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Fengler, Sarah; Wouters, Dinah

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Editorial

Sarah Fengler and Dinah Wouters*

Introduction: New Perspectives on Biblical Drama

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Dramatizations of biblical narratives have shaped European culture from the Middle Ages to this day. They continue to confront literary scholars with a variety of issues from the choice of a specific play's subject, its composition, character design, and themes to more general and theoretical aspects such as the status of biblical drama as a historical document, a piece of literary Bible reception, or an instance of a subgenre of drama. The present special issue, *New Perspectives on Biblical Drama*, considers the overarching idiosyncrasies that characterize biblical plays from across Europe, gathering the findings of an international workshop held in June 2022 at Jesus College, University of Oxford, organized by Sarah Fengler and Dinah Wouters. The workshop enabled 11 scholars from various countries and backgrounds to discuss the history of European biblical drama from diachronic, transnational, and comparative perspectives, and to explore its complex traditions in a number of literatures and languages, including Latin, German, Swiss, Dutch, Danish, French, Spanish, and English. Daisy Black and Jan Bloemendal delivered keynotes on biblical drama from a transnational point of view, tracing the way it has persisted in European literature across time and highlighting its changing forms. With this special issue, we seek to share the findings of our workshop with a wider scholarly community and turn the spotlight on exciting new scholarship that emphasizes the continuing relevance of biblical drama as a European literary phenomenon.

This special issue features articles that discuss the status and significance of biblical drama in the literary histories of the European cultures from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period, as well as the role that transnational connections and reception have played in its development. The contributions cover the period from the twelfth to the seventeenth century and analyze plays from the Low Countries,

*Corresponding author: **Dinah Wouters**, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Janskerkhof 13, Utrecht, 3512 BL, Netherlands, E-mail: d.wouters@uu.nl. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1793-2766>

Sarah Fengler, Jesus College, University of Oxford, Turl Street, Oxford, OX1 3DW, UK, E-mail: sarah.fengler@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk

France, Italy, Iberia, and the Holy Roman Empire. As Scripture, historically, belongs to the most cherished texts in Europe, it is not surprising that, once the performance of these beloved texts was introduced as a common practice in medieval drama, European writers kept producing plays that were, in some way, inspired by the Bible. Across time and space, the history of biblical drama in Europe features a large variety of manifestations and modes, which emphasizes the complexity and mutability of the genre. Examples from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period include medieval mystery plays, humanist sacred comedies and tragedies, Jesuit Bible drama, and Spanish Golden Age *autos sacramentales*, as well as neoclassical biblical tragedy, biblical *Trauerspiele* from the German *Empfindsamkeit*, and scriptural plays from English Romanticism. During the nineteenth century, the so-called cycle plays were rediscovered; twentieth-century drama saw a recovery of biblical subjects, often for political purposes; and even today, biblical narratives are still being dramatized and staged, from modern and postmodern plays through to Broadway, soap opera, and the movies. Forming an important part of the literary reception of the Bible, the ongoing interest in adapting biblical narratives and subjects for the stage calls for a closer examination of the relationship between drama and Scripture, especially with regard to the transnational links between diverse historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to each of our contributors for their enthusiasm and commitment, which enabled us to compile a multifaceted collection of inspiring and insightful essays on a literary genre that, especially in its transnational, European dimension, deserves further attention and scholarship. Furthermore, we are grateful to the Association for German Studies in Great Britain and Ireland, the British Comparative Literature Association, and the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands for their financial support of our workshop in June 2022, and to Jesus College, Oxford, for providing the conference venue. We would also like to thank the *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* for providing us with an excellent platform to share our research in a special issue entirely dedicated to the topic of European biblical drama from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period.

1 History of Scholarship

This introduction is not the place to provide an exhaustive overview of the history of scholarship on biblical drama. However, to contextualize the articles of the present special issue, we wish to highlight some recent insights, breakthroughs, and current challenges in the field, without raising any claim of completeness. The aim of this short review is to emphasize the continuing relevance of biblical drama as a field of study, and to accentuate new developments within this research area on which the articles gathered in this special issue build.

