

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Literatures in English Faculty Research and
Scholarship

Literatures in English

10-2007

Review of *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to King Lear*, by Katharine Goodland

Jamie K. Taylor
Bryn Mawr College, jktaylor@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/engl_pubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Citation

Taylor, Jamie K. Review of *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to King Lear*, by Katharine Goodland. *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 4 (2007): 915-917.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/engl_pubs/3

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

live instead off their rents or the labor of others. They thus ceased to be peasants and became what might be termed agrarian entrepreneurs. Some of their names appear both on lists of rebels in 1381 and later on lists of members of the Commons. Harriss, however, misinterpreting the real effects of the plague and believing that peasant postplague conditions were much better than they were and that they quickly became static, concludes that the period 1360–1461 was “a time of general peasant well-being” (245). This misinterpretation, in turn, distorts what he has to say about the peasantry.

Women do not fare well at Harriss’s hands. Queen Margaret of Anjou is the only prominent woman to play an active political role in this book, but then she had physical control of her husband for four years. Female peasants, not surprisingly, fare worse.

Many broad questions are not addressed in this book. For example, how do the feudal lords of the thirteenth century, who saw themselves as the principal representatives of the community of realm, evolve into an aristocracy so self-absorbed and greedy that its members pose a threat not just to each other and the king but to the nation as a whole? By what process does the curriculum of the Inns of Court, coupled with the explosive growth in the number of lawyers, infect the mentality and behavior of Harriss’s political society? What effect does the percentage of English land controlled by the church, which rose from slightly less than 20 percent at the time of Domesday Book to approach and probably exceed 50 percent by 1400, have on Harriss’s period? Such issues were presumably what Roberts imagined in writing of the need for the New Oxford History of England to incorporate “processes only slowly unfolding, sometimes across centuries” (viii).

In short, *Shaping the Nation* is an old-fashioned book, interesting in content, but narrow and exclusive. As Roberts observed in his preface, the ways in which historians today understand and define their profession are very much broader and more inclusive than the ways in which history was understood in the mid-twentieth century, and the New Oxford History of England was intended to reflect these changes. Most historians of medieval England will want to read Harriss’s book and make a place for it on their shelves. Regrettably, they will have to continue waiting for the sort of book that Roberts envisioned and historians still need.

Janet A. Meisel, University of Texas at Austin

KATHARINE GOODLAND. *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to King Lear*. Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005. Pp. 254. \$94.95 (cloth).

In this compelling study of female mourning on the medieval and Renaissance stage, Katharine Goodland examines Renaissance drama’s debt to medieval mourning rituals and conceptions of grief, arguing that the figure of the grieving woman embodies the cultural trauma of the English Reformation. Though Anglican nationalism was predicated on severing the medieval past from the present in favor of a more distant classical heritage, the grieving woman exemplifies the Catholic residue still powerful in the sixteenth century. Goodland is thus interested in the ways Renaissance drama encounters and stages a past that is viewed as potentially idolatrous but also crucially foundational. By tracing shifts in mourning rituals—both as cultural practices and dramatic conventions—Goodland traces the shifts in England’s constitution of its own national history.

Goodland locates the profound shift in mourning rituals in the eradication of the doctrine of Purgatory during the Henrician reform. Following the model of the Virgin Mary’s compassion, medieval Catholic doctrine envisioned tears, prayers, and emotional wailing as powerful demonstrations of a connection between the living and the dead. After the Reformation,

Goodland shows, such emotional laments were seen as excessive, effeminate, and sinful, but the Renaissance stage offered a place for emotional laments to be performed, a site of mourning safe from doctrinal disapproval. Goodland maps out the mourning practices of late medieval and Reformation England to emphasize that the performances of lamenting women operate not as mirrors to actual cultural practices but as comments on Reformation England's doctrinal and political conceptualization of death and its putative break from medieval Catholicism.

To make the argument that female lament on the Renaissance stage draws upon medieval constructions of grieving, Goodland divides her book into two sections. The first is a three-chapter examination of late medieval discourses of mourning and their articulation in English religious drama. In part 1, Goodland traces what she calls the "spiritual pedagogy of tears" (32), in which the Virgin Mary's compassionate mourning for her son's suffering celebrated female lament as central to Catholic devotional practice. Chapter 1 examines a series of Lazarus plays to argue that these plays expose the theological conflict between a faith that promises eternal life and funerary rituals that lament the dead. The next two chapters look at, respectively, Nativity, Passion, and Resurrection plays, outlining patterns of heroic female grief and devotion that will be taken up by Reformation dramatists. Goodland is careful to give nuanced readings, thus providing a complex picture of the various forms of female lament on the medieval stage. In doing so, she clearly demonstrates "the structuring contradictions of medieval English discourses of mourning and death" (36).

