"Reconstructing medieval theater from local records" in "Widener Library: Voices from the stacks"

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Reconstructing Medieval Theater from Local Records

Eckehard Simon

In the winter of 1205–06, missionaries in the town of Riga staged an elaborate Prophets play in the marketplace in order to teach the pagan Prussians, a Slavic people then living in the region of Latvia, rudiments of the Christian faith. But when Gideon battled the Philistines on stage, the Prussians ran away in fear. The churchmen had to plead with them to return to the performance and they did so, reluctantly. The Prussians should have trusted their instincts and kept on running. The Teutonic Knights were about to convert them so thoroughly that today even their language is lost.

At Mardi Gras around the year 1440, the good townspeople of Thorn in Prussia (the German Prussia) put on the popular Carnival play on how to make old women young again. This could be done by immersing them in a “fountain of youth” or grinding them through a mill. The procedure was not a delicate one. In Rhenish towns like Deventer, blacksmiths specialized in producing this play. In Thorn, a flock of stage devils had the task of spotting suitable candidates among the spectators. Medieval theater was street theater. It drew no line between stage and audience. Actors who, when not in costume, were just your neighbors from down the street, often intermingled with the audience. However, when the devils of Thorn picked on the mother of a humorless peasant, sitting on the cart her son happened to be driving by, the enraged rustic clubbed one of them to death.

In February 1500, the North German nobility led by King Johan of Denmark and his brother, the duke of Schleswig-Holstein, hired a notorious band of mercenaries known as the Black Guard in order to subdue the ever rebellious Frisian farmers of Ditmarschen. On the day of the battle, 17 February, it rained heavily after severe frost and the Frisians flooded the field by opening a sluice gate. Within three hours, the warlike farmers (although outnumbered two to one) had routed both the Black Guard and the gentry cavalry flanking them. Two weeks later (Sunday, 1 March), a confraternity in the nearby town of Lübeck, whose rise to power as leader of the Hanseatic League had long chagrined the old aristocracy, put on a Carnival play on “how the nobles were led astray by the scoundrels of the Guard.” The play was written and staged by the men, mostly young merchant traders, who governed Lübeck. The confraternity was an elite religious and social club that had, since 1430, been using their moral plays both to entertain the townspeople and to instruct them. “The Gentry Betrayed,” performed on a wagon stage drawn to the
Tract. XV. Cap. XXI. § 3.

... hoff und gut rith. Dem graff in genuste was, und er nimpt sechs knecht und quam in die stat Marienburg, und wie im war vermeldet, er trat in ein haus, da solte sein der ritter, sonder er war week, und das juncker Hansen von de Heide mit vilen ohare* adel *fol. 392b. der gehur* des landes zu* Preussen, mit disem* er* quam zu worten und darnach zu schlagen, und es quam, wie* juncker Hanss unnd seine collaciengesellen den graff mit seinen sechs knechten zu stücken hiben, und riten zum konig von Polen in den dienst. Den homeister Paulum vermochte sein hoff, und er dis* liez bezeichnet, und* sie nit quomen, und man nam in*, was sie hatten, und sie in die acht tetteren, und vil wort auf den Preuschen adel tatten* sie lestern*.

Der homeister bedacht, was er der landschaft befolen hatte, vor gewalt und unrecht sich zu beschitzen, er verbote sein hoffe solche wortte, damit der adel des landes den stetten nit bekiefe, sondern ja me er es in verbote, je me sie es triben und schriben solche versehe an, wa sie weren in der stat:

Ein Pole von natur ein dieb,
Derr Preuss seinen henn verriet."

Nach solchem der adel in Preussen gewan ein bots hertzff auf den orden."

§ 3. Wie einer mit der larffen ermodt war und seinem gerichte.

In disem selben*tagen dass unserigen fassnacht zu Thorn dis* geschach, und man het ein spil*, in welchem die alte weber* vor-*fol. 393a. jungt werden, zu welchem gehoren viel teufel, und* dis* lieften um* und triben grossen spuch, mit den die sie begriffen. So* quam ein paar gefaren vom dortha, und dies* hatte seine muter eine alte Frau hinder im auf dem wagen. Dis erset* die spieltuelt, ethich an die fraw fiehen, ethich an die pferdt, ethich an den

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magnificent Lübeck marketplace on the three Carnival days, made quite an impression. When the Danes, in June 1507, submitted to Lübeck a list of grievances, they claimed that the “public Carnival spectacle” had insulted their king’s honor more than the Ditmarschen disaster itself.