Biblical drama, and “religious” drama in general – which also includes plays about saints – has often been enmeshed in narratives of religion and secularization. Besides the actual text, scholars have traditionally focused on aspects related to the functional contexts and intended purposes of biblical plays, employing predominantly historicizing methodologies. For medieval drama, such an approach entailed the view that drama originated in a liturgical context and then gradually moved out of the churches to processions or festivals. The notion that the different dramatic genres of the Middle Ages, such as Passion plays or moralities, had a common origin in representations of biblical scenes as part of the liturgy, however, disregarded other forms of theatre. It also tended to conflate elaborate musical dramas written in Latin with what Michael Norton calls “representational rites.”¹ Today, these rites seem of less dramatic than liturgical character,² whereas it has been shown that Latin musical plays do not appear in liturgical manuscripts and should therefore receive separate treatment.

Essential for changing this often-simplistic research paradigm has been the addition of new perspectives through the increased study of liturgy and musicology on the one hand, and the study of texts in their material contexts on the other. The publication of the Records of Early English Drama (REED) from 1976 onwards has helped to combat misconceptions about medieval and early modern drama like those discussed above by placing theatrical events in their material contexts. For instance, the hypothesis that cycle plays, historically, were inextricably linked with the feast of Corpus Christi was refuted.³ It has also been shown that some cycle plays, which represent history from Creation to Judgment, were in fact not the records of one big theatrical performance that spanned several days. Instead, they were proven to be separate plays that were brought together in anthology manuscripts for archival purposes, meant to preserve a tradition that was under threat from the Reformation. Building on these findings, Peter Happé’s monograph *Cyclic Form and the English Mysteries* transcends regional and linguistic boundaries by looking for “continental analogues” of cyclic form.⁴

1 Michael Norton, *Liturgical Drama and the Reimagining of Medieval Theater* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, Medieval Institute Publications, 2017), 6.

2 C. Clifford Flanigan, “Liturgical Drama and Its Tradition: A Review of Scholarship 1965–1975,” *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 18 (1975): 81–102, and 19 (1976): 109–36; Nils Holger Petersen, “Medieval Latin Performative Representation: Re-Evaluating the State-of-the-Art,” *European Medieval Drama* 23 (2019): 115–32.

3 Alexandra F. Johnston, “They Got It Wrong: How the Misunderstanding of the Nature of the Creation to Judgment Manuscripts of the English Biblical Drama Distorted Our Knowledge of the Genre,” *European Medieval Drama* 23 (2019): 142.

4 Peter Happé, *Cyclic Form and the English Mystery Plays: A Comparative Study of the English Biblical Cycles and Their Continental and Iconographic Counterparts* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004).

However, the functional contexts of education and edification, from which many biblical dramas emerged historically, must not be underestimated. The pedagogical potential inherent in biblical subjects was not only taken up in humanist and Jesuit Latin school plays: Melanie Batoff, for instance, has shown that when *Visitatio Sepulchri* scenes performed on Easter Sundays grew more elaborate, this elaboration not only meant to exploit their dramatic potential, but was also rooted in the didactic goal of demonstrating the unity of the Gospel stories to clerical students in Augustinian communities.⁵ Similarly, the appearance of Italian *sacre rappresentazione* in fifteenth-century Florence was closely connected to pedagogical concerns by ecclesiastical and civic authorities, who looked for ways to turn young boys into exemplary Christians and citizens.⁶

Emerging from specific historical conditions and functional contexts, biblical drama always responds to and reflects the ever-changing status and uses of the Bible. Two recent edited volumes on biblical drama from the late Middle Ages to the sixteenth century revive research on the English tradition of biblical drama.⁷ These evince a particular interest in the continuities and discontinuities that shaped the development of the genre in these periods, as they trace how biblical drama was influenced by the printing and translating of different Bible editions, new reading practices, and other changes brought about by both Protestant and Catholic strands of Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

As the previous outline has shown, biblical drama is central to medieval scholarship and still plays an important role in research on early modern literature. However, scholarly interest appears to decrease the further one moves away from the Middle Ages: already Latin drama from after the twelfth century did not fit the narrative of vernacularization, and its aesthetic qualities were often overlooked in favor of a closer examination of its original pedagogical or propagandistic functions. Scholarship on humanist drama has attempted to counter this view, restoring the central cultural position of Latin biblical drama from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century.⁸ Yet Jesuit drama, written by schoolteachers and performed by their pupils, is still neglected by non-specialists, its massive eighteenth-century output even more

5 Melanie Laura Batoff, *Re-Envisioning the Visitatio Sepulchri in Medieval Germany: The Intersection of Plainchant, Liturgy, Epic, and Reform* (Doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 2013).

