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Title

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Journal

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession, 4(1)

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/NC34159805

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PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 04 | Issue 01

Spring 2023

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Lipton. 2023. How I teach medieval concepts of performance with Christina Fitzgerald's *The York Corpus Christi Play: Selected Pageants*. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 4.1: 82-87.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

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How I Teach Medieval Concepts of Performance with Christina Fitzgerald's *The York Corpus Christi Play: Selected Pageants*

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Abstract

Emma Lipton, professor of English at the University of Missouri, reflects on the classes she teaches to both medievalist graduate students and students from other areas, and on how to teach to such a wide range of students that have different interests and goals when they take her classes. Lipton gives the example of a seminar she teaches on the York Plays and examines her methods of teaching this class in order to focus on medieval studies and performance theory, but also to create transferable skills that can be useful for students from different areas.

At the University of Missouri, where I teach, our Ph.D. program has become notably smaller in recent years, requiring us to teach graduate classes that appeal both to students specializing in our fields and to graduate students specializing in a range of topics, forms, and historical periods. As a result, often many of the students in my graduate medieval seminars are not familiar with Middle English language, literature, and culture. In contrast to the medievalist graduate students, these students come to my medieval seminars hoping to learn transferable skills. To meet the needs and interests of this varied audience of students, I've developed a class that features a theoretical framework, while also covering a wide range of medieval texts. Instead of the graduate class I used to teach on "Medieval Drama," my new "Medieval Performances" graduate class features selections from the York Plays (which have some of the best extant performance documentation) and includes a variety of ways to think about performance, including ritual, affective meditation, speech, and dance, as well as legal and sacramental concepts of performance. We consider the relationship between performative practices and a variety of textual forms including the civic drama, civic records, lyric poetry, poetry of the *dance macabre*, conduct books, and recipe books. The class includes criticism and theoretical texts from writers as diverse as Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, J. L. Austin, Michel de Certeau, and Eve K. Sedgwick. The syllabus is broadly framed and constructed, but ultimately inspired by, and radiates out from, the York Plays.

For this new course I no longer use Clifford Davidson's excellent TEAMS edition, *The York Corpus Christi Plays* (2011), but Christina Fitzgerald's *The York Corpus Christi Play: Selected Pageants* (2018), which, with its regularized spelling and conversion of Middle English to modern English letters, provides a welcome alternative for a class in which most graduate students will not be medievalists. The text of the edition maintains the York Plays' distinctive rhythm and diction, providing same-line glosses to more difficult terms and footnotes to explicate phrases more challenging for the modern reader. The book includes selections from the York Plays that feature all the pageants most useful to my class on performance, such as "The Crucifixion," "The Last Judgement," and the sequence of trial plays. In addition to presenting a well-edited regularized text of a selection of the York Plays, this book provides a host of additional materials that aid the instructor in putting the plays in broader cultural and performative contexts. Fitzgerald includes the Register of the York Plays, which contextualizes her choices in the larger compilation and succinctly demonstrates changes to the York Plays over time since not only pageants listed in the Register are in the York manuscript.

In the course, I include sections on civic space, affect, and speech that work well with the supplementary materials in Fitzgerald's edition. For instance, I turn to the edition's selections of civic and guild records to help students understand the role of the plays in city and guild life in the period, an approach of long-standing importance to medieval drama studies. The text includes an excerpt from *The Mercer's Pageant Accounts*, which lists expenses for the upkeep of the wagons and of various props, giving insight into the financial aspects of production as well as into the staging. It also includes an excerpt from the City Council in which the Skinners' guild petitioned the city for financial support to help the guild members afford to put on their pageant. These documents facilitate a class discussion of the ways that the York Plays, while Biblical in subject-matter, were supported by lay civic and guild interests and shaped by both politics and practical matters. In addition to providing a brief

introduction to the methods of archival studies, these documents ground a conversation about the ways that the plays perform and shape civic identity.

