
H-France Review Vol. 3 (August 2003), No. 81

Jody Enders, *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. xxx + 324 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, appendix, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-20787-0.

Review by Laura A. Smoller, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

In this intriguingly-titled book, Jody Enders, professor of French at the University of California at Santa Barbara, examines tales told and retold about the medieval French stage. Her contention is that these stories, whether found in medieval chronicles or in modern collections of theatrical anecdotes, bear a close resemblance to contemporary urban legends: tales that, while plausible enough on the surface, turn out to be maddeningly unverifiable and hence represent more a window into cultural fears and anxieties than an accurate depiction of past actions. After years of reading medieval saints' lives and miracle stories, I am extremely sympathetic to this argument; some stories circulate not because they are obviously true but rather because they should be true. The "medieval urban legends" Enders narrates fall easily into this category, a point she makes eloquently and persuasively in her prologue. What she does with this observation is somewhat more problematic. Enders attempts to write a book that tells the story of "[t]he real life of medieval theatricality . . . to medievalists, theater historians, cultural historians, performance theorists, fiction lovers, urban-legend mavens, and general readers" (p. xxviii). Anyone crossing that many disciplinary lines is bound to disappoint some of her audience at least some of the time. As a historian, I found myself both enchanted by the stories Enders relates and mystified by the questions she uses them to raise.

At the heart of Enders's book are fourteen tales or clusters of tales. (To her great credit, an appendix reproduces these stories in the original languages, whether from edited versions of medieval sources or from collections of theatrical anecdotes.) These stories fall into two large groups. Those in part one, "Telling the Difference," all lead to reflections about what Enders calls "the truth of pretense" (p. 3), raising questions about "that passing strange moment when it becomes impossible to tell if life is imitating art or art is imitating life" (p. 2). The anecdotes in part two, "Make-Believe," all date from the first half of the sixteenth century and raise the issue, according to Enders, of whether theatrical uncertainty was equated with theological uncertainty.

Enders's typical pattern is to introduce a story, proffer reasons why it fits the moniker "urban legend," and then reflect on what the tale reveals about the hopes, fears, or anxieties of its tellers. She asserts that the important feature of the stories she studies is not so much whether they were true or not but rather that people believed them to be true. Perhaps for that reason, Enders often enters into speculations about the motivations and reactions of the characters involved in her legendary tales as if they were in fact true. These musings are often prompted by modern literary theory, theater criticism, and psychology. She is particularly fond of J. L. Austin's notion of the "performative," meaning those "speech acts' that alter real life [in that] 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action'" (p. 10). There is, in fact, something almost postmodern about the sensibilities of many medieval texts, and not infrequently Enders's juxtapositions of medieval tale and modern theory show almost uncannily

connections between the two. She can also, however, take modern theory to task, particularly for what she sees as an almost callous disregard for reality and real people.

For example, chapter one, “Lusting after Saints,” takes up the story of a performance of the life of Saint Catherine of Siena in fifteenth-century Metz. The actress who played the part of Catherine was reportedly so charming in her role that a gentleman named Henry de la Tour fell in love with her and made her his bride. After noting some rather jarring inconsistencies in the two chronicles that are the source of the tale—as with urban legends, the story is ultimately unverifiable—by chapter’s end, Enders is speculating whether marriage to a woman skilled in acting the part of the headstrong Catherine of Siena would have been a happy ending for either Henry or the unnamed actress. Chapter two, “Queer Attractions,” also has Enders looking for a happy ending. Here she tells the story of a young man named Lyonard, another Metz actor, who reportedly played the part of Saint Barbara so well that both a widow and a cleric named Jehan Chardelly offered to “nourish and raise” (p. 31) him, with Master Jehan winning out and sponsoring the boy’s education and eventual career in the clergy. Enders speculates about the erotic attractions felt by both the widow and the cleric to the actor who portrayed “a saint’s life packed with tortures of a positively perverse sexuality” (p. 32). The real winner here, she says, was the Church, which not only gained a talented man of the cloth but also saw “ratified [its] self-fulfilling prophecy about the people’s attraction to filth, obscenity, and effeminacy” (p. 41).

