

MOURÓN-FIGUEROA, CRISTINA 2005: *El ciclo de York. Sociedad y cultura en la Inglaterra bajomedieval*. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela. 310 pp. ISBN 84-8121-978-9. Price: 19,23 €.

From the 1950s onwards, there has been an increasing interest in the Corpus Christi Cycles so long forgotten and disregarded as object of serious literary study. Exceptionally, as early as the year 1885, Ms. Toulmin Smith had already edited the longest, most complete, most lyrical, and best preserved mystery cycle, namely, the York Cycle. Nearly a hundred years later the text was again edited by Beadle (1982), whose edition has come to be considered the authorised version, and Beadle & Meredith (1984), who also edited a facsimile of the original text. These two editions, especially Beadle's (1982), made the text both popular and accessible to a wider audience, while providing a reliable corpus to be studied and analysed by other scholars, such as Twycross (1978, 1982, 1994), Davidson (1984), Johnston (1979, 1985, 1987), Meredith (1979, 1980, 1981), and Rogerson (1978, 1979). These studies deal mainly with issues relating to performance, edition, and literary and dramatic criticism, occasionally including some sociocultural readings such as Horner's (1998) study on *maintenance* and *bastard feudalism*. The success and revival of the York Cycle is evident in the fact that the text has been performed, at least in the city of York, since 1951¹.

The present book, on the one hand, parallels the current social importance and revival of the cycle and, on the other hand, contributes both to a better understanding of the text and complements recent research into purely textual, literary or dramatic aspects of the York cycle by offering a thorough and complete sociocultural description of late medieval England based on the

¹ Although today the performance at York might be regarded as mere entertainment for the tourists, a more serious performance undertaken by the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto had already taken place in this same city by 1977.

study of anachronisms found in the text. The book is written in Spanish but it should be noted that, contrary to what could be regarded as a demerit, this contributes to divulge its contents, and by extension, an understanding of the social and cultural panorama of late medieval England, to scientific, university, and Spanish-speaking communities that would not otherwise have access to them. As the study is based on the analysis of the corpus formed by a detailed and careful selection of the most relevant instances containing anachronisms, and is aimed, in broad terms, at Spanish-speaking students and scholars, it is only natural that examples in English should be followed by their corresponding translations into Spanish. Because no translation of the cycle is available in Spanish, the author has made a great and most welcome effort in successfully rendering the Middle English version into Spanish, maintaining a very acceptable level of linguistic accuracy, while preserving the text's peculiar medieval style. In spite of the fact that the translation overlooks the rhyme, rhythm, and characteristic alliterative verse, emphasis should be placed on the success with which the author has translated more specialised terms related for example to the activity and different tools of the guilds, forms of polite address among the characters or greetings, salutations, and exclamations.

The book is divided into seven chapters preceded by a brief introduction and preface, and concludes with some final remarks and considerations. It also includes both an appendix with a bilingual version of the titles of all the different episodes and updated bibliographical references.

In chapter 1, the author briefly introduces the reader to the world of York and its cycle by explaining processional performance and the role the City Corporation and guilds played in it. She also confronts the controversial issue of authorship and copyists and includes a review of Biblical and apocryphal sources. Indeed, it is a most necessary framing chapter which contributes to a better understanding of the literary characteristics of the sociocultural approach.

Strictly speaking, the sociocultural analysis begins in chapter 2. King Herod, bishops Annas and Caiaphas, and Pilate embody the vices and virtues of contemporary monarchs, noblemen, and churchmen. In this way, the author applies and complements studies like May's (1983) on the virtues of medieval kingship or McKisack's (1971) description of the hierarchy of clergymen. The social status of knights and soldiers is also described and used to exemplify the concepts of *maintenance* and *bastard feudalism*. The author considers the sociolinguistic context as well, by introducing a note on the linguistic habits of the characters and the society surrounding them.