Later, we examine the social construction of space, anchoring our exploration in the document Fitzgerald includes in the back of her text showing payments from people wishing to select the locations for the “stations” where the wagons stopped to play individual pageants. These documents suggest that wealthy people had the ability to shape the pageant route and thus the performance—and even the meanings—of the plays themselves. This document opens up the possibility of understanding the York Plays’ engagement with space not just in terms of the material geography of the processional route, handily documented by a map of the route in the front of Fitzgerald’s edition, but also as a social product. I ground our discussion of this material in the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre, assigning students a portion of chapter 1 from *The Production of Space* that discusses three concepts of “spatial practice,” “representations of space” and “representational spaces” (2016). Fitzgerald’s convenient map of the city facilitates a discussion of the ways in which the plays were literally mapped onto the space of the city, in contrast to modern proscenium theater. We address the ways that the processional staging helped shape the meaning of the plays and consider how the imagined Biblical space of the play interacts with the physical space of the medieval city of York, making space an active participant in performance.

I further ground my discussion of concepts of space and performance in a close reading of York’s “Entry Into Jerusalem.” The play features Christ coming up to the gates of the city of Jerusalem—depicted as the medieval city of York itself—and engaging in dialogue with a porter to the city who is reluctant to admit him. The porter, who closely resembles a municipal official described in the York customal, consults the burgesses—figures of civic government—for advice. Most of the dialogue of the play occurs at the gates of the city, and the play focuses on defining what is part of the city and what should be excluded. Drawing on Lefebvre, I ask my students to consider, through a close reading of the text, how the play defines the city spatially. For example, I ask my students to identify the effect of the preponderance of spatial terms in the opening speech by Jesus, in which he tells his “dear disciples that been here” (2) that “My time to pass hence it draweth near” (4) and comments that He wants to bring the ass so that “the prophecy’s clear meaning / May be fulfilled here in this place” (24-25). When Christ is admitted at the end of the play, the gatekeeper says he will “Let him abide here in this street” (484-88). Drawing on the photograph of Micklegate and the city walls at the end of the text, we discuss the ways that “this street” in the “Entry Into Jerusalem” might be seen as simultaneously the heavenly city and the city of medieval York where the play is staged. The city in the play is both the material space of the city of York and an imagined space performed by the play.

I use the York “Crucifixion” to consider the performative nature of affect and its role in medieval concepts of drama, drawing on a range of texts that we have read earlier in the class prior to studying the York Plays. In an earlier class in which we read selections from Bonaventure’s *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, we discuss the centrality of the Passion to late medieval piety, and the growth of vernacular religious writing and affective religious practices in the period. I use close readings of excerpts from Bonaventure’s text to teach the students about affective contemplation, which asks readers to imagine themselves present in Biblical scenes, through visualization and the experience of physical sensations and emotions, and to teach the ways that the text presents affect and bodily experience as a way of knowing, and the sensual as a means of understanding the spiritual. When we

discuss the York “Crucifixion,” I ask my students to compare the dramatic text and the implied dramatic experience to the process of affective contemplation, and to compare the ways in which the body is used in both cases, noting that in theater the very medium is grounded in bodily practice and that theater is a public and collective experience rather than an internal one.

In our discussion of the York “Crucifixion,” we also draw on an earlier class dedicated to the Harley Lyrics (two of which are conveniently included in Fitzgerald’s edition of the York Plays in addition to two other Middle English Crucifixion lyrics.) For this earlier class on the lyric, I assign excerpts from Ingrid Nelson’s *Lyric Tactics*. In this book, Nelson builds on de Certeau’s concept of “tactics” and integrates discussion of “written text, performative practices, and poetic forms,” considering them as “central and interdependent features of medieval literature” and defines “the medieval lyric genre as much by what it *does* (its cultural work) and by what it *is* (its formal features)” (6). When we get to the York “Crucifixion,” I ask students to draw on Nelson’s ideas and to consider what happens to a medieval lyric when inset into a medieval play. We focus on close reading the words of Christ from the Cross comparing them to the four Passion lyrics in the back of Fitzgerald’s text. Students are generally interested in the role of the audience and the passer-by as the inset lyric explicitly addresses “All men that walk by way or street,” calling on them to “behold” his body, and to “fully feel now” what they see (lines 253-56). We discuss this invitation to identification in the context of Sara Ahmed’s theory (as articulated in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [2004]) that affect is constructed through interaction between individual and collective experience. In this case, individuals are both asked to identify with the suffering body of Christ and with the collective experience of the audience experiencing the play on the streets of medieval York.

