**Shakespeare Survey: Critical Studies Review 2023**

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These are books filled with uncertainty. This theme is explicit and central to Lauren Robertson’s *Entertaining Uncertainty in the Early Modern Theater*, but uncertainty features throughout 2023’s Shakespeare studies in sometimes surprising ways. Questions of knowing and unknowing, the uncertainty of sound, and the slippery unknowability of identities, categories, and physical phenomena present a world of unstable knowledge and fraught attempts to fix sense and meaning upon it. Questioning, deconstructing, and rendering deliberately obscure emerge as key critical methods, and much seems productively indeterminate.

To begin with those texts tied more closely to questions of performance, Laura Jayne Wright’s *Sound Effects: Hearing the Early Modern Stage* (Manchester University Press: 2023) considers ‘the shifting and malleable sonic world’ of early modern drama (2). This is a work concerned more with the semantics rather than the mechanics of sound effects, though audience response is a key preoccupation. The book nicely complements ongoing work on recreating the soundscapes of early modern London, as explored by such large projects as Early Modern Soundscapes and the English Broadside Ballad Archive, providing here an attentive interpretation of the meanings of sounds in early modern drama. We come to understand audiences as both makers and receivers of sound, the importance of becoming ‘sound-aware readers’ (20), and the mix of deliberate and accidental sounds that comprise the theatrical backdrop.

The book explores four chapters that chart soundgrams, nocturnal sounds, Ben Jonson’s use of sound, and Shakespeare’s use of sound, and in doing so analyse four ways to ‘read’ those sounds: as allusive, as acousmatic, as invasive, and as imagined. We begin with the instability of sound effects, and the ways in which playwrights can deploy sounds allusively. This shows how ‘Sound effects are caught between their capacity to signify and their capacity to contain subjective meanings’ (33). The semantic ambiguity of thunder, trumpets, guns, and bells are explored here, with the analysis of bells and trumpets providing particularly rich. Trumpets as a ‘signal of beginnings’ (42) and bells as markers of specificity – ‘a sonic dissonance between *here* and *there*, *this bell* and *those bells*’ (58) – facilitate compelling ways of reading these sonic moments. As intriguing as the allusive use of sound to recall specific uses of sounds in other plays might be, our only major example is in William Rowley’s *A New Wonder*; if this is a widespread feature of early modern drama, it would be fascinating to hear more about it. The broader allusive use of soundgrams considers how sounds like gunfire, trumpets, and bells can refer to environments, experiences, and situations, ‘dependent on memory,’ and can subvert meanings just as much as they communicate them (64).

In Chapter Two, the subject of nocturnal soundscapes is shown to ‘interrogate[...] contemporary spiritual and philosophical concerns over the veracity of the senses’ (73). Sounds can be sourceless and disorientating: nocturnal, indefinable yet meaningful, liminal and unseen; and they can be ‘acousmatic’, sounds without known sources. Such sounds are uncertain and unrecognised by players, which means ‘To listen becomes an act of theatrical faith that trusts in the evidence of things not seen’ (108). Chapters Three and Four turn to Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare respectively, considering Jonson’s use of bodies and sound and Shakespeare’s use of potential sounds. Jonson is a critic and modifier of sounds, first drawing a clear distinction between sound and speech before positioning the body as, ‘like the playhouse, [...] the producer, the receiver, and the container of sound’ (116). The windy nonsense of speech is treated here, and there are unexplored opportunities to engage with other windy concepts – Falstaffian air, Bakhtinian belching – though we remain attentively textually engaged. This chapter provides frequently useful axioms for thinking with, such as the tenuousness between ‘meaningful speech and meaningless sound’ (119-120) and how ‘The body both made sound and suffered from sound’ (124). There is definitely potential for more theoretical extension of these ideas, but this is a strong textual foundation. This includes a stimulating reading of *Volpone*, where Morose figures as ‘a megaphone, magnifying the sound he would contain’ (147-8). The possibility for comparative readings is tantalising here: in Jonson, ‘dangerous speech and sounds are not merely frivolous; they are infectious, and the act of listening can make one vulnerable’ (148): how might these readings of sonic infection apply to ‘breathier’ texts like *Coriolanus*?