The second section moves into the Reformation, promising to explain Renaissance tragedy's reconstitution of medieval feminine displays of grief into explorations of masculine doctrinal and political authority. Goodland begins with *King John*, in which she persuasively argues that Lady Constance inherits the medieval model of Mary's performance of grief. The two most successful chapters of this section—and of the entire book—come at the end, when Goodland thoroughly discusses the interrelationship between grieving practices and revenge as a structuring principle of Renaissance tragedy. Chapter 7, "The Gendered Poetics of Tragedy in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," gives a sensitive reading of the patterns of interruptions and denunciations of female grief in the play, understanding those patterns as registering angst over England's disrupted funeral rituals. In chapter 8, "Inverting the Pietà in Shakespeare's *King Lear*," Goodland elegiacally writes of Lear's gendered revision of the Virgin Mary's lament, suggesting that the pietà operates as a model for his own grief for Cordelia. These chapters beautifully articulate the focus of her book, which is to understand how William Shakespeare relies on the dramatic conventions of the medieval stage and Catholic grieving practices to comment on the political and cultural upheaval that is both required and produced by Anglican nationalist doctrine.

Given her Shakespearean focus, it is strange that chapter 6, "Monstrous Mourning Women in Kyd, Shakespeare, and Webster," motions toward other Reformation plays, specifically John Webster's *The White Devil* and Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*. Despite such a gesture, this chapter remains an examination of Shakespeare's drama (this time, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*). Here, Goodland lucidly demonstrates how these two Shakespeare plays dramatize the trauma surrounding the violent iconoclastic destruction of artifacts depicting the pietà and female saints. However, Webster provides merely an introductory exploration of how destabilizing the noise of grief can be, and Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* receives no sustained reading whatsoever.

The strength of this book is its dedication to thinking across the medieval–early modern divide that structures English literary studies. Goodland's sustained interest in medieval drama is a welcome addition to current trend in thinking across the divide between pre- and early modern England, and her study provocatively shows Shakespeare's investment in the dramatic conventions of both the medieval stage and medieval funerary rituals. Had the book articulated itself as such—that is, as an exploration of Shakespeare's use of the medieval English past as a staging ground for his investigation of the cultural trauma at the heart of

reform movements—the book would have been able to provide more specific and even, perhaps, more courageous readings of Shakespeare’s drama. It is nonetheless an informative and stimulating read for medievalists and Shakespeareans alike.

Jamie Taylor, Bryn Mawr College

EAMON DUFFY. *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers, 1240–1570*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2006. Pp. 202. \$35.00 (cloth).

In his latest work, Eamon Duffy takes an unconventional look at Books of Hours and their use. Duffy argues persuasively that annotated copies of these books can provide insight into the intimate world of late-medieval prayer. He investigates whether the use of Books of Hours contributed to the growth of individualism and encouraged elites to abandon popular religion while also evaluating the impact of the Reformation on traditional, book-based piety. While of immense value to those desiring a better understanding of the dynamic world of late-medieval religion, *Marking the Hours* also demonstrates the limitations of an approach based primarily on marginalia.

For medieval laypeople, images, beads, and books all functioned as aids to prayer and memory, but Books of Hours played a special role. Besides being the primary prayer book for Christians, Duffy notes that Books of Hours were frequently used to record births, marriages, and deaths. Books were passed from generation to generation or given as gifts to secure patronage relationships. They could even be used to record debts and contracts. Duffy argues that these various uses demonstrate how late-medieval people combined fundamental spiritual concerns with a desire for dynastic continuity.

The advent of print made Books of Hours more affordable and increased their use. Because praying from a book tended to be a solitary activity, some scholars have argued that the availability of prayer books contributed to individualism. Duffy argues that this is a misreading of the relationship between the Books of Hours and the public practice of religion. The medieval church stressed that solitude and quiet were the ideal conditions for prayer. Duffy contends that it was unlikely that the practice of this sort of prayer would lead people away from the communal life of their parish church. Pictorial evidence, for instance, suggests that it was not unusual for families to recite the prayers of the Hours together at home or out loud in church.

Duffy gives ample attention to how individuals prayed. Beginning with a book owned and annotated by John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, in the fifteenth century, Duffy attempts to elucidate the emotional and mental response of those who prayed the Hours. Talbot added many prayers for protection in battle—a sensible addition given that he was a soldier fighting in France. Duffy notes that many of these prayers carried indulgences. Prayers with attached indulgences or promises of blessing were common in English Books of Hours. Duffy found a similar profusion of added prayers that hovered uneasily between petition and incantation in the Roberts Hours, a cheaper manuscript book from circa 1400. What is not evident in either example is a flight into interiority. Aristocrats and the middling sort both favored prayers that meshed easily with parish worship and perennial spiritual concerns.

Duffy also confronts the question of whether the proliferation of Books of Hours encouraged the social elite to distance themselves from their neighbors. In this discussion Duffy diverges from John Bossy, Colin Richmond, and Jonathan Hughes. For them the prayers of the Hours were self-centered, complaining, and deeply concerned with worldly advancement. Duffy argues that their vision of late-medieval society is flawed, overlooking the fact that the Psalms and canonical prayers of the church often feature prayers begging protection from enemies and material blessings. To strengthen his position, Duffy again