ESSAY I

Darwin, Mutations, and the Origin of Medieval Drama

I

IN THE LAST fifty years literary criticism has experienced a series of major revolutions. During this period, however, the history of early medieval drama has retained the basic form established in 1903 by E. K. Chambers' *The Mediaeval Stage*. Karl Young's *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, published in 1933, sharpens the definition of the subject, modifies several important details, and adds a wealth of fresh documentation. In these respects it is a revision and supplement, not a new departure. Since 1933 scholarship has continued to accumulate new records and to suggest modifications in regard to influences and modes of transmission without seriously questioning the frame within which the new material is to be placed. Both *The Mediaeval Stage* and *The Drama of the Medieval Church* were reprinted in the 1950's—a striking testimony to their continuing authority in view of the swift obsolescence of many other studies once considered definitive. The most recent full-scale study, Hardin Craig's *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*, assimilates much fresh data but remains fundamentally aligned with what Craig refers to as the "two great books in the field of religious drama"—i.e., Chambers and Young.1

The continuing authority of Chambers and Young is in one respect both inevitable and proper. *The Mediaeval Stage* and *The Drama of the Medieval Church* are compendiums of texts and information essential to the subject and difficult or impossible to obtain elsewhere. In another respect, however, the situation is less satisfactory. Is it possible that the methods and approaches which in the last thirty years have had such a profound effect on the study of postmedieval literature have nothing to contribute to the study of the drama of the Middle Ages?

This question has been raised sporadically in the past—particularly in the last decade—by scholars as diverse as Eleanor Prosser, J. S. Purvis, 

John Speirs, and A. P. Rossiter, to name only four; but thus far no comprehensive re-examination of the materials treated by Chambers and Young has appeared.

To speak of a re-examination of Chambers and Young is to recognize that *The Mediaeval Stage* and *The Drama of the Medieval Church* are more than anthologies of facts. In both works the materials are selected and arranged in accordance with assumptions which were widespread at the time of their composition. As Henry Adams discovered in the course of his arduous self-education, "Historians undertake to arrange facts,—called stories, or histories—assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect. Their assumptions, hidden in the depths of dusty libraries, have been astounding but commonly unconscious . . . ; so much so that if any captious critic were to drag them to light, historians would probably reply, with one voice, that they had never supposed themselves required to know what they were talking about." The phrasing is facetious and probably unfair to the historians Adams had in mind, but the concern with assumptions is proper. Chambers and Young wrote in an atmosphere which encouraged the belief that one approach to literature is correct and that others are either wrong or trivial. The assumptions inherent in this approach were regarded, at least by scholars, as self-evident. But it is increasingly clear that they are not self-evident. They are the product of a particular moment in the history of scholarship, and one with major limitations as well as outstanding virtues.

In 1894 John Addington Symonds observed that "if we attempt to seize the main fact in the intellectual development of the last half of the nineteenth century, we shall find that this may be described as the triumph of the scientific method in relation to all man's thoughts about the universe." In the field of literary scholarship, as distinct from belles-lettres, the scientific method was indeed triumphant. Many factors contributed to its success. The underlying cause was probably a wholly natural desire on the part of humanists to associate themselves with the noble enterprise of leading mankind "ever onward, ever upward, down the ringing grooves of change." The discoveries of the brothers Grimm, of Verner, Scherer and the "jung Grammatiker" had demonstrated that one


branch of literary study—philology—could be elevated to the status of Strengwissenschaft. A more ambitious program aimed at the creation of a science of culture began in France with Madame de Staël’s *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1801) and culminated in Taine’s *Introduction to his History of English Literature* (1864). This Introduction, which may be considered almost a manifesto of historical scholarship, buttressed Madame de Staël’s rather elementary sociological notions with ideas drawn from Comte, Sainte-Beuve, Stendhal, and Hegel. History, Taine asserted, is “but a mechanical problem; the total effect is a result, depending entirely on the magnitude and direction of the producing causes.”

Most historical scholars in the generation following Taine subscribed to his scientific ideal while substituting a methodology based upon the accumulation of “fact” for the Hegelian metaphysics. Empiricism, the no-nonsense philosophy of Mr. Gradgrind, which, as T. H. Huxley explained, “is nothing but the expression of the necessary mode of working of the human mind,” easily overcame all rival approaches to the study of culture. Among the influential expressions of the empirical approach are August Boeckh’s *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaft* (1877), Georges Renard’s *La méthode scientifique de l’histoire littéraire* (1900), and Langlois and Seignobos’ *Introduction aux études historiques* (1897), a work of sufficient stature to be reprinted in English translation as late as 1925.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the course of empirical criticism was modified, to a degree not always recognized by its...
proponents, by the concept of evolution. At the end of *The Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin called for an evolutionary treatment of subjects relating to man. Within the next twenty years Darwinian concepts became pervasive in studies of culture, including literary scholarship. In France, Taine and Zola were both influenced by Darwin, but it was Ferdinand Brunetière who made the most important large-scale application of Darwin to literary history in his *L'Evolution des genres dans l'histoire de la littérature* (1890). Brunetière's Introduction to the English edition of the *Manual of the History of French Literature* (1897) fairly represents the temper of the age. The *Manual*, says Brunetière, is simply "an application of the doctrine of Evolution to the history of a great literature. In this way the work is placed under the auspices of the great name of Charles Darwin."10

One of the examples of Darwinian evolution cited by Brunetière is "English drama in the sixteenth century." In retrospect, it can be seen that English drama provides an ideal subject for evolutionary investigation. It appeared to have developed in relative isolation from outside influences, and its development appeared to be continuous—the sort of gradual, incremental growth demanded by biologists in the days when *Natura non facit saltus* was considered an essential evolutionary postulate. Moreover, the evolutionary hypothesis gave scientific respectability to a theory already widely held. Ever since Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, the history of drama had been regarded as organic. Drama had "arisen" from simple medieval beginnings, had "flowered" in the work of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson, and had then passed into a phase of "decadence" until its expiration in 1642.

In England, E. B. Tylor, Herbert Spencer, and T. H. Huxley were particularly influential in popularizing the application of Darwin's ideas to cultural study. In 1884 J. A. Symonds offered an evolutionary interpretation of English drama in *Shakespeare's Predecessors*; in 1894 he generalized his findings in an influential essay "On the Application of Evolutionary Principles to Art and Literature." At about the same time Karl

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11 *Essays, Speculative and Suggestive*, pp. 26-52. Spencer and Huxley were evidently (p. 27) Symonds' chief sources. The view taken is "organic," and English drama is cited as an especially clear example of organic evolution. The citation restates the position taken earlier by Symonds in *Shakespeare's Predecessors* (London, 1904), pp. 2-9. For Symonds' influence on several important American scholars, see H. H. Clark, "The Influence of Science on American Literary Criticism," pp. 109-38.
Pearson, the eminent mathematician and biologist, included an important essay on the German Passion play in a collection entitled *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution*. Here Pearson combined Taine's idea that cultural phenomena are relative to their socioeconomic milieu with the theory that "a study of the medieval passion-plays will . . . bring before us an intermediate link in the chain of evolution" from savagery to "liberal faith."  

It is against the background of nineteenth-century historical scholarship and, in particular, the theory of evolution, that the work of Chambers and Young must be appraised.

II

E. K. Chambers was a far-ranging, deeply learned scholar, exemplary of all that is best in the English tradition. Resisting the Germanic impulse toward narrow specialization, he wrote poetry, belletristic essays, and studies of figures as remote from the Middle Ages and Renaissance as Coleridge and George Meredith. In his later life he apparently came to feel that the historical method had dangers as well as virtues. His presidential address to the English Association, delivered in 1940, is a discussion of "The Timelessness of Poetry." In this paper he suggests that literary history is a discipline of secondary importance and that the real issue is the confrontation of reader and text: "Many of my hearers are no doubt teachers of English literature, accustomed to classify it by periods.... That is no doubt a useful exercise. Anything, indeed, will do as scaffolding, so long as it is not forgotten that the dominant purpose is to bring the young mind, in one way or another, directly into contact with poetry, itself. But there are dangers to the historical method. The categories may become too rigid."  

