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Drama as a field for the promotion of the ideal of labour solidarity in Late Medieval English towns

Abstract

During the fourteenth century, the English guilds managed to impose themselves in the civic councils and gain political and economic control over the urban communities, by promoting their influential members in the civic hierarchy. The redistribution of power from landlords to merchants, forced the majority of the world of labour to join in a guild in order to ensure their job positions, which were already threatened. Despite the fact that the new social and political structures contributed to the increase of urban wealth, they equally caused the migration of those labourers who were now considered as surplus workforce. In addition to the hostile conditions of everyday life after the plague, such as the decrease of food products and the subsequent phenomenal rise in market prices, famine and the riots, the diversification in trade and manufacture, increasing numbers of peasants and artisans moved to the cities which, as their markets became saturated, could not provide jobs for them. The financial austerity, the incapacity to express their dissatisfaction and the need to come up against their work problems favored the establishment of groups and brotherhoods within the guilds, promoting the necessity for "solidarity and protection". The ideal of solidarity, which was propagated through the use of biblical texts and ecclesiastical sermons, was a rallying point for the world of labour and one of the most prominent arguments to assert new rights and maintain traditional privileges. Artisans and tradesmen used the biblical drama and the civic rituals to highlight the significance of labour and their professional "pride" and status: the kind and honest city dweller, Christian and laborer. Theatre was one of the means to promote their claims in the new urban society. This paper focuses, firstly, on the various strategies of promotion of the ideal of labour solidarity through the biblical drama and the "mystery plays", funded and staffed by members of urban guilds. Secondly, it highlights their arguments on stage

and in their workplaces. Thirdly, it deals with the reaction on the part of employer/power groups and fourthly, it examines the gradual transformation of the conditions and work relations in the English towns during the 14th and 15th centuries.

During the fourteenth century, the world of labour in late Medieval English towns had to face adverse political and economic conditions, which threatened not only its prosperity but also its survival.[1] In the last two decades of the thirteenth century and throughout the period considered, the English guilds managed to establish themselves in the civic councils, by promoting their influential members in the civic hierarchy, thus creating a new model of civic administrative organization.[2] Despite the fact that the new social and political structures contributed to the increase of urban wealth, this model had an adverse economic and political effect on labourers. In the mid-thirteenth century, the urban communities were governed by wealthy landlords, who based their economic power and prestige on their trade activities, rich merchants and a plethora of royal officials, responsible for the supervision of civic matters, who had created a difficult but stable environment for labour relations. During the fourteenth century, the redistribution of power from landlords to merchants and the political growth of the civic councils forced the majority of labourers to join in a guild in order to ensure their job positions. As a result, most of them, including the masters, were in a dire economic condition, despite the overall gains in English economy.

Furthermore, on the eve of the fourteenth century, a succession of economic and social crises reversed the positive economic climate and caused enormous damage to the middle and lower

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[1] I would like to thank Costas Gaganakis, Associate Professor of Early Modern European History, for his comments and his assistance. The research for this paper was made in the Institute of Historical Research, School of Advanced Study, University of London. The Primary Sources are: Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (eds.), *York,* 2 vols., Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979˙ James Stokes (ed.), *Lincolnshire,* 2 vols., Toronto, University of Toronto Press and The British Library, 2009˙ Anne Lancashire (ed.) with David J. Parkinson (asst ed.), *Civic London to 1558,* 3 vols., Cambridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2015˙ John Stow, *A Survey of London. Reprinted From the Text of 1603,*C.L. Kingsford (ed.), Oxford, 1908, *British History Online* http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/survey-of-london-stow/1603˙ Chris Given-Wilson, Paul Brand, Seymour Phillips, Mark Ormrod, Geoffrey Martin, Anne Curry and Rosemary Horrox (eds.), *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England,* Woodbridge, 2005, *British History Online* http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/parliament-rolls-medieval˙ Jonathan Mackman and Matthew Stevens, *Court of Common Pleas: the National Archives, Cp40 1399-1500,* London, 2010, *British History Online* http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/common-pleas/1399-1500˙ H.T. Riley (ed.), *Memorials of London and London Life in the 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries,* London, 1868, *British History Online* http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/memorials-london-life .

