REVELS END: A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ENGLISH UNIVERSITY STAGE


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Academic drama has, once again, been rediscovered after being largely ignored by the New Critics and the historicists during the second half of the last century. The vast majority of this recent attention - most notably Jonathan Walker and Paul Streufert's collection Early Modern Academic Drama (2008) - considers theatrical performance in the universities as a pedagogical instrument within a larger humanist educational program. My dissertation, "Revels End: A Conceptual History of the Late Medieval and Early Modern English Academic Stage," presents the stage as a localized site within the two most ancient English universities. Focusing on the site of performance, my project examines the theatrical events and the curious textuality of the works associated with the university stage as it emerged from the medieval period. In this effort I rely on the evidence found in the Records of Early English Drama (REED) volumes for Oxford (2004) and Cambridge (1989) and the two publication runs of Renaissance Latin Drama in England from Georg Olms Verlag Press (1983-92). Adapting the methodologies of Richard Beadle and Alexandra Johnson, I argue that the academic stage was an ephemeral and temporary site within the university governed by the conventions of community festive drama. In this regard, the experience of playing was often at direct odds with the emergent humanist pedagogy of drama. Official reactions to the unpredictable reality of staged performances kept the academic stage uncomfortably perched on the margins of other discursive centers, namely: the university curriculum, the local government and ecclesial apparatus, the pan-European humanist movement, the vernacular stage and the nascent professional stage. Furthermore, the textuality of the academic dramas discloses that scholars memorialized the experience of playing over and above the texts of individual dramas.

The argument is presented in two distinct parts. The first half of my dissertation draws from archival sources and readings of the earliest extant academic dramas with the texts and records of Merton College's Christmas lord traditions, which dates from the late thirteenth to the early sixteenth century, the records of Edward Watson's 1512 degree play and Thomas Chaundler's 1460 play, Liber apologeticus de omni statu humanae naturae. A close examination of this underappreciated work reveals that Chaundler, who twice served as the Chancellor of the University of Oxford, deploys popular dramatic forms drawn from the cycle plays and the morality tradition as a humanist gambit. The first half concludes with an analysis of the effects of the English reformation on the university stage, arguing the English reformation's attack on the festive culture greatly reduces the diversity of the productions in academic institutions. In this effort I draw attention to the texts associated with a 1522 performance of Miles Gloriosus in Trinity Hall, Cambridge directed by Stephen Gardiner, a 1545 performance of the protestant propaganda play Pammachius in Christ's College Hall, and the textuality of three academic dramas published during the Henrician reformation, Nicholas Grimald's Christus Redivivus (1544) and (1546) and John Christopherson's Jephthah (1546). The second half of my dissertation turns to the academic stage's history of interpretation, as told through the critical reception and editorial treatment of one of its most important sources, the St. John's College, Oxford MS S2.1. This manuscript contains the spectacular Jacobean text, The Christmas Prince, which memorializes the college's 1607-08 winter revels. I dispute the claims of an earlier generation of editors and critics, who, like F.S. Boas, saw in it the seamless continuation of medieval dramatic practices in the post-reformation university.