On the other hand, in the period from 1895 to 1903, when *The Mediaeval Stage* was being written, the historical method was in the ascendancy and Chambers embraced it with enthusiasm. "The Study of English Litera-

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12 "The German Passion-Play: A Study in the Evolution of Western Christianity," *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution* (London, 1897), II, 250. That the word "evolution" is used in the technical Darwinian sense and not simply as a synonym for "history" is evident from the essay, as well as from the general orientation of Pearson's two volumes. By 1903 the idea that English drama had "evolved" in the technical sense had penetrated the popular handbooks, e.g., Richard Garnett and Edmund Gosse, *English Literature, an Illustrated Record* (London, 1903), I, 221.

ture," written in 1896, takes a position generally parallel to that of Taine, though without Hegelian elements. Chambers takes a strong stand against reducing literature to "lessons in philology and grammar," on the narrow Germanic pattern. In place of philology he advocates study of the socio-economic milieu within which literature is produced; for "... no writer, however great, stands absolutely alone; each is the child of his own age ... nor is a complete understanding of any man's work possible, without some knowledge of the conditions under which it had its being, of the influences which helped to shape its form and inspire its purpose. This is an universal law." The Preface to *The Mediaeval Stage* reflects Chambers' practical commitment to this "universal law." A. W. Ward, author of the most extensive English study of medieval drama prior to Chambers', is criticized, along with other, unnamed scholars, because "while dealing excellently with medieval drama as literature, [they] have shown themselves but little curious about the social and economic facts upon which the medieval drama rested. Yet from a study of such facts, I am sure, any literary history, which does not confine itself entirely to the analysis of genius, must take a start." The Study of Poetry," *A Sheaf of Papers*, p. 101. Like Taine, Chambers at this time believed that the critic is a reader "not of books only, but of souls" (p. 108). The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), I, v. Hereafter cited as *MS*. The distinction between "literary history" and "analysis of genius" echoes an important nineteenth-century debate. Because of the nature of aesthetic creativity, Kant argued in the *Critique of Judgment* (trans. J. H. Bernard [New York, 1951], pp. 150–63) that genius is the capacity to create without the guidance of general principles. Romantic writers inflated this idea into the cult of genius unflatteringly described by Irving Babbitt in *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York, 1959), pp. 39–66. The rise of sociological criticism and Darwinism created acute problems: (1) Sociological criticism could account for the typical, the traditional, for sources and influences, but if genius was the ability to be absolutely original, could it account for the very element supposedly responsible for artistic greatness? (2) Darwinian critics of the early school insisted that literary change was organic and continuous; hence they were led to discount the importance of individual artists, a viewpoint which seemed to work in connection with folk literature and anonymous material such as liturgical drama. Solutions varied. Taine ( *History*, pp. 34–35) reinterpreted literary genius. To him genius was a superior capacity for reflecting the essence of one's age. Thus the sociological critic finds "classics" his best documents— a viewpoint apparently echoed by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*. Taine, of course, wanted to use literature to discover society; most later historical critics had the opposite goal in mind. Thus Brunetière ("Introduction," in Hardison [ed.], *Modern Continental Literary Criticism*, pp. 97–99) defended the historical method because it allowed the critic to peel away the conventional elements in a work of genius, leaving the truly original elements all the more visible. This view has its parallel in the contemporary notion that the more we study the theatrical conventions of Shakespeare's day, the more we appreciate his innovations. The position is, of course, two-edged. It pays lip service to genius while justifying concentration on everything but genius. Chambers' condescending statement that Ward was "but little curious about the social and economic facts" on which "any literary history, which
The scholars cited approvingly by Chambers in his "List of Authorities" further illustrate his commitment to historical methodology. The list is a roster of the outstanding historical scholars of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Not a single purely theoretical or critical work is included. Ward and J. A. Symonds, who deal with the "literary" as well as the historical aspects of the subject, are dismissed with a condescending "of value." Foremost among Chambers' authorities is Wilhelm Creizenach's *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*, complete to volume three by 1903. Next there is J. M. Manly, whose *Specimens of Pre-Shakespearean Drama* had appeared in 1897 in two volumes with the promise of a third (of commentary) to follow.\(^\text{16}\) Finally, among major authorities, there is L. Petit de Julleville, whose *Histoire du théâtre en France au Moyen Age* had been published in four volumes between 1880 and 1890. The minor authorities cited with approval in Chambers' footnotes (e.g., Sepet, du Méril, Cloetta, Duchesne [for liturgy]) are also for the most part historical scholars, with an occasional reference to psychologists and anthropologists in connection with Book II. As far as methodology is concerned, Chambers complains, perhaps half in fun, that "Oxford, my most kindly nurse, maintained in my day no École des Chartes, and I had to discover the rules of method as I went along."\(^\text{17}\) He adds that he had as a guide the "re­morseless ideal" of Langlois and Seignobos.

The references to an École des chartes and Langlois and Seignobos are significant. No less a figure than Frederick York Powell, Regius Professor of Modern History and a member of the editorial board of the Clarendon Press at the time when the *Mediaeval Stage* was submitted for consideration, had called publicly in 1897 for the establishment of an English École des chartes.\(^\text{18}\) In 1898, the same year that Chambers' still incomplete work was does not confine itself solely to the analysis of genius, must make a start" (MS, I, v) places him in this group. It was for this very reason that the American Darwinian critics sought for an alternative to organic evolution. To Manly, and even more emphatically, to John P. Hoskins, the mutation theory allowed for a reconciliation of evolution and genius. See John P. Hoskins, "Biological Analogy in Literary Criticism: I. Variation and Personality" (MP, VI [1908–9], 416–18), for a Darwinian discussion of genius. Significantly, Hoskins finds an ally in Sainte-Beuve and strongly attacks Zola's naturalistic theory, expounded in *Le roman expérimental*. After 1910 the discussion of genius became increasingly Freudian, with special emphasis on the relation of genius to neurosis.

\(^{16}\) MS, I, xiii.

\(^{17}\) MS, I, vii.

\(^{18}\) Oliver Elton, *Frederick York Powell* (Oxford, 1906), I, 250–53. The nineteenth-century effort to collect and publish documents was encouraged by Ranke, Froude, Motley, and the Abbé Migne, to name only the most prominent figures. Among the monuments to this effort are the 112 volumes of the *Colección de documentos inéditos*, the over 200 of the *Collection des documents inédits*, the English Rolls series, and, in English literature, the publications of the Early English Text Society.
accepted by Clarendon, Powell had contributed an enthusiastic Preface to the English translation of Langlois and Seignobos' *Introduction to the Study of History*. In view of Powell's immense prestige in the area of medieval history and literature, Chambers could hardly afford to ignore the work and, in fact, was strongly influenced by it.

The *Introduction to the Study of History* is an epitome of historical method as understood at the end of the nineteenth century. It is resolutely empirical, and its authors, with Powell's hearty approval, dismiss "curious Hegelianisms" as vestigial survivals of a religious—hence unscientific—world view. Powell boasted that the authors "have the temerity to view history as a scientific pursuit. . . . They are bold enough to look forward to a day . . . when a sensible or honest man will no more dare to write history unscientifically than he would to-day be willing to waste his time and that of others observing the heavens unscientifically." Like other empiricists of their generation, Langlois and Seignobos consider the accumulation of "fact" the first and most important task of the scholar. The first half of the *Introduction* deals with the reading interpretation, and evaluation of documents, which are the "facts" of the historian. These "facts" have an intrinsic value, quite apart from any interpretation which may be placed upon them. The possibility of an organic relation between "fact" and interpretation—the idea that the "facts" elicited in any investigation may be a function of the questions posed—is not even considered.

This overriding, almost Gradgrindian concern for documentary fact dominates *The Mediaeval Stage* to such a degree that Chambers himself felt the need to apologize. "The burden of my notes and appendices," he wrote, "sometimes appears to me intolerable." His excuse for such an accumulation was that facts have an intrinsic worth quite apart from the uses to which they are put: "I wanted to collect, once for all, as many facts . . . as possible. These may, perhaps, have a value independent of any conclusions which I have founded upon them." Since Karl Young, the consensus has been that Chambers' pursuit of fact did, indeed, lead him astray: "It is out of scale, and he knew it," wrote F. P. Wilson. The

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20 P. vi. It is amusing to compare Powell's statement with Whitman's poem "When I Heard the Learned Astronomer."

21 *MS*, I, vii. In a generally laudatory review contributed to *The Pelican* in 1903, Chambers' close friend Oliver Elton expressed the hope that he "would not bind himself against appreciating the plays as literature" when he reached Elizabethan drama (see Wilson and Wilson, "Obituary Notice," pp. 277–78).

result is a structural weakness: disproportionate emphasis on minstrels and folk plays tends to obscure the main line of development being traced. A still more serious weakness is the fact that the "main line" traced by Chambers does not emerge in classical empirical fashion "from the data themselves," but is assumed before the data are discovered and thus serves as an unconscious criterion for the selection. A circularity commonly associated with naive empiricism is evident. Having been selected on the basis of evolutionary theory, the data can hardly fail to illustrate this theory when assembled.

The second half of Langlois and Seignobos deals with "synthetic operations," the process of ordering the "facts." In this section there is no questioning the sufficiency of the empirical method. Christian and Hegelian metaphysical ideas are ruled out. When the "facts" are collected, a pattern will inevitably emerge, and this pattern will be the form of history. Although the pattern will be vague in places because of lacunae in surviving documents, its outline will be beyond dispute. Consequently, Langlois and Seignobos reach the striking conclusion that the future of history-writing, except in the area of recent history, is limited: "History has at its disposal a limited stock of documents; this very circumstance limits the possible progress of historical science. When all the documents are known, and have gone through all the operations which fit them for use, the work of critical scholarship will be finished. In the case of some ancient periods, for which documents are rare, we can now see that in a generation or two it will be time to stop."\(^{23}\) What remains is the essentially mechanical task of co-ordination: certain "workers of experience should be found to renounce personal research and devote their whole time to . . . comprehensive works of historical construction."\(^{24}\)

Obviously, no research, even of the most trivial sort, can be carried forward in such a vacuum of general concepts as that suggested by the more doctrinaire passages of Langlois and Seignobos. As might be expected, several hypotheses are offered for guidance in the "synthetic" phase of research. One of the key hypotheses is that fundamental human desires and impulses remain the same in all ages; this assumption may be invoked to explain historical causality when detailed information is lacking. Another hypothesis—and perhaps the most important one—is that of evolution.\(^{25}\) Langlois and Seignobos accept the idea that cultures grow organically by continuous fine gradations, and that a general pattern of birth, growth, and decline can be observed in most cultural phenomena.