[2] R.H. Hilton, *English and French Towns in Feudal Society: A Comparative Study,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992˙ Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: The Origins and the Revival of Trade,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969˙ Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization 1500-1800,* London, Routledge, 2007˙ David Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000˙ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973˙ Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West,* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968˙ Christopher Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society, The Estates of Bishopric of Worcester 680-1540,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980˙ Catharina Lis & Hugo Soly, "An Irresistible Phalanx: Journeymen Associations in Western Europe, 1300-1800", in C. Lis, J. Lukassen, H. Soly (eds.), *Before the Unions; Wage Earners and Collective Action in Europe, 1300-1850, International Review of Social History Supplement 2,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994 p.11-49.

ranks, making labour an uncertain and fluctuating condition.[3] To name but a few, dearth and the subsequent phenomenal rise in market prices, the outbreak of riots and revolts, the consequences of the famine of 1315 and the Black Death, the diversification in trade and manufacture caused the migration of labourers, farmers and daily workers, who were now considered as surplus workforce. Due to the increased migration in the cities, unable to receive more migrants and asylum seekers and provide jobs for them, the guilds tried to exploit the opening-up of the markets, hiring the necessary workforce with very low salaries. Consequently, three categories of townsmen were formed: those who managed to make a living and survive by their labour, the traditionally rich merchants, who managed to prosper financially and politically and a large majority of beggars, dependent on charity.

Moreover, in 1349, King Edward III accepted and enforced the *Ordinance of Labourers*, which was enhanced two years later with the *Statute of Labourers* in order to set some general but ground rules for each aspect of labour. Among other regulations, it was decided that everyone under the age of sixty must work and that employers must not hire excess workers. On the other hand, the workers may not receive wages higher than pre-plague levels and no one, under the pain of imprisonment, was to give anything to able bodied beggars. Furthermore, regulations were made in order to control of the profits in food prices. [4]

The first phase of the labour laws in England created a highly polarized environment among the urban communities and promoted the idea that labour was not only a means of living and personal success, but also the basis of the welfare of the kingdom. This welfare was threatened by those who preferred to live in sloth or work in an unauthorized context. In other words, the idea of labour was one of the basic factors that ensured the "common profit of all the good people of the realm", facing the great problem of vagrancy and uncontrolled labour. The distinction between *"good"* and *"bad"* labour, which was promoted as a means of defense against the disastrous social and economic problems following the plague, was transformed into a tool of control and

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[3] James Davis, *Medieval Market Morality: Life, Law and Ethics in the English Marketplace 1200-1500*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012˙ Cristopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989˙ F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973˙ Friedrich Heer, *The Medieval World*, New York, Mentor Books, 1963˙ Robert Henry Bautier, *The Economic Development of Medieval Europe,* London, Thames Hudson, 1971˙ L. A. Clarkson, *The Pre-industrial Economy of England*, London, Batsford, 1971˙ Nigel Saul, *Fourteenth Century England*, London, Boydell Press, 2000˙ John Schofield & A.G. Vince, *Medieval Towns: The Archaeology of British Towns in their European Setting,* London, 2003˙ Mayhew N.J., "Numismatic Evidence and Falling Prices in the Fourteenth Century", *EcHR 27,* 1974, 1-15˙ Michael Prestwich, "War, Taxation and the English Economy in the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries" in J.M.Winter (ed.), *War and Economic Development: Essays in Memory of David Joslin*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

[4] Berhta Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes of Labourers during the First Decade after the Black Plague*, Columbia University Press, 1908˙ John Bellamy, *Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973˙ Anne Middleton, "Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version 'Autobiography' and the Statute of 1388" in Steven Justice, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (eds.), *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, 208-317.

suppression, as the Labour Statutes identified the main source of social problems in the attitude of the workers. In the Ordinance of 1349, the labourers were seen as malicious and idle speculators "willing to beg in idleness rather than get their living by labour".[5] For the promotion of the ideal of common profit, idle workers had to inform their masters for each of their activities and reassignments and participate in public rituals, such as public oath-giving and initiation rites, and if they did not accept, order would be enforced by penalties and the marginalization of troublemakers.

Economic decline, the incapacity to express their dissatisfaction and the need to come up against their work problems favored the establishment of groups and brotherhoods within the guilds, promoting the necessity for solidarity and protection. The ideal of solidarity, propagated through the use of biblical texts and ecclesiastical sermons, was a rallying point for the world of labour and one of the most prominent arguments to assert new rights and maintain traditional privileges.

