

**THE MEDIEVAL  
THEATER OF CRUELTY**



Jean Fouquet, *The Martyrdom of Saint Apollonia*. From the *Livre d'heures d'Etienne Chevalier*. Courtesy of the Musée Condé, Chantilly.

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**THE MEDIEVAL  
THEATER  
OF CRUELTY**

**RHETORIC, MEMORY, VIOLENCE**

*cm*

Jody Enders

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To the memory of Daniel Poirion



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## Preface

Strange things happen when the discussion turns to violence. And because this is a book about violence, torture, medieval drama, and the dark side of rhetoric, some prefatory remarks may prove appropriate.

Over the past several years, as I have presented various stages of this project in various public forums, I have never known whether colleagues were going to break into amused guffaws, or gasp in horror. Sometimes, in a phenomenon that is endemic to performance, the way an audience responds and the way I choose to present the material become part of the Q and A. If audiences titter, it is because I have smiled during the presentation. If audiences are mortified, it is because I have stressed the horror of the real events to which dramatic scenes of torture allude. If audiences are put off, it is because I have been too preachy. If they are angry, it is because I have trivialized the real suffering that medieval plays represent by proposing a “mere verbal” connection with the rhetorical tradition.

Similarly, if an audience member laughs when I am stressing horror, that person is accused of being morally defective. If another audience member deems problematic the pleasure it is possible to take in one’s work—even when that work treats a horrific subject—then it is I who become morally defective. If someone else finds that my judgment has been too pronounced, the presence of evaluative standards becomes an invitation to dismiss the argument on the grounds that twentieth-century morality is no way to approach the Middle Ages. And yet someone else deems that any verdict I may have rendered is not strong enough—indeed, that the moral obligation to distance oneself from the horrors of torture is so urgent that to fail to do so is to be complicit.

I thus acknowledge the problematic place of the personal in literary theory . . . the better, I hope, to move beyond it. All the responses cited above (each of which I have seen) can be reduced to two polarized and polarizing stances. The first is “How can one *fail* to take a position?” It operates under the assumption that the absence of a critical stand against torture is tantamount to silent approval or consent. The second is “How dare one *take* a position?” It operates

under the assumption that there is no place in the academy for an individual with a modern contextualized self who stands back and makes aesthetic, logical, or moral judgments. Needless to say, the only critical response that can satisfy both objections is silence. And silence is not the purpose of literary criticism or, I submit, a suitable moral response to torture.

Throughout this book I endeavor to occupy a middle ground, which in fact is impossible to occupy when I seek neither to trivialize nor to pontificate about suffering. In this respect, David Nirenberg elaborates the problematic of speaking of violence so eloquently and so sensibly in *Communities of Violence* that I cannot say it better: "It is never easy to think or write about violence, however meaningful one believes it to be. Throughout the writing of this book I have tried to find sense in horrors, to place acts of violence in cultural and social contexts that would give them meanings beyond the literal ones which emerge with such visceral force" (16). Nirenberg hopes that the quest to understand the ideology of violence will not be misperceived as a denial of its horrific physicality. So do I. Nor does that wish stop him from emphasizing "how rare and strange a similarity the nightmares of a distant past bear to our own" (17).

In the classical, medieval, and modern theories that inform the pages that follow, it is my goal to do justice to the nightmarish violence of the medieval theater of cruelty. In aiming for measured assessments about aesthetics, rhetorical efficacy, and contextualized morality, I also attempt to respect similarities as well as differences between medieval and modern times along the lines articulated by Louise Fradenburg. As critics, she urges, we "need to concede some significant differences between modern theory and medieval texts. If we fail not only to concede these incompatibilities but to inform our interpretations with them, we lose our capacity to conduct cultural analyses of the Middle Ages, analyses that draw partly on differences for their interrogative power."<sup>1</sup> The contemporary world provides a variety of intellectual avenues for exploring a culture, from psychoanalysis to folklore to anthropology. I have opted for a model that the Middle Ages frequently chose as a means of explaining itself to itself: the rhetorical tradition.

