

## Review

REVIEW: Theodore K. Lerud. *Memory, Images, and the English Corpus Christi Drama*. The New Middle Ages Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Pp. xvi, 181, 17 b/w illustrations. Hardcover: \$85.00.

In her seminal study *The Art of Memory* (Chicago UP, 1966), Frances A. Yates explored classical systems of “artificial memory” as post-classical thinkers adapted and put these systems to new use. With an eye on the Renaissance, Yates sketched medieval revisions of memory systems as a precursor to exploring her main subject of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century thinkers. Reading Yates’s survey of medieval memorial arts and their role in the formation of imagery, we get the sense that she recognized much more was going on in terms of memory during the medieval period than she had the space or ability to treat. Thankfully, other scholars in subsequent years thought so too and have explored the interstices of Yates’s discussion. Janet Coleman, for instance, in *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge UP, 1992), surveyed ancient, medieval, and early modern theorists to examine the role of memory arts in the production of *historia*. Similarly, Mary Carruthers, in her diptych on the subject—*The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge UP, 1990; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2008) and *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge UP, 1998)—advanced an understanding of the ethical dimension of memory training and memorial thinking as developed in medieval culture. As she concluded in *The Book of Memory*, such memorial work in medieval thinking “[made] present the voices of what is past, not to entomb either the past or the present, but to give them life together in a place common to both in memory” (260). Read in tandem, Carruthers’s and Coleman’s studies probe several aspects of the history of memory at which Yates hinted but which she did not pause to develop. Taken together, Yates, Coleman, and Carruthers contribute to a foundation for further studies into the means, function, and results of classical memory arts in post-classical cultures. The book under review here is one such study.

In *Memory, Images, and the English Corpus Christi Drama*, Theodore K. Lerud offers his examination of early English drama “as a case study in the effects of image-making in the later Middle Ages” (4):

an image-making rooted deeply in medieval memorial culture. In presenting his case study, Lerud argues for viewing “the Corpus Christi drama as a kind of elaborate memorial theater” whose power can be understood “only from the point of view of the memory arts’ influence on image-making” (6). He continues:

Until quite recently, scholarship on the drama has failed to fully appreciate the symbolic value of town spaces in developing medieval towns. Places or backgrounds, in the form of key town spaces, themselves became part of the play, incorporating the town itself into the festive pageant. In this way, past was linked to present in a memorialization and celebration of Christ’s living presence in the life of the community. (6)

Exploring relations between image, production, text, and space, Lerud examines through a series of ten chapters the Corpus Christi drama, with a special focus on the Chester biblical plays, in light of memory arts and their role in image-making.

Before taking up the Chester biblical plays in their civic context, Lerud first establishes a framework for understanding medieval image production as it pertains to drama in general. In chapter one, “Medieval Culture and the Memory Arts,” Lerud summarizes much of the ground covered by Carruthers and Yates in order to establish the role memory arts play in image production. Those familiar with the memory arts will find this chapter a review, and Lerud acknowledges he is not breaking new ground; rather, he is establishing common ground for understanding the central concepts of *loci* (places) and *imagines* (images) as the means for both structuring memory and understanding how the Corpus Christi drama functions as memorial theater in late medieval and early modern English culture. In chapter two, “The Position of Theater in the Thought of Augustine of Hippo,” Lerud traces what he calls a “double-edged” treatment of theater in Augustine’s writings: both an objection to and engagement with spectacle, image, and fable. This mixed treatment of theater, Lerud argues, underpins conflicting late medieval ideas about images. Lerud then considers the place of Aristotle in medieval discussions of images in chapter three, “Medieval Aristotelianism and the Poetics of the

English Corpus Christi Drama.” Demonstrating that the *Poetics* exercised little influence on medieval dramatists, Lerud argues rather for a reading of *De Anima* as central to any discussion of a poetics of medieval drama. As Lerud points out, this poetics, with its focus on how images serve memory and can lead to spiritual understanding, was foundational to the orthodox view of images in late medieval culture. In chapter four, then, “Thomas Aquinas and the Rehabilitation of the Image,” Lerud reviews Aquinas’s synthesis of Aristotle in his discussion of the role *sensibilia* play in image production. Such an attitude toward *sensibilia*, he argues, leads to an understanding of drama as a series of “quick images designed to jog the memory of the viewer” (47)—an understanding that comes to serve as a basis for late medieval defenses of drama.