\(^{23}\) P. 316.
\(^{24}\) P. 318.
\(^{25}\) Pp. 244–49.
The *Introduction* ends with the assertion that "if the result of these labors were to bring out clear and certain conclusions as to the nature and causes of social evolution, a truly scientific 'philosophy of history' would have been created, which historians might acknowledge as legitimately crowning historical science."²⁶

In its simplest form, Chambers' concept of the evolution of drama is an updated version of an idea prominent in English thought as early as Roger Ascham. The humanists of the Renaissance accepted a rudimentary theory of history according to which the brilliance of classical literature was obscured by a long night of Gothic barbarism, which, in turn, was gradually dispelled by the Revival of Learning. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was often assumed that the progress initiated by the humanists was—and would be—continuous.²⁷ In spite of the Gothic Revival, Thomas Warton complacently admitted in his *History of English Poetry* that "our reflections on this subject are accompanied with a conscious pride, arising in great measure from a tacit comparison of the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages, and our present improvements in knowledge."²⁸ The concept of evolution adopted by nineteenth-century literary scholarship modified this view without fundamentally changing it. The earlier position assumed a pattern of gradually increasing complexity, together with a teleological bias involving progress toward a goal considered ideal. Nineteenth-century scholars incorporated both of these ideas in a synthesis based on the analogy between culture and biological organisms. Literatures, periods, and literary types were compared to living creatures. In *Shakespeare's Predecessors*, J. A. Symonds discovers three phases in the history of English drama. These are growth (from the "germ" of liturgical drama to

²⁶ P. 318.

²⁷ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* ([London, 1921] pp. 260–349), discusses nineteenth-century progressivism. His last chapter (pp. 334–49) is devoted to "progress in the light of evolution." The idea of progress must be balanced against theories of history as a decline from an ideal norm or Golden Age. Among historical critics of literature the progressive idea was generally adopted. "Organicism" in the later nineteenth century encouraged the sort of growth-blossoming-decadence cycle found in Symonds. Since medieval drama was considered the prelude to Elizabethan drama, the emphasis, naturally, was on progress, with sixteenth-century religious dramas conveniently explained as vestiges or degenerate survivals of earlier forms. The idea that primitive ages produce the finest poetry—popular among students of epic and espoused by Vico, Herder, Macaulay, and Renan, to name only a few authors—was not applied to medieval drama, probably for the reason that medieval drama contradicted it.

Marlowe), maturity (Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson), and "deca­dence and dissipation" (the Jacobean to 1642). As in the case of an organism, "the completion of the process was inherent in its earliest embryonic stages." Symonds' terminology makes the teleological bias of his work readily apparent. The mature state of the organism is its "ideal" form. Thus early forms of drama are interesting only as they lead to Shakespeare; later ones, only as they are consequences of the Shakes­pearean moment. Symonds concludes that "the more we study Shakes­peare, the more do we perceive that his predecessors, no less than his successors, exist for him."

The conceptual frame of The Mediaeval Stage may be understood as the fusion of the concept of progress with the organic analogy evident in Symonds' work. While at Oxford, Chambers had been a student of classics. His sense of the contrast between classical civilization and medi­eval ignorance could only have been intensified by his undergraduate studies. After graduation, and probably with the encouragement of his close friend Oliver Elton, he decided to devote himself to English litera­ture. The project which he set himself was "a little book . . . about Shakespeare," and The Mediaeval Stage began as an attempt to write "a short account of the origins of play-acting in England and its development during the Middle Ages." In other words, The Mediaeval Stage was, in its initial conception, teleological. That it remained teleological is indicated by Chambers' Preface, in which the final goal of the work is defined as "to state and explain the pre-existing conditions which, by the latter half of the sixteenth century, made the great Shakespearcan stage possible." Chambers did not carry his project beyond Shakespeare. His essay on "The Disenchantment of the Elizabetheans" indicates, however, that if he had, the composite image would have been one of organic evolution, maturity, and "decadence and dissipation," an image varying little from that offered by J. A. Symonds.

Instead of beginning with liturgical drama, Chambers began his history with the decay of the ancient world. Neither Roger Ascham nor Thomas Warton—nor, for that matter, Edward Gibbon—would have quarreled with his picture of "the onslaught of Christianity and the indifference of barbarism" which broke down the tradition of classical drama. Chambers' second book, insofar as it is not wholly digressive, endeavors to show that

30 P. 14.
31 I, v.
32 I, v–vi.
in spite of the hostility of the Church a “mimetic instinct” continued to manifest itself in the form of spectacula, ludi, folk dramas, and irreligious offshoots of church ceremony such as the Feast of Fools. Strongly influenced by Sir James Frazer’s recently published Golden Bough, Chambers associated the “mimetic instinct” and its various products with paganism. The folk drama, in fact, is the detritus of ancient pagan ceremonies never completely eradicated by the Church.

In the third book, which is the central one insofar as Chambers’ influence is concerned, the evolutionary analogy becomes explicit. Words like “growth,” “development,” and “process” are frequent, and the book opens with a formal bow to Darwin. Its subject, Chambers remarks, “is of the highest importance as an object lesson in literary evolution. The historian is not often privileged to isolate a definite literary form throughout the whole course of its development, and to trace its rudimentary beginnings, as may be done, beyond the very borders of articulate speech.”

The existence of a spectrum of forms from the Quem quaeritis to the enormous Corpus Christi cycles doubtless made the evolutionary hypothesis inevitable. Yet even in The Mediaeval Stage defects are visible. The distribution and chronology of the existing documents was (and is) highly erratic. Simple forms occur at late dates, and not infrequently the earliest surviving example of a type is more complex than later examples. No country exhibits the full range of forms, and gaps in the English record must be filled with examples from other countries, principally France and Germany. To preserve the idea of a gradual, uniform development from simple to complex, documents must be chronologically displaced. To preserve the idea of the development of varieties of a species from a single archetype, complex lines of influence must be postulated between Germany and France, and France and England. The exact manner in which the influences operated is left vague, but traveling monks and clerici vagantes are suggested as possibilities. Although Chambers admits that it is impossible “to isolate the centres and lines of diffusion of that gradual process of accretion and development through which the Quem quaeritis gave ever fuller and fuller expression to . . . dramatic instincts,” he also believes that if all texts were available, apparent anomalies “would not improbably be removed.”

Since only fifteen examples of the fully

35 II, 27–28; also 64, 73, 109, etc. The theory of transmission by monks and clerici vagantes was given substance by George R. Coffman’s suggestion, in A New Theory concerning the Origin of the Miracle Play (Menasha, Wis., 1914), that the Cluniac reform accounted for at least some of the necessary consolidation and travel between monasteries.
expanded *Quem quaeritis* and only two full medieval Latin texts of the *Pastores* were known to Chambers, the evolutionary hypothesis was not, in fact, an empirically justifiable theory.\(^8^6\)

Although Chambers used the evolutionary hypothesis *passim*, he appears to have been dissatisfied with it. After commenting on the problem of establishing a chronological line of development for the *Quem quaeritis*, he suggests that “disregarding . . . in the main the dates of the manuscripts, it is easy so to classify the available versions as to mark the course of a development.”\(^8^7\) The classification system moves from simple to complex. Obviously, it does not abandon the concept of evolution, but it does shift attention from stemma and lines of influence to content. Later, when discussing the plays of the Epiphany cycle, Chambers claims only that he has reproduced “at least the logical order of their development.”\(^8^8\) Thus, along with the dominant evolutionary element in *The Mediaeval Stage*, there is a subdominant current of scepticism. Considering Chambers’ evidence, this sceptical strain seems more in keeping with his scientific ideals, a fact clearly recognized by J. M. Manly and Karl Young.\(^8^9\)

In his fourth book Chambers almost entirely abandons evolution to assume another stance typical of nineteenth-century historians. The fourth book crosses the line between Middle Ages and Renaissance. It describes with muted but unmistakable enthusiasm the “transformation” of the mediaeval stage by humanism and the emergence of “a new class of professional actors, in whose hands the theatre was destined to recover a stable organization upon lines which had been departed from since the days of Tertullian.”\(^9^0\) As the quotation indicates, Chambers’ emphasis is on discontinuity rather than continuity. The idea of the Renaissance as a radical departure from medievalism—a concept encouraged by Hegel as well as by Hallam, Taine, Burckhardt, and Symonds—is evident. Paradoxically, Chambers considered the break in the evolutionary process particularly sharp in the case of drama: “. . . hardly any branch of human activities was destined to be more completely transformed by the new

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\(^8^6\) *MS, II, 31, 43*. Cf. A. W. Ward, *A History of English Dramatic Literature* (London, 1899), I, 37: “it is easier to detach the successive stages [of liturgical drama] from one another in accordance with an *a priori* theory than to arrange the sequence in proved chronological order.” The source for Chambers’ arrangement is Carl Lange, *Die Lateinischen Osterfeiern* (Munich, 1887). Lange makes no evolutionary claim for his arrangement, which he evidently regarded simply as a convenience.