If I am fortunate enough to convey humor, despair, hope, or fear when early texts convey them, I hope also to be fortunate enough to point out (and without myself doing violence to the sociocultural contexts of these texts) that sometimes fear is the dark side of hope and suffering the dark side of pleasure. To those who may ask: "Why the dark side? What about all the beauty of medieval aesthetics? What about the positive rather than the negative examples?" I can but respond that I do not see beauty and positivity as the primary side of the artifacts to be analyzed in this book. The dark side is not the only side. And it is not my intention to discount the influence of brightness, beauty, and non-

<sup>1</sup> Fradenburg is extrapolating from Elaine Scarry's groundbreaking *Body in Pain* in "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the Prioress's Tale," 74.

violent things. But since the dark side of aesthetics is still with us today, it merits inclusion within the larger scholarly dialogue.

Once upon a time Peter Brook cautioned that "there is a deadly element everywhere; in the cultural set-up, in our inherited artistic values, in the economic framework, in the actor's life, in the critic's function."<sup>2</sup> Rhetoric, law, and drama also betray a deadly element; and that is the subject of the medieval theater of cruelty.

I have profited enormously over the past several years from the insights and expertise of numerous colleagues. My intellectual debt to the inspiring work of R. Howard Bloch will be only too apparent, as will that to my various mentors: Stephen Nichols, Douglas Kelly, James J. Murphy, Robert Francis Cook, and David Lee Rubin. I am also grateful to Sarah Beckwith for her challenging reading of the manuscript for Cornell University Press, and to the remarkably generous colleagues who took the time to critique parts of this work in its various stages: Mary Carruthers, Rita Copeland, John Ganim, Richard Helgerson, Bruce Holsinger, Michal Kobialka, Michael Lieb, David Marshall, D. Vance Smith, Eugene Vance, and Kathleen Welch. I also owe three very special debts: to Robert Gaines, my first rhetoric teacher, because he paused to puzzle over Aristotle's treatment of torture; to Alan Knight, who not only discovered seventy-two plays from Lille in the library at Wolfenbüttel but was willing to share their texts pending publication of his own edition; and to Clifford Davidson, who in 1992 invited me to contribute an essay to a special issue of *Comparative Drama* devoted to the theme of classical survivals in the Middle Ages. When we spoke of my suspicions about a connection between torture, violence, and rhetoric on the medieval stage, he urged me to follow that hunch—one that led to *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*.

It is perhaps with the greatest pleasure of all that I recognize the community of scholars I was fortunate enough to find at the University of California, Santa Barbara. When I needed to brainstorm about memory, Louise Fradenburg regaled me with her insights into psychoanalysis. When Sharon Farmer learned that I was working on torture, a photocopied passage from the *Miracles de Saint Loys* appeared in my mailbox; Jeffrey Burton Russell was there to sort out medieval Heaven from medieval Hell, and Paul Sonnino told me everything I needed to know about Philip II. When I was perplexed by the phenomenology of impersonation, Bert States talked it through with me, and Simon Williams cheerfully spearheaded an institutional effort to bring together colleagues in theater studies. When I needed to track down what Charles Nodier had really said about the theatricality of the French Revolution, Catherine Nesci knew immediately. When I realized that my own dean had pondered the topic of virtual performance, Paul Hernadi's *Cultural Transactions* arrived in intramural mail. When

<sup>2</sup> Brook, *Empty Space*, 17.

it came to the continuity of violence as aesthetics, Didier Maleuvre stirred me with contemporary philosophy. When I needed to ask about snuff films and urban legends, Constance Penley shared her resources; and when it was time to broach larger ideological questions of risk and censorship, Lizzie MacArthur shared her own work in progress. Meanwhile, my colleague William Ashby never once lost his astonishing ability to answer any philological question I have ever had. I also thank Bernie Kendler and Barbara Salazar, with whom it is always a pleasure to work; the Aspen Center for Physics for generously sharing their office resources with me each summer; and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where some of my research was conducted.

My first teacher of the Middle Ages was Daniel Poirion, and it is with pleasure that I acknowledge the life and spirit of a pedagogue who treated a class of undergraduates at the University of Virginia to the performance of a lifetime when he played every single role in the courtroom scene of the *Farce de Pathe-lin*. It is also with the deepest sadness that I mourn the passing of this remarkable man with whom I feel privileged to have studied.

Finally, I am grateful for the love and support of my husband, Eric D'Hoker, who spent countless hours listening to discussions of torture—proving once again that things of beauty can come from pain.