What these three plays have in common is that they do not exist, that is, they have not come down to us as texts. Information about them comes from local records. Chroniclers wrote down what transpired in Riga and Thorn. In Lübeck, the merchants, true to their calling, kept careful book. Each year stewards entered the names of the four “Carnival playwrights,” whom the confraternity designated to write and produce the play plus the subject of their show, into the great company book. The Lübeck merchants were obviously well educated and no strangers to books (romances, histories) then popular. Still, they considered having to do the play an unwelcome chore, to be passed off to the young and unwary. Thus once brothers had done their stint, they made sure that a record of this went into the company book.

Most of what we know about European theater before Shakespeare comes from local records of this kind. The reason for this lies in the ephemeral nature of medieval play texts. Early plays were not drama to be read and preserved in perpetuity, they were not dramatic literature as we understand the term. Like today’s screenplays, they were performance scripts. Clerics, town clerks, and schoolmasters, who directed the actors, copied out part sheets from the scripts and prompted from them during the performance itself. Some would eventually wind up in someone’s library, but most were used up in the process of producing the play over the years. From late medieval England, only about thirty-five plays survive, either as complete texts or in fragments. They come mainly from towns in northern England, like York and Chester, and consist of long Biblical cycles (from Creation to Doomsday) associated with the Feast of Corpus Christi (June). Individual episodes were performed in sequence by guildsmen on wagon stages who would stop and play at various street locations.

The Toronto project Records of Early English Drama (begun in 1977, ten volumes so far, out of a projected thirty-five) shows, however, that the surviving text corpus is completely unrepresentative of what was actually going on. After REED, every history of early English theater will have to be re-written. Between 1400 and 1650, virtually every town in Great Britain, and notably southern communities, had religious and folk festival theater of some kind. The same is true for continental Europe and Germany. Wherever archival records from this period survive, you will, if you care to look, find references to theater. The plays REED so richly documents for England were not cycles, but, as on the continent, single plays (Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Easter, Pentecost, Saint, May, Robin Hood, tournament, dance plays), not movable in performance, but stationary (scaffolds in open places). Between 1400 and 1650, theater was a church and civic mass medium of extraordinary importance. Movies play a similar role in our society. Much of the culture of these centuries (town, court, university) is theatrical. We only realized this when we started looking at unpublished archival sources.

My project is to collect and edit the records of non-religious plays (religious plays have been done) staged in German-speaking towns before the Reformation (ca. 1370 to 1520) and to write a history based on them. Dialects of German were then spoken as far east as Riga, as far south as northern Italy, and as far west as the Dutch
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town of Arnhem and Deventer. The performances I am reconstructing were part of Carnival theater that also involved street dancing, running around in masks, and an early form of home invasion called mumming. Befitting the season of the flesh (no sex during Lent) and the world-upside-down, most Carnival plays were comedies, similar to the farces and sotties of France. But the example of Lübeck shows that one can have fun while getting a serious message across. In fact, we can document Carnival plays dealing with religious subjects, like saint lives (martyrdom can be very theatrical), David killing Goliath, Susanna and the two lewd senior citizens of Babylon, and the ever-topical coming of the Antichrist. The texts of about 150 Carnival plays survive, 110 of them from Nuremberg, and they have been well studied. But as in Great Britain, performance records tell an entirely different story. I have found about 700 of them so far. They come from about forty towns in every German-speaking region. What are these records? Why do they exist? And where and how do I find them?

Tip O'Neill used to say that all politics is local. The same goes for theater. It takes a community to do theater, doing and viewing theatricals is a social activity. Unlike reading a romance or singing a ballad, it is not something you can do by yourself. Because the only reason people wrote plays was to have them publicly performed, performances left traces in the paper record which towns began keeping in the late fourteenth century (animal skins like vellum and parchment had been too expensive for the ordinary bureaucrat to use). Town fathers were keenly interested in sponsoring theatricals, whether religious or profane. (If you know your Second Shepherds Play, it is often hard to tell the difference.) Theater put their town on the map. It showed the old aristocracy (who came to see the spectacle) where the new centers of wealth and culture lay. There were no theater buildings at that time: the town itself was the theater. This, of course, raised for the authorities issues of public control and public spending. Many records came into being because the town council would give or deny amateur thespians permission to perform. In giving their decision, the councilors will at times mention the play's subject. When theatricals got out of hand, which happens at Carnival, councilors and judges imposed fines and bread-and-water time in the tower. It is the habit of those in a position to punish people to record the infractions in graphic detail.