6 Sophie Stallini, *Le théâtre sacré à Florence au XVe siècle: une histoire sociale des formes* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011).

7 Eva von Contzen and Chanita Goodblatt, eds., *Enacting the Bible in Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken, eds., *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350–1600*, Ludus 14 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016).

8 James A. Parente, *Religious Drama and the Humanist Tradition: Christian Theater in Germany and in the Netherlands, 1500–1680* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1987); Jan Bloemendal and Howard B. Norland, *Neo-Latin Drama and Theatre in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013).

so than the seventeenth-century part. Although the phenomenon of dramatizing Scripture continues through to modernity, theories of secularization have led to less engagement with the further development of the genre as it fades into the background in studies concerned with the centuries after 1600. Related research focuses less on biblical drama as an overall genre or phenomenon and more on single instances of biblical plays. A future challenge for the study of biblical drama will be not only to compare different European traditions and trace transnational links between them, as we do in this special issue, but also to extend the scope of the research into these later periods.

2 Aims and Articles

With the present special issue, we seek to illuminate the evolving nature of biblical drama in medieval and early modern Europe. It is our aim to shift the often Anglocentric focus of previous research to a more comparative European perspective that appreciates the manifold configurations of biblical drama across the European cultures and languages. Comparing, contrasting, and discussing single plays with one another will help us gain a better understanding of biblical drama as a transnational phenomenon. On this basis, we wish to consider the variety within this genre and the themes addressed by it, while considering the literary and historical contexts in which single plays appear: some were intended to sustain or contest political or clerical power, others are presented as texts that deal with the sacred and offer theological insights, still others treat biblical stories as history and are situated within the sphere of the historical. It is our objective to shed light on the diversity of biblical drama within the overall transnational phenomenon.

The articles presented in this special issue address three main questions. The first of these questions is related to generic aspects: is it useful to consider biblical drama as a distinctive generic category, one that has persisted for a long period of time, and if so, what distinguishes biblical drama from other forms of drama, apart from the fact that it is based on Scripture? The above-mentioned volume *Staging Scripture* (2016), for instance, was followed by another volume entitled *Staging History* (2021), yet the latter does not exclude biblical drama from its purview. On the contrary: the introduction by Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken centers on Passion Plays and Corpus Christi Plays, as well as on medieval models of history derived from biblical books such as the book of Daniel. Elsa Strietman points out the long-lasting popularity of biblical subjects among more recent historical material, and Richard Hilman writes that, even though “forms of more-or-less historical secular history moved in to place as the dominant source of basic matter for dramatization,” “history in all these cases means sacred history,” infused with moral and allegorical

significance.⁹ The relationship between “biblical” and “historical” drama is complex: in many cases, the sacred status of scriptural stories, particularly of those surrounding the life and death of Christ, does influence the composition of a play or even the possibility of writing and performing one. In other cases, we might argue that biblical stories are rather viewed as part of history, such as in the case of dramatizations of parts of the Old Testament history books, or as moral exemplars, as in the case of parables. How valid, then, is a demarcation between biblical and historical drama?

Rasmus Vangshardt’s article “Ruins of Empire or Tears of Joy? An Intersection of History and the Bible in Lope de Vega’s Religious *Comedias*” in the present issue addresses the intersection between biblical and historical drama based on Lope de Vega’s biblical *comedias*. Lope de Vega is well-known, as a playwright and theoretician of theatre, for his creation and defense of mixing tragedy and comedy, high and low style, noble and common characters, tragic fate and happy endings. The article connects this dissolving of generic boundaries to another conflation, that of biblical and secular history, arguing that Lope uses Old Testament plays to reflect on historiography. In Lope’s play about queen Esther, for instance, Esther’s beauty refers to the worldly beauty of the dedicatee of the play, as well as to a contemporary Spanish woman, *and* to the beauty of divine creation. Dinah Wouters’s article “The Biblical History Play: Turning Seventeenth-Century Joseph Plays into Political Drama” also addresses the porous boundaries between biblical and historical drama. She analyses how Jesuit playwrights modelled their biblical dramas about the patriarch Joseph on the genre of political-historical drama, with its concern for historicity and its depictions of court politics, war and peace. Together, these two articles highlight the importance of considering the way certain aspects of biblical subjects are organized in their dramatizations, such as typology or the sacred, and of examining the specific characteristics of historical drama, such as different historicizing strategies, while emphasizing that such characteristics can easily be transferred between plays that treat biblical history and dramas about other historical subjects.

The second question raised in this special issue is more functional in nature as it asks how biblical narratives were adapted for contemporary stages and made relevant to contemporary audiences. Although the dramatization of biblical subjects has a long tradition, its specific form was never static but constantly changed to appeal to new contexts and audiences. By way of a case study, M A Katritzky’s article

⁹ Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken, eds., *Staging History: Essays in Late Medieval and Humanist Drama* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021); Elsa Strietman, “‘An Easy Commerce of the Old and New’: Rhetoricians and the Use of the Past”, in *ibid.*, 157–91; Richard Hillman, “History in the Long Shadow of Allegory”, in *ibid.*, 115.

“The Merchant Scene of Biblical Drama: Rehabilitating the Female Input” considers an adaptation of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* with an extra-biblical scene, in which the three Marys purchase spices before visiting Christ’s grave and finding it empty. Katritzky argues that this scene, as well as the iconography of merchant scenes in general, was an innovative contribution by female religious leaders that put biblical women at the centre in order to appeal to female religious audiences. In a similar vein, Vangshardt’s article points out how the allegorical dimension of biblical narratives could be utilized to connect biblical and contemporary persons or events. Wim François’s article “Biblical Drama and Politically Incorrect Ideas in the Dutch Reformation Era” further exemplifies this phenomenon by discussing a play created within the context of Rhetoricians’ Chambers in Amsterdam in the 1530s. During this time of religious and political upheaval, the play takes a critical stance with regard to the contemporary authorities, as it uses the conversion of Paul as a means of criticizing the persecution of reformed preachers. This critical stance ultimately resulted in the censorship of the Chambers of Rhetoric. Thus, the article provides an illuminating counterpoint to the much-studied historical situation after the English Reformation, where biblical drama was looked at with suspicion because of its perceived Catholic nature.

Finally, we seek to shed light on the third question of how transnational perspectives on biblical drama contribute to our understanding of the genre. This question is at the heart of Jan Bloemendal’s article “Biblical Stories on the Early Modern Stage: A Transnational Approach.” The transnational study of drama is generally concerned with the transmission and adaptation of plays to new contexts when crossing borders. These boundaries can be geographical or linguistic; they may represent the historically perceived borders or the disciplinary divisions within which scholars operate. Bloemendal shows how biblical narratives, as a shared feature of European culture, travelled easily between regions, languages, and contexts, and argues that they are a privileged site for the study of drama from a transnational perspective. Next to Bloemendal’s article, this transnational perspective is integrated in Wouters’s article, which highlights how easily new aesthetic models for biblical drama were exchanged in Jesuit networks, and in M A Katritzky’s uncovering of the way networks of female religious leaders enabled the circulation of images and texts of biblical drama, highlighting the large transnational impact of the Latin/Catalan *Ludus Pascalis* of Vic Cathedral.

In sum, this special issue explores the generic features, historical functions and adaptability, and the transnational dimensions of European biblical drama from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period. We hope that our comparative perspective will enrich the understanding of biblical drama as a European phenomenon and highlight its significance in literary history while drawing attention to the need of further scholarship that expands this research focus across time and space.

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