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## Carol J. Harvey, Medieval French Miracle Plays: Seven Falsely Accused Women.

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Carol J. Harvey, *Medieval French Miracle Plays: Seven Falsely Accused Women*. Dublin and Portland: Four Courts Press, 2011. 167 pp. Bibliography, plates and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84682-273-5.

Review by Vicki L. Hamblin, Western Washington University.

The miracle plays of the fourteenth century brought sacred and secular narratives to the stages of medieval France. These relatively short performances present an episode in the life of a model Christian who faces a particularly difficult conflict or threat from within the social hierarchy of the medieval era or from among the dark forces emanating from hell. Predictably, divine intervention sustains the protagonist's righteousness, remorse, steadfastness, or courage so that s/he triumphs against these threats. Given their proclivity for this authoritative and moralistic backdrop, miracle plays tend to share a number of thematic and dramatic conventions. Alongside divine mediation we find rhymed couplets, contemporized narratives, integrated sermons and hymns, as well as a speech-then-action performance style, all characteristics common to these productions.[1]

The Cangé manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, f.fr. 819-820), with forty miracle plays in two vellum volumes, is the primary source of our understanding of this performance genre and of its texts. Harvey's work focuses on a subset of the plays in the collection and situates itself in the long tradition of literary analyses of pre-modern dramatic texts. Harvey's rationale for selecting this subset of plays is not only that they were performed consecutively during a ten-year period, but that an unusual number of these plays have as protagonist an innocent woman who is wrongly accused or threatened but who, by virtue of her own steadfast faith, is eventually delivered by divine intercession. Since these plays were produced by a goldsmiths' guild that favored a Marian cult, the Virgin herself either descends to the stage or otherwise mediates on behalf of these persecuted heroines. Furthermore, the ten-year period selected for analysis (1368-1379) was characterized by an especially conflicted relationship between the goldsmiths and the royalty they served. Harvey's contention is that the female victims in these plays, who are threatened by aristocratic scoundrels then aided by morally-upstanding burghers, are a bid by the goldsmiths to subvert the authority enjoyed by the monarchy and to demonstrate their own value as society's more stalwart leaders.

To reach this conclusion, Harvey organizes her research in the following manner. First, a foreword by Kathy Krause lays the theoretical background upon which Harvey's work builds by positing that, despite being long ignored by phallogocentric and elitist scholarship, female protagonists actually emerged from folklore traditions in which the wrongly accused heroine is a long-standing archetype. This literary prototype emerges in the literature of the fourteenth century.

Next, the introduction contextualizes historically the Cangé manuscript and its collection of plays, which are identified on its frontispiece as the *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages*. Produced by the Parisian goldsmiths' guild, this prized manuscript records for posterity both the play texts and the winning *sirventes* that were performed during the guild's annual *pays* between 1339 and 1382. Also described are the plays' sources: hagiography; the Marian legends of Gautier de Coinci; epic history; courtly romance; and folklore. Finally, the subset of persecuted heroines is justified thematically as the

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basis for this new examination of the plays, promising a detailed analysis of the “salient features of each in order to elucidate both their commonalities and their individual characteristics” (p. 26).

Each of seven chapters thereafter treats the individual miracle plays in the subset. These are: *Une femme que Notre Dame garda d’être arse* (Miracle 26); *L’empereris de Romme* (Miracle 27); *Miracle d’Oton, roy d’Espagne* (Miracle 28); *La fille du roy de Hongroie* (Miracle 29); *Miracle de Berthe* (Miracle 31); *Miracle du Roy Thierry* (Miracle 32); and *La fille d’un roy* (Miracle 37). The chapters are constructed in similar fashion and, with one exception, are of comparable length.<sup>[2]</sup> They provide a résumé of the narrative, contextualize any cultural material that is relevant to each narrative, and analyze the thematic content as it relates to the wrongly accused heroine, to other miracles in the collection, and to broader cultural issues.

Finally, the conclusion reiterates the major themes of the miracles plays in the subset, speaks to possible performance issues, and elaborates further on the premise that “the plays provide a dramatic space within which the dominant discourse could be challenged” (p. 156).

Three of the seven analyses that comprise *Medieval French Miracle Plays: Seven falsely accused women* (Miracles 29, 31, and 32) come from previous work by the author and provide the organizational structure and thematic bases for the present volume. Each analysis is self-contained. Historical context is supplied for those miracles in which a social phenomenon, such as the medieval justice system or medieval society’s view of lepers, is relevant. For the most part, this contextualization is developed only enough to explain how the narratives operate. This is the case, for example, in Harvey’s discussion of the pilgrimages undertaken by characters in Miracle 26 in hope of earning divine intercession on behalf of a loved one (pp. 38–39).

However, in her discussion of the *Miracle d’Oton, roy d’Espagne*, the author treats the *Jacquerie* uprising of 1358 in more detail, providing evidence that goes beyond merely contextualizing the relevant text and that supports her concluding hypothesis. In that miracle, the burghers successfully defend their fictional town just twenty-three years after France’s nobles were unable to avoid the disastrous loss at Calais, thereby reiterating their own trustworthiness when compared to the royals’ mishandling of the political and economic affairs of the state (p. 69). In another instance, though, a protracted discussion of medieval “plagiarism” comes much too late in the volume, as the preceding chapters all confirm that the plays’ narratives adapted and/or borrowed their material from other sources and from each other. This begs the question of whether it may not have been preferable to organize this work thematically and historically rather than chronologically by miracle play. In that way, the supporting theme of the burghers’ moral superiority in Miracles 27, 29, 31, 32, and 33 would have more readily supported the evidence provided by Miracle 28. Likewise, Harvey’s evidence that during this contentious decade the plays borrowed more frequently from royalty-focused romances, and her assertion that the Virgin Mary appears less often in the plays leading up to the 1382 interdiction that brought an end to the goldsmiths’ performance tradition, may have benefitted from a less discrete organization.

