The Drama of Reform: Theology and Theatricality, 1461–1553 by Tamara Atkin (review)

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Reviews

Tamara Atkin. *The Drama of Reform: Theology and Theatricality, 1461–1553.* Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013. Pp. x + 195. €23.70.

Tamara Atkin's book opens with a quote from the *Histrio-Mastix* (1633) by the anti-theatrical writer William Prynne, who translates a passage from Honorius Augustodunensis (twelfth century) that affirms a connection between the priest celebrating Mass and acting in the theater; for example, "by the stretching out of his hands, he denotes the extension of Christ upon the Crosse." Prynne, like Protestant polemicists of the first half of the sixteenth century, saw Roman Catholic ritual to be empty shows disconnected from substance and lacking in integrity. Actors in his view are hypocrites, who pretend to be what they are not. Atkin then sets out to provide an extended examination of how early Reformation dramatists, similarly distrustful of the liturgy and especially of the Eucharist, were happy to use drama "to undermine the rituals, symbols, plays, and processions of the Roman Church and promote reformed alternatives" (9).

Chapter 1, however, takes up the late medieval Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, a Host desecration drama involving the skepticism of some Jews concerning the real presence in the Eucharist, and in so doing once again revives for discussion Cecilia Cutts's view of it as anti-Wycliffite polemic. The drama, like other Host miracles such as the popular Mass of St. Gregory so often appearing in iconography, is a strong affirmation of transubstantiation, and at the conclusion the perpetrators (their blasphemous act is described as like a "new turmentry" or repetition of the Crucifixion), on account of the seriousness of their crime, will require baptism and absolution by the higher authority of a bishop. The miraculous appearances shown in the play are nevertheless not real but only signs, revealed in the rubrics when a cauldron is described as boiling over with what is "apperyng *to be as blood*," that is, not actual blood (55). Atkin compares the staged events, seemingly miraculous, to the miracles claimed by the monks of Hayles Abbey at the display of their relic of the Holy Blood, which would be revealed by reformers to be false ("it is but duckes bloode," 61). Having myself witnessed a showing of a relic of the Holy Blood at Bruges many years ago, I

cannot see a direct comparison here. The blood in the Croxton play is not an actual devotional image, but rather is *like* one, albeit designating a purported fact: the ability of the Eucharist to perform miracles.

The chapter ends with the suggestion that the mid-sixteenth-century manuscript of the *Play of the Sacrament* might have been copied from its fifteenth-century original for a Protestant who wished to show its theatrical "tricks" in order to reveal the deceptions practiced by the Catholic clergy upon the ignorant (63). While this supposition seems highly unlikely to me, it does provide a rationale for including Atkin's discussion of this play in her book. The odd placement here of her comments on *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (55–59) does also serve to tie her discussion better to the subsequent chapters in which plays by Protestant playwrights and anti-theatricalism are discussed. More pertinent to the *Play of the Sacrament* is Margaret Aston's convincing argument that "not all illusions were to be equated with delusion" and that spectators "could both revere the miraculous and respect the limitations of physical enactment" (quoted 58).

Bale's polemic in his *Three Laws* and in *King Johan* is designed to link Roman Catholic ritual with deceptive and delusional play-acting, the perversion of biblical and theological truths, and the subversion of social order and religious values. His views are characterized by psychological *splitting*, dividing social and personal reality into good (represented by himself and the Protestant faith) and extreme evil (invoking the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope, the Devil, and Antichrist). Thus, as Atkin points out, "Bale's extant plays are less concerned with the instruction of religious truth than they are with the exposure of erroneous belief and custom" (67), with the latter being a mixture of ideology and, to be sure, legitimate charges of corruption in the Church and State. Adherence to historical fact is not Bale's purpose. *King Johan*, heavily allegorical, bears little relation to English history. Vice figures such as Sedition, Clergy, Dissimulation, and Treason dominate, opposed to the king, the widow England, and Veritas. In the exposition of the "Ages of Man" in the *Three Laws*, the Vices of Infidelity, Idolatry, Sodomy, Ambition, Pseudo-doctrine, and Hypocrisy are arrayed against the Law of Nature, Mosaic Law, and the Law of Christ. The attack upon Roman Catholic Vices, real and imagined, is relentless. The irony here is that in Bale's ridicule of Roman Catholic ritual as "popetly plays" (referring to puppet shows and entertainments) (87–88) he is undercutting the very form he has chosen (drama) to present his argument. Whereas the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* had condemned *playing* in itself as false and an exercise in idolatry, apostasy, and insincerity ("signes without dede"), Bale used the theater without apparently seeing the contradiction. For him falsehood was embedded in Catholic traditions, rituals, veneration of images, and superstition, and his plays were a means of unveiling what he felt was evil or perverted (e.g., illicit sex among the clergy). Bale's intemperate use of language is an indicator of the playwright's inability to control his stagecraft, however innovative it was in his time.