\(^8^7\) II, 28, 32.

\(^8^8\) II, 50.

\(^8^9\) See below, pp. 20, 26–27.

\(^9^0\) I, vi.
The consequence of this transformation is that Chambers’ history becomes compartmentalized. If it is true that *Natura non facit saltus*, the evolutionary hypothesis breaks down. The discussion of medieval drama may be agreeable to an antiquarian, but, by Chambers’ own admission, it casts little light on “the pre-existing conditions which . . . made the great Shakespearean stage possible.”

Two other features of *The Mediaeval Stage* can be traced to characteristic nineteenth-century attitudes. The first is Chambers’ attitude toward Christianity. In dealing with medieval subjects, he was continuously involved with religious subject matter. Yet he lived in an age when Christianity was suspect. Matthew Arnold’s definition of religion as “morality touched by emotion” is both an expression of scepticism and a profession of faith in ethics as opposed to theological dogma. Ironically, although Arnold strongly criticized historical scholars in his Introduction to Ward’s *The English Poets* (1880), his religious views aligned him with them.42 The scientific student of culture, according to Taine, should examine questions of right and wrong in the same dispassionate spirit as that of the chemist examining sugar or sulphuric acid. Chambers’ mentors Langlois and Seignobos insist throughout the *Introduction to the Study of History* that the historian must take no sides, espouse no causes, and shun the outmoded providential view of history inherited from the Christian Middle Ages. In practice, such “objectivity” was often a disguise for contempt, or even active hostility, toward religion. Sir James Frazer, from whom Chambers derived his ideas about folk drama, took unfailing delight in pointing out the primitive origins of Christian ritual, most notably in the excursus on “The Crucifixion of Christ” appended to volume nine (*The Scapegoat*) of *The Golden Bough*. The implied conclusion of Frazer’s excursus—like the work of such nineteenth-century anthropologists and critics as David Strauss, Rudolf Seydel, and J. M. Robertson—is that Christianity is nothing more than a tissue of barbaric superstitions redeemed here and there by some useful moral truths.43

41 This, 206; still more emphatic, II, 180: “It is the object of the present book [Book IV of MS] briefly to record the rise, also in the fifteenth century, of new dramatic conditions, which, after existing side by side with those of mediaevalism, were destined ultimately to become a substitute for them and to lead up directly to the magic stage of Shakespeare” (italics mine).

42 The essay is the famous “Study of Poetry” essay, in which Arnold proposes the theory of touchstones. It was reprinted in 1888 as the first essay of *Essays in Criticism, Second Series*.

43 Frazer believed the reader of his treatment would “reduce Jesus of Nazareth to the level of a multitude of other victims of a barbarous superstition, and will see in him no more than a moral teacher whom the fortunate accident of his execution invested with the crown not merely of a martyr, but of a God” (quoted in John B. Vickery, *The Golden Bough: Impact and Archetype,* *VQR*, XXXIX [1963], 52-53).
Thus it is that a dramatic element enters the conceptual framework of *The Medieval Stage*. The clergy is consistently cast in the role of the villain who opposes the “mimetic instinct,” which is associated with such terms as “healthy,” “human,” and “pagan.” Classical drama was, by definition, “pagan.” Christians, allied with “barbarian invaders,” attacked the theater. By the seventh century, “the bishops and the barbarians had triumphed.” Yet the mimetic instinct lived on. Minstrels “braved the ban of the church, and finally won their way.” Folk plays, “the last sportive stage[s] of ancient heathen ritual,” were enacted, although they “remained to the last alien and distasteful to the Church.” Unfortunately, liturgical drama is almost impossible to explain within the framework of a struggle between Christianity and the “mimetic instinct.” Chambers was therefore forced to describe it as “an audacious ... attempt to wrest the pomps of the devil to a spiritual service, or as an inevitable and ironic recoil of a barred human instinct within the hearts of the gaolers themselves.” Such a view, it may be noted, is unlikely to encourage scholars to seek explanations of the form or effect of medieval drama within the framework of medieval Christianity.

At any rate, liturgical drama was at first “a mere spectacle, devised by ecclesiastics,” but in time it “broke the bonds of ecclesiastical control” and appealed to a “deep-rooted native instinct”—clearly a pagan instinct, since Chambers stresses the popularity and elaboration of scenes featuring devils. Pagan instinct again triumphs over Christianity in the secularization of the drama, which Chambers describes as a “reaction of the temper of the folk upon the handling of the plays, the broadening of their human as distinct from their religious aspect.” As a result, “*officia* for devotion and *edification*” give way to “*spectacula* for mirth, wonder, and delight.”


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44 I, 22.
45 II, 179.
46 II, 2.
47 II, 3. Cf. Pearson, “The German Passion-Play,” p. 284: “Thus the scenic ritual, and ultimately the religious plays, indirectly owe their origin to the very heathen ceremonies which their introduction was designed to suppress.”
49 II, 69. Chambers’ rhetoric exhibits a strong polarity. The passages cited in the text can be tabulated in two columns, labeled Christian (pejorative) and pagan (favorable). In the first column, along with “Church,” would go “bishops,” “barbarians,” “gaolers,” “ban,” “triumphed,” and “barred.” In the second, along with “pagan,” would go “braved,” “won,” “sportive,” and “deep-rooted instinct.” Note that “religious” is distinguished from “human,” and “devotion and edification” from “mirth, wonder, and delight.”
Clearly, Chambers' anticlericalism is complemented by a pronounced sympathy for things pagan. The same sympathy is evident in Karl Pearson's studies of witchcraft and of the German Passion play, where it is associated with a bias toward "Aryanism" reminiscent of Nietzsche. The association is worth mentioning because it has reappeared in the twentieth century in the attempts by Stumpf, Pascal, Hunningher, and others to show that almost all dramatic elements in medieval drama are derived from survivals of Aryan ritual and folk custom. In Chambers the sympathy toward paganism is never so extreme. It does, however, divert attention from Christian backgrounds. And since the "Renaissance" popularized by Taine, Burckhardt, and Symonds was primarily a "pagan" Renaissance, it also contributed something to the sense of discontinuity between medieval and sixteenth-century drama. With the advent of humanism, Chambers observes, drama at last "put off its exclusively religious character, and enter[ed] upon a new heritage." Yet even in the new era, ecclesiastical authorities remained bitterly hostile. Just as Catholics were beginning to accommodate themselves to drama, the Lollard author of A Tretise of Miraclz's Pleyinge (ca. 1400) raised the old objections anew, and bequeathed his attitudes to sixteenth-century Puritans. The first volume of The Mediaeval Stage closes with the melancholy observation that "it is a far cry from Tertullian to Bishop Grosseteste to Archbishop Grindal, but each alike voices for his own day the relentless hostility of the austerer clergy during all ages to the ineradicable ludi of pagan inheritance."

Although F. P. Wilson's suggestion that Chambers "writes about religious drama and leaves out religion" is not wholly serious, it contains an important truth. The view encouraged by The Mediaeval Stage is that drama originated in spite of Christianity, not because of it. In addition to the celebration of "Aryan" and "folk" elements of culture began with German romanticism (Herder) and gained momentum from the work of Fichte and Schleiermacher, the operas of Wagner, and Nietzsche's attack on Christianity. Chambers may have absorbed some of this admiration for things Aryan from Otto Schraeder, Pre-Christian Antiquities of the Aryan People (trans. F. B. Jevons [London, 1890]), which is cited in his bibliography. Karl Pearson believed strongly in both the importance and the fundamental health of pagan survivals in Christian religious drama (see above, n. 47). English and American criticism quietly dropped the Aryan theory of the origins of drama, but it was revived briefly during the 1930's by Robert Stumpf (Kultspiele des Germanen als Ursprung des mittelalterlichen Dramas [Berlin, 1936]). Also, R. Pascal, "On the Origins of Liturgical Drama in the Middle Ages," MLR, XXXVI (1941), 369–87; and B. Hunningher, The Origin of the Theatre (New York, 1961).

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II, 181.


distorting the understanding of medieval drama itself, this view encourages emphasis on discontinuity between medieval and Renaissance drama and prepares the way for (or complements) a reading of Shakespeare which ignores or actively denies the religious elements in his plays.

If Chambers exhibits the anticlericalism of his age, he also manifests the historical scholar’s impatience with literary theory. The first edition of A. W. Ward’s *History of English Dramatic Literature*, published in 1875, begins with an extended theoretical discussion of the nature of drama. In the second edition of 1898, the theoretical introduction is dropped “to make room for more ample treatment of various passages in the body of the work.” In effect, Ward joined the apostles of fact. Chambers, on the other hand, never threatened apostasy. At no point in *The Mediaeval Stage* is there a discussion of what constitutes drama, and Chambers’ definition must be reconstructed from various more or less casual observations.

