Early Theatre
A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama

Volume 5 | Issue 1 Article 7

1-1-2002

Book Review: John Cox. *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge Universsity Press, 2000.

Peter Happe
Southhampton University, ph7@soton.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/earlytheatre

Recommended Citation
Happe, Peter. 'Book Review: John Cox. *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge Universsity Press, 2000.'. *Early Theatre* 5.1 (2002): 87-9 (paper). Article 7.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/earlytheatre/vol5/iss1/7

Copyright © 2002 by Early Theatre. This Book Review is brought to you by DigitalCommons@McMaster. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Theatre by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@McMaster. For more information, please contact scom@mcmaster.ca.

to theatrical traditions. It is the discrete and insightful observations of both stage and film productions, rather than its overall approach to Shakespeare in the theatre and on film, that make this book worth reading.

deborah cartmell

John D.Cox. *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp x, 257.

This wide-ranging study of the use of the devil in medieval, Elizabethan and Stuart drama has much to recommend it. It treats an impressive number of plays, picking out several authors, notably Bale, Marlowe, Jonson and Dekker, whose contributions to the role of the devil, as well as their influence, are effectively examined in some depth. The work promotes a substantial thesis on the devil as a stage character, but in doing so it may have omitted a number of other considerations which 'make not for it': we shall return to these below. It is also written in such a way as to challenge and clarify continuities between traditional chronological categories, and this too is to be welcomed.

The theoretical position adopted by Cox is essentially a social one, and his analysis continually avails itself of a social vocabulary in order to describe it. Thus the devil in medieval drama is seen primarily as a threat to a sacramental society, and his manifestation is primarily associated with feudal power structures. Because of this, it is argued that the model for the devil is frequently drawn from upper classes in society. This account runs broadly through the chief genres of medieval drama, but a change is marked by the work of Bale, who brought in a Protestant perspective, and Marlowe, whose moral ambiguity Cox carefully and successfully illuminates as seminal for change. Such developments are made apparent by an innovatory association of the devil with Catholicism, a concept in itself dependent upon the Reformation. Cox also wisely associates change with developments in the nature of the drama in the sixteenth century. The chief effect is that the devil came to be associated with commoners, and a major thrust of Cox's theory here proposes that this association is substantially the emphasis of seventeenth-century dramatists. In discussing their drama, Cox again includes a range of genres, and among them are many plays not frequently read, cited, or performed. Interestingly a goodly number of these relatively unknown plays are collaborations, and the material adduced here may well be used to clarify the interactions among the co-authors. As well, Cox delivers a repeated, even repetitive, attack upon the 'evolutionary'

approach which he perceives in the still influential work of E.K. Chambers. He traces what he calls 'oppositional thinking' in the portrayal of the devil, by which the devil is conceived as being part of a binary system of opposition to established or promoted values. In doing so, he pays attention to many aspects of continuity in the drama for a period of over two hundred years, and he seeks to replace the notion of secularisation of the drama with a more complex model, which is in truth a matter of changing ideologies and the negotiations between them.

In dealing with these topics, Cox uses much material which is primarily satirical, and it is here perhaps that one may have some doubts about the comprehensiveness of his theory. The long continuance of interest in the devil may indicate strong emotional and psychological elements, but these are not systematically addressed in this book, and the overall effect is thus somewhat weakened, even if the force of the social theorisation be fully accepted. For example, Cox does not address the variety of emotional impacts which the devil may arouse, and there is a considerable variety of effect between such different instances as Satan in *The Devil is an Ass* and Lucifer in the N. Town cycle, both of whom Cox does discuss in other contexts. One of the most striking aspects of recent revivals of early plays is the *frisson*, the sensation which a devil's arrival can still generate. The frequency of nervous laughter suggests that a significant aspect of theatrical devils is simply not covered by Cox's socially oriented analysis. To some extent he also privileges a social perspective at the expense of a moral one.

In a number of ways, this study might have given a richer impression of the presence of the devil. One of the medieval aspects is the relationship which appears between the World, the Flesh and the Devil, a common configuration which suggests that more attention to theological contexts might also have been useful. Another is the widely used subject of Margaret Jennings's monograph (*Studies in Philology* 74, 1977), Titivillus, who has a significant background in non-dramatic as well as dramatic analogues. There is also the question of the function of the devils in the Cornish cycle where devils appear on all three days, and there are 'tents' nominated for hell on two of them; additionally one could adduce or refer selectively to many appearances in continental medieval drama, especially, but not exclusively in the drama of France, Germany and the Low Countries. Possibly these would have enhanced Cox's central argument, but even if they did not, they might have added significant contexts for it. With regard to the four cycles in English, some

difficult questions regarding continuity and consistency within them remain, and it would be valuable to take account of these questions.

The study might also have been strengthened by further shifts in emphases. For example, Cox underestimates the political concerns of John Heywood, whose plays are intimately related to the public events of the early 1530s, especially those surrounding the divorce. In *Four PP*, the Pardoner recounts a visit to hell, where he found the somewhat Henrican chief devil watching the souls play at 'racket' (ll. 881–8). The treatment of the Vice is also open to question. Cox does not always discriminate accurately between the stage convention commonly called '*the* Vice' by theatrical practitioners and publishers for a period of about thirty years, and vices in general (often part of the Seven Deadly Sins, and lasting for much longer in the history of the early drama), though he is aware that there is a difference. The important thing for this study is that 'the Vice' was a stage convention, used for all sorts of practical staging necessities in a period when acting companies were small and players had to make the most of a key player whose professional skills had high entertainment value. He was usually so busy that it was impossible to double his part. If the devil did have an emotional impact, as I have suggested, the Vice invariably did not: his expressions of emotion are always comically insincere. For a time he must have been an indispensable element in the business of making a profit. In places the conduct of Cox's argument could also be tighter. For example the function of Fansy and Foly in Skelton's *Magnyfycence* is not addressed, and yet the play is considered as though devils were present.

As an historical survey, however, this study has much in its favour. It is notably effective in showing the long-term continuity of the devil on the stage, especially by illuminating many manifestations in seventeenth-century plays. This aspect has not previously been treated in such detail, and as such it is a significant contribution, and one which will, one would hope, stimulate further investigation.

PETER HAPPÉ

Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson. *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp 289.

Since the 1980s, at the meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) a band of scholars, often including Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson,