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Review of Peter Holland and Stephen Orgel (eds.) 'From script to stage in early modern England'(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)

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"Review of Peter Holland and Stephen Orgel (eds.) From Script to Stage in Early Modern England Redefining British Theatre History series, gen. ed. Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) ISBN 1403933443X (paperback) xiii+251 pp." by Gabriel Egan

Until recently the verb 'to theorize' was most commonly used intransitively. Now 'theorizing' often gets done to something, as when theatre history has its 'methodological [and] . . . theoretical bases' looked into, as Peter Holland's introduction to his series Redefining British Theatre History puts it. The 'traditionally positivist . . . Theatre Notebook' (p. xii) tries to do theatre history by just presenting the facts, so far as they can be determined, but this approach, Holland implies, leaves uninvestigated the means by which knowledge is generated. In an avowedly self-examining mode, this new series of books puts the received wisdom (including the knowledge about knowledge) up for debate and hopes to send scholars off in new directions.

Although no consensus emerges from the eleven essays in this book, some trends are apparent. There is a democratizing impulse at work in the rejection of author-centered study in favour of the perspectives offered when we take up the positions of the 'audiences, actors, theatre companies, patrons, architects and designers' (p. 1). Theatre history is increasingly concerned with everybody's agency other than the dramatist's, and Stephen Orgel is under the sway of Michel Foucault when he confidently overstates his case that in the 'generally anonymous' theatre industry around 1600 plays were only 'supplied with authors' (p. 2) when the state's power was to be applied to them. Useful correctives to this over-generalization are Lukas Erne's demonstration that as early as 1590 plays were treated as literary artefacts with identifiable authors (Erne 2003, 31-55) and Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser's evidence that as a category of agency the dramatic author was constructed within, and not in opposition to, the theatre (Farmer & Lesser 2000). The democratizing principle is also apparent in several contributors' praise for the project Records of Early English Drama (REED), which is helping to build a national picture of the touring of early modern players to balance the metropolitan bias of our subject. Still, as Holland notes, with the exceptions of Bristol, Prescott (Lancashire), and York, REED has 'found no evidence of provincial theatres' (p. 54) in the early modern period. For that reason, a certain strand of theatre history has to be London-centered.

Just where the currently fashionable dispersal of authority disperses it to is the subject of Anthony B. Dawson's sensible contribution, in which he argues that we are too enamoured of uncertainty and indeterminacy these days. We are now so assuredly uncertain--for example, that competing quarto and Folio texts of a play are 'equal but different' (not simply 'good' and 'bad')--that to treat anything as determinate can seem like a conservative political gesture. As Dawson wittily shows by analysis of an American neo-conservative politician's reading of Shakespeare's Othello (in which uncertainty about Muslim military strength must not be allowed forestall a preemptive attack), the cavalier postmodern attitude to evidence and logic can serve illiberal ends. To disperse intentionality from the individual and give it to the collective is a kind of irresponsibility: 'intentionality . . . is still there . . . but it is not really anybody's doing' (p. 96).

Andrew Gurr makes a sound argument that the paucity of the evidential base for theatre history is the best reason for concentrating on playing companies and their repertoires rather than on dramatists and their plays. We have only 2 out of the 167 extant Chamberlain's/King's men plays in 'allowed book' form, so we cannot hope to recover any play as it was first performed--the goal the 1986 Oxford Complete Works of Shakespeare set itself--although aiming for this ideal is a useful heuristic (p. 71). Gurr thinks that 98% of Shakespeare's company's plays went to press "from their writers" (because the 'allowed book' was too valuable to send to the printers) and hence that these publications were not meant to remind readers of performance (p. 75). Gurr quotes play title-pages bragging that within the reader will find more than was performed, but surely we should treat these as extras of essentially the same kind that cinema aficionados get from 'special edition' DVDs; the ownable version is nonetheless recovering the pleasure of the public performance. I must declare an interest here: in the next volume in Holland's series I will argue that printed plays were parasitical on the professional stage through the 1580s and 90s, not becoming an independent site of authority and pleasure until 1605-10.