Evidently Chambers believed in the existence of a mimetic instinct. While the phraseology suggests Aristotle, there is a strong tendency to regard the mimetic instinct as non- or even anti-Christian. After defining drama as a mimetic art, Chambers offers a few suggestions for differentiating it from other mimetic forms such as lyric poetry, minstrelsy, and dance. Minstrelsy, he observes, employs dialogue, which is “the first condition of drama,” but it does not use two other essential elements, “impersonation and a distribution of roles between at least two performers.” In other words, there are three criteria for differentiating the dramatic from the nondramatic. These are dialogue, impersonation, and “action” in the sense of role-playing. Each of them is important, and presumably Chambers did not feel that they could be ranked. Although they owe something to the discussion of “modes of imitation” in the *Poetics* 1147a–48b, they grossly oversimplify Aristotle’s concept and disregard his equally important discussion of the six “parts” of tragedy. In particular, they ignore his comments on such subjects as unity, plot, and character. They are external criteria that are useful in selecting documents but that contribute little to the interpretation of the documents selected.

In retrospect, *The Mediaeval Stage* is a composite of the often contradictory ideas shaping nineteenth-century historical scholarship. It is a

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65 I, 90ff., associates the mimetic instinct with “the folk” and appears to be based on Frazer. *MS*, I, 147, however, appears to be indebted to the somewhat different ideas of Karl Groos, *The Play of Man*, trans. E. L. Baldwin (London, 1901), pp. 280–319. See below, pp. 31–32.
triumph of the effort to collect documentary facts, but many of the facts are, by common agreement, tangential. It is strongly influenced by the analogy between biological and literary evolution, but the evolutionary hypothesis is contradicted by Chambers' sense of the Renaissance as an antithesis to medieval culture, and weakened in respect to medieval drama by the impossibility of establishing a chronology of the movement from *Quem quaeritis* to Corpus Christi cycle. It attempts to understand the social and economic milieu of medieval drama, but it is affected by anti-clericalism to such a degree that the dramatic elements in religious drama are treated as a rebellion against religion rather than as attempts to express it. Finally, its definition of drama is inadequate. Unfortunately, the limitations of *The Mediaeval Stage* have had as much influence as its virtues on Chambers' successors.

III

Karl Young's *Drama of the Medieval Church* was published in 1933. A considerable amount of scholarship had accumulated during the thirty years since Chambers' *Mediaeval Stage*, but nothing had appeared to threaten Chambers' pre-eminence. Young wrote in his Preface, "I take pleasure in pointing to my use of his *Mediaeval Stage* in most of the chapters that follow." 57

Young's most obvious contribution is his sizable addition to the documentary facts made available by Chambers. His work began as "a slight volume . . . in the way of an exposition," but grew into a thirteen-hundred-page corpus of medieval Latin drama. Like Chambers, Young felt that documents were more important than interpretations. He invites the reader "to centre his attention upon the plays themselves, and to assign to the accompanying exposition only such secondary importance as may seem to him appropriate." 58 Thus, says Young, if he fails in what he has written himself, he may "still hope to 'merit the thanks of the antiquarian,' through putting into his hands a considerable body of originals either freshly verified, or now brought forward for the first time." 59

There can be no question of Young's success in this endeavor. On the other hand, Young's theoretical contributions are considerably more important than his modest Preface indicates. In terms of content, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* is an advance beyond Chambers in the

57 *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford, 1933), I, xv. Hereafter cited as *DMC*.
58 I, vii.
59 I, viii. It is perhaps significant that Young is quoting Thomas Warton.
direction of definition. The decline of classical drama and the varieties of semidramatic spectacle are dealt with in a twelve-page Introduction. Conversely, almost two hundred pages are devoted to the Roman liturgy and the dramatic ceremonies associated with it in the Middle Ages. Chief emphasis falls on the development of three major types of liturgical drama: the Passion plays, the Nativity plays, and various extrabiblical and legendary plays. Young makes no effort to follow the plays from Latin into the vernacular.

Young's method is empirical in a sense which Langlois and Seignobos would have heartily approved. He promises a "descriptive" treatment of the material, and explicitly rejects aesthetic analysis, which is defined by a reference to the "aesthetic and spiritual aspects of the liturgy—its majesty, its charm, and its significance." 60 Evidently, aesthetic analysis has to do with the appeal of artistic forms to an audience. Since this sort of appeal is "subjective," it has no place in "descriptive" (i.e., objective) criticism. On the credit side, Young's approach avoids anticlericalism. Chambers had considered the devils of medieval drama as evidence of the recrudescence of pagan instinct; Young observes only that they were "undoubtedly ... an object of derision as well as of fear, but in a particular dramatic situation we may not be able to say confidently which effect was intended or achieved." 61 Chambers—and a good many of his followers—had stressed the comic aspects of the liturgical plays; Young considers the plays for the most part "serious," even down to Balaam's ass, and attributes their early expansion to "those who were especially ambitious for the development of religious drama" rather than to the anti-Christian demands of "the folk." 62

On the debit side, Young's "objectivity" creates two serious problems. To consider it apart from the stereotyped debate over subjectivity versus objectivity, his refusal to discuss aesthetic matters—matters involving "majesty, charm, and significance"—is a refusal to discuss the reasons why the liturgy and liturgical drama appealed to the medieval audience. Hence the second problem: unless these reasons are considered, it is impossible to interpret medieval drama in terms of the forces which actually shaped it, and there is a tendency to fall back on the presuppositions evident in Chambers. In spite of Young's cautionary statements, his approach encourages a reading of the history of medieval drama as a process of "secularization," with a complementary stress on tangential

60 I, viii. Young's principles, summarized on pp. ix–xii, show the same concern for documents evident in Langlois and Seignobos.


62 II, 422.
action, minor characters, and comic farce. That he himself accepted this
general view is indicated by his reference to an "impulse toward increasing
the worldly appeal of the plays through the comic element," which
manifested itself in medieval vernacular drama, although not evident in
the Latin plays.\footnote{I, 422.}

The problem of the development of medieval drama leads directly to
the problem of evolution. In his Preface Young appears to reject the
evolutionary concept in favor of the method of logical classification which
had been subdominant in The Mediaeval Stage. He will group the plays,
he says, in "the \textit{logical} order of development, from the simplest to the most
complex and elaborate. Presumably this is, in general, also the \textit{historical}
order, but from the dates of the manuscripts a demonstration is usually
impossible."\footnote{I, viii–ix.} Even in this statement, however, the logical order is related
to the historical order. The evolutionary hypothesis was too well estab­
lished and too attractive to be surrendered lightly. After duly expressing
his reservations, Young contradicts them with the assertion that "presumably" the evolutionary model is historically true. The same belief is
evident in his vocabulary. Although his organization is apparently logical,
he frequently employs terms and ideas suggesting biological analogies,
among them "process," "development," "developments from a single
form," "transition," and "growth." Toward the end of his Introduction,
Young expresses his general view of early drama. It is the same one that
Chambers had expressed thirty years earlier. Medieval drama, he asserts,
"presents to the historian a unique opportunity for isolating a literary
form and observing its development from almost inarticulate origins,
through centuries of earnest experiment, into firmly conceived results."\footnote{I, 12. Cf. \textit{MS}, II, 3.}

The influence of evolutionary theory on Young is both deeper and more
pervasive than this echo of Chambers might indicate. Young's Darwinism
is not a restatement of tired organic analogies; rather, it is a fundamentally
revised theory in which the concept of mutations—sudden, radical
changes—has replaced the concept of development by minute variations.

Like England, America had produced a large number of social Darwin­
ists and evolutionary historians during the last quarter of the nineteenth
century. William Dean Howells espoused Darwin's cause in \textit{Harper's
Magazine} and later in \textit{Criticism and Fiction} (1892). William Graham Sumner
taught Darwinian sociology at Yale, and Thomas S. Perry risked (and
lost) his Harvard professorship for the sake of Darwinian ideas in criticism. Thereafter the literary application of evolutionary ideas in America spread rapidly. John Fiske, E. C. Stedman, W. M. Payne, and Kuno Franke, chairman of the Harvard German Department, supported the use of evolution as a theory of criticism. In 1898 Felix Schelling recognized the application of Darwinism to the history of drama in an article in the University of Pennsylvania Bulletin entitled “Studies in the Evolution of Dramatic Species from the Beginnings of English Drama to the Year 1660.”

Most of this early criticism is organic. A significant new departure was made by Professor John M. Manly in an article published in 1907 in the fourth volume of Modern Philology, titled “Literary Forms and the New Theory of the Origin of Species.” At that time and for some years to come, Professor Manly was the outstanding American authority on medieval drama. He was also the teacher of Karl Young and of several other scholars destined to become major figures in American medieval studies. For both reasons his article had—and continues to have—considerable influence. It led immediately to three lengthy essays in Darwinian criticism by John P. Hoskins of Princeton; it was quoted approvingly by such scholars as P. S. Allen, George C. Taylor, H. S. V. Jones, and George R. Coffman; it was referred to in 1955 by Hardin Craig, at the beginning of English Religious Drama, as “brilliant and original”; and it is cited at the beginning of the entry on drama in the revised Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman Handbook to Literature, published in 1960. In other words, it is still a living influence today.66

Manly’s success stems from the fact that he significantly altered the co-ordinates of Darwinian critical method. He explains (perhaps with Chambers explicitly in mind) that “the historians of literature . . . like the thinkers in all fields of thought, have come under the pervasive, dominating influence of a great zoological theory, and under this influence have been blind to some of our facts, have distorted others, and have allowed ourselves to substitute catchy phrases for a real understanding of the processes.” His experience with medieval drama convinced him that the accepted concept of organic growth was inadequate: “the conditions of change had been very different from what the theory presupposed.” Manly did not, however, abandon evolutionary analogies. Instead he turned to the new theory of evolution by mutation. This theory, an outgrowth of the nineteenth-century study of genetics, had been explained by Charles A. White in an article on “The Mutation Theory of Professor de Vries,” published in the *Smithsonian Report* for 1901. In de Vries’s theory, evolution proceeds in two ways, by “fluctuating” variation, which accounts for gradual improvements within species, and by “sudden and unaccountable differences” or mutations, which account for the development of new species. Accordingly, new literary species develop “not by gradual accumulation of insensible differences, but by a sudden definite change . . . because certain literary forms, like certain species of plants, owe their distinctive character to the presence of one essential element.”