Having reviewed the memory arts, Augustine’s thought on theater, Aristototele’s discussion of images, and Aquinas’ discussion of *sensibilia*, Lerud turns more sharply to the late medieval context of the drama in the next two chapters. In chapter five, “Drama as ‘Quick Image’: The Fifteenth-Century Context,” he examines the medieval debate about images—both “quick” and “dead”—as evident in a number of non-dramatic texts, including among others *The Treatise of Miraclis Pleyinge* on one side of the argument and *Dives and Pauper* on the other. As both types of texts point to a value of external images (one negatively; one positively), Lerud argues that we ought to understand Corpus Christi dramas as “quick” images intended as memory and devotional aids. Turning to two other forms of image-making in chapter six, Lerud examines “the key role of backgrounds, places, and locations” (68-69) in “. . . Liturgical Precedents and Illuminated Manuscript Analogues.” Concerning liturgy, he reviews the function of place and location in the Mass as a memorial rite, in the fourth-century Jerusalem stationary liturgy Etheria described, in the tenth-century Metz rite for dedicating a church, and in the Latin church dramas of the tenth century and following. While Lerud argues that liturgy serves as precedent to the Corpus Christi dramas’ use of space and location in performance, he also argues that manuscript illuminations of architectural features—particularly in Books of Hours—serve as contemporaneous visual analogues to Corpus Christi plays “as dynamic memory images, ideally suited to the viewer’s meditation and spiritual betterment” (75). In each case (liturgy,

illumination, drama), Lerud concludes, significant structures and spaces frame and contain the images, linking past to present through an image viewers can store in their memories.

In the study's final four chapters, Lerud turns his attention fully to the Corpus Christi drama. After reviewing scholarship on civic drama and the role of the city in the opening paragraphs of chapter seven, "Plays, Places, and the Dramatic Records," Lerud examines what dramatic records suggest about "place, frame, and background" (97) in Chester and York (the two known sites in England of Corpus Christi dramas with more-or-less complete extant cycles). He concludes that "in the records, the places where pageants were performed constituted an integral part of the quick images themselves" (104). In chapter eight, "A Bird in the Hand: Shifting Politics and Processions in Chester," Lerud turns wholly to Chester, exploring how changing religious politics following the Henrician reforms of 1534 are reflected in and shape the play texts as well as the processional performance space. Perhaps most interestingly he suggests that John Bird, Chester's first bishop of a newly-created see, possibly was instrumental in revising the Chester cycle and its processional spaces along Reformist lines. This discussion sets up nicely chapter nine, "Reinventing the Cycle: The Banns, the Text, and the Pentecostal Design," in which Lerud examines the production's move from Corpus Christi to Whitsuntide and revisions of specific play texts. He argues that the design of the reformed drama centers on the *Pentecost*, which in turn is centered on "the infusion of the Word" (129): a particularly protestant interest. He closes his textual analysis in this chapter with a discussion of protestant elements in the Clothworkers' *Prophets of Antichrist* and the Dyers' *Coming of Antichrist*. Finally, in chapter ten, "The Missing Link: Spaces, Places, and the Chester Whitsun Plays," Lerud draws together discussions from earlier chapters, exploring here the question of locational performances and locational memory by examining three pageants: *Christ at the House of Simon the Leper*, *The Trial and Flagellation of Christ*, and *The Harrowing of Hell*. In each case, he links the pageant's action and dialogue with particular places in the city of Chester based on careful readings of records, city architecture and space, and the pageants themselves. In his discussion of *The Harrowing of Hell*, for instance, Lerud imagines a post-1541 performance of the play at the first location of the Whitsun plays: the *platea* before the

gates of Chester Cathedral, which had been St. Werburgh Abbey prior to its dissolution in January 1540. These gates, decorated for performance of the Whitsun plays, served as background and possibly had scenic value as Hell-gate in the play. Lerud interestingly suggests that the *Harrowing* “partly replays . . . the dissolution of the Abbey of St. Werburgh as made concrete by the seating there of the new Reforming bishop, John Bird, in 1541” (144): just as Jesus rescues only a few of the souls in the play, so to only ten of the Abbey’s twenty-eight monks remained on as canons of the new Cathedral. He implies that contemporary citizens of Chester, as members of the audience familiar with the old and new, might have linked in memory the gates with the pageant and perhaps the Jesus of the pageant with the Reforming bishop sent to release the city from pre-Reformation religion.

*Memory, Images, and the English Corpus Christi Drama* has many strengths. Drawing together elements from the memory arts, Augustine, Aristotle, and Aquinas that he finds reflected in late medieval theory and production of images, Lerud offers an engaging reading of the Corpus Christi drama in its civic and performance contexts. His interpretations of the Chester Whitsun play are particularly interesting in light of changes evident in the pageants and in the political and religious climate of Chester itself. These readings point to new ways to consider the pageants within their sixteenth-century context. I have one slight critique to place next to these strengths. Though Lerud recaps well the main lines of the argument as he moves from chapter to chapter, I would have liked to see a fuller discussion at the end that weaves together in a summative way the various strands of the argument laid out from the beginning. It need not be long, but such a concluding chapter or epilogue might not only succinctly wrap up the case study of the drama as memorial theater but also point to new directions for this kind of work. That said, the way he does conclude the study—with a reflection on the quite different post-Reformation careers of John Bird, Chester’s first bishop, and Thomas Clarke, St. Werburgh Abbey’s last abbot—is poignant and memorable in its own right. Perhaps such a concluding epilogue as I have in mind would detract from the force of this reflection.

This study is complex, engaging, and illuminating. I recommend it for all libraries supporting English studies and theater studies. As an

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application and development of the kind of work in memory that Yates, Carruthers, and Coleman inspire, it also offers an important contribution to medieval studies. I know I will return to it again as I continue to think about both the drama and the memory arts in medieval and early modern English culture.

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