
Jody Enders. *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Urban Legends*.
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As the title suggests, this book applies the methodology used to investigate the urban legends of our own time to surviving anecdotes about the medieval and early modern theater in France. Enders proposes that the theater as an institution, like urban legends, focuses the characteristic anxieties and concerns of a society in a way that interrogates the audience's criteria for truth. She speculates that the wealth of such anecdotes related to the stage results from the ways in which "the tenuous boundaries between theater and real life" helped "audiences to confront the nature of artistic representation" (xxiv) as urban legends reflect the unifying fears of our society, for instance about foreign travel or about the purity of the food supply.

What matters, Enders suggests, is not so much the truth or falsehood of the event the story represents, which it may be impossible to ascertain anyway, as the truth that the story was told and that someone believed it or believed that someone else believed it. The indeterminacy of the truth of the stories, as in the word *histoire* itself, results in frequent chiasmus: "we cannot really authorize what we cannot debunk, and we cannot really debunk what we can never authorize" (13); "it was just as easy for the Middle Ages to politicize theology as it is today for modern times to 'theologize' politics" (142); "Although Tournai looks to be the tale of a theater made more real by a legend, it is also the tale of a legend made more real by the theater" (194).

The first part of the book, "Telling the Difference," examines seven stories that suggest the continuities between what happens on the stage and off. For instance, a spectator falls in love with and marries the young woman who plays the role of St. Catherine, or a young man plays St. Barbara so well that members of the audience compete to adopt him, or an actor playing St. Bartholomew ruins the performance by fleeing another actor who impersonates his executioner. The second part, "Make-Believe," examines four performances of the period of the Reformation. Here Enders pursues uncertainties about what is and isn't real, the way these uncertainties reflect the contemporary theological debates, and the way in which they differentiate between believers and skeptics in the audience. For example, the records suggest a reenactment of the miracle of the loaves and the fishes in a play of the Passion at Valenciennes in 1547; this reenactment divides members of the audience between those who think they see a miracle and those who think they see special effects:

Ultimately, if theater audiences couldn't tell the difference between history, illusion, and reality, if the Catholic Church actively *discouraged* them from seeking clarification on those matters in printed Protestant Bibles, then they might just as

well have been watching “urban legends” unfold before their eyes—or have believed that they were. They might just as well have believed that *mystères* and *miracles* were merely legends about religion. Worst of all, they might have reckoned that religion itself was nothing more than an “urban legend”—just one of many of what Brunvand would later call “somewhat bizarre unverifiable stories, plausible nonetheless because they are grounded in certain verifiable facts.” (161-162).

Insufficient reverence or even laughter at a religious play threatened the authority of the Church, and Enders sees in a story about the suicide of an actor who once played Despair and the execution of a heretical colleague a wish on the part of the Church for the death of the theater itself.

One by one, Enders investigates her theatrical legends, although, as she says: “Trying to find out what really happened...is like trying to find an alligator in a sewer” (137). She examines and collates the different versions that have survived and like a detective tries to resurrect the events that might have given rise to them. An appendix containing generous passages from her sources in the original French and occasionally Latin enables the reader to follow and share the detective work. In the case for instance of a Parisian legend of the fifteenth century in which a Jew repeatedly and ingeniously desecrates a host, Enders interprets the documents in a way that traces them to the performance, rather than to the story on which the play, in turn, is based. Truth, she argues, is relative. If a document says that an audience was waiting for a play at 4:00 in the morning, the document may exaggerate, but the audience might still have arrived very early.

While she scrutinizes the problem of determining truth, Enders looks at the warnings, reminiscent of those in urban legends, implicit in the narratives. A story about the rescue of priests playing the roles of Christ and Judas from imminent death in Metz in 1347 indicates “the eternal tendency of theater to ‘spill over’ into real life and ‘real life’ to spill over into theater” (66). Stories about the unscheduled Satanic intervention in plays involving devils and the diabolical may “carry the urban legend’s usual admonitions about the dark side of pleasure along the lines of ‘Death in the Funhouse’: when there is work to be done, one should not be out gallivanting at the amusement park—or the theater” (96). An anecdote about relics dropped and contaminated in a procession demonstrates that “it is dangerous to put the life’s blood of religion in the hands of the people” (140). An enactment of the beheading of Holofernes threatens: “Beware the theater...because it will *execute* you” (183).

Enders translates the most relevant sections of the documents she discusses, so her argument is highly accessible to Anglophone readers. She even translates verse as verse and doggerel as doggerel. And her writing is charming, forceful, and colloquial, as the decorum of urban legend requires. ✱