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Carol Symes, *A Common Stage: Theater and Public Life in Medieval Arras*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007. xvi + 335 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-8014-4581-1.

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Medieval theater studies—(and whether one elects to say “theater studies” or “drama studies” is part of the problem)—is home to a divided population with subdivisions that only a medieval scholastic could love. On the theater side of things live performance studies, ritual, philosophy, and even canonical theater history and criticism; even within that community, twains do not meet between archive-dwellers and theorists, or between the actors, directors, and other practitioners who bring living arts to life (or back to life).<sup>[1]</sup> Meanwhile, on the drama side of things, departments of English, foreign languages, and comparative literature (bearing the scars of old fissures), compete separately, if rarely equally, for the better interpretations of dramatic texts-on-the-page via such enduring debates as the Old vs. the New Historicism or the Old vs. the New Philology. Theory-savvy medievalists in English departments often wonder: Just how many more analyses of the Chester plays can there be? Meanwhile, hundreds of medieval French theater pieces remain critically untouched. To put the matter polemically: scholars of medieval Britain have everything to say about very little; whereas most scholars of medieval France have very little to say about everything theatrical. Enter Carol Symes, who brings expertise, elegance, and flair to her exquisite history of one of the richest theatrical bodies of work extant in any European vernacular: that of the thriving, thirteenth-century city of Arras.

One of the rare scholars trained in both social history and theatrical practice, Symes comprehends, as few others, the relentless complexities of acting, casting, direction, production, and even set design. In a deeply learned and superbly written book that belongs on the bookshelf of any medievalist, she has written that rare hybrid that traces, in depth, breadth, and scope a bona fide social history of a single medieval site. Part manifesto and part exemplary case study, the book shows why historians must attend to medieval theatricality and why theater historians must attend to historical studies. Refreshingly, Symes does not merely talk the talk but walks the walk of true interdisciplinarity. In that sense, *A Common Stage* is a stunning accomplishment: superlative argumentation; handsome appearance—both Symes and Cornell University Press are to be commended, for instance, for providing face-to-face Old French and English translations for inset quotes. It also avoid the two great pitfalls that so frequently inform work of this nature, namely, a style that oscillates uneasily between literary and historical events and the impressionistic usage of such terms as “theater,” “drama,” “performance,” and “theatricality” as mere metaphors. Symes has produced an integrated, contextualized reading of medieval theatrical life in Arras, which was “not merely . . . the first medieval town to produce vernacular plays,” she points out, but “the first to produce scripts recognizable to modern eyes *as plays*” (p. 2, her emphasis). And all readers will profit from her understanding and painstaking reconstruction of its civic life through an overarching argument that bears repeating:

I argue that the malleable forms in which medieval performances survive, and the permeable conditions in which they were devised and received, call for different ways of looking *for* and *at* the evidence of plays and their larger role in medieval public life. This book takes account of the

practical and material processes by which these artifacts and their companion texts were created and exposes the teleology that has elevated only a few to the status of drama. It treats *all* premodern texts as potential participants in a culture of performance—some as the residue of performed actions, some as prompts for performance, some as the focal points of performance—and juxtaposes plays with the variety of other activities alongside which they were produced and transmitted: the display of charters, crying of news, taking of legal testimony, exhibition of relics, celebration of liturgies, organization of ceremonies, preaching of doctrine, telling of tales (p. 2, her emphasis).

All of this is noteworthy and astutely observed. But just because this is news to a number of historians does not mean that it is news to those who study the medieval stage, who have long defined medieval theatrical culture as historically, philologically, paleographically, codicologically, even musicologically contingent.

If anything, O. B. Hardison, in his signature *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* released us, in 1965, from precisely the teleological tyranny that Symes is denouncing: he did so by looking, not to the popular culture of the ritual forms so exhaustively catalogued and analyzed by E. K. Chambers in *The Mediaeval Stage* and by so many after him like Johan Huizinga, Lawrence Clopper, and William Tydeman in a hefty recent compilation of primary sources from all walks of life, but to the bona fide theater of the church, which Hardison synthesized from the work of Karl Young in an intellectual *tour de force* about Darwinism.<sup>[2]</sup> Medieval French theater, moreover, has long attracted the attention of such towering figures as L. Petit de Julleville and Gustave Cohen, whose work finds new relevance daily in the able hands of Elyse Dupras, Alan Knight, Elie Konigson, Jelle Koopmans, Donald Maddox, Charles Mazouer, Lynette Muir, Thierry Revol, Henri Rey-Flaud, Graham Runnalls, Darwin Smith, and Rainer Warning (to name but a few).<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed, this reviewer has been performing and advocating the inclusion and investigation of precisely those sorts of protodramatic activity since 1992.<sup>[4]</sup> To be sure, Symes provides a copious critical apparatus which seems short nonetheless, especially in theater theory and performance studies, for a subject of this complexity (pp. 285-316); and she makes extensive use of the rich bibliographic work of others. But she tends to suggest throughout that decades of the very work that makes *A Common Stage* possible, valuable, and appreciated was performed by a motley crew of compilers rather than by thinkers or synthesizers—that is, until *enfin Symes vint*. For theater historians, the stellar contribution of this book is that no single scholar has ever documented how the much-ballyhooed medieval openness to civic theatricality produced such rich and varied dramatic activity in a single site. The demonstration is new; the insights about the nature of medieval ludic culture, less so.

