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Playbooks and their Readers in Early Modern England, by Hannah August, London, Routledge, 2022, Material Readings in Early Modern Culture, xvi + 270 pp., £130 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-032-05901-3

Hannah August's fascinating study of playbooks and their readers deserves attention not only from those interested in the history of reading but also from all scholars and students of early modern drama. This very well-researched book surveys hundreds of early modern playbooks in quarto with readers' annotations as well as contemporary miscellanies and commonplace books in which readers reproduced dramatic extracts. It thus gathers a considerable amount of material evidence as to who read what plays and how. August explores the relationship between this evidence of reader response and the ways in which the paratexts of the playbooks that she surveys market the plays. Her discussion of these paratexts yields lots of useful insights into the cultural status of drama in the early modern period, the extent to which different dramatists echo and reinforce each other's concerns, and the economics of the early modern book market. But it is in the reader responses that she uncovers, not in the words of the dramatists themselves, that we gain the most interesting perspectives on how authorship, genre, and the value or purpose of plays was perceived in the period. One key contribution lies in how this work decentres Shakespeare. Where earlier study of early modern play-reading tended to focus on Shakespeare, and some critics have assumed 'that early readers shared our own sense of Shakespeare's cultural value' (183), August reveals evidence that suggests that many early readers had just as high a regard for the works of other playwrights.

The book includes some striking moments of reception, which will be of wide interest. For example, we find readers continuing the *querelle de femmes* debate that had raged in print in the 1610s in their private annotations. One annotates a passage in Shackerley Marmion's *Holland's Leaguer* (1632) with a paraphrase of a remark made in Joseph Swetnam's virulently misogynistic pamphlet, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615). The reader's use of this pamphlet as an intertext appears to impose a particular interpretation of the marked passage: that women are to blame for the womanising of the male character, Ardelio (194-95). Such evidence adds valuably to our sense of how a work like Swetnam's reflected and shaped contemporary views of women.

Some exciting examples are, perhaps inevitably, to be found in the midst of detail that may only appeal to more specialist readers. One might observe that attending to other kinds of evidence would yield other kinds of insights; in particular, the focus is on quarto playbooks but there are a number of folio collections of plays from the period with extensive contemporary annotations. At times, the discussion of plays only in terms of their paratexts feels limiting and more incursions into the plays themselves might have been helpful. In particular, the discussion of how early modern playwrights define and promote the genres of tragedy and comedy in Chapter 2 might have benefited from consideration of the choric Grex in Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour*. This Grex begins and punctuates the play with commentary on the play, which addresses the question of genre explicitly and complicates the distinction between paratext and text. But, of course, any study has to find ways of limiting the material that it addresses, and August is commendably clear about her methodology and its rationale.

This is an impressive, clearly written, and engaging study. It is vital reading for anyone interested in how early modern plays were marketed and consumed. Given the breadth of its

engagement with other studies, it is an excellent introduction to the wider field of the history of reading too. But one hopes that its reach will be still greater.

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