At the heart of this work are the thematic and textual comparisons that are made among the plays in the subset and to others in the larger collection, especially in the case of Miracle 37, which, as Harvey effectively demonstrates, has been created from three other plays that had been staged by the guild in earlier years. The analyses focus generally on comparisons to analogue texts, on defining the sinister forces in the plays, on relevant social themes, and on the protagonists’ Marian and archetypal qualities. In this regard, they build on work by Charles Mazouer, Pamela Sheingorn, Kathy Krause, and others. Well-written and engaging, Harvey’s analyses do lead the reader into the narratives’ psychology, their social mores, and their conventions. While useful citations from the seven miracle plays are frequent and well translated, they are not accompanied by a reference to the appropriate edition even though the author lists two modern editions of the collection in her bibliography.<sup>[3]</sup> The only exception to this

surprising omission is a footnote regarding Miracle 29's sources in which Harvey states that translations from that miracle are her own (p. 77 fn).

As already noted, Harvey argues that in several of these miracle plays royal characters are depicted in an unfavorable light while burghers are instead shown positively. This common feature of urban theater throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries is described most convincingly in two chapters: the analysis of the *Miracle d'Oton, roy d'Espagne* (Miracle 28), a play with "historical roots in the story of Charlemagne," (p. 65) in which the upheavals of war would not have been lost on fourteenth-century spectators, and in her analysis of the *Miracle de Berthe* (Miracle 31), in which a fictionalized Pepin is an easy dupe who has to be reminded that a "king should beware even more of sinning" (p. 104). These two plays were performed about a decade after the goldsmiths, worried about financing the on-going conflicts with England, had first pressed for reforms in 1355 then been severely punished in the aftermath of the *Jacquerie* uprising of 1358 (p. 67). Since the Cangé manuscript includes no play texts for 1358-1560, as Harvey also points out, it is plausible indeed that some bitterness characterizes the plays that were performed in the decades before their final curtain, and that sacred sources were being replaced by romances rewritten with a social purpose as "a product for and of this affluent urban audience" (p. 95). Given this politically-charged environment, Harvey rightly questions earlier assertions that the Cangé manuscript, copied after 1382, was intended as a gift to Charles VI. Pointing to more recent evidence discovered by Robert Clark, she postulates that the manuscript was commissioned instead as a commemorative copy (p. 157).

As a commissioned text that records for posterity the collective memory of the sponsoring Saint Eloi Goldsmiths' annual banquet, procession, poetry competition, and play performance, the Cangé manuscript is a valuable resource. Despite that status, there is still much to be uncovered, as Harvey notes in her discussion of Miracle 26's authorship (p. 39). For that reason, Harvey's otherwise compelling arguments call for an underpinning in reception theory as it relates to the theater and to performance because, whereas textual satire might have been dangerous (p. 156), performance—especially in an enclosed venue for an already initiated population—can play the text in any way it chooses. Assumptions that texts critical of the aristocracy could only be performed behind closed doors, and, tangentially, that voyeurism might have been a tantalizing by-product of the sexual violence in some of these plays, require a theoretical basis, just as the wrongly-accused woman motif has its foundations in the work of folklorists, feminist theoreticians, and social psychologists.

While performance is not the focus of Harvey's analysis, she does allude to it intermittently throughout *Medieval French Miracle Plays*. In one chapter she enumerates the possible *mansions* that may have been required to recreate a narrative on stage (pp. 82-83). A second analysis includes references to the animated dialogue that demonstrates a writer's "mastery of theatricality" (p. 40). A third example occurs in the analysis of *La fille du roy de Hongroie*, in which the author finds the notion of an inebriated messenger cavorting with a dowager queen to be "astonishing" (p. 93). The inebriated messenger is, of course, a standard character in many medieval plays, transgressing class and status by virtue of his job and his penchant for drink. That fact alone alters audience reception of his behavior.

In her conclusion, the author, reacting to what seem to be performance challenges, asks a series of staging questions to which any medieval theater historian would answer an enthusiastic 'Yes!' (pp. 152-153). Angels did descend to a lower platform or *parc*; actors were "beaten" on stage; and fires were lit on stage, as evidenced by a few infamous accidents. Finally, the author's glossing of the centrality of performance in all theatrical texts reiterates an outdated assertion about medieval theater: the notion that because of their authoritative (religious) basis, edification and entertainment were dual, but somehow separate, objectives. In the last twenty years, theater historians have argued in favor of a more integrated understanding of performance itself. As Jean-Pierre Bordier has asserted: "[l]e théâtre est un divertissement, même quand il se réclame d'intentions édifiantes" (theater is entertainment, even when it professes that its intentions are educational). [4]

## NOTES

[1] The “speech-then-action” performance style implies that the actor announces a gesture or movement before carrying out that simulation on stage. When using simple backdrops or reusing the same props to represent different realities, this type of embedded performance cue helped the spectator to follow the action.

[2] Harvey’s analysis of Miracle 32 is twelve pages long while the other chapters are fifteen to eighteen pages long.

[3] The first quotation from a miracle play, as well as its translation, occurs on page 29 but there is no accompanying footnote.

[4] Jean-Pierre Bordier, “Présentation,” in Jean-Pierre Bordier, ed., *Le jeu théâtral, ses marges, ses frontières; actes de la deuxième rencontre sur l’ancien théâtre européen de 1997* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), p. 13.

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