Most of our records exist, however, because they involved money. Town fathers believed theater to be socially useful and, quite unlike today, were very generous in supporting it. But paying out tax money is serious business. As today, it is something you write down very carefully. The town treasurers gave what they call “drinking money” to actors who, judging from the sums recorded, were well able to hold their ale and wine. They paid for posts and boards to build scaffolds in the marketplace, on some of which sat the actors (when not playing), the spectators on others. They paid bailiffs to control the crowds and guards to keep a lookout in the church spire in case an unfriendly neighbor should exploit the diversions of Carnival to attack. During the three Carnival days almost everybody went mumming and dancing. Just think of Mardi Gras in New Orleans today. The plays were part of the great Carnival performance which involved theatrical rituals, some ancient, of all kinds. The records mention certain plays, like the Thorn one of making old hags young again or hunting the Wild Man, for which no texts survive. We can assume that none ever existed, that some customary Carnival theater did not require scripted texts. This is another reason why records make such good evidence.
Cultural studies flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, much as they do once again in our age. So did theater research. There is a connection here, no doubt. Archivists and theater historians of the time took care to publish performance records from the major theatrical centers. All I had to do, therefore, was to go back to the archives in such towns as Nuremberg, Lübeck, and Eger (now Cheb, Czech Republic), look at the town council minutes, expense accounts, and court protocols and transcribe the records anew. Philologists of today are greater sticklers for the significant detail than our nineteenth-century pioneers and every “autopsy,” to use the German term, yields new information. But I would have to live for another sixty summers to visit all those towns where archival holdings document one, two or just a few performances or where I suspect others await the scanning gaze of future theater historians.

That is where the great treasure house of Widener Library enters the picture, in whose catacombs (Study 15) I have been working for thirty years. No other library in North America surpasses Harvard in collecting local publications, account books, protocols, chronicles, small journals, town histories, and histories of “theater in our town.” The library has been doing this for a century. It is on the shelves of Widener, then, that I find most of my performance records. Many of them are new in the sense that local scholars (then and now) are often in pursuit of other game or do not recognize entries as referring to theater. Such indirection is the essence of scholarship. My research benefits from the informed and systematic zeal with which the resourceful book acquirers of Harvard College Library have, for generations and with the help of generous donors, collected all scholarship fit to print. I am drinking from wells that I surely did not dig. And so, as I will explain, do my students. Those who come after us will, I hope, have reason to be just as grateful even when, feeding on electronic discs, they do not remember us. Local scholarship has a limited market and appears in small editions. If a library does not buy such books when they are published, they will never become available again.

One of my aims in doing theater research is to make it a respectable historical discipline. The Theatre Collection in Pusey Library is splendid. My students and I use it gratefully. In fact, one of them wrote a term paper on the part (one day out of three) of the Montferrand passion play in the Theatre Collection. It is, on the other hand, not easy to concentrate in theater at Harvard. Scholars of my ilk have long regarded the performing arts with a certain suspicion. For theater (make-belief is untruth) this disdain goes back to Christian theologians like Tertullian (fl. ca. 200 A.D.) who thundered against the mimeas disporting themselves in Roman theaters. Yet one of the ways we study early drama today, as we do early music, is to perform it. This brings me to my Core course. In Literature and Arts C-25, The Medieval Stage, I reconstruct, with the help of diligent undergraduates, how some major medieval plays were staged (when, where, on what site, on what kind of stage, by whom, how, for what purpose, for what audience). To prepare this course, I again delved into the Widener holdings on local scholarship: English, French, and German monasteries, cathedral chapters, and towns. Students write a term paper in which they pick a play we don’t read and do research into its background. I usually recommend English plays because students are able to work with local scholarship and we now have the REED volumes that render the records, kindly enough, into modern English. But I always am impressed how many of today’s undergraduates are fluent in foreign languages and at home in other cultures.
They are thus able to tap Widener's resources on such subjects as kabuki theater, the first play ever written in Hebrew (a wedding comedy, Mantua, Italy, ca. 1560) or Passion plays that Spanish Jesuits brought to sixteenth-century Mexico and which the Aztecs performed in their own imaginative way. Students are able to do such research because of the enormous scholarly range and depth of our collections.