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Lynette R. Muir, *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and Their Legacy*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 294 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$96.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-521-82756-6.

Review by Noah D. Guynn, University of California, Davis.

The passing of Lynette Muir in July 2007 was a regrettable loss for scholars in all fields of medieval literary studies. Muir's erudition was distinguished by its breadth and depth, and her career was a long, fruitful one. Happily, she left behind her an impressive legacy of scholarly publications, including influential studies of Arthurian romance, a wealth of editions and translations, and, most notably, many articles and three key monographs on medieval theater: *Liturgy and Drama in the Anglo-Norman "Adam"* (1973); *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe* (1995), a comprehensive overview of more than 500 biblical plays; and, finally, the volume reviewed here, which offers a similarly wide-ranging account of the serious tradition in medieval drama.

The terms "serious" and "medieval" require some explanation in this case. By "serious," Muir means the genres that Alan Knight has categorized as "historical": plays based on events and stories familiar to medieval audiences from a variety of sources and accepted by them as true rather than fictional.[1] For Knight, historical drama includes biblical and mystery plays, profane histories, saints' lives and miracles, and dramatizations of romance and epic. Having already treated biblical drama in her previous book, Muir excludes it from this one. She likewise makes only limited reference to polemical and morality plays and excludes altogether "plays of situation rather than story, especially farces and Shrovetide plays" (p. 1). Even with these omissions, Muir's corpus is immense: "a very substantial body of serious medieval plays on love and war, especially in French and Italian, with smaller but still significant collections in Spanish, German, English and Dutch" (p. 1). Muir divides these plays into four categories: Marian plays, saints' lives, tales from romance and epic, and legendary and historical events. In exploring each category, she focuses primarily on "minor variations" in the construction of plot through history, and argues that those variations "reflect the changes in the theatrical world of different parts of Europe at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period" (p. 2).

If Muir's corpus is unusually broad, her historical focus is all the more so, stretching from Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim's martyrdom plays (tenth century) to Hans Sachs' historical and biblical dramas (sixteenth century) and beyond. Indeed, she pays ample attention throughout the book to the influence of medieval plays on early modern playwrights, including authors as late as Shakespeare and Marlowe, Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina, Rotrou and the Corneille brothers. Given that the influence of medieval drama endures well into modernity, Muir scarcely needs to justify her revision of conventional periodization. She cites Graham Runnalls, who has "made it quite clear that to suggest that French medieval drama stops around 1500 is 'frankly absurd'" (p. 1). Muir identifies the year 1550 "as the end of half a millennium of medieval plays," but insists that this date is not a terminus ad quem, rather "the beginning of the first century or so of retellings of these stories on both amateur and professional stages" (pp. 1-2).

Muir was one of the few scholars with the erudition and training necessary to breach the divides

between medieval and early modern drama and between the various languages and cultures of Western Europe. I found myself regularly marveling at her command of theater history: there seems to be little she did not know about plays, playwrights, and performance from the tenth century to the seventeenth. If her breadth of scope in the book is compelling, however, Muir's typological and descriptive approach to plot also has significant limitations. A few examples should suffice to demonstrate both the advantages and the disadvantages to her methods.

Among the numerous extant Marian plays from the medieval period, Muir pays particular attention to those based on the legend of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat, a Christianized version of the life of the Buddha traditionally attributed to Saint John Damascene. Two French plays on this subject have survived (the twenty-first miracle play in the Cangé manuscript and the *Mystère du roi Advenir*), as well as two Italian ones. Lope de Vega composed a *Barlan y Josafa* (1611), which in turn influenced Calderón's most famous play *Vida es sueño* (1636). The plot of the Cangé miracle proceeds as follows. After his wife's death in childbirth, King Avenir of India consults his astrologers about the fate of the newborn prince Josaphat. Much to his horror, the king is told that his son will one day convert to Christianity. Hoping to prevent this, Avenir secludes Josaphat in a manor far removed from human suffering and, therefore, the need for redemption. Eventually, Josaphat wearies of isolation and asks his father's permission to see the world. Avenir agrees but attempts, unsuccessfully, to shield his son from awareness of poverty and mortality. Seeing Josaphat meditating on human suffering, God sends word to Barlaam, a former member of Avenir's household and a convert to Christianity, and asks him to proselytize the prince. Barlaam is successful, which prompts several attempts by Avenir to trick Josaphat into renouncing his new faith. Tempted by a band of young girls sent to seduce him, Josaphat prays to the Virgin Mary, who strengthens him against his desires. Ultimately, Avenir relents and is converted, and Barlaam baptizes the entire court.