Chapter three, “Of Madness and Method Acting,” offers up Enders’s reflections on an anecdote told by the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata about an incident in which an actor portraying the madness of Ajax actually went insane on the stage, nearly killing the unfortunate actor in the role of Odysseus. This story provokes comparisons with so-called “method acting,” in which actors are encouraged to forget technique and simply to become their characters, as well as with modern theories about observers’ inability, in certain cases, to tell the difference between the real and the simulated, a condition symbolized here and elsewhere in the book by Stanley Cavell’s description of the “yokel” who leapt on stage to rescue Desdemona from the murderous Othello. Contrary to these theorists, Enders insists both that such audience reactions are not always naïve and wrong and that, in the case of Lucian’s Odysseus and some other more recent similar examples, the actors “were genuinely in danger and not in the appearance of danger” (p. 48).

The stories told in chapters four through seven (“Two Priests and the Hand of God,” “Dying to Play,” “The Eel of Melun,” and “The Devil Who Wasn’t There”) all deal with those odd moments where life does imitate art. In chapter four, Enders takes up another tale from fifteenth-century Metz, in which the priest playing Jesus in a passion play nearly does die on the cross, while the cleric acting the part of Judas almost asphyxiates in portraying Judas’s suicide by hanging. Both actors had to be rescued by astute observers. Enders uses this story to comment on “the dreaded moment when theatrical events are not quite representation and not quite reality” (p. 66), speculating on the reactions of both audience members and actors at such a time. In chapter five, Enders spins out two stories from the late fourteenth century in which special effects involving cannons led to the death of two stage hands. Enders uses these examples to berate modern critics; as she says, the two men “did not die from any theory of the rehearsal of real effects” (p. 74), and “not all the phenomenology and reception theory in the world can refute what two men have confirmed definitively: the very real prospect of a performative death by drama” (p. 76). Key here is the fact that the two deaths are documented in royal letters of remission. One may well wonder why these true tales belong in a book devoted to medieval “urban legends” save for their resemblance to other, undocumentable stories related about deaths in the theater.

Chapter six treats more obviously legendary material, the supposed source of a French proverb: “He’s like the Eel of Melun: screaming before you skin him!” (p. 79). The story, reported in a nineteenth-century history of the French theater, has an actor named Languille (The Eel) playing the role of St. Bartholomew, whose martyrdom involves his being flayed alive. Languille, apparently, found the special effects so realistic that he began to scream before the knife ever touched him. Chapter seven begins with

another tale from Enders's rich trove of material from Metz, in which an actor playing the role of a devil has relations with his wife while still in costume; nine months later she delivers a baby that is half human and half devil. A string of similar tales leads Enders to speculations about the anxieties and religious squeamishness that produced so many stories hinting "that the Devil might materialize at any time in theatrical company" (p. 96).

Chapters eight through fourteen deal with tales from the early sixteenth century, a period in which, as Enders argues, religious drama sought not so much to present believable illusions as to make audiences believe correctly (p. 102). In chapter eight, Enders shows that this task was often made more difficult by the laughter of audiences, who, in the anxious minds of religious authorities, "[took] pleasure in all the wrong things" (p. 107) in an almost child-like fashion, increasing religious worries about the theater and the unintended messages its audiences might take home from performances. In chapter nine, Enders unravels the story of a play commemorating an alleged host-desecration miracle from thirteenth-century Paris (the miracle story itself is here the urban legend). She suggests that such a play was designed to answer clerics' anxieties about the theater by "certify[ing] that the Jewish religion was mere spectacle" (p. 117). She also speculates convincingly that the legend itself was embellished by the plays commemorating the miracle, that is, "that certain aspects of an actual performance attached themselves to the original story (or stories)" (p. 123).

