

The Liturgicality of the N-Town Play

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Abstract

This thesis challenges the received wisdom about the dramatic text known as the N-Town Play in particular and about medieval liturgy in general. It provides a reassessment of the play through an examination of the liturgical material included within this complex mystery. The two main conclusions are, firstly, that the commonplace descriptions of the play as a conservative cousin to the northern civic cycles do it an injustice and, secondly, that the extant text could have been compiled for private reading rather than public staging.

The thesis begins with a discussion on the nature of drama and liturgy: there is a less than clear-cut distinction between the two media, which is further blurred by the integration of liturgical material into a dramatic text. An overview of recent scholarship on drama and liturgy indicates that this project negotiates the topic from a new perspective.

The N-Town Play is then considered within its geographical, religious, and political context. The heart of the thesis is a detailed analysis of the liturgical material in the play and the effects of its inclusion on the play's text and putative audiences. A picture emerges of a liturgical anthology within an anthology of drama; liturgy is employed in a variety of dramatic effects; and there is an emphasis on strong, devotional women. This assessment is tested against other late-medieval cycles: dramatic and non-dramatic texts from northern England, East Anglia, and the Low Countries, and four iconographic schemes.

The final chapter compares the N-Town Play with other anthologies and collections, arguing that it is as close in content and format to works intended for private reading as it is to those for public performance: indeed, its purpose probably changed either during or after the process of metamorphosis from separate plays to amalgamation into the extant manuscript.

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