
Relatively little is known of the aesthetic views of drama in late medieval England, with the exception of a surviving treatise, the anonymous *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. In *Street Scenes: Late Medieval Acting and Performance*, Sharon Aronson-Lehavi examines the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* as a singular example of late medieval views of performance and performativity, asking whether live performances of late medieval English religious theater were created as embodiments of contemporaneous theatrical discourses of aesthetics in mind. Her book argues that late medieval religious theater self-consciously admits the tension between the theatrical event’s “live” nature and the “fictional” world of the Bible that it enacts, therefore developing an acting and performance style that highlights this difference instead of hiding it.

One aspect of Aronson-Lehavi’s argument for this differentiation is her emphasis on the difference between the “epic” and “total” acting styles, the former being one in which the actor exposes the theatrical mechanism to the audience as the art of make-believe while the latter advocates a style in which the actor becomes the character. Referring to the agency of the actor in medieval religious theater as a key theme in the *Tretise*, namely as one who both enacts sacred, Biblical characters and yet stands on-stage in his impure fleshly presence, Aronson-Lehavi connects this to the *Tretise’s* own anxiety concerning the conflicting voice of Christ and the voice of the flesh (human pleasure). The concomitant tension that arises between elevated, clerical culture and popular culture, between soul and body, highlights the medieval actor’s role as a figure that mediates between the audience and the sacred, and yet maintains a necessary distinction between himself and the character(s) he enacts.

Aronson-Lehavi’s study should be commended for its attention to the potential similarities between modern, Brechtian theories of theater as a means for exposing bourgeois ideology through highlighting itself as an illusion, and medieval religious theater’s ability to breach the distance between audience and theater. Granted that medieval theater and Brechtian theater have different motivations, the former stemming from civic-religious convictions and the latter from that of political demystification, her study demonstrates that Brecht’s idea of the self-referentiality of theater...
can offer a lot to a reading of medieval religious theater in its blending of epic (symbolic) and total (naturalistic) styles. She draws attention to this blending of styles through several aspects of performance: the actor wearing a mask while drawing attention to the difference between his face and the mask, multiple castings of actors in a role such as Christ or the Virgin Mary, and highly stylized gestures which can be recognized and remembered. Her case studies therefore straddle this medieval-modern divide with close studies of imbedded textual directions within select plays of the York cycle of pageants, such as the three episodes of the Fullers’ *Adam and Eve in Eden*, the Coopers’ *The Fall of Man*, and the Armourers’ *Expulsion, Joseph’s Trouble about Mary*, and also a contextualization of the *Crucifixion* play within the 2006 production of the city of York.

As a study of the relationship between the *Tretise* (as a theoretical model) and the York cycle of plays in late medieval England, *Street Scenes* also demonstrates that the *Tretise* did not emerge in isolation from medieval religious theater as an intellectual exercise, but shaped its very aesthetics as a discourse about the conflict between mimesis and present-ness, between mirth, profiteering from theatrical activities, and devotion. Instead of merely rehashing the six objections to medieval performances, Aronson-Lehavi contextualizes the *Tretise* by highlighting that the alarm which medieval performances pose for detractors is rooted in their emphasis on the here-and-now, in their bodily and earthly functions. This emphasis on the contingency and indeterminacy besetting medieval performances becomes manifest in the *Tretise’s* own vocabulary of “miracles,” “bourding” (used often in association with joking), and “game,” but is fleshed out in terms of the York and Chester Noah plays with medieval misogynist stereotypes of the shrewish wife of Noah, and the structuring of violent games in plays like the *Transfiguration* and *Christ before Annas and Caiaphas*. Her study of the etymological ambivalences of these words, coupled with their instability of meaning in the plays of York, highlight that when taken out of their original devotional context within the Church alone, these plays do mark an interpolation of extratextual elements such as lay folklore and customs. By doing so, she emphasizes the event-ness and live nature of late medieval religious theater, subject to change and instability in the moment of performance.

All in all, Aronson-Lehavi’s book is a valuable volume to be added to any theater theoretician and historian’s collection, because it helps to fill the gap in the ethical and aesthetic study of medieval drama. The book is meticulously researched and convincingly argued, and Aronson-Lehavi