In chapter 3, Atkin turns to Lewis Wager's *Life and Repentaunce of Mary Magdalene*, which she analyzes against the background of the Edwardian war against religious images, typified in the draconian Visitation Injunctions that were to be enforced throughout the kingdom. "Activating both the functional and phenomenological similarities between imagery and drama," she writes, "the play can also be read as a spirited defense of the use of drama for religious instruction." In this respect, she calls attention to a defense of "honest playing" written by Martin Bucer (103). Not surprisingly, Wager's play is very different from the better known (and aesthetically superior) Digby play on the life of this saint, for it excises entirely not only her legendary post-biblical life but also even the *Noli me tangere* scene included in the York Corpus Christi plays and the N-Town collection. Influenced as it probably was by Bale's dramaturgy, for example, in the matter of introducing the Vices, the *Life and Repentaunce* nevertheless lacks the extreme and single-minded anti-papal polemic of the *Three Laws* and *King Johan*. At the same time the drama is more clearly directed to teaching a doctrinal point of view concerning the conversion of Mary Magdalene that will serve as a model for members of the audience, presumably watching a troupe of traveling actors. This involved the promotion of Calvinism, including exposition of predestination and the role of grace. Such concepts were derived either directly from Calvin or from his followers in England. But, opposed to the strident iconoclasm of the Injunctions, Wager does represent a slightly more moderate posture than usually attributed to those of Calvinist persuasion. The staging of Magdalen's conversion suggests to Atkin a strong parallel with "the reformation of an image [of the saint] rather than its destruction" (125).

Finally, in her discussion of *Jacke Jugeler*, Atkin interprets this Edwardian school play as a demonstration of the kind of falsehood said to be inherent in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. This is not a new interpretation of the play, but her approach nevertheless is of considerable interest. Borrowing from Plautus's *Amphitruo*, the author, speculated to be Nicholas Udall, probes "the relationship between presence and representation, between prop and object, and between actor and character" (129). Jacke Jugeler, the Vice figure, is a page who has put on Jenkin Careaway's "garments, cape, and all other geare" (l.174, quoted 131) so as to replicate the other's appearance and thereby assume his identity. The impersonation, which reduces Careaway to confusion, serves to confer identity to *something that is not*—exactly what is claimed for the Mass by Protestant and Reformed critics of Real Presence, a doctrine which would make the body of Christ to be both absent (in heaven) and present (in the consecrated bread) at the same time. This interpretation, never overtly expressed and only obliquely suggested in the play ("this trifling enterlud... / May sygnifye sum further meaning if it be well serched," ll. 998–99), is given credence by the very frequent Protestant allegation that the Roman priest's role in consecrating the bread and wine for Communion is "juggling," a term indicating legerdemain

but with sinister connotations. One needs only to recall the reference to "juggling fiends" in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (5.8.19). Roger Bacon had spoken of the "Jugler" as one who, "by an handsome sleight of hand, will put a compleat lie upon the very sight" (trans. quoted in Philip Butterworth, *Magic on the Early English Stage* [2005], 4). However, while the charge of juggling was used to excoriate the Roman Mass, Atkin concludes that the line of argument implicit in *Jacke Jugeler* also may reveal the arbitrariness of the meaning ascribed to the Eucharistic rite in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which had been ridiculed as "a Christmas ga*m*me"—that is, as play-acting—by the rebels who rose up against the new rite in 1549.

Atkin's brief concluding chapter outlines the trajectory by which the "indictment of [Roman] Catholicism as drama eventually turned against itself." By the end of the sixteenth century, anti-theatricalism such as Prynne's was already widely prevalent, holding "that all drama is in fact popery" and hence false, evil, and dangerous (158). Sir Richard Morison, essentially from a Lutheran position, had defended drama and affirmed the utility of its visual appeal: "[for] the common people thynges sooner enter by the eies, than by the eares: remembryng more better that they seen then that they heere" (quoted 154). On the other hand, the later adversaries of the theater, writing from a more extreme Reformed point of view, saw all of it as *polluting* to the eyes, memory, and soul. This crucial point could have been discussed in more depth in Atkin's book, which herein misses an important phenomenological dimension.

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Jacqueline O'Connor. *Documentary Trial Plays in Contemporary American Theater*. Theater in the Americas. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 225. $40.00.

Documentary Trial Plays in Contemporary American Theater constitutes a welcome addition to the growing body of research concerned with forms of documentation in the theater. By investigating what she calls the "documentary trial play," O'Connor sets out to explore "complicated questions…about law and the execution of justice, about art and the resolution of emotion" (21). Through theatrical reenactment of the procedures of justice, she argues, communities of performers and spectators can symbolically "re-open" the cases, and can debate their cultural and social ramifications in ways legal proceedings cannot. In close readings of nine such documentary trial plays, first produced between 1970 and 2000, O'Connor deliberates and interrogates the boundaries that (often very tentatively) separate fact from fiction, the courtroom from the theater, and the individual from the social.