The fifteenth-century *Mystère du Roi Advenir* follows the same basic plot but is divided into a three-day performance that involves a good deal more violence toward Christians and a different form of dramatic resolution: Advenir gives half his kingdom to Josaphat but banishes him; eventually Josaphat manages to convert the rest of the kingdom, at which point he joins Barlaam in the desert and dies. One of the Italian plays alters the temptation scene significantly. First, a *donzella* sent to seduce Josaphat begs him to marry her, but he refuses because he has vowed to remain celibate. The *donzella* then offers to convert to Christianity if the prince will spend the night with her. An angel reassures Josaphat that he will be able to withstand the temptation, and so he agrees to the request. Finally, Josaphat manages to baptize his father, who abdicates the throne and joins his son in the desert. An angel announces Barlaam's death to Josaphat, who buries him before returning to his own cell. Lope's *Barlan y Josafa* by and large follows the traditional plot but adds another original twist. At the end of the play, the temptress (whom Lope names Leucipe) retreats to the desert after failing to seduce Josaphat. At her death, bells are heard, signifying that Leucipe has achieved a state of grace.

In a subsequent chapter on the Devil and temptation plays, Muir attends not just to the medieval roots of early modern Catholic drama but also to the influence of medieval religious theater on post-Reformation playwrights. She begins with a discussion of the Theophilus tradition, including Rutebeuf's *Miracle de Théophile*, three fifteenth-century German works and an Italian one, numerous documented performances of Theophilus plays by the Jesuit order in the sixteenth century, and Antonio Mira de Amescua's *El esclavo del demonio*, a Golden Age miracle play loosely based on the same theme. Theophilus is a fallen priest who strikes a bargain with the Devil, disavows Christ, and is saved only by the miraculous intervention of the Virgin Mary. As Muir observes, the influence of the Theophilus legend, and of saints' plays more generally, persists even among authors who have abjured Catholic hagiography and Mariology. She cites the work of Susan Snyder, who has read Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* as an "anti-saint play" in which Christian conversion is recast as Faust's bargain, the convert's good works as Faust's "central conjuring tricks and other apparently pointless activities," and entry into Heaven as Faust's "final death and damnation" (p. 71). As a post-Reformation reworking of the Theophilus legend,

the play can only end with Faust's perdition: "There is no omnipotent Virgin Mary to sweep in with her attendant angels and trample on the Devil's belly" (p. 72).

If *Dr Faustus* is an "anti-saint play," Muir interprets Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as "an anti-Faust play complete with the bad spirit, Caliban and the good spirit, Ariel" (p. 72). In Act V, Ariel urges Prospero to renounce vengeance and embrace mercy instead. These words are the "turning point" in the play, and suggest the persistence of Marian themes in post-Reformation English drama, albeit in altered forms: "When just after this, [Prospero] is talking to Alonso about the supposed death of Ferdinand he tells the grieving king he has not 'sought her help of whose soft grace / for the like loss I have her sovereign aid.' To a medieval spectator this would surely have referred to the Virgin Mary—Prospero is talking of Patience" (p. 72).

