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*Fifteenth-Century English Drama* by W. A. Davenport (review)

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and with little inclination to shout "Namooore of this, for Goddes dignitee!"

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W. A. DAVENPORT, *Fifteenth-Century English Drama*.  
Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982. Pp. 152. \$37.50.

Despite greatly increased interest in medieval English drama, evident in numerous articles published over the past several years, relatively few studies have addressed themselves to problems of literary criticism. Instead, matters of social and theatrical history have dominated the annual lists of publications in this field. W. A. Davenport seeks to correct this imbalance, not for the whole field of *Fifteenth-Century English Drama*, as his title implies, but rather, as his subtitle indicates, for "The Early Moral Plays and Their Literary Relations." The choice of title is no doubt deliberate. Davenport finds the growing tendency to insist on the generic categories of "mystery cycle" and "morality play" exerting an unfortunate influence on the way we think of the plays of the fifteenth century. For him the use of such classifications forces us "to look at kinds of drama rather than plays, so that individual works tend to be seen as versions of the archetype rather than as achieving effects in their own right" (p. 2). Thus the broad title is part of a general attempt to avoid as much as possible the use of the category "morality play" in the discussion of *The Pride of Life* and the plays of the Macro manuscript that constitute the core of this study.

Before I discuss the study's real strengths, a word is in order on the question of generic distinctions and medieval drama. In the first place, no generic distinction adequately accounts for all the works of literature we seek to place in one pile as opposed to another. One has merely to reflect on the difficulties posed by the traditional categories imposed on Shakespeare's plays to realize how often plays

refuse to fit into the pigeonholes our neat critical minds wish to force them into. Genres are inadequate descriptors for real works of literature because a product of the human imagination can assume any form the author wishes, whereas the biological species for which genre classifications were developed cannot change from one generation to another. An osprey always begets an osprey; tragedies do not “beget” other tragedies. Second, the categories “mystery” or “morality” play were not used in the Middle Ages and only correspond roughly to ideas of what constituted a play in that period. Despite these caveats, the generic principles proposed by V. A. Kolve for understanding *The Play Called Corpus Christi* and by Robert Potter for understanding *The English Morality Play* have enabled us to get at essential features of both civic religious plays and the moral interludes more effectively than did the categorical descriptions employed by earlier historians of medieval English drama who saw all early plays as rudimentary embodiments of later Renaissance forms. For those unfamiliar with actual performances of these often lively plays, the term “morality play” may conjure up images of dull, pedantic sermonizing, but the solution for this problem is not, as Davenport proposes in chapters 1 and 2, to substitute the anachronistic dramatic genres “tragedy” and “comedy.”

The strengths of *Fifteenth-Century English Drama* lie not in the attempt to force *The Pride of Life* or *Everyman* into the mold of tragedy, or *Mankind* into the mold of medieval comedy, but in the extended discussions of individual plays as conscious works of art whose style, form, and structure are worth serious consideration. Davenport’s procedure is first to analyze the central play to be discussed in each chapter as a work of art important in its own right and then to suggest other works, both dramatic and nondramatic, with which it shows affinities. The intended audience for this book is not the small band of committed enthusiasts for medieval plays but rather those with a “general knowledge of the mystery plays, *Everyman* and a few others” but whose “acquaintance with medieval literature is not extensive” (p. 1). Thus each discussion of a play is preceded by an interesting, economical summary of the main points of the play’s action. Such summaries are helpful for spe-

cialists as well, for not all have the main action of *Wisdom* at their mind's edge, ready for instant recall. Each summary is followed by a first-rate discussion of the play, offering new insights, making soundly based evaluations of strengths and weaknesses. Like many others fortunate enough to have seen a good contemporary production of *Mankind*, Davenport (who saw a good performance in 1979 at Royal Holloway College) finds the most good to say about this play. Drawing on several recent studies of the language of *Mankind*, he shows how, despite its use of fifteenth-century aureate diction, the language of this play is rich and full and is meant to oppose, with strength and amplitude, the barren scatology of the Vices. Davenport is valuable beyond his discussion of language, however. His analysis of *Wisdom*, or *Mind, Will, and Understanding*, as the play is also known, shows a thorough grasp of the ways a play can use costume and spectacle to convey serious ideas. One is driven, after reading his discussion, to want to reread the play to find the things in it one has earlier missed. On the other hand, Davenport finds *The Castle of Perseverance* the least successful of the Macro plays, for reasons of dullness and prolixity. From personal experience, having seen a production of the play in Toronto in August, 1979, I am convinced that his criticisms are fair and accurate.

Because he is seeking not only to dissolve what he sees as confining generic boundaries but also to overcome the unfortunate tendency, evident since the publication of the Oxford English Literature volumes covering the fifteenth century, of treating fifteenth-century plays as having little or no connection with other works of imaginative literature written in the same period, Davenport's discussions of literary connections are quite as important as his excellent analyses of individual plays. Without heaviness, without seeming to carry a ponderous weight of learning, Davenport suggests numerous connections for all the plays under discussion. The parallels are often to be found in the N-town cycle, as might be expected, given the obvious affinities that cycle has, not with the civic plays of the North and West but with the drama of East Anglia, of which it is a part. All the proffered cross-generic connections are suggestive, and will help anyone interested in the literature of the fifteenth century to gain a much greater respect for it as a period of intellec-

tual vitality than one would gain from slogging through the interminable imitations of Chaucer. The greatest figure of the period, of course, is Lydgate. Davenport finds his influence important at every turn, and the book ends with a charged, tightly packed series of suggestions about Lydgate's connections, through Chaucer's family, with the court and the noble patrons of the arts in East Anglia. His hometown, Bury St. Edmunds, as Gail Gibson has already suggested, begins increasingly to look like an important dramatic center, and his influence in that part of England demands further study. Anyone interested in any aspect of the literature of late-medieval England will find this a welcome book, the sort one returns to for ideas to enrich one's own understanding of an important period in English literature.

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JOHN V. FLEMING, *From Bonaventure to Bellini: An Essay in Franciscan Exegesis*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982. Pp. xviii, 171. \$25.00 cloth; \$12.50 paper.

This book, a sophisticated and detailed exegesis of a single painting, Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis*, raises an obvious question: Not a book of literary criticism and not about the period usually classified as the Middle Ages, what does it have to offer students of medieval literature? That John V. Fleming is a literary historian provides a partial answer; more important, his concerns remain the concerns of a literary iconographer. To rediscover meaning in Bellini's painting, he explores the relationship between text and image within the tradition of medieval Franciscan spirituality. Thus when Fleming examines a given image, pictorial or verbal, he is necessarily expanding its medieval meaning. The book is therefore exactly what its subtitle indicated, "An Essay in Franciscan Exegesis."

Such an exegesis is grounded in the assumption that what is necessary is a deep and thorough understanding of the major Fran-