On Shakespeare, the subject is the unheard and the untold, where ‘sound onstage can be a fallacy, as much of an error that might drive ears amiss as speech can be’ (156). This centres on the question of how audiences are always also ‘audiators’ who construct their own forms of sound in their mind, and thus all produce sound as individual experiences – essentially a question of qualia. This chapter raises a wide variety of fascinating avenues to consider: the absence of sound always invoked in its description, the ‘phonographic ekphrasis’ (164) of comparing sounds to painting, and how ‘verbal descriptions of sound are [...] subject to the manipulation of their speakers. What is spoken can be false; and what is heard can also be misheard’ (173). Sounds serve to mark doubt, with unreliable descriptions creating soundscapes ‘mediated by unreliable listeners who infect audiences with their own sense of doubt’ (181). This emphasis on the audience as active listeners and thus participants in the creation of plays’ auditory worlds is especially promising.

Wright’s book is a strong complement to ongoing research in early modern soundscapes, perhaps most notable for its wide-ranging textual readings which rove from the familiar to the obscure. Wright identifies sonic tropes across a vast selection of plays to assemble these first two chapters, and indeed a minor complaint might be that the density of these comparisons makes the latter two author-focused chapters a little less compelling. There is a great deal of theoretical potential in further pursuing some of the ideas raised in this book that can hopefully be taken up in future, or by other scholars. For anyone interested in sound on the early modern stage, Wright’s book is a very worthy addition to the corpus.

In contrast to Wright’s exploration of the listening audience of early modern drama, Hannah August’s *Playbooks and their Readers in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2022) provides a look into its reading audience. This book treats the early readers of early modern printed plays, examining what playbooks ‘imply about their readers – textually, paratextually, and materially’ (3). This is an excellently written and particularly accessible text; while audiences as readers is less commonly covered in the teaching of early modern drama, this is a perfectly understandable text for strong undergraduates and would make a good choice for courses teaching about audiences beyond the playhouse.

Its first chapter asks who read plays, and explores a diverse demographic of readers, considering particularly the dynamics of purchasing and ways to motivate and manipulate consumer habits. Attention is paid to fine details of paratextual materials which are found to express the common anxiety of playwrights that their plays will not suit the tastes of a consumer public, while navigating difficulties including readers’ lack of education and the phenomenon of printers’ profits conflicting with playwrights’ desires for a more elite demographic of readers. These studies shore up work on the consumer impact of paratexts, where it appears that excessive paratexts are similarly used to appeal to buyers in plays as well as biblical texts. Other playwrights, August demonstrates, particularly Thomas Heywood, seek to court a less specific readership, encompassing lower class and women readers. But attempts to specifically court a female readership ‘do so by stressing the propriety of their subject matter, in order to combat the non-dramatic discourses that view women’s playreading as an incitement to immodest thoughts or behaviour’ (56). As August emphasises, however, it ‘is not that playbooks were marketed to women: it is clear from the examples Levin gives that they weren’t. It is that they weren’t *not* marketed to women’ (59). This, too, contributes well to ongoing scholarship on women readers. August’s explorations into how playwrights manipulate readers, inviting their judgments and thus allowing them ‘to imaginatively self-identify as intellectually and/or socially superior,’ are especially stimulating (62).

Chapter Two asks the straightforward question of why plays were read, and expands on the paratextual discussion of Chapter One to consider how these paratexts affected readings. August’s argument here is that readers developed a more sophisticated understanding of generic taxonomy, and that paratexts subsequently heightened the poetic nature of plays in order to interact with that growing understanding. There is an important argument here about complicating assumptions that playtexts aimed to convey the original performance; as August demonstrates, subsequent editions of plays were expected to reflect the most recent productions and thus would change appropriately to remain updated. The chapter then turns to the question of the market value of author identity, asking exactly what the name of an author signified and arguing that it served a ‘generic’ purpose, indicating to readers what a play might contain by its authors. Tragedies and histories are accompanied by generic indicators, whereas comedies were not: for Shakespeare’s work, it is the specific inclusion of his name that indicates their comic structure. We see how attempts to advertise playbooks’ poetic nature are fraught with difficulty: playbooks printed with ‘paratexts that reached out to those readers who were sufficiently educated to appreciate the genre’s pedigree [...] ran the risk that those same readers would be familiar with the precepts regarding the ideal form and content of that genre’ (92). The importance of paratexts is clearly paramount, as they come to emphasise the bawdiness and originality of their works to sell them. Divorced from the overall content of the book, these arguments as to the influence of paratexts fit well within the growing scope of paratextual scholarship.