A final example: Muir discovers similar forms of continuity and change in medieval and early modern plays based on the Ovidian story of Pyramus and Thisbe. Through time, the story evolves from a moral and religious allegory into a tragic love story situated within a largely secular and literal world. The *Moralité nouvelle de Pyramus et Tisbe à quatre personnages*, which is modeled on the popular *Ovide moralisé*, depicts Pyramus as Christ, Thisbe as the Christian Soul, and the Lion as the Devil. The wall separating the lovers symbolizes the separation between Man and God caused by Adam's sin. There are two Dutch versions of the same story, one produced by the Chamber of the Pellicanisten in Haarlem in the early fifteenth century and another produced in Antwerp in the sixteenth. Both plays feature allegorical debates and concluding sections that expound on the relationship between the play and the theology of Christ's passion. The Pyramus and Thisbe tradition continues in subsequent decades with three major tragedies, including a lost work by Chateaufvieux (1581), Lope de Vega's *Castelvines y Monteses* (1588), and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Théophile de Viau's *Pirame* (1621) retains the characters and plot of Ovid's tale, but unlike the medieval plays contains no allegories and no overt moralization.

The examples I have outlined above should serve to demonstrate the expansiveness of Muir's vision but also its conceptual shortcomings. As I have indicated above, *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama* is a study of plots as they evolve over the *longue durée*, and its ambitions are principally categorical and descriptive, rather than analytical or historical. Muir seeks to create a typology of dramatic stories, to summarize those stories in more or less detail, to document subtle shifts in plot construction, and to inventory extant texts. As she explains in the conclusion to her study, "It is the plot structure which made the stories work in the first place and allowed dramatised versions to hold their popularity for so many centuries" (p. 204). In some cases, for instance the Theophilus-Faust temptation plays, this approach is quite fruitful: Muir is here able to demonstrate the ways in which plots drawn from the medieval miracle tradition are transformed by post-Reformation writers like Marlowe, who purges Mariology to create a tragedy, and Shakespeare, who renders the Virgin as Patience, thus bringing his hero to redemption.

In other of Muir's chapters, however, the connections between evolutions in plot and other forms of historical or cultural change are considerably less clear. Not discussed, for instance, is the significance of the differences between the various plays based on the legend of Barlaam and Josephat. It would seem that with each new work, ever-greater emphasis is placed on the character of the temptress, ultimately yielding, in Lope's play, a fully fleshed-out female heroine who steals the spotlight away from the eponymous hero in Act III. Muir does not seek to explain this gradual transformation, nor does she offer any concrete evidence for the influence of the earlier works on the later ones. We are left to wonder, then, whether Lope de Vega knew the medieval French and Dutch plays, or whether he was influenced instead by narrative sources (of which there were many, especially in Spain). Similarly, though Muir makes clear the connections among the medieval morality plays based on Pyramus and Thisbe, the relationship between those works and the early modern ones is not adequately explored. Why do the later playwrights (including Catholic ones) eliminate the moral, allegorical, and religious elements found in the earlier works? Does that content resurface in other forms? Is there any direct

influence of the medieval Pyramus and Thisbe plays on the four early modern tragedies Muir cites? Is there any connection between them other than a shared plot, which is, ultimately, drawn from a single source, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*?

Muir's failure to answer—and in many cases even to ask—these kinds of questions is simultaneously frustrating and enticing. Indeed, to my mind the most serious limitation of *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama* is also its greatest richness: Muir is reluctant to go beyond the categorization and description of plot, but manages nevertheless to offer a resource on early European drama that will likely fuel inquiry in the field for many years to come. The book can be recommended to students and scholars with research interests in theater history, and especially to those who wish to explore the kinds of analytical and historical work that Muir generally neglects. Indeed, each chapter could be seen as the blueprint for a new research project, whether a doctoral dissertation or scholarly monograph. Perhaps we should see this as a final act of intellectual generosity on the part of a scholar known not just for her capacious intellect but also for her remarkable skills as a teacher and mentor.

NOTE

[1] See Alan E. Knight, *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), esp. pp. 16-40.

Noah D. Gynn
University of California, Davis
ndgynn@ucdavis.edu

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