

space for the repeated Biblical claim that at root all desire is a longing for God. Is the sanctifying power of human friendship that it prepares us for that friendship with God to which it is so much akin? Certainly heterosexual people are quick to see in the love and intimacy they experience a pale reflection of divine love. As Michael Vasey puts it, why is it that gay people should not be allowed the same freedom?

The approach set out in Michael Vasey's book could produce a genuine development in doctrine that is not set in advance by either side in this debate, by drawing us back to the appropriateness of the questions asked. In a collegial spirit there are though two lines of questioning I would raise. One is that he deals almost exclusively with male homosexuality, as does much of the research he draws on. The most recent historical work has provided a powerful corrective to this exclusion of female homosexuality, especially in the writings of Valerie Traub; and I suspect that the book was substantially completed before this work appeared.

The second line lies in his handling of the history of friendship between people of the same sex. This is not to deny the imaginative shock of grasping the weight that has been given to such friendship in the past, but his suggestion that we might in some measure return to these forms overlooks the extent to which they were posited on a sharp social division between male and female spheres and the extent to which they expressed relations of social dominance as well as egalitarian relationships. Rather to my mind the point is that the strangeness of the past in this respect is a measure of how different again the future might be.

The style of the book is lucid and direct and is brought to life with wit and good humour. The reader should though take seriously the author's recommendation to look up the scriptural references. Without this much of the detail in the argument will be lost. When this fine, touching, and unfailingly intelligent work goes into a further edition the publisher could usefully add an index of scriptural references.

ALAN BRAY

**THE BIBLICAL DRAMA OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE** by Lynette R. Muir, Pp xix + 301. *Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995. £40.*

In her preface Muir states her purpose in writing:

The aim of the present study is to make available to the increasing number of scholars working in the field of medieval drama, and to the even larger number of people who attend performances of such plays, a detailed survey and analysis of the surviving corpus of biblical drama from all parts of medieval Christian Europe. The number of plays is very considerable, their variety and quality remarkable and the history of their development and evolution fascinating. (p xiii)

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This she succeeds in doing in this interesting and comprehensive book. She both confirms and stimulates the reader's interest in a period of dramatic production which spanned six centuries in development and whose plays were an expression of the integrity of religious and civic life in medieval times, in which biblical imagery was an immediate source of symbols for people to express their faith, hope and experience of God and life. Muir identifies two groups at which the book is aimed: those studying medieval drama academically and those attending such plays as pieces of drama. But it must also be said that this kind of book is of considerable interest to those that would hope to find in the expression of faith in the past models for representation of belief today that might capture the imagination as well as the intellect.

The book falls into two principal parts. First Muir outlines the *theatrical* community behind the plays. She draws out their origin in the Easter liturgy, as a kind of dramatisation of the angel's address to the three women as they come early on Easter morning to anoint the body of Jesus (the *Quem quaeritis*) and their more elaborate development as accompaniment to the Feast of Corpus Christ and its procession of the Blessed Sacrament through the streets. She describes the movement of their setting from within the church and within the liturgy to the streets and open places of the towns, and of their production by clerics to their production by guilds of lay people. She enables us to grasp the gradual and varied development of different cycles of plays throughout the medieval west, from the tenth to the sixteenth century. In the second part she surveys the body of texts, portraying scenes from the beginning of the world, through the history of Israel, into the life of the Christ and ending with the Last Judgement. These express the basic cycle behind the plays, the theme of creation, redemption and judgement, reflecting the formula of the Apostles Creed. Muir readily acknowledges that she cannot offer a totally comprehensive account of all the plays, but yet manages to give a clear sense of the content and tremendous variation of interest and portrayal in different parts of Europe.

In the first part of the book we get a strong sense of the origin and development of the plays as for arousing and expressing the devotion and faith of the people. They are meant for the people and engage their enthusiasm and resource. The plays were amateur productions by the people. The enthusiasm of the audiences is noted by the evidence of problems of noise and violence, and the measures needed to keep quiet and control of the crowd, even to the extent of having mass celebrated before the plays began. Though moving away from church and clerics in their development, the plays show the theocentric nature of life for people in medieval times. We see an interesting aspect of the integration of religious and civic life in the production of biblical tableaux to greet the arrival of princes into towns. While usually expressing the greater qualities of the rulers by comparison with biblical figures, sometimes the comparisons were covert means of political criticism, as when the people

of Arras presented a tableau of Rehoboam to express what they thought of the prince.

In the survey of the plays themselves Muir indicates the sources drawn upon by the writers and the resultant theological vision. While the extant plays are biblical in that they portray history of the world and the characters of the bible, it is clear that such material was mediated through and shaped by the liturgy, the lectionary, and works such as the *Legenda Aurea*, a commentary on the lectionary. Many plays, such as those portraying the early life of the Virgin, draw on apocryphal and non-biblical sources that has become popular elements in the medieval tradition. For instance, 'The Harrowing of Hell', the descent of Jesus after his death into hell to release the souls of all the just, was a theme for which there was only limited canonical biblical evidence, but which became a developed theme in the writings of the Fathers and Thomas and became part of the Easter liturgy. These plays, then, express theological understandings of biblical material, rather than mere dramatisations of them. Their writers also incorporated the religious and devotional world of the medieval times into the action of the plays themselves. Plays of the Crucifixion sometimes follow the pattern of the 'Stations of the Cross', a devotion invented by the Franciscans, even incorporating manifestly non-biblical elements such as Veronica wiping the face of Jesus.

In her conclusion Muir sketches the developments after the sixteenth century and points out the reasons for the general decline of this form of drama from the time of the Reformation and Counter Reformation. In Protestant lands the liturgical background of Corpus Christi disappeared and the portrayal of God was forbidden. Across Europe theatre becomes professional and humanist, in contrast to the amateur and theocentric drama of the medieval times. One interesting detail is that, with the forbidding of the portrayal of God, the Devil as a comic figure ceases. As Muir notes, this does not mean an absence of a sense of evil and suffering, but rather the end of an ability to personify and hence to deal with such things by laughter. Yet, as she also points out, the production of biblical drama of the medieval mould did continue and has remained a feature in areas of Europe, most famously at Oberammergau, and there has been a revival of interest even where the tradition had been lost.

Muir supplements this account with maps of places of production of plays, and pictures of modern stagings. She also gives a very useful appendix, giving information on the liturgy that formed the origin of the drama, something of immense help to those who approach these plays without a knowledge of such things.

Perhaps some readers might find this book rather bitty. No play is gone into in any great detail, rather details are taken from a whole range of the corpus. Those who do want to become introduced to the rich dramatic and religious world of these plays, however, will not mind this, for they will be inspired to go and read the plays themselves.

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