Artisans and tradesmen used the biblical drama and the civic rituals to highlight the significance of labour and their professional *"pride"* and status: the kind and honest city dweller, Christian and labourer. Theatre was one of the means to promote their claims in the new urban society. This paper focuses, firstly, on the various strategies of promotion of the ideal of labour solidarity through the biblical drama and the mystery plays, funded and staffed by members of urban guilds. Secondly, it highlights their arguments on stage and the workplace. Thirdly, it deals with the reaction on the part of employer/power groups and fourthly, it examines the gradual transformation of the conditions and work relations in the English towns during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Late Medieval English drama was considered as a civic duty, because of the guilds, which bore the artistic, technical and economic custody of the theatrical productions.[6] Theatre was not only a means of civic entertainment, but it had multiple targets, such as the maintaining of moral integrity within the city through the dramatized example of the lives of Saints and Apostles, the edification of the flock, the promotion of the ideal of charity and last but not least, the teaching of the Bible. The preparation of the theatrical productions offered an opportunity for coexistence and

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[5] Steven Justice, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (eds.), *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, 208-317, p. 229.

[6] William Tydeman, *English Medieval Theatre 1400-1500*, London, Routlegde, 1986˙ Margaret Rogerson, *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City*, London, Boydell & Brewer, 2011˙ Bernard Johnson, *The Acts and Ordinances of the Company of Merchant Taylors in the City of York,* York, Borthwick Publications, 1949˙ Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987˙ Richard Beadle, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003˙ John Wesley Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context*, London, Routledge, 1992˙ John Gassner & Edward Quinn, *England in the Middle Ages: The Reader's Encyclopedia in World Drama*, London, Courier Corporation, 2002˙ Lawrence Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011˙ Robert Withington, *English Pageantry: A Historical Outline,* London, Read Books, 2008, Andrew Cowell, *At Play in the Tavern: Signs, Coins and Bodies in the Middle Ages*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1999˙ Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

participation, created networks of friendship and solidarity between different and highly competitive crafts, raised concerns about the work conditions and opened up channels between them. Among others, Gervase Rosser's study about medieval brotherhoods and fraternities and the ways that medieval solidarity expressed in urban communities, provides us with many interesting conclusions and a great amount of archival material.[7] Following the analysis of Gervase Rosser, drama can be examined as a rallying point for the world of labour and as a means to express the political opinions of the lower ranks as well as their thesis that political power of their guilt required a good environment and stable working conditions behind the doors of their workplace.

In conjunction with the traditional charitable activities, the initiation rituals for new colleagues and the dinner meetings, participation in theatrical procedures became a new way for mutual understanding and a means for the development of mechanisms for their protection. Gradually, members of the guilds set up brotherhoods in order to maintain concord, justice and solidarity. They spent their time together, cooperated in the theatrical procedures and eventually realized that a dramatized story could be an alternative answer to the pressures of the elites and the employers. The ideal of labour solidarity promoted through the context of medieval Christian theology, urged the labourers to rally, considering that their struggle to achieve better employment and living conditions for themselves and the vagrant persecuted worker, was not only just but necessary.

In 1350, artisans, journeymen, and daily workers, who participated in the guilds of the city of Lincoln, formed a religious fraternity that they called "fraternity of folks of common and middling rank". The aim of the fraternity was the organization of *Corpus Christi* productions. Though, they had an additional purpose. All the members of the urban or merchant elites were excluded from the fraternity unless they accepted to prove their good intensions and their will to discuss with them.[8] This political decision led the elites to form their fraternity, dedicated to St Anne. With their religious fraternity the elites aimed to promote their political and trade status, highlighting in the same time their political and financial superiority.

In order to promote the ideal of labour solidarity on stage, they created a link between the biblical figures and the ordinary people through the dramatization of biblical exemplum. Furthermore, they gave prominence to the significance of personal and collective *"good"* labour as a counterargument against the accusations of idleness and jobbery. They also emphasized the allegorical link of town and guild as a corpus. Last but not least, they promoted the value and status of their profession and their skills. In New Castle-upon-Tyne, drama was considered by the

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[7] Gervase Rosser's, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages, Guilds in England 1250-1550*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

[8] Francis Hill, *Medieval Lincoln*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 298.

labourers as an *"image of good unity, concord, and charity binding the diverse trades of the town, whose members went together in the procession amicably and lovingly".*[9]

The world of labour used the theatrical repertoire, which drew its inspiration from the Old and the New Testament in order to achieve these targets, maintaining the basic idea of the biblical story but changing their characteristics and placing them in the present. The presentation of scenes, inspired by the Passion of Christ, the lives of Apostles or familiar scenes from the actions of saints, promoted the teachings and sermons of the Church regarding daily social and economic adversities. As the interaction between the individual and the civic body as an entity was of great importance to the medieval worldview, the theatre of the workers highlighted the ideal of labour solidarity in the workplace, in the parish and also the town. The idea of solidarity as a basic prerequisite of the maintenance and growth of any type of community, such as towns and brotherhoods, was fundamental and promoted by preachers and civic officials.

