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Locating the Queen's Men, 1583-1603: material practices and conditions of playing

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Locating the Queen's Men, 1583–1603: material practices and conditions of playing, edited by Helen Ostovich, Holger Schott Syme and Andrew Griffin, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009, xii + 269 pp., £55 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7546-6661-5

This edited collection of essays acknowledges throughout the contents its indebtedness to what Roslyn L. Knutson calls “my parent text” (99), namely Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean’s seminal study, *The Queen's Men and their Plays*. Many of the essays begin by siting their work in relation to this work, and the resultant scholarship deviates only in ways which augment and elaborate on McMillin and MacLean’s work. Some essays, such as Knutson’s, do indeed ask difficult questions, testing the boundaries of claims made by the “parent” to supplement and enrich its groundbreaking material.

The 16 essays of which the volume is comprised are prefaced by an excellent introduction by the editors, which serves to contextualize the ensuing material both within the joint fields of theatre history and literary criticism, and within the context of the Queen’s Men. This introduction, the longest piece in the collection, fluently narrates the history of the theatre company and its performance history, as well as emphasizing the importance of each section of the book, focusing on performance venues, the company’s repertory, characterization within the plays and company, and practical performative issues. The introduction skilfully blends a summary of Queen’s Men studies with carefully interwoven references to the individual essays contained within the volume, so that it serves to introduce the general and specific themes of the collection both for new scholars and for those already familiar with its material.

The “locating” of the title occurs in a multitude of ways: in terms of the company’s geographical, political and cultural position, the collection’s placement chronologically and thematically, and its methodological approach to some of the complex questions it tackles. Throughout, the reader is reminded of the paucity of certain kinds of scholarly material: the physical documents and records, lost plays, and the ephemeral “visual display” and acting style described by Ian Munro (110) as being synonymous with the Queen’s Men, but which is to a certain degree absent from the printed play text (additionally an explanation for the company’s lack of success in publishing their plays in print form). Despite these lacunae, the essays make remarkable headway in examining and fleshing out new evidence, so that this collection makes a valuable and insightful contribution not only to study of the Queen’s Men, but early modern drama more generally.

Tiffany Stern’s essay emphasises the importance of change in repertory studies (77); this collection reflects her assertion by commenting on the responsiveness of the company to performance venue, audience and taste in the drama which developed during the Queen’s Men’s 20-year existence. What is made clear by Stern, Peter

Cockett and, to some degree, Knutson, is the reluctance to fix meaning, and the willingness to explore, expand and suggest. While Stern inverts the stasis usually imposed by reconstructions of theatre buildings, Knutson is careful to acknowledge the issues with her “fresh attack” on establishing the company’s repertory of plays (99); Cockett rejects the description of his theatre historiography project as one of “reconstruction” (229), suggesting instead a new hybrid between “original practice” and twenty-first-century rehearsal techniques to experiment with Queen’s Men’s texts in what he prefers to describe as a “research-creation exercise in theatrical history” (230).

Play texts known to have been performed by the Queen’s Men repeatedly receive scholarly treatment but from a variety of angles. For example, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and Shakespeare’s *Henry V* are discussed by Richard Dutton in terms of dating the published texts, and Karen Oberer investigates the complexity with which the popular tradition is incorporated into the latter play’s historical genre. Alan C. Dessen considers and contextualizes the role of Conscience in *The Three Ladies of London*, and Lloyd Edward Kermode explores the play’s references to usury in their wider context.

The collection’s balance between analysing dramatic text and theatre practice is careful; both aspects inform nearly all the essays it contains. Somewhat surprising is the lack of clarity in describing how this volume relates to the *Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men* project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2005–2008. Cockett describes his methodology for directing three Queen’s Men plays, *King Leir*, *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, as part of this project, and Eleanor Rycroft provides an insightful analysis of both the relation between beards and masculinity onstage in early modern drama and its application to the actual performances directed by Cockett. In a study that focuses so specifically on the plays and practice of one theatre company, it is interesting not to see greater reference made to this project or its Web presence, *Performing the Queen’s Men*, as a supplementary resource to the collected essays. Given the placement of the fourth and final section, “From Script to Stage” (which contains both Rycroft and Cockett’s contributions), at the end of the volume, perhaps the editors envisage the reader using the final essays as a point of departure for the website; however, given that academic essay collections are rarely designed for linear consumption, the introduction would have been an excellent point for advertising these additional resources.

With its insightful introduction to the main issues of studying both the Queen’s Men specifically and early modern performance and publication in general, this collection makes for a detailed and varied analysis, which is as useful in elaborating on McMillin and MacLean’s work as it is the wider issues confronting students and scholars of early modern drama. The selection of different topics covered and rigorous, succinct essays make *Locating the Queen’s Men, 1583–1603* a suitable case study for introducing postgraduate students to core issues in early modern drama without being overshadowed by Jonson, Marlowe or Shakespeare. The content would appeal to students both of drama in practice and of literature.

Locating the Queen’s Men, 1583–1603 is a vital and expansive contribution to repertory studies and serves as a microcosmic representation of current interests in the scholarship of early modern drama. As Brian Walsh argues of the Queen’s Men, this collection has “a penchant for engaging with the past” (123); he identifies the

company's itinerant status as the reason for its multiple meta-theatrical "framing devices", used to grab its audience's attention (124). The essays within this volume, skilfully edited by Helen Ostovich, Holger Schott Syme and Andrew Griffin, also make use of framing devices with which to arrest their reader: the detailed, informative introduction, the debt of gratitude to McMillin and MacLean's scholarship and inspiration, and the complementary online Web resources of *Performing the Queen's Men*.

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