Constructing and negotiating social roles in early modern school drama

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The Orationes manuscript (Lit. MS E41, Canterbury Cathedral Archives) offers valuable material to the researcher interested in the connection between language and society in early modern Britain. This manuscript contains drama and speeches composed and publicly performed by the students and staff of the King’s School, Canterbury, in the latter half of the 17th century. The texts can be divided into four categories depending on the time of their performance, and since the plays in the different categories were performed for different reasons, we have in effect four different subgenres of plays, all with different practical purposes. For example, the goal of the Christmas plays was to secure an exeat from the Dean of the Cathedral. Because of these differences, plays from different subgenres often aim at constructing a specific type of relationship between the actors and the audience, and they also vary in their depictions of social roles and their hierarchy. Hence, for example, the Christmas plays allude to the shared social background of the students and the audience, positing a connection between education and social status.

The present paper focuses on the construction and negotiation of social roles through language in the Orationes texts. The analysed linguistic variables include, in particular, the use of address forms and code-switching between English, Latin and Greek. The analysis utilises especially the concept of face in explaining how the linguistic variables are connected with sociological variables (such as social class, age, power and social distance), and why specific forms are chosen in specific contexts. This study examines interaction on two communicative levels: between the play and the audience, and between the dramatis personae, while taking into account the interplay between these two levels. The work presented in this paper is part of my on-going doctoral dissertation project, which focuses on historical multilingualism.

Keywords: social roles, drama, Early Modern English.