

Medieval English Theatre Society meeting 2025
Saturday 29th March, University of Bristol
Hosted by Eleanor Rycroft and Cathy Hume
Medieval Theatre in Action

Call for papers

Theatrical ‘action’ has sometimes been characterised as unworthy of attention in comparison to text: construed as vulgar ‘spectacle’ or obfuscatory ‘stage business’. As the essence of performance, however, it demands our attention. The study of medieval theatre in performance is complicated by the fact that the original action is all but lost, leaving scant textual traces in archival records and play scripts. For the 2025 METH conference, we invite delegates to consider how we respond to that loss, both critically and theoretically, and especially through the staging of medieval drama today. The conference will include a workshop presentation of ‘The Life of Job’, a fifteenth-century text that implies action but gives no clear indication of what it might have been.

Papers might focus on practical features of individual performances, such as those listed below. Alternatively, they might examine more generally what constitutes ‘action’ and ‘performance’ when it comes to medieval theatre: do we have the right theoretical framework to consider these performances, or are ‘play’, ‘games’, or ‘pretence’ more helpful terms? Papers may wish to consider the role of modern performance when researching medieval drama, and how we articulate its utility to audiences, including funders. Are ‘practice as research’ and ‘practice-based research’ clear expressions of the contemporary goals of staging medieval drama, and how else might we conceive of our speculative engagements with it? Finally, how do we accommodate medieval theatre ‘inaction’ or a general lack of commercial engagement with medieval drama? If medieval theatre research is impoverished by the small archive of contemporary or professional performance in comparison with Shakespeare studies, for example, what can be done to remedy this situation? Can we as scholars stimulate a wider culture of performance?

Areas that might be explored include:

- Stage directions
- Actions on stage
- Performance style and gesture
- Special effects and spectacle
- Performance skills
- Mime and clowning
- Non-verbal performances
- Somatic/ embodied approaches to theatrical action
- Action and affect, including empathy
- How annual repetition of performance might have influenced stage action
- How putting medieval drama in action might speak to contemporary political contexts

We invite proposals for 20-minute papers from scholars at any stage of career or studies. Please send abstracts of up to 250 words to Cathy Hume (cathy.hume@bristol.ac.uk) and Eleanor Rycroft (e.rycroft@bristol.ac.uk). If you have any questions, please feel free to email us informally. Submission deadline: Friday 25 October 2024.

The conference will be held in person at the University of Bristol, possibly with a Zoom session to accommodate speakers who cannot attend in person: please let us know when you submit your abstract if you would like to participate in this format.