Theoretically, that meant that each brotherhood of labourers had its own founding declaration, and a ritual with theatrical elements to enforce it. Practically, it was clear that the achievement of personal motivations and goals, the capability of social mobility and the need to protect themselves against the dangers posed by the employers, could be accomplished in unison. The founding declaration of the Guild of the Holly Cross in London started with the lines *"And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one mind and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common".* [10] The ideal of labour solidarity was based on the need for a cohesive and peaceful society, based on the metaphor of the physical body, where all parts had to function normally. Through drama, the participants found the similarities between the world of labourers and the world of Saints. Even though they did not equate themselves with these figures, they managed to show that the protagonists of the biblical story had more in common with them than the employers and the civic elites. In the Processions of the *Corpus Christi* in York, Coventry, Sussex and elsewhere, it was stated that Christ's Disciples belonged in the middle and lower social ranks. As a result, the characteristics, choices and the actions of theatrical figures adapted to the present times. As Glynne Wickham pointed out:

In this new context of universal time where the past was reflected in the present and the future, the proper narrative environment for the depiction of all these events was fourteenth century Europe. For the script-writers and the actors this meant translation of Pontius Pilatus into Sir Pilate, J.P. or into a German Burgomeister, Annas and Caiaphas into Bishops of the Roman

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[9] Matthew P. Davies, Caroline M. Barron, Andrew Prescott (eds.), *London and the Kingdom: Essays in Honour of Caroline M. Barron: Proceedings of the 2004 Harlaxton Symposium*, Donington, Shaun Tyas, 2008, p. 124.

[10] Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity*, p. 108, Acts 4.32.

Catholic Church, the shepherds of Bethlehem into those of the Alps…Herod behaves like any ducal tyrant and swears by Mahomet; Noah becomes a shipwright of the Adriatic or the North Sea ports.[11]

In Coventry, the Fraternity of *Corpus Christi* used to organize pageants, where Christ's body was presented in the litany, followed by the members of the guild. These labourers declared *"Christ was engaged with us and chose to soak His body in ours, so we can be together as a whole".[12]* That dramatized ritual opened up a way to incorporate townsmen of different social ranks in a geographical unit (town), a social unit (craft) and a spiritual unit (Christian society). In late fourteenth-century-York, the Guild of *Corpus Christi* opened the official pageant of the guild in the public squares of the city, declaring "*Hoc est corpus meum*". [13]

Moreover, apart from the reinterpretation of the dramatized biblical exemplum, theatrical productions offered the opportunity to promote the products and services of the civic guilds. Drama was also a means to advertise the significance and the political and economic status of these professional unions as well as the need to work freely, without regulations. The members of the Fraternity of St John the Baptist, connected to the Guild of Tailors, spent a lot of time in Saint's Chapel in order to organize theatrical productions, dressed in their official garments and bearing the banners of the guild.[14] This, common practice, in England aimed to highlight the importance of professional and civic status, as a counterargument for their solidarity, as well as for the promotion of their professional skills. In Lincolnshire, the banner of the guild of St Mary was *"Noah's ship"*, in order to stress their capacity to work in that advanced level. The arc was basically a street wagon, driven through the town and followed by the members of the guild. All these rituals and pageants transformed the entire town into a great theatre, where the need for solidarity and respect as well as the presentation of the world of labourers as guarantors of the civic peace were emphasized. [15]

While the elites and the employers blamed the journeymen, the daily labourers and the workers for being vagrant, idle and unfriendly, through the Statutes of labour, they on their turn orchestrated a public spectacle in order to demonstrate that they were good Christians, citizens and professionals, not only within the workplace but also in all aspects of civic life. In Beverley, the members of the guild of Saint Helen dramatized the martyr in the road to Calvary and in Sleaford they directed the Ascension of Christ. [16] In all these spectacles, what becomes apparent is an effort

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[11] Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre,* p. 64-65.