67 Pp. 580–81, 591–92. Manly aptly expresses the appeal of Darwinian thought in the early twentieth century: “. . . even if we try to keep steadily before us the fallacy of reading in such terms as ‘organism’ or ‘evolution,’ it is practically impossible to speak or think of any unified body of facts showing progressive change as men habitually spoke and thought before 1860” (p. 580). Like other neoevolutionists, Manly objected to (1) the organic analogy and (2) the *Natura non facit salus* idea (see Cassirer, *Logic of the Humanities*, p. 179). It is important to realize that although neoevolutionists occasionally seem to attack evolution, they themselves believed that they were improving on earlier efforts. Hoskins wrote: “We have no quarrel with the theory of evolution, we are rather convinced that it is almost the only theory which gives any promise of bringing order out of the chaos of aesthetic, biographical, and historical monographs, which form the bulk of critical production today” (“The Struggle for Existence,” p. 80). Craig is merely paraphrasing Young and Manly when he writes: “literary forms do not arise out of a welter of circumstances and influences, approximations and imitations, but each literary form is a special discovery or invention” (*ERD*, p. 19).

68 Manly, “Literary Forms,” p. 577. De Vries addressed a convocation at the University of Chicago in 1904, and his talk was subsequently reprinted in the *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institute*, 1904, pp. 389–96. Manly does not mention hearing the 1904 talk, but he does tell us that he read White’s article in 1903.

69 “Literary Forms,” pp. 590–91. Cf. Hugo de Vries, *Mutation Theory* (trans. J. B. Farmer and A. D. Darbishire [Chicago, 1909], I, 3): “I define mutation theory as the thesis that the characteristics of organisms are built from wholes sharply distinct from each other . . . species do not flow [into one another] but have originated from one another in a step-wise fashion. Each new whole coming from the old constitutes the new form as a species independent from the species from which it came.”
The Darwinian axiom *Natura non facit saltus* is replaced by the de Vriesian axiom *Natura semper facit saltus*.

To apply the mutation theory, it was necessary to improve on earlier definitions of drama. As long as drama was considered an “organism” in continuous development from the protozoan *Quem quaeritis* to *Hamlet*, labeling was sufficient. As Manly recognized, however, the mutation theory required literary forms to be regarded as bundles of “characteristics.” In this view, a new species is formed when an established characteristic changes or a new one is added to the original complex. Medieval drama, Manly believed, is a perfect illustration of the mutation theory. Drawing on Chambers, he equated the elements of dialogue, action, and impersonation with the characteristics of species in mutation theory. Dialogue is the least important of these characteristics, but action and impersonation are essential. A literary form which does not employ action and impersonation may be dramatic or theatrical, but it is not drama. In the same way the miracle play, the morality play, pastoral drama, and the heroic couplet are seen as evolutionary “jumps” rather than as products of a “gradual accumulation of insensible differences.”

Karl Young used Manly’s theory as the basis for the theoretical framework of *The Drama of the Medieval Church*. Unlike Chambers, he believed that “no satisfying study . . . can be made without . . . a candid and practical definition of the term *drama*.“ With a footnote bow to Manly, he continued, “A play . . . is, above all else, a story presented in action, in which the speakers or actors impersonate the characters concerned.” Impersonation is still more important for Young than for Manly. Dialogue, while important, is not necessary, for monologue and pantomime are “true though limited” forms of drama. It is the criterion of impersonation that leads Young to make an emphatic separation between the liturgy and the drama proper, which he believes to have emerged first in the ceremony of the *Visitatio Sepulchri*. Young quotes medieval authorities who call the Mass a drama only in order to reject their testimony. The Mass does not involve impersonation but is a “true sacrifice.” It is not pretense but a literal repetition of the original sacrifice, according to Catholic

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70 “Literary Forms,” pp. 580–86. See the comment on this by Hoskins, “Biological Analogy: I,” pp. 409–10. Hoskins’ only objection to Manly is that the “Literary Forms” article is too “impersonal.” In fact, Manly’s reform of evolutionary theory had the effect of emphasizing the individual’s part in the process of developing new species, as Hardin Craig rightly insists (*ERD*, p. 19). Temporarily, at least, it was possible to discuss genius (see Hoskins, “Biological Analogy: I,” pp. 414–20; “II,” pp. 65–68).


doctrine: "What takes place at the altar is not an aesthetic picture of a happening in the past, but a genuine renewal of it"; "it is not a representation of an action, but an actual re-creation of it." 73

A clearer understanding of Young's classification scheme is now possible. It is only in part a logical device based on the wish to be descriptive. It is also (perhaps primarily) a schematic elaboration of the mutation theory. Recurring theatrical elements, with emphasis on dialogue and action, are discovered in a variety of ceremonies, including the Easter Introit, the Depositio and Elevatio Crucis, the procession on Palm Sunday, and the ceremony for the consecration of a church. These are merely "dramatic" because they lack impersonation. They are what Manly called "futile variations." 74 Then in the Visitatio Sepulchri impersonation appears, and the new species called drama is formed. Once formed, it can develop. The development, however, is not perfectly smooth. It occurs by a series of increments (Manly's "fluctuating variations"), which, since they do not involve the essential characteristic, improve the species without changing it. The Visitatio manuscripts are divided into the three large "stages" originally proposed by Chambers. Stage one includes only the three Marys and the angels. Stage two adds the apostles Peter and John; stage three adds the risen Christ. Between stages the increments are dramatic episodes. There is also evolution within stages. Each stage contains "groups" arranged from simple to complex. The placing of a drama within a group depends on the absence or presence of "additions," such as the antiphon Venite et videte, the sequence Victimae Paschali, and the Planctus Mariae. The additions are the smallest evolutionary increment considered.

Chronology must be disregarded in Young's arrangement, but we recall his belief that "presumably" if all manuscripts were recovered anomalies

73 DMC, I, 84–85, 110. The radical effect of the mutation theory on literary history is apparent from this arbitrary rejection of medieval testimony concerning the Mass. The same line of thought is apparent in Young's 1910 article: "To many an intelligent and sensitive observer . . . it must have occurred . . . that the addition of the merest suggestion of impersonation . . . would transform the dramatic dialogue into true drama." Other followers of Manly also seem arbitrary. Allen, for example, refuses to consider Hroswitha's plays dramas because they are not written for "impersonation." They are therefore "nothing but legends in dialogue form" ("Mimus," p. 25). Other scholars were encouraged to postulate evolutionary "jumps" to account for previously unexplained literary changes. Coffman, for example, explained the medieval saint's play as an evolutionary jump; Jones invoked the theory to account for the "new species" created by Chaucer in his Canterbury Tales; Taylor discovered evolutionary jumps in the introduction of nondramatic lyric material into Middle English drama; Hoskins found mutation at work in the formation of the Renaissance drama of personality and nineteenth-century naturalistic drama, as well as an example of the extinction of "unfit" literary forms in the decline in reputation of Paradise Lost.

74 "Literary Forms," p. 581.
would disappear. The result is strikingly similar to a biological classification chart showing the origin of a species, its variants, and its pattern of evolution toward its most recent (and, in drama, its most complex) members. In *The Drama of the Medieval Church* the most recent “member” considered is the Passion play. In *English Religious Drama* Hardin Craig extends the survey to the cycle plays and moralities. The result, says Craig, is “not unlike the meticulously perfect range of colours seen in the breeding of the fruit-fly: every possible colour is realized, but not by a sequential transition from one shade to another.”

Because of Young’s *terminus ad quem*, the question of continuity between medieval and Renaissance drama does not occur in *The Drama of the Medieval Church*. It does arise in Craig’s *English Religious Drama*, which in this respect may be considered a logical continuation of Young’s work. The lacuna apparent in Chambers’ theory persists. His dislike for the critical emphasis on “comic realism” leads Craig to insist that “medieval religious drama existed for its own self, and not as an early stage of secular drama,” a position clearly at odds with evolutionary teleology. Although the idea of viewing medieval drama “for its own self” has suggestions of aesthetic formalism, as used by Craig it serves chiefly to emphasize the discontinuity between medieval and Renaissance drama. The mysteries, says Craig, “were medieval in their essence, and the Middle Ages were passing.”

If any influence persists, it is not via comic realism but in the backwaters of sixteenth-century Latin Biblical drama, Jesuit school drama, and vestigial survivals like Bale’s Protestant mystery cycle and the Stonyhurst pageants. Morality plays have a more obvious influence, but for Shakespeare, even their influence is indirect—it is limited to “a quality of moral earnestness” common among sixteenth-century Englishmen. Chambers had hoped for a history of medieval drama which would “explain the pre-existing conditions which, by the latter half of the sixteenth century, made the great Shakespearean stage possible.” The failure of this ideal was inherent in his assumptions. Its epitaph is Craig’s observation that “there is only the faintest possibility that there was any tangible influence of the moral interlude on Shakespeare when he wrote *Macbeth*. . . . It is not therefore a matter of the formal and often thin thing called literary influence that makes Macbeth remind one of Everyman, but a community of race and purpose that found expression in the drama of two different though still closely connected ages.”

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75 P. 6. For Craig’s use of the action-dialogue-impersonation trilogy, see *ibid.*, pp. 3–4.
76 P. 7.
77 P. 363.
78 ERD, pp. 367–71.
79 P. 389.
IV

At this point we may legitimately proceed to summary and evaluation. Chambers, Young, and Craig agree that the chronology of medieval drama is difficult to trace, but the outline and logic of the development is clear. After a long period of quiescence, a dramatic instinct asserted itself in the Quem quaeritis trope of the Easter liturgy. The trope grew, was detached from the liturgy, and eventually became genuine drama. Similar dramas developed in connection with Christmas and other Church festivals. At first the dramas were given in the church and in Latin. Later they were presented in the churchyard, and vernacular began to be used. In the course of this development they were expanded, and much comic and farcical material was added.

Although there is disagreement about the steps in the process, all authorities agree that the individual plays tended to be collected and presented in groups. By the early fourteenth century large-scale cycles had been created which form the basis of the Passion plays and Corpus Christi cycles of the fifteenth century. In northern England the cycles were most popular; in the south and on the Continent the Passion play became dominant.

We may pause here, for the time being, to ask what the history sketched in the preceding paragraphs amounts to. No one who reads Chambers and Young can fail to be impressed by their energy. If their theory is a skeleton, they have created an enormous body around it. No available document has remained unread, no known allusion has been overlooked, no surviving fragment of dialogue has been ignored. If later scholars have gleaned a good many new facts after the harvest, their findings have added fresh confirmation or modified details without affecting the whole.

The structure created by Chambers and Young gives the sense of being unshakably solid—of being objective and empirical in the best sense of those terms. Yet on examination it proves to be arbitrary. Buried among the facts and protestations of objectivity are assumptions peculiar to a specific age and group of thinkers. In the first place, the empiricism radically limits the type of question which can be asked. The focus is on the “what” rather than the “why.” The resulting form is closer to a chronicle than a history in the true sense of the word. From Thucydides and Polybius to Collingwood, historians have recognized that the number of facts available to them is limited only by the patience of their readers and the affluence of their publishers. The historian must select and discriminate, and his highest achievement is to create a coherent structure which explains the “why” of history as well as the “what.” J. M. Manly
asked the question, "Can we not lay aside all theories and merely collect
the facts of literary development, and then enquire what they mean?"
His reply is a challenge to the most fundamental assumption of nineteenth-
century empirical scholarship: "We cannot. The whole history of science
tells us in unmistakable tones that no man who merely collected facts and
then inquired into their meaning has ever succeeded in dealing with any
problem but the tiniest." 80

Even as Manly made this point, historical scholarship was being chal­
lenged from several other directions. Humanists following in the path of
Matthew Arnold and James Russell Lowell complained that "scientism"
in cultural study was destroying the very values which justified the
emphasis placed on it in higher education.81 A quite different group, in
the tradition of Schiller and Coleridge, argued with equal vehemence that
historical criticism was based on a fundamental misconception of the
nature of art. The most telling expression of this view, Croce's Aesthetic,
first appeared in 1901 and was published in English translation in 1909,
followed almost immediately by Joel Spingarn's announcement in "The
New Criticism" (1911) that "we have done with the 'evolution' of
literature.... The later nineteenth century gave a new air of verisimilitude
to this old theory by borrowing the term 'evolution' from science; but this
too involves a fundamental misconception of the free and original move­
ment of art." 82

A question of a seemingly different sort, and one directly pertinent to the
history of medieval drama, was being raised by the cultural historians
themselves. The study of primitive culture had begun on a confidently
progressivist note with Fontanelle a century and a half before Darwin.
Primitive society was of interest chiefly as it revealed the abysmal depths
from which humanity had dragged itself. Although Vico and Herder
qualified this view, it persisted and actually gained strength in the
generation following Darwin.83

80 "Literary Forms," p. 592.
81 Typical of "neohumanist" invective against historical criticism are Irving Babbitt's
Literature and the American College (New York, 1956), first published in 1908, and Norman
Foerster's The American Scholar (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1929).
82 Visions and Revisions in American Literary Criticism, ed. B. Oldsey and A. Lewis, Jr.
(New York, 1962), p. 19. There is no satisfactory history of aesthetic criticism in the
later nineteenth and early twentieth century. A useful but partial survey of the earlier
period is given by Benedetto Croce, "History of Aesthetic," in Aesthetic, trans. D.
Ainslie (New York, 1960), pp. 155ff. Bosanquet is unsatisfactory. For excerpts and
brief comment, see Hardison, Modern Continental Literary Criticism, pp. xi–xix, 141–224.
83 For the history of the study of primitive culture, see Richard Chase, The Quest for
Myth (Baton Rouge, La., 1949), pp. 7–12, 38–65. For the Victorian anthropologists
E. B. Tylor, Andrew Lang, W. Robertson Smith, and James Frazer were (or began as) evolutionists, but the very nature of their material forced them to relax their doctrinaire position. Max Muller, father of the idea that myth is a "disease of language," had contributed, both by his theory that primitive society is a degeneration from a higher culture and by his editions of oriental texts, to an awareness that society is not evolutionary in the biological sense. The "primitive" mentality which produced the Upanishads may be different from the modern one, but it is certainly not simpler. E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) was a direct response to *The Origin of Species* and was praised by Darwin himself in a letter following its publication. Yet to understand primitive myth Tylor was forced to attempt to see the world from the primitive point of view, and he thus anticipated in some measure the nonevolutionary stance of modern comparative anthropology. The same may be said of James Frazer. A firm rationalist who never tired of ironic descriptions of primitive superstitions, he was directly responsible for the Cambridge school of anthropologists, contributed significantly to the thought of Freud and Jung, and continues to influence such diverse thinkers as Clyde Kluckhohn, Stanley Hyman, T. H. Gaster, and Northrop Frye, none of whom would accept the straightforward evolutionism which Frazer himself believed in.

If there is any meaning to the work of these anthropologists, psychologists, and critics, it is that rather than clarifying cultural phenomena, the evolutionary analogy obscures them. Therefore, although the documents accumulated by Chambers and Young remain valuable, the evolutionary history of the drama—whether organic or in terms of mutation—needs to be re-examined. As Spingarn was insisting in 1911, "art has no origin separate from man's life. . . . The simple art of early times may be studied with profit; but the researches of anthropology have no vital significance for Criticism, unless the anthropologist studies the simplest forms of art in the same spirit as its highest. . . ."

The need for a new perspective on medieval drama rests on far more than the mere desire to substitute modern for nineteenth-century views. It arises from failures inherent in, and often recognized by, the his-

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84 E.g., Tylor: "... myth is the history of its authors, not of its subjects; it records the lives not of superhuman heroes, but of poetic nations" (*Primitive Culture* [London, 1871], I, 416).


torians of medieval drama themselves. Thus it is a truism of the historical method that the scholar must seek understanding of the literary work in the context of the age which produced it and, as far as possible, from the point of view of its contemporaries. Yet Chambers and Young clearly violate this principle. Chambers' teleology leads him to write about medieval forms as though they existed as transitional points on the road to "the great Shakespearean stage." His hostility to the Church leads him to ignore the religious content of the plays and to stress "secularization." In the same way Young refuses as a matter of principle to examine the plays aesthetically—that is, in terms of the very elements which might explain their popularity. And perhaps most obvious of all, Young quotes elaborate medieval discussions of the dramatic nature of the Mass only to reject them because the Mass does not conform to his twentieth-century definition of drama.

A second problem is the evident failure of the evolutionary approach to achieve its own goals. The gap between medieval and Renaissance drama remains as wide as ever in spite of numerous demonstrations that in other areas of culture the contrast between Middle Ages and Renaissance is far less emphatic than Burckhardt imagined. As Craig admitted in 1955, no real influences of the type recognized by historical scholarship have been demonstrated between religious drama and Shakespeare. The best that one can say on the basis of the standard histories is that first there was medieval drama and then there was Elizabethan drama. In practice, the introductions and handbooks to English drama do just that, devoting a chapter or two to summaries of Chambers and Young, and then proceeding to the sixteenth century with scarcely a backward glance. Or—if the author belongs to the minority still demanding influences—continuity is found in "comic realism." Craig properly complains, "Critics of the medieval religious drama have treated excrescences and aberrations as if such things, thought of as looking forward to the dramatic masterpieces of the Renaissance, were the end and purpose of dramatic activity. They have been interested in devils, raging tyrants, and clowns, in the shrewishness of Noah's wife, and the sheep-stealing episode of the Townley Second Shepherds' Play, and have sometimes been indifferent to the fact that

medieval religious drama existed for itself . . . and not as an early stage of the secular drama.\textsuperscript{89}

The need to stress "excrescences and aberrations" is such a clear demonstration of the failure of historical scholarship to live up to its own ideals that perhaps nothing more need be said on this score. But there is another critique of the Chambers-Young approach which needs to be made. The terms action, dialogue, and impersonation appear quite simple at first glance, but the more closely they are examined, the more questionable they become. Generally speaking, they are understood as externals by Chambers and his successors. Thus action does not refer to plot or Aristotelian praxis, but to stage activity, perhaps akin to actio as used by Elizabethan rhetoric in reference to the lore of delivering orations. Action occurs whenever there is movement on the stage which mimics the movements or gestures of characters who, because they are imitated, are conceived to be more "real" than the flesh and blood players. Discounting the curious idea that fictitious characters are more real than actors, all performances—pageants, dances, orations, ceremonies—may be said to have action. Such action is independent of dramatic structure. It is part of what Aristotle called spectacle, and if taken seriously as a differentia for drama, would imply that a play ceases to be a play when it is read rather than performed. At any rate, as utilized, the criterion of action confuses the issue by directing attention away from dramatic form and focusing it on externals—stage directions, costumes, machinery, and the like. It has the same effect on the criticism of the drama that the classification of a whale as a fish would have on a system of zoology.

The criterion of dialogue is no less slippery. Young discounted it because it would have caused the exclusion of monologue and pantomime from the ranks of drama. Add to this point the agonies of critical indecision caused by the débat, and it is apparent that an emphasis on dialogue creates more problems than it solves.

Finally there is the criterion of impersonation, which, since Manly, has been the most important of the three differentiae. The most authoritative definition (Young's) asserts: "As to the nature of impersonation in itself there can scarcely be any substantial disagreement. It consists in physical imitation. In some external and recognizable manner the actor must pretend to be the person whose words he is speaking, and whose actions he is imitating. The performer must do more than merely represent the chosen personage; he must also resemble him, or at least show his intention of doing so. It follows, then, that the dialogue and physical movements of those who participate in the liturgy will be transformed from the dramatic

\textsuperscript{89} ERD, pp. 6–7.
into *drama* whenever these persons convey a story and pretend to be the characters in this story.” 90

The definition is complex, but certain features stand out. Evidently, impersonation is closely related to the criterion of action. Like action, it is conceived as something physical—a “physical imitation.” The point is important. Young is clearly not thinking of literary texts but of performances, not of what appears in manuscripts but of what would presumably occur if the manuscript were acted out. 91 Whatever else it may be, this is an extremely limiting view of drama. Discussions of drama are often weakened by ignorance of stagecraft, but acting and staging procedures are certainly not essential elements of the theory of drama. A knowledge of the habits of Elizabethan players, for example, is useful to a reader of *Hamlet*, but lack of it will not prevent him from understanding and appreciating the play. Charles Lamb’s preference for *Lear* as read to *Lear* as performed is a case in point.

In addition to placing undue stress on performance, “impersonation” connotes artificiality. It suggests make-believe in contrast to reality. Both Chambers and Young approved of this suggestion. Chambers explicitly endorsed the “play” theory of art in the formulations of Herbert Spencer and Karl Groos. 92 According to the play theory, man’s activities are

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90 *DMC*, I, 80–81.

91 In his 1910 article in *PMLA* (p. 313) Young cites “a gesture, a change of facial expression, a bit of costume” as examples of impersonation. The triviality of this view is evident when we note the questions which could arise if it were taken seriously. Would Hroswitha’s “legends in dialogue form” become dramas if they were acted today? Or is it the intention of the author which determines whether a work is drama or not? If so, how do we ascertain the intention of an author long dead, e.g., Hroswitha? The answer would probably be “by the probabilities of the age; for since Hroswitha wrote at a time when nobody composed dramas, she herself could not have composed them.” But this answer, of course, assumes what is to be proved and, in addition, gets away from impersonation altogether. Again, if the Mass is not drama because it is too real (i.e., Christ is not “represented” but is actually present, as Young has it), then is the Episcopal Communion service a drama? Or the Protestant Lord’s Supper? Or do we not shift from the intentions of the author to the intentions of the performer (or spectator), and if so, which performer (or spectator)? These questions are not facetious. They illustrate the inadequacy of the criterion of “impersonation” to even the simplest demands placed upon it. Since Young studied drama with George Baker of Harvard before coming under Manly’s influence, he should have known better.

92 *MS*, I, 147–48. That the idea can lead to genuine insight is illustrated by Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*. However, in the theories of Herbert Spencer and Karl Groos, which Chambers drew upon, art occupies only a minor place, and the play idea becomes another way of saying that art is trivial and/or childish (see Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology* [New York, 1890], II, 629). Groos (*The Play of Man*, pp. 389–95) is somewhat more sophisticated, but remarks, “The more earnest is a man’s life, the more will he enjoy the refuge afforded by play when he can engage in sham occupations, chosen at will, and unencumbered by serious aims” (p. 389).
divided into the practical and utilitarian on the one hand, and the useless on the other. Work, whether physical or intellectual, is utilitarian and is the normal lot of mature men. Occasionally, however, human beings undertake "unprofitable activities ... serving no end beyond themselves." These activities are play. Children’s games, dancing, all forms of make-believe, and art—particularly poetry—are varieties of play. Needless to say, drama is also a variety of play. That Young agreed is indicated by his use of words like "pretend" and "pretense" as synonyms for the actor's art and by his insistence that the Mass is not "drama" because the participants actually become what they represent—i.e., the ceremony literally becomes too real.

Right or wrong, the play theory of art echoes the nineteenth-century debate between science and poetry. In this debate the key words for science were "objective," "real," "fact," and "common sense," while the key words for art were "imagination," "emotion," "play," and "suspension of disbelief." Impersonation is therefore a nineteenth-century concept, and one which is in marked contrast to medieval and Renaissance attitudes. One needs only to recall the list of confessions attributed to the effect of drama in Thomas Heywood’s *Apology for Actors* to realize that during the Renaissance the line between art and reality was much less definite than it was in the nineteenth century. Hamlet’s plot to trap the conscience of a king is another example; and even in the midst of the Age of Reason, Tom Jones’s friend Partridge "fell into so violent a trembling that his knees knocked together" on seeing the ghost of the elder Hamlet. Even today the experience of great drama is much more than make-believe. There would seem to be no reason to deny to medieval man watching a dramatization of the Passion of Christ experiences which modern man can have while watching *Oedipus Rex*. The folklore of such survivals as the Oberammergau Passion play is rich in examples of the curious mingling of art and reality which medieval drama seems to have encouraged.

If it is conceded that no simple line can be drawn between art and life, the principle applies to the actor as well as the spectator. One of the basic concepts of the study of primitive customs, accepted since Frazer, is that of identification. The priest does not represent the god, he is the god. That identification is a common experience among actors is attested to

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93 *MS*, I, 147.
94 The curious association between particular professions and particular plays (e.g., Goldsmiths and the Magi; the Shipmen and Noah, etc.) also serves to illustrate the point.
by numerous sources. If Manly or Young had consulted professional actors, in fact, they would have discovered that far from being beyond "substantial disagreement," the idea of impersonation had been hotly debated since it was first suggested—as a novelty—by Diderot. It was the subject for an early (1888) psychological study by William Archer, in which actors were asked to describe their attitudes toward their roles. By far the greatest number agreed that "contagion" (i.e., identification) was necessary for successful acting. "In this sympathetic contagion," concludes Archer, "... the poet—say Shakespeare—fecundates the imagination of the actor—say Salvini—so that it bodies forth the great passion-querivering phantom of Othello. In the act of representation, this phantom is, as it were, superimposed on the real man . . . the passion of the moment informs him to his fingertips, and his portrayal of a human soul in agony is true to the minutest detail. His suffering . . . cannot be called other than real." Stanislavski's "method" has similar elements. Assuming that "the actor must first of all believe in everything that takes place on the stage," Stanislavski designed his famous "method" exercises to facilitate generation of this belief. It may be said, therefore, that the criterion of impersonation used by Manly and Young is at odds not only with probable medieval attitudes but with the impassioned testimony of nineteenth- and twentieth-century actors as well.

In sum, the standard historians of medieval drama have followed the procedure used by early evolutionary anthropologists in connection with the study of myth. They have attributed present concepts and attitudes to a culture of the past. They have assumed that medieval man thought like nineteenth-century man, or ought to have done so. The result has been serious distortion. History has become teleological, interpreted both intentionally and unconsciously in terms of what texts anticipate rather than what they are. The texts themselves have been read as though they were intended for production under conditions vaguely foreshadowing Covent Garden and for audiences vaguely like the rowdies in the Victorian gallery.

Chambers, Young, and Craig believed deeply that medieval drama constitutes a unique opportunity for the study of literary form. If they

95 See William Archer, Masks or Faces? A Study of the Psychology of Acting (London, 1888), passim, for actual case histories and testimonials from living actors.
96 Ibid., pp. 1–11.
97 Ibid., pp. 200–1.
were right, the opportunity deserves to be exploited. The documents and facts which they so painstakingly assembled should be used creatively. In 1929 Norman Foerster complained of the scholarly "mystique of the brick," according to which each new literary monograph is a brick stored in a gigantic brickyard for use by an architect who never comes. The section of the yard marked "History of English Drama" is particularly rich in bricks. It is high time that scholars began building with them.