A couple of the contributors could tighten their grips on evidence. Bruce R. Smith's essay 'E/loco/com/motion' is as frivolous as its title, confining itself to the uncontroversial claim that theatre is about movement of various kinds, including the movement of air particles carrying the actor's voice to the audience's ears and the movement of fluids around the actor's body (which in a Galenic model of human physiology is what emotions amount to) that stimulates like movements in the audience, as when they are moved to tears. This is all pleasingly expressed and for the most part copiously footnoted, although the substantial and arresting claim that 'Through the 1590s at least, the epilogue to most plays was performed if not spoken by dancers, in the form a jig' (p. 131) is unsupported. Theatre historians want to know more about jigs and will be teased by Smith's 'at least' that implies dating evidence not supplied. Regarding theatre acoustics, Smith contrasts the 'broad sound produced by sound waves moving primarily from side to side' in the open-air amphitheatres to the 'more rounded sound' at indoor theatres with 'beamed ceilings' such as the Blackfriars (p. 137). The sense of an argument resting on undisclosed bases is enhanced by the claim that the Blackfriars ceiling was beamed, which is either a guess or needs substantiation.

Tiffany Stern here continues her career-length demonstration that plays were, in a number of textual senses, bitty rather than cohesive. Like Smith, Stern throws out arresting claims without substantiation or comment on how she came by them, as when she reports that there were 'roughly 50350 printed books published between 1580 and 1660' (p. 153). The English Short-Title Catalogue (ESTC) CD-ROM version 3rd edition has 61787 records for that period, which is almost a quarter more than Stern reckons. Nothing but the word 'heroic' can satisfactorily characterize the researches that have led Stern to 'look over' 10,000 rare books, which I calculate to be more than 5 a day, every day, for 5 years. Stern dates the coining of the word 'playwright' to 1617 and thinks that it later appeared in Ben Jonson's poems 'To playwright' and 'On playwright', which she misdates by their inclusion in the Folio of 1640 (p. 173n8). Possibly Stern was misled by Chadwyck-Healey's Literature Online (LION) database, the searching of which can save one reading thousands of books. LION takes its texts of these poems from the 1640 edition, although they also appear in the 1616 edition and so predate Stern's examples of 'playwright' being used in

1617. Stern's characterization of plays as patchworks needs a convincing refutation of the obvious objection that a powerful cohesive force existed in opposition to all this fragmentation of the text: the state censor insisted upon a unified and singular text that he licensed for performance. Without the censor's licensed text the players could not work and it must have acted as a brake on their improvisatory and revisionist practices. Reconciling the conflicting evidence is an empirical endeavour and Stern has the advantage that she is already squarely in the positivist camp.

Stern's great contribution to theatre history has been her work on how different a play looks when considered as a collection of actors' cue-scripts rather than a singular listing of speeches from first scene to last. In the book's final essay Scott McMillin takes this as his lead and discovers that more than half of Desdemona's cues are given her by Othello, and more than half the cues she gives are to Othello. Between them, this master and boy could rehearse more than half their parts. Add Emilia and Iago to the rehearsal and these two boys' parts could be rehearsed for virtually the whole play (p. 236). The same pattern applies in another King's men play of 1610 performed at Oxford at the same time as Othello: Doll Common and Dame Pliant in The Alchemist can be rehearsed with just two or three masters. A single group comprised of a couple of masters and a couple of boys could, then, have rehearsed much of Othello and The Alchemist together. On the other hand, Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra gives cues to and gets cues from almost everyone on stage.

McMillin distinguishes 'restricted' roles, those that give and take cues from just one or two masters, from 'wide-ranging' roles such as Cleopatra. This distinction might explain the choice of plays for the King's men's 1604-5 season at court. Othello, Measure for Measure, and The Merry Wives of Windsor all have 'restricted' parts for boys that could be rehearsed in small groups, rather than 'wide-ranging' parts for which the boys would have to work with virtually the whole company. McMillin suspects that the company chose plays suitable for newly-apprenticed boy actors who needed individual coaching, a hunch that fits well with David Kathman's recent discoveries of particular apprentices' articles of indenture. The 1604-5 court season ended three months after it started with The Merchant of Venice, which was preceded by plays with female parts that are small and 'restricted'. Perhaps a boy who had recently joined the company was being given space to rehearse the tricky and 'wide-ranging' role of Portia to end the season (p. 241). McMillin openly worries that he has speculated far beyond the evidence, but he has not. The pattern of roles that are short and have 'restricted' cueing is objectively there in the plays, assuming that the texts we have are reliably close to what was played at court. This sort of analysis is undoubtedly a new direction for theatre history, and we positivists can draw comfort from the fact that it requires no practices to be transitively theorized.

Works Cited

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