I also ask the students to analyze the complex performativity of the York “Crucifixion” in the context of legal theories of witnessing and proof. In addition to analyzing Christ’s words from the cross as a Passion lyric, we consider them as an act of inviting the audience to bear witness. Medieval law required witnesses to testify to what they have seen and heard, a formulation with a clear analogy to the experience of witnessing a dramatic performance. The law also required witnesses to be drawn from the neighborhood, a definition relevant to Christ’s lyrical words from the cross (also a citation of Lamentation I.12), especially when spoken from a pageant wagon on the streets of medieval York at various stations along the pageant route. Medieval law, like modern law, required witnesses to swear that their testimony did not stem from the emotions of love or hate, identifying affect as a key component of medieval witnessing also relevant to contemporary dramatic experience.

Medieval legal practices also frame our discussion of the York “trial plays” a sequence of plays in Fitzgerald’s edition that include “The Trial Before Caiaphas and Annas,” “The First Trial Before Pilate (The Dream of Pilate’s Wife),” “The Trial Before Herod,” and “The Second Trial Before Pilate (The Judgment).” We consider broad questions of the analogy between trial and dramatic performance, which is easily recognizable to students because of the continuing popularity of TV courtroom dramas such as “Law and Order” and others. Referencing modern examples such as the Nuremberg trials, we consider the ways in which the performance of trials are important parts of history and how they help shape and express the collective values of a community. We also discuss the characterization of Christ and his detractors in legalistic terms as good and bad witnesses, respectively.

In addition to drawing on performative legal paradigms, I invite students to compare the dramatic texts of the trial plays to the advice of conduct books which we have studied earlier in the course,

especially in reference to their advice about the regulation of speech (as discussed in Christina Fitzgerald's monograph, *The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture* [2007] which I draw on indirectly but do not assign. Conduct poems are not included in her edition of the York Plays). For example, Christ's silences and regulation of speech correlate to the admonishments in conduct books to regulate one's speech as in "How the Wise Man Taught His Son" which instructs the reader to "beware what thou dost say, where and to whom." This regulation of speech is linked to other lessons of bodily self-regulation, such as proper table manners and proper grooming habits, taught in conduct books such as Caxton's *Book of Courtesy* (Furnivall 1868) and *The Babees Book* (Rickert 1908) (which we've read earlier in the semester), all of which are part of the *performance* of social status taught in these texts.

When I teach the York trial plays, I assign a section of J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* to introduce students to his concept of the "performative utterance," in which the "issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action" (1991, 6). We discuss the implication of Austin's famous reluctance to apply his concept of the performative utterance to theater. This generates a larger discussion—that begins with Austin but goes beyond his work—of the relationships between speech, action, and performance in the York Plays and in dramatic performance more generally. In addition to thinking about these formal questions of dramatic performance, I ask my students to consider how and when the effect of speech is presented in the plays as linked to institutional authority, such as that of church, monarch, or law and what this says about the allegiances and politics of the trial plays. We also talk about how the plays invite us to judge the people by the character of their speech.

In my class on York's "Resurrection" and "Last Judgment" Plays I draw on Sarah Beckwith's idea of "sacramental theater" as articulated in *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (2001). For this class, we read an excerpt from Hugh of St. Victor's *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith* (Deferrari 1951, esp. 154) in conjunction with the plays and with excerpts from Beckwith's book. We think about the ways in which Hugh of St. Victor's theorization of the sacraments can be understood as a performance theory, especially since it addresses questions of the relationship between actions and things, symbol and substance, perception and belief. As Beckwith has argued, all these questions are deeply relevant to understanding medieval theater and we tie them to a close reading of the two plays, concluding our discussion of the York Plays.

As this outline of portions of my class has shown, my class introduces graduate students to a broad range of medieval texts as well as a range of theoretical paradigms about performance, teaching students both specifically about medieval culture and providing tools for the study of other periods of literature. The contextual materials provided by Christina Fitzgerald in her edition of the York Plays provide a wealth of materials for the instructor of classes that feature drama as a means of understanding a wide range of medieval literature and culture. Ironically, an edition like Fitzgerald's, with its carefully selected supplementary materials, allows us to provide a richer understanding of medieval drama, late-medieval English culture, and multiple theoretical paradigms than a course using a Middle English text.

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