By that remark, I mean in no way to discount the importance of what Carol Symes has done in offering fresh readings of the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, the *Courtois d'Arras*, *Le Garçon et l'aveugle*, *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, and the *Jeu de la Feuillée*: analyses that, especially for the last of those works, can be described in one way alone: brilliant. Each chapter places one of those plays center stage in fascinating contexts too numerous to mention, such as the thirteenth-century “The Meaning Which One Ought to Enact within Oneself at Mass” (*Li senefiance comment on se doit contenir a le messe*) (see esp. pp. 168-174) which, at the very minimum, ought to compel the immediate attention of anyone interested in the public or private performance of piety <sup>[5]</sup>—and which should also set performance theorists hot on the trail of any and all prototheatrical connotations of the verb *contenir*. In a veritable dramatic arc that spans five chapters toward a conclusion, Symes dedicates her Introduction, “Locating a Medieval Theater,” to the methods, historiography, and theory described above.

She then reads, in chapter one, “A History Play: The *Jeu de saint Nicolas* and the World of Arras,” the work of Jehan Bodel in the context of the physical spaces of ecclesiastical and civic life, numismatics, Christian (rather than the more familiar Jewish) money-lending, and the geographical nature of the performance of otherness. Arguing convincingly that, as early as its prologue, “the play and its audience

are poised between a culture that accepts performance itself as authoritative and one in which performances must be grounded in writing” (p. 33), Symes concludes that “[a] crier could be himself and a crier in a play. A king could be a foreigner from France and a foreigner from Outremer. The Town of Arras could be the town in a play. The marketplace could be a theater” (p. 62). The exposition, here and elsewhere, is only marred slightly by its numerous subsections—seven of them in the first chapter, some as short as a scant four pages—which make for a reading experience best termed *saccadée*.

In chapter two, “Prodigals and Jongleurs: Initiative and Agency in a Theater Town,” Symes turns to the sophisticated, eloquent, and theologically astute figure of the Arras jongleur. Here, she demonstrates that a culture of confraternity in the *Carité de Notre Dame des Ardents* produced, via the legend of its own origins and of the highly adaptable pieces it produced like the *Courtois d’Arras*, the focal play of the chapter, complex, migratory allegories that, while localized in Arras, need not have been. Symes walks a fine line, contending that the play is both remarkable and unremarkable, as when she inveighs against the “covert and overt falsifications of medieval plays’ ‘modern’ appearance that have fed the narrow conceptualization of a medieval theater by imposing artificial restrictions on its sources. *Courtois* is certainly an exceptionally attractive play, but it is not exceptional as a play. It is one of a great many pieces performed during the thirteenth century in Arras and elsewhere, couched in a variety of forms but sharing many of the same functions, audiences, and enactors” (p. 72). The pay-off proves what many scholars have been saying for years about the performance of power in civic culture, especially in the Low Countries: that, by means of theater, the *Carité* “inverted the social order and created a new community out of the disjunctions and disharmonies that prevailed in Arras” (p. 121). While individual jongleurs, she continues, “were performing the hazards of social mobility in play, a confraternity of jongleurs was rising to a position of actual prominence on the strength of its members’ collective self-invention and the cultivation of a religious community that could support it” (pp. 125-26).

Symes devotes chapter three, “Access to the Media: Publicity, Participation, and the Public Sphere,” to the moveable wealth and, most notably, the public performance of private piety in the theatrical context of *Le Garçon et l’aveugle*, making for a rich assessment of actors in the public sphere (or of what contemporary performance theorists are wont to call the theater of everyday life). She draws on past scholarship on the theatrical nature of jurisprudence and rhetoric and agrees with many medievalists that early theater belongs to what we call today media studies. Of special note is a much neglected aspect of theatrical life that has long been ripe for rethinking: although Symes does not mention the *ars dictaminis* per se, she advocates a theatrical reading of the crying of news, a highly theatrical—one could certainly say proto-theatrical—event that has been much researched by art historians and historians alike in their attention to the ways in which performers navigated a large variety of civic spaces for the dissemination of information.[6] This is a chapter about, if not necessarily Philippe Buc’s “dangers” of ritual, then, certainly, about the role of a malleable ritual in the “making and unmaking of space” (p. 151).[7]

