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*The York Plays* ed. by Richard Beadle (review)

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RICHARD BEADLE, ed. *The York Plays*. York Medieval Texts, second series. London and Baltimore, Md.: Edward Arnold, 1982. Pp. 537. \$98.50.

Clearly, the last three decades have seen a significant revival of interest in medieval drama. The many editions of plays intended for scholarly pursuits and modernized texts for performance, numerous articles on myriad aspects of the drama, and several very influential books have reshaped our earlier perceptions of the plays. We add to this list Richard Beadle's *The York Plays* in the York Medieval Texts, second series. Beadle provides a text based upon BL Additional 35290 and a single pageant in the Sykes manuscript, diligently compared with other editions of the cycle. This edition is precisely intended to correct misreadings in the Lucy Toulmin Smith edition. This handsomely presented volume provides its readers with an extremely select bibliography, considerable textual criticism, historical material based on civic records, a text of the plays, and an extensive glossary. Appendix 1, a treatment of the music in play 45, "The Assumption of the Virgin," is particularly interesting, and it provides some valuable information which may help us date the recording of the cycle more exactly.

While we commend Beadle on his work, we see several difficulties in his edition. A major problem lies in its failure to address itself to a clear audience. Other productions in the York Medieval Texts, second series, such as Derek Pearsall's edition of *Piers Plowman* and Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron's *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, are primarily directed toward advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Beadle's work seemingly overlooks the matter of audience, yet the extensive glossary clearly marks it as an edition following the precedent of other editions in the series. His preoccupations with establishing "an accurate text" (p. 1) and with providing an extensive treatment of the social background of the plays are important grounds on which to construct a reading. His discussion of the mode of presentation would be stronger had it made use of the work of Nelson and Wickham on staging. The REED project on York is used extensively to very significant ends. What we must lament, however, is the lack of commentary on various parts of the cycle. Clearly, Beadle is knowledgeable of critical perspectives, a fact evident in occasional comments in the textual notes at the back; but students and even more experienced readers often need critical commentary as they are reading that explains various ideas, particularly obscure theological doctrines. No doubt the overwhelming size of the present text as well as economic concerns

eliminated the possibility of commentary. A companion volume of notes would solve this problem.

Another problem, again perhaps related to an unclear audience analysis or to the demands of an actual seminar situation, relates to the glossary. While it is quite extensive, it does not help readers interpret several rather difficult lines. Making syntactical sense of what one finds after looking up words can be perplexing. Glossing the text on these difficult lines at the bottom of the page on which they appear would help solve many problems of meaning.

Editorial procedure remains the most frustrating problem of the text. Any textual critic can sympathize with the trials of producing a reliable text. Beadle corrects many misreadings of the Smith edition, as noted in the apparatus, but what is puzzling is his own editorial policies. Such readings as *thoughte* (1/19) for MS *thoghte* or *welth* (1/28) for MS *wethth* seem to have no clear reasoning behind them. Certainly the latter case seems more expedient. Occasionally a missing word, such as *a* (9/25), makes reading difficult. No doubt *bodly* (5/90) was intended to be *boldly*. These listings are by no means complete. Some of them result from a copy editor's missing the error. Beadle's discussion of editorial procedures addresses the use of punctuation, abbreviations, and marginalia in the manuscript, and it might also include more information about some of the silently handled matters.

Even with these problems, Beadle's edition has many merits. Providing us with a newly edited text is indeed itself valuable. It is an edition most useful to advanced scholars rather than to students. Its cost seems excessive when compared with the cost of editions of other cycle plays in the EETS series with which its format agrees favorably. No edition is ever perfect. Every reviewer would have the editor to answer his own desires. Beadle gives us a text which will replace the earlier Lucy Toulmin Smith edition as the standard.

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C. DAVID BENSON. *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986. Pp. viii, 183. \$20.00.

This well-written book challenges the tendency of generations of Chaucerians critics to construe *The Canterbury Tales* as disclosures of the person-