In chapter ten, Enders attempts to get to the bottom of a nineteenth-century author's claim that the relics of three martyrs were used on stage as part of a play commemorating their martyrdom staged in Romans in 1509. Here, her speculations seem to me off-base. The play, according to records quoted by Enders, was staged by a confraternity who had successfully invoked the three saints to cease a plague two years' previously (p. 133). Enders makes of this performance, which from the accounting she quotes seems to represent some sort of *ex-voto*, a second act of invocation, and she insists that "it problematized one of the most fiercely debated issues of Reformation theology" (p. 133): the cult of the saints. Never mind that the year is 1509, not 1539; Enders relates the physical plague of 1507 to the spiritual plague of heresy (p. 135), presumably in the form of a Protestant theology that would question the role of the saints.

In chapter eleven, she probes the tale of a quarry near Doué that Francis I supposedly allowed those in the region to use as a theater, to the considerable profit of the local peasants. According to Enders, this story "concretizes the anxiety about what happens when theater is wrested from the hegemony and delivered—even partially—to the people" (p. 147). In other words, the troublesome detail in the story is the fact that local peasants profited from the theater, although, according to Enders, the worry that audiences would respond religiously to the theater, or to the theatrical sermons of Huguenot ministers was the "rock bottom line of the quarry of Doué-la-Fontaine" (p. 155). (Enders delights in this sort of coy punning.)

Chapter twelve takes off from a report of a 1547 play in which the special effects really appeared miraculous when five barley loaves and two fishes somehow did manage to be distributed to a thousand spectators, with twelve full baskets left over. Given the Protestant questioning of miracles, Enders wonders, "[h]ow...was the...audience to know what to see and believe?" (p. 160). Since religious drama could raise theologically hairy questions, Enders suggests, Catholic clerics became increasingly anxious and "responded with real repressions" (p. 168), although more repressions of "heretical speech," than of the theater itself. In chapter thirteen, however, the tale of the unhappy ends of several actors from the short-lived wooden theater in Meaux (1547-49)—the actor playing Despair, for example, hanged himself—leads Enders to intimate that the Catholic Church itself closed down the theater for "creat[ing]...psychic disturbances" like Despair's suicide. That the theater's site became an Ursuline convent seems "quintessential poetic justice for the Catholic Church" (p. 181).

In chapter fourteen, Enders probes her “title story,” a bizarre tale from a nineteenth-century author asserting that during Philip II’s triumphal entry into Tournai in 1549, among the festivities arranged for his visit was an enactment of the story of Judith and Holofernes in which convicted criminals were cast in the two roles, carrying out a real beheading in the place of the usual stage-effects. The audience offered both applause and cries of indignation; Philip, it was reported, simply remarked “nice blow” (p. 183). With absolutely no contemporary evidence to support the tale, this story fits well into Enders’s category of “urban legend,” although she entertains the possibility that it might be true. She links the tale’s circulation to Catholic-Protestant tensions as well as to fears familiar to modern readers that seeing violence on the stage (or screen) creates a demand for more violence.

An epilogue offers Enders’s observation that, while what matters for the scholar is that the tellers of her tales believed in their truth, the actual truth or falsity of the stories “has to matter.” In the end, she concludes, “life and theater each seem more real when permeated with the theatricality of the other” (p. 202). And with that observation, she says, the middle ages and the modern world are not so different. Perhaps this remark sums up as well both the strengths and the weaknesses of this study. Enders has assembled a fascinating collection of anecdotes that opens up a window to the late medieval stage, as well as to the fears and anxieties of its performers and audiences. Just as often, however, the window through which she peers looks instead into modern television and film, method acting, or postmodern critical theory. She makes clear the point that in the theater lines blur between pretense and reality. In the end, it was that blurring that made late medieval clerics both employ the theater as a didactic tool and worry that its messages might be misperceived. That fear about the ultimately uncontrollable power of a captivating media-form links the medieval and the modern world.

Laura A. Smoller
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
lasmoller@ualr.edu

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172