascination with all things Roman” (155): the cycle’s unusually positive treatment of figures such as Octavian is a subtle manifestation, she finds, of

Chester's civic pride in its Roman "cultural imaginary" (150), its "material and moral Roman heritage" (153). Mark Faulkner brings together three Cestrian texts: the exegetical practices found in Lucian's twelfth-century encomium to the city, *De laude Cestrie*; the exegetical work performed by the cycle's Expositor; and the explanatory potentials implicit in a new digital website, Mapping Medieval Chester. Heather S. Mitchell-Buck provides an insightful reading of the psychological depth, political complexities, and regional relevance of Chester's Herod: much more than a stock character, Herod in these plays is "a cathectic figure who highlights the flaws of royal policies that emphasize outward conformity at the expense of regional ideals and individual convictions" (188).

It is appropriate that this volume should conclude with Joanna Dutka's biography of a pioneer in the field, F. M. Salter, whose 1955 monograph *Medieval Drama in Chester* served as a prime mover and inspiration for more than fifty years. With a useful introduction written by its editors, Jessica Dell, David Klausner, and Helen Ostovich, this is a fully considered collection of first-rate essays. Reading them from first to last is an enriching experience: its authors all have the most relevant materials at their fingertips (such as the recently discovered letter of Christopher Goodman), and all are equally sensitive to the necessity of understanding the late Chester Whitsun play as a unique artifact enacted within a specific urban, social, and religious context.

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