The final two chapters turn to the process of reading plays, examining ‘extractive reading’ in the commonplace books of Edward Pudsey, William Drummond, and Abraham Wright, as well as an analysis of the manuscript additions made to plays themselves. First, August emphasises how gentlemen readers organised commonplace books against the means of organisation recommended by theorists: these readers develop their own, esoteric systems of organisation. For example, Pudsey excludes Shakespeare’s name as a header because of his familiarity with him, employing a ‘method of organisation enables the use of his notebook as a reference tool […] structured through his privileging of the early modern author and its classificatory function’ (134). By contrast, ‘For Pudsey, what is important is the playbook as a locus of extractable text, not performed or performable text’ (141). It is extremely rewarding to see these gulfs between the prescriptive or intended purposes of organisational systems or paratexts and their actual use. For Drummond, his own selections of quotations and their arrangement reveal ‘a prurient fixation upon erotic subject matter’ (141), including the recontextualising of quotations to suit his personal interests and heightening or introducing misogynistic senses as he does so. This is an interesting practice to compare with a work such as Thomas Bentley’s *The Monument of Matrones* (1582), which offers similar recontextualizations of non-dramatic works for misogynistic purposes. By contrast, Abraham Wright ‘retains a sense of plays as performable wholes, even as he reshapes them into groups of textual fragments’ and ‘collapses the distinction between plays and another early modern genre that existed in both oral and textual form: the sermon’ (153). These are rich, complementary case studies with obvious application beyond their immediate context of playbooks.

In the final chapter, August considers the use of books both in the sense of manuscript additions (e.g., underlining) as well as the ‘book-ness’ of books. August considers how ‘the marks and marginalia [...] point to moments of “use”, to “acts of reading”, to shared and individual reading practices, and (occasionally, if not often) to “readings”’ (178). The actual process of early modern reading, of course, remains mostly lost to us, but through such marginalia August is able to consider responses to the playbook as material object, how marginalia function as an aid to reading, what we can learn from them about the ways in which readers categorised their playbooks, and their use of recordkeeping. August demonstrates conclusively that ‘it is by no means certain that performance was at the forefront of readers’ minds when they annotated these books. [...] their sense seems largely to have been of these material objects as books that resembled other books, containing texts that invoked other texts – rather than the performances of those playtexts that were historic, contemporaneous, or virtual’ (219). This is convincingly and thoroughly argued.

August’s book is an exceptional work with relevance not just to its immediate topic of playbooks and readers but to wider interests in reading practices and paratexts outside of the world of drama. Eminently readable and excellently structured, it is a very strong contribution to the field.

My personal interests and research on early modern financial ethics led me to Anne Enderwitz’s *Economies of Early Modern Drama: Shakespeare, Jonson, and Middleton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), which considers household management and commerce on the early modern stage, and the socioeconomic contexts of plays grappling with the new implications of exchange in an increasingly mercantile world. Chapter One discusses household management and oeconomy with thorough consideration given to both classical and early modern perspectives on these themes. It argues that ‘The sheer amount of verbal instructions in the prescriptive literature of the time indicates the household’s political significance, but also its lack of transparency and the anxieties this produced’ (41). We are told the plays’ ‘dynamic network structure is clearly at odds with the discrete, governable space of prescriptive literature’ (85); however, what these differences are, how they occur, and why they are of interest could be more clearly considered, given the weight of household management in the first chapter and that this is a book on early modern drama. These relationships are made clearer in chapter three, which considers master-servant relationships in *Othello* and *The Alchemist* and contrasts ‘the instrumental use of business skills as villainous’ in the former and such skills ‘as object of satire’ in the latter, ‘yet both plays highlight the entrepreneurial efficiency of “wisdom of business”, persuasive speech, theatrical self-display, and the manipulation of credit and desire’ (175).

Chapter four offers some of the most interesting ideas in the book, which builds on Craig Muldrew’s foundational research to consider the dynamics of lending in *Volpone* and *Timon of Athens*. Here, Enderwitz argues, ‘In a culture of credit and investment, the interval between an initial act of lending, borrowing, or investing and its recompense is particularly precarious because it leaves time enough for all kinds of complications’ (176). The book emerges here as deeply concerned with moments of tension and uncertain futurity, a subtextual thread through much of its discussion, and an untapped cohesive theme. The reading of gifts in *Volpone* is strong: Here, ‘The gift shares the structural delay of a reciprocal action with credit. It is thus ideal for an exploration of the asynchronous temporality of profitable lending and investing’ (181). I am less convinced by the author’s reading of *Timon of Athens*, which focuses almost exclusively on the first acts of the play and is very brief on Timon’s discovery of the gold. I agree with Enderwitz in saying this has ‘an important structural function’, but the reading glosses too easily over Timon’s use of this gold (221). His intentions are not merely destructive, but rely on the excessive nature of sexual disease