Chapter 3 focuses on law and order. Through an exhaustive analysis of the trials of Jesus, the author describes both royal and local medieval courts, the types of judges or officials presiding them, the difference between secular and ecclesiastical courts, together with references to civil and canon law. Moreover, there is an accurate account of several types of royal officials and administrators (*beadles*, *sherriffs*, *stewards*, *bailiffs*, and *clerks*), as well as a consideration of crimes and offences such as treason, felony or heresy along with their corresponding punishments. The various kinds of medieval courts, such as the *Hallmote* or the *Curia Regis* and the confusion of the duties of the king's officials, explained by Bennett (1960), are brought to light in this chapter. It is also worth mentioning the author's appropriate application to of the differences between *trespas*, and *transgression* or *treason* and *felony*, already put forward by Hyams (2000) and Barron (1981), respectively. Finally, the chapter describes some of the activities of soldiers who, as those ultimately responsible for upholding law and order, arrested, tortured, and physically punished transgressors.

The working activity of trade and artisan guilds as reflected in the *Cycle* constitutes the core of chapter 4. The author offers a most interesting and agreeable picture of God and Noah as master and apprentice, together with references to the actual tools and instruments used by contemporary medieval shipwrights, which results in an excellent example of real and everyday life

brought onto the stage. There are also additional comments on the activities of other guilds, like the ones performed by tilehatchers or pinner. Examples related to agriculture and livestock farming are also included. However, the low number of references seems to suggest that the reader could have been spared the analysis of these two aspects.

Chapter 5 contains a well-balanced description of the cultural component of the research. The author studies several matters classified into two complementary groups: the one including everyday activities such as food, dress, funeral rites, pilgrimages, games, entertainment and ceremonies, and the other dealing with references to medieval general knowledge, including the animal world, diseases (the plague, leprosy), and popular medicine. For example, the symbolism of the animal imagery present in the York Cycle reproduces that compiled in medieval bestiaries, and follows other studies such as the ones by George & Yapp (1995) and Charbonneau-Lassay (1996).

A most faithful and interesting portrait of female social roles, the status of medieval women, and the characteristics of the medieval family are given in chapter 6. The analysis is so conscientious that the real English woman of the later Middle Ages becomes flesh and blood before our own eyes. This study of the female world is most welcome as this subject has been, in broad terms, traditionally disregarded by historians. In so doing, the author adheres to the popularity of current studies on women in general, and on medieval English women in particular. She follows previous work like the ones by Duby (1994), Goldberg (1995) or Leyser (1995). The depiction of Mary and Eve as embodying the vices and virtues of real women stands out. The woman of the York Cycle is described as having a twofold nature: sometimes she is a restless worker, a caring mother, an affectionate wife or a chaste widow, but she can also become a rebel, or a gossiping and deceitful human being. The misogynistic atmosphere surrounding the cycle reflects the prejudices of contemporary patriarchal society and other social constraints on women. The subjects of motherhood and education are also analysed by the author.

The last chapter describes the audience of the cycle and the strategies of communication used by playwrights to fuse the ordinary with the dramatic, and considers those aspects of the Cycle related to its performance. The public, mainly lay and illiterate, was the main reason for the existence of a cycle which is pervaded with didacticism and which successfully transmits the message of Human Redemption. Jürgen-Diller's (1991) classification of the strategies (namely, *framing*, *straddling*, and *homiletic*) used by medieval playwrights to put the ordinary, real world in touch with the dramatic world are successfully applied to offer an accurate description of the characters performing these dramatic functions. References to the performance itself, such as the use of wagons or the processional character of the performance, are also included and serve to emphasise the dramatic nature of the whole text.

In short, the book functions as a coherent unit, the thorough analysis serving a twofold purpose: to describe one of the English mystery cycles from a new perspective, the sociocultural one, in this way filling today's gap in this type of studies, and to bring the Spanish-speaking scholar or student close to the sociocultural context of late medieval England through the world of theatre.

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