

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY KATHERINE SCHEIL

A Common Stage: Theater and Public Life in Medieval Arras. By Carol Symes. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007; pp. xx + 335, 24 illus. \$49.95 cloth. doi:10.1017/S0040557410000037

Reviewed by Helen Solterer, Duke University

The Greek city-state, London of the Globe, 1920s–1930s Berlin cabaret: to this list of communities whose performative culture proves vital to theatre history, it is now time to add another locale—medieval Arras. *A Common Stage: Theater and Public Life in Medieval Arras* makes this bold argument with erudition and imagination. Historian Carol Symes offers a systematic inquiry into the composers, actors, and audiences of this unfamiliar Franco-Flemish world, placing it in a comparative European and even American context.

At the heart of her inquiry lies a major revision of Jürgen Habermas's thesis of the public sphere. Far from a singularly modern situation linked to the rise of print culture and the press, she contends, the public sphere is already perceivable in the activities of hundreds in this town. Symes presents their voices and body languages, their improvisational uses of parchment and a medley of objects as they struggle to make a place for themselves among bourgeois, nobility, and clergy. In effect, she theatricalizes Habermas's public sphere. By attending to all the performative forms of culture that the sociologist did not consider, she reconstructs a public sphere that was defining urban life by the thirteenth century. Symes's common stage in Arras—created by and belonging to jongleurs, poet-musicians such as Jehan Bodel and Adam de la Halle, as well as preachers and nameless throngs of people—represents a powerful test case long before the Enlightenment.

Starting with maps that locate Arras as equidistant between London and Paris, Symes takes us into this vibrant commercial center neighborhood by neighborhood. She organizes her investigation around five of its works: Bodel's *Play of Saint Nicholas*, the anonymous *Courtly Lad of Arras* and *Boy and the Blind Man*, as well as Adam de la Halle's better-known *Play of the Bower* and *Robin and Marion*. With each of these works, she tackles a received idea: in Europe before 1400, there are no surviving records of production where there are plays, and no plays where there are records (6). She mobilizes an impressive array of archival evidence including the charter of a (trade) union of jongleurs, the Carité de Notre Dame des Ardents, miniatures showing ritual behavior during the Catholic Mass, seals of individual performers, as well as a satire of the Passion liturgy. She also assembles a type of immaterial evidence—the sounds of church bells, the buzz of fast-talking merchants and street people. Some of this evidence has long been known, and some has long disappeared from critical view. Through

a series of investigations of individual works, Symes combines her evidence in original ways and exemplifies the value of using performance as her chief analytical tool (278).

Bodel and his *Saint Nicholas* is the first example of Symes's critical iconoclasm. Critics often invoke the Crusades in their efforts to make sense of this drama, with its African king converted by the city's patron saint and its backdrop of Saracens battling Christians. By following the multilingual Bodel during the time when his city was ceded by Flanders to France, Symes situates his work in the context of civic upheaval in Arras. His *Nicholas* scenario was born out of the disputes between the citizenry and the new Capetian French rulers. The drama expressed a political, economic rivalry between a rich town and an up-and-coming monarch, transposed and performed through a Crusading story. Bodel thus emerges as an enterprising figure who capitalized on this power struggle for the benefit of his community. While Arras was losing political autonomy, his play helped to secure its cultural prestige, since it was written not in the language of the French kingdom but in the town's vernacular, Picard, which became "the gold standard" for performance and written records across a large area of northern Europe (64). For Symes, this sort of activism in the public sphere puts Bodel in league with another civic-minded playwright: Shakespeare of London (37).

With the *Courtly Lad of Arras* and *Boy and the Blind Man*, Symes tracks the anonymous city people who shaped their own communal space. Like several generations of critics, she turns to these stories of the country bumpkin and the street beggar because they are linked to actors who founded a professional confraternity of sorts. She argues that another community was formed out of the social discord among civil, ecclesiastical, and royal authorities (121). This "lordship of jongleurs," as they were called, created scripts of civic power transmitted through the media of town life. These performers are Symes's paradigmatic public figures, and they are joined by a variety of collaborators: scribes who managed the jongleurs' household accounts; itinerant religious folk who hawked their creed in the marketplace alongside those performing the *Courtly Lad*; and the town criers, in her view, "the public man" (143). Assembling all these actors in a Habermasian public sphere, Symes extends the definition of theatre in the premodern European world. Far from a literary genre, it existed as an influential medium of social construction.

Symes hits her stride when she investigates Adam de la Halle. Plays attributed to him have long been cherished by directors and critics working in French and in English. The *Play of the Bower* (*Jeu de la Feuillée*), so the standard line goes, is a world upside down. Bakhtin's dominating theory of carnival has helped to convert Adam's *Bower* into a midnight romp that resembles a Situationist happening more than any activity in Arras around 1237. Symes returns the play to a specific town square, linking its performances to acts of religious devotion. *Feuillée* is not a code for folly, but rather a leafy archway built over a reliquary, a centerpiece of Marian processions in which poets, performers, and the whole town participated. Symes undoes another critical commonplace for the *Robin and Marion* play. "Once again, we find ourselves confronted with a

play . . . approximating a lived reality” (238). Her research anchors Adam’s work in the world of Count Robert II of Arras, whose court was “a perpetual theater” where men and women regularly impersonated literary characters (257, 245). However difficult it is to trace Adam’s professional life in the count’s theatricalized world, from Arras all the way to Sicily, Symes the historian is not stymied, though she deftly acknowledges the limits of her project, strengthening her argument that “the medieval public sphere was larger and more buoyant” than during the eighteenth century, its theatre “more multi-faceted, immediate, and representative” than that of the English Renaissance (279).

Symes offers a compelling argument of origins about early European theatre, joining a lineage of critics: O. B. Hardison Jr. and Marius Sepet, who underscored the religious matrix; Gustave Cohen on politics; and Jody Enders’s influential *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama* (1992). In proposing Arras as a crucible for public culture, Symes leaves no document uninspected, no audiovisual sign ill-considered. Translating the works into rhymed verse, she also takes a daring and whimsical step toward English-speaking audiences.

As I read this significant book, I found myself with only one unsatisfied wish: that she had tipped her hat to Paul Zumthor, who conceptualized the fundamental theatricality of medieval culture. Poet, critic, and Paris ’68 intellectual, Zumthor pioneered this principle in his *Essay on Medieval Poetics* (1972), arguing that all texts from this world were destined to function theatrically. He did so without Symes’s knowledge of manuscripts, but with a deep understanding of the physical force of theatrical forms. A generation later, Symes provides a specific urban history to his insight, giving it material heft and a new critical direction. Symes’s argument will no doubt set parameters for the next generation to come.



Modern Mysteries: Contemporary Productions of Medieval English Cycle Dramas. By Katie Normington. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007; pp. 192, 24 illus. \$60 cloth.

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Reviewed by Karen Sawyer Marsalek, St. Olaf College

In *Modern Mysteries: Contemporary Productions of Medieval English Cycle Dramas*, Katie Normington asks why productions of medieval cycle plays, popularly referred to as mystery plays, became more common in the decade surrounding the New Millennium. After outlining some medieval staging practices and their relationship to current performance theory, Normington identifies three common objectives of recent directors of mystery plays: experimentation with staging practices and nonnaturalistic acting styles; articulation of contemporary meaning through directorial concepts; and