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Carol Symes. A Common Stage: Theatre and Public Life in Medieval Arras

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Symes, Carol. *A Common Stage: Theatre and Public Life in Medieval Arras*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. Pp. xvi, 335. \$49.95 978-0-8014-4581-1.

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Operating from the premise that five surviving plays from thirteenth-century Arras are the products of a particular environment and therefore that their meaning is referential and contemporary, Symes argues against the traditionalist approach by which well-known works including Jehan Bodel's *Jeu de saint Nicolas* and Adam de la Halle's *Jeu de Robin et Marion* have been interpreted generically as examples of early French literary drama. Since medieval plays constitute the "scripted remains of activities" (2) that were publicly endorsed and publicly displayed, Symes maintains that they reflect instead the specific performance culture in which and to which they were speaking. Unrivaled in that era, according to the author, the town of Arras constituted a "maelstrom of conflicting politics, unprecedented economic opportunities, and unfamiliar types of social mobility." (4) As such it is uniquely qualified as a forum from which to counter previously-held notions of "national" theaters and their theatrical offerings.

In each of five chapters, Symes examines one of the surviving textual artifacts of those plays that have been connected with medieval Arras, elucidating via archival evidence the relationship between details in the plays and local confraternities, geography, personalities, commemorations, conflicts, as well as changing political alliances. Chapter 1 focuses on the *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, which the author defines as a history play. She demonstrates the numerous textual clues that link it to specific places, events, themes, and persons in Arras in the late-twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In so doing, the author contends that Bodel, following a contemporary trend, used the Saint Nicholas legend as a vehicle "for cutting-edge treatments of hot topics." (45) Chapter 2 looks at the *Courtois d'Arras*, an adaptable play text that contemporizes the prodigal son morality. In this case, urban and rural anxieties contrast as an innocent discovers the wily ways of a modern city like Arras. Symes here links this type of play, rather than the specific text, with professional jongleurs, and cites in particular the confraternity of players that enjoyed a prominent role in Arras's social life. Next, Chapter 3 deals with the satirical *Garçon et l'aveugle*, which preserves a long-standing gag that would later find its way into many mystery plays. The Boy in question hails, predictably, from that most notorious of sinful cities, Arras itself. The author contextualizes this short dialogue as being indicative of the kinds of contests that took place in the cityscape as church bells, criers, preachers, heralds, and itinerant performers played the crowds. In Chapter 4 the author turns to the *Jeu de la feuillée*, written by Adam de la Halle. Like Bodel's *Saint Nicolas*, this play is laden not only with local references but with a list of characters that actually lived in Arras. One detail in particular, the *feuillée* (bower) in the play's title, "was erected every year in the Petit Marché of Arras by 1221, and was still being erected

annually at least through 1328." (194-5) Symes thus counters critics' contentions that the practice originated with the play itself, suggesting an alternative performance date that coincides instead with the annual celebrations of the aforementioned confraternity of jongleurs which, she contends, was the only locally-founded puy. Another work by Adam de la Halle, the *Jeu de Robin et Marion*, occupies the fifth chapter in this investigation into Arras's public traditions. Also included in the manuscript anthology in which both the *Jeu de saint Nicolas* and Adam's *Jeu de la feuillée* are found, the pastoral theme of this musical frolic has been expanded in this instance to include a dramatic prologue in which a pilgrim come from afar announces both Adam's recent death and his own intention to show off the poet's most recent work. Symes traces the career of Robert II of Artois, who had commissioned *Robin et Marion*, proposing that Adam had followed the count abroad. After the poet's death far from home, someone, perhaps this fictional 'pilgrim' himself, compiled what Symes identifies as a dramatic biography of Adam de la Halle. An elegantly-produced compilation of those works which he wrote and in which he likely performed, this anthology and its miniatures seem to "immortalize Adam's primary role as performer." (272)

In her conclusion, Symes reiterates that her objective in writing *A Common Stage* is to look into a particular history in order to "broaden the study of a medieval theater." (278) The thoroughness with which Symes conducted her historical research builds a convincing case for the contemporary relevancy of Arras's plays and for their referential content, particularly in her readings of the *Jeu de saint Nicolas* and the *Jeu de la feuillée*. Clearly, these textual artifacts reference that community and its local circumstances rather than a larger generic, or pseudo-national, intention. One of the two adaptable pieces, the *Courtois d'Arras*, also provides a logical context for the author's examination of the *Carité* confraternity, which she contends was literate and civic in both its composition and its purpose. However, in the author's reconstruction of the nature of public participation in theatrical events in the medieval era, like her discussion of Adam le Bossu's final years and local prominence, the *Garçon et l'aveugle* and the pastoral *Jeu de Robin et Marion* seem to serve merely as convenient backdrops. While it makes for a fascinating account, the latter discussion is not supported by the preponderance of historical evidence that characterizes other chapters in this work. As for the author's reconstruction of the nature of theatrical events, few would argue with the notion that theater operates in social and political spheres, or with the contention that medieval societies might be characterized as performance cultures in which visually- and aurally- stimulating play was part and parcel of the communicative arts. As a result, in defining all public play as theater, Symes conflates diverse performative initiatives in order to wrestle theater from the grasp of literary critics whose interpretation of medieval plays she finds "reductive," "potted" and "dogmatic." Her arguments in favor of performance as "the flamboyant seizing of time and space" (138) would have been further strengthened had she chosen to cite scholars on both sides of the Atlantic who are actively examining medieval theater's materiality, reception, and performance. Instead, her summary assessments of Michel Bakhtin, Jurgen Habermas, and other theoretical critics do little to bolster what is otherwise a ground-breaking work. In other arenas, too, Symes attempts to settle old scores with past scholarship, as in her call for a revision of traditional histories regarding pre-fifteenth-century theater, (3) and her defense of the notion that public spheres of exchange (the common stage that comprises her title) existed well before the reasoned debates of the Enlightenment (279), given, as she argues, that Arras was an early example of the kind of society in which classes and professions crossed on many levels and in which "public opinion

mattered." (278) Despite this somewhat distracting posturing, Symes's research is audacious, meticulous and far-reaching. While it may not effectively broaden our study of medieval theater because it overlooks the varied disciplines that comprise theater studies, it does redirect scholarly attention toward the all-important historical context in which theater, and public life, thrived throughout the medieval period.