JODY ENDERS

*Santa Barbara, California*

## Abbreviations

- AM      *The Art of Memory*, by Frances Yates  
AMM     *Ancient and Medieval Memories*, by Janet Coleman  
AP      *An Actor Prepares*, by Constantin Stanislavski  
BM      *The Book of Memory*, by Mary Carruthers  
BP      *The Body in Pain*, by Elaine Scarry  
BS      *Bodied Spaces*, by Stanton B. Garner, Jr.  
BSMA    *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages*, by  
         Marie-Christine Pouchelle  
CB      *Christ's Body*, by Sarah Beckwith  
CC      *Corpus Christi*, by Miri Rubin  
CD      *Comparative Drama*  
CPM     *Le Cycle de Mystères des premiers martyrs*, edited by  
         Graham A. Runnalls  
CRCD    *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*,  
         by O. B. Hardison, Jr.  
CV      *The Culture of Violence*, by Francis Barker  
DP      *Discipline and Punish*, by Michel Foucault  
DT      *De tradendis disciplinis*, by Juan Luis Vives  
ECP     *Education of a Christian Prince*, by Desiderius Erasmus  
EETS    Early English Text Society  
EH      *The Ecclesiastical History*, by Eusebius  
EL      *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*,  
         by Ernst Robert Curtius  
EP      *L'Évolution pédagogique en France*, by Emile Durkheim  
GM      *The Genealogy of Morals*, by Friedrich Nietzsche  
GOR     *Genealogies of Religion*, by Talal Asad  
GSD     *Le Jeu Saint Denis du manuscrit 1131 de la Bibliothèque Sainte-  
         Geneviève*, edited by Bernard James Seubert  
HL      *Homo Ludens*, by Johan Huizinga

- HLC *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*,  
by Bernard Weinberg
- HMS *Histoire de la mise en scène dans le théâtre religieux français du  
Moyen-Age*, by Gustave Cohen
- HTB *Histoire du théâtre en Belgique depuis son origine jusqu'à nos  
jours*, by Frédéric Faber
- HTDW *How to Do Things with Words*, by J. L. Austin
- IO *Institutio oratoria*, by Quintilian
- LC *The Lives of the Caesars*, by Suetonius
- LFWP *The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain*, by Barbara J. Eckstein
- LM *Les Mystères*, vols. 1 and 2 of *Histoire du théâtre en France*,  
by L. Petit de Julleville
- MCV *Milton and the Culture of Violence*, by Michael Lieb
- MFLI *Medieval French Literature and Law*, by R. Howard Bloch
- MM *The Master and Minerva*, by Helen Solterer
- MS *Mervelous Signals*, by Eugene Vance
- NLH *New Literary History*
- PCC *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, by V. A. Kolve
- PCM *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs*, by Michael Roberts
- PDMA *Pour une dramaturgie du Moyen-Age*, by Henri Rey-Flaud
- PEL *The Practice of Everyday Life*, by Michel de Certeau
- PN *Poetria nova*, by Geoffrey of Vinsauf
- POLF *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, by Kenneth Burke
- PP *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, by Peter Brown
- QJS *Quarterly Journal of Speech*
- RAH *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, by [Cicero]
- RCPP *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*,  
by Jean-Baptiste Du Bos
- RIMA *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, by James J. Murphy
- RMDD *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, by Walter Ong
- ROMD *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama*, by Jody Enders
- RPI *Role Playing and Identity*, by Bruce Wilshire
- RRT *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, by Walter Ong
- SES *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy*, by David Marshall
- SRT *Staging Real Things*, by Geoff Pywell
- ST *Stages of Terror*, by Anthony Kubiak
- SV *The Subject of Violence*, by Peter Haidu
- SW *Selected Writings*, by Jean Baudrillard
- TD *The Theater and Its Double*, by Antonin Artaud
- TFW *Trial by Fire and Water*, by Robert Bartlett
- TM *Théâtre de la mort*, by André de Lorde
- TMA *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, by William Tydeman
- TO *Theater of the Oppressed*, by Augusto Boal



TT	<i>Torture and Truth</i> , by Page duBois
VH	<i>The Vanishing Hitchhiker</i> , by Jan Harold Brunvand
VS	<i>Violence and the Sacred</i> , by René Girard
WD	<i>Writing and Difference</i> , by Jacques Derrida
YFS	<i>Yale French Studies</i>



**THE MEDIEVAL  
THEATER OF CRUELTY**

If we are what people say we are, let us take our  
delight in the blood of men.

—Tertullian, *De spectaculis*