Chapter four, “Relics and Rites, ‘The Play of the Bower’ and Other Plays,” is, without question, the most innovative, most historically adept, most imaginative, and most convincing reading of Adam de la Halle’s famous *Jeu de la Feuillée* ever written. Although any beginning student of medieval French drama is conversant with the play, few have been able to converse intelligently about its pre-Absurdist, almost dada-esque concatenations of sense and nonsense, prompting Symes to invoke, as templates for its insanity, both Bakhtinian carnival and modern Rorschach tests. Thanks to her philological revelations on the interrelations between *feuillie* and *fiertre* (pp. 193-207), she is able to link reliquaries, Marian-inflected bowers, and legally permitted sites of performance (theological and other). This is a dazzling reading that represents medieval studies at its apogee; and it should be required reading in any theater history course. Only Symes has understood (with fabulous English translations to boot) the context of what it meant, philologically, theatrically, theoretically, ethically, legally, and theologically to perform the *Jeu de la feuillée*, such that she asks whether, “[w]hen Guillos says that it’s time to go and

offer a candle at the *fier tre* of Notre-Dame, is he on his way to stand with the other ardens in the doorway of the chapel in the marketplace, to await the coming of the Sainte-Chandelle? If so, the performance of the *Jeu de la feuillée* had whiled away the short late summer night as a prologue to the Virgin's holy rites" (p. 231).

The *Jeu de Robin et de Marion* (as well as its fortunes outside of Arras) come to new life in Chapter 5, "Lives in the Theater," where Symes reads the play in the context of actors' wages, the material culture of vellum, wax and seals, parodic legal discourse, translation (of relics and language), the person of Robert d'Artois, and which even finds her wondering whether the play might constitute "an obscene parody of the *Quem queritis*" trope (p. 255)—all in "a play that is participating in public life and approximating a lived reality" (p. 238). Concerning the role of minstrels in civic life, we learn, much to our profit, that "not only did the entertainers of Robert's household sometimes take the field, but they acted as messengers, heralds, and emissaries as well. In so doing, they were expected to bring theater, or at least a touch of theatricality, to diplomatic missions and everyday life—so long as their lives were spared" (p. 249).

A brief conclusion "On Looking into a Medieval Theater" occupies some five pages, the first two of which are devoted with such clarity to the book's main arguments that they might have functioned better as an introduction; the final words invite a meditation on the future of Arras as well as our own.

The late O. B. Hardison used to say, in conversation, that medieval drama was a "many headed beast," the evidence for which was to be found and, above all, sought in unexpected places. Although Symes's quest itself is not new, her evidence is rich and unexpected as she adds her voice to a large community ever interested in the ways in which medieval theatricality changed the meaning of ordinary spaces, investing and reinvesting them with meanings old and new.

## NOTES

[1] On the fortunes of the theater department in the U.S., see Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[2] I refer here to O. B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965): Essay 1, "Darwin, Mutations, and the Origin of Medieval Drama"; E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903); Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2001); William Tydeman, gen. ed., *The Medieval European Stage, 500-1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933). See also Donnalee Dox, *The Idea of the Theater in Latin Christian Thought: Augustine to the Fourteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

[3] It would be impossible to do justice to the rich comparatist work in medieval theater studies; so this list is limited to influential book-length studies of medieval French theater. See L. Petit de Julleville, *Les mystères*, vols. 1 and 2 of *Histoire du théâtre en France* (1880; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine, 1968); and Gustave Cohen, *Histoire de la mise en scène dans le théâtre religieux français du moyen-âge*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Champion, 1951); as well as Elyse Dupras, *Diabes et saints: Rôle des diabes dans les mystères hagiographiques français* (Geneva: Droz, 2006); Alan E. Knight, *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1983)—Symes cites an earlier article but not the book; Elie Konigson, *L'Espace théâtral médiéval* (Paris: CNRS, 1975); Jelle Koopmans, *Le Théâtre des exclus au Moyen Age: hérétiques, sorcières et marginaux* (Paris: Imago, 1997); Donald Maddox, *The Semiotics*

of *Deceit: The Pathelin Era* (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 1984); Charles Mazouer, *Le Théâtre français du moyen-âge* (Paris: SEDES, 1998); Lynette R. Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Thierry Revol, *Représentations du sacré dans les textes dramatiques des XIe-XIIIe siècles en France* (Paris: Champion, 1999); Henri Rey-Flaud, *Le Cercle magique: Essai sur le théâtre en rond à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) and *Pour une dramaturgie du moyen-âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980); the prolific Graham Runnalls, e.g., *Études sur les mystères* (Paris: Champion, 1998); Darwin Smith, *Maître Pierre Pathelin: Le Miroir d'Orgueil* (Saint-Benoît-du-Sault: Tarabuste, 2002); and Rainer Warning, *The Ambivalences of Medieval Religious Drama*, trans., Steven Rendall (1974; Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[4] See, e.g., Jody Enders, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama*, *Rhetoric and Society*, 1 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[5] See, e.g., Thomas H. Bestul, *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Texts and Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

[6] For helpful introductions to the topic, which do not appear in the Bibliography, see *La Circulation des nouvelles au moyen âge: XXIVe congrès de la S.H.M.E.S., Avignon, juin 1993* ([Rome]: École française de Rome; Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1994); and Barbara Hanawalt and Michal Kobiak, eds., *The Medieval Practices of Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[7] Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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