[12] *The Roman Breviary*, trans. John Marquees of Bute, London, 1879, p.575

[13] *The Guild of Corpus Christi,* P. Lozar (ed., trans.), " The 'Prologue' to the Ordinances of the York Corpus Christi Guild", *Allegorica* 1 (1976), 94-113˙Clifford Davidson, *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval Britain*, Ashgate Publishing, 2007, p. 81˙

[14] Matthew Davies and Ann Saunders, *The History of the Merchant Taylors' Company*, Leeds, 2004, p. 31.

[15] Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity*, p. 127.

[16] Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity*, p. 77.

to suggest a different social example within the city, appealing to the broader community. The mystery plays portrayed Jesus as a citizen of York and showed Chester as an alternative Jerusalem.

The arguments on stage and the efforts of labourers to reinforce themselves within urban society were faced with suspicion by the elites, employers and civic officials. Yet they primarily served to promote the political status and the economic prestige of their business in the towns. By the end of fourteenth century, when the Peasant's Revolt revealed the dynamics of urban protest, the elites realized that they had to take further measures on labour. In 1381, one of the Leaders in the great revolt, the preacher John Ball declared in public that *"When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"*[17] urging his followers to fight for the abolition of serfdom and the assertion of labour rights. On the contrary, the conservative poet John Gower claimed that the labour of the lower ranks was not a matter for discussion, but primarily their destiny, as a consequence of the Original Sin and the loss of Paradise. To Gower and other scholars, friendly to the elites, the world of labour had to be controlled because of its limited understanding of the divine plan for the world.[18] This argument was fundamental for the proliferation of critique of many public figures in the English political sphere, such as the Lollards. The ideal of common profit and the ideal of labour solidarity were shown to be responsible not for the salvation of the realm but for its decay. For the civic councils and the employers, artisan drama emerged as a means to escape from the workplace: *"No man may be converted to God but only by the earnest doing of God, and by no vain playing.* During 1388-89, English brotherhoods were brought under royal supervision, due to the pressures of employers and civic officials. In the summer of 1388, Parliament in Cambridge decided to suppress these groups: *"that all guilds and fraternities and their common chests shall be abolished and done away with for all time and the goods and chattels in their possession laid out upon the war".*[19]

The ideal of labour solidarity through drama eventually became a favorite theme for preachers and social satirists. A homilist in c.1400 denounced the widespread absence of Christian charity and friendship: *"When the fiend sees love and peace among good men, he has thereto much envy and does all that he can or may, and with the fire of ire he stirs their hearts to discord and strife . . . After strife comes chiding, with great noise and crying. And right as fire casts first up smoke and afterwards bursts into flame, right so after ire and evil will come strife and debate. And when one says to another 'It is thus', the other says 'Nay!' The one says 'It was thus!' the other says 'It was not so!' Thus begins strife, and after that comes chiding, with 'Thou liest' and 'Thou*

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[17] R.H. Hilton, *Bondmen Made Free: Medieval Peasants Movements and the English Rising of 1381,* London, Maurice Temple Smith, 1973, pp. 211-12.

[18] John Gower, *Vox Clamantis,* E.W.Stockton (trans.), The Major Latin Works of John Gower, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1962, 3.1.

[19] Leonard C. Hector & Barbara F. Harvey (eds), *The Westminster Chronicle*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 356-357.

liest'...[leading to] menaces or threatenings, which stir men's hearts to ire so that battles and wars begin amongst them, and cease not until one of them be avenged of the other." [20]

From 1349 to 1490, the ideal of hard and true labour as an antidote to vagrancy and uncontrolled labour was enforced by numerous ordinances and royal charts. The idea of common profit that separated the good from the idle labourer became the main counterargument of the ruling elites to the appeal for artisan solidarity. During these two centuries, civic authorities and employers showed that control of the world of labour was of utmost importance. From their point of view, drama had to be a means of entertainment and an educational tool for those who could not read the Scriptures. All these efforts were reduced during the reign of Henry VII, who understood the insufficiency of those measures in altering the working conditions. The ideal of labour solidarity, based on traditional theories pertaining to common profit, strengthened links between labourers, within the same or between different guilds. Drama was a rallying point for the world of labour, highlighting the importance of personal and collective work as a prerequisite of the welfare of the medieval urban society and the realm. It also offered an opportunity for discussion and reflection on the work matters and became an agent for the assertion of better working and living conditions, promoting the need to establish the bonds of solidarity and friendship.

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[20] Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity*, p. 92˙ G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 459.