



Shakespeare's Medieval Craft: Remnants of the Mysteries on the London Stage

Kurt A. Schreyer

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In *Shakespeare's Medieval Craft*, Kurt A. Schreyer explores the relationship between Shakespeare's plays and a tradition of late medieval English biblical drama known as mystery plays. Scholars of English theater have long debated Shakespeare's connection to the mystery play tradition, but Schreyer provides new perspective on the subject by focusing on the Chester Banns, a sixteenth-century proclamation announcing the annual performance of that city's cycle of mystery plays. Through close study of the Banns, Schreyer demonstrates the central importance of medieval stage objects—as vital and direct agents and not merely as precursors—to the Shakespearean stage.

As Schreyer shows, the Chester Banns serve as a paradigm for how Shakespeare's theater might have reflected on and incorporated the mystery play tradition, yet distinguished itself from it. For instance, he demonstrates that certain material features of Shakespeare's stage—including the ass's head of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the theatrical space of Purgatory in *Hamlet*, and the knocking at the gate in the Porter scene of *Macbeth*—were in fact remnants of the earlier mysteries transformed to meet the exigencies of the commercial London playhouses. Schreyer argues that the ongoing agency of supposedly superseded theatrical objects and practices reveal how the mystery plays shaped dramatic production long after their demise. At the same time, these medieval traditions help to reposition Shakespeare as more than a writer of plays; he was a play-wright, a dramatic artisan who forged new theatrical works by fitting poetry to the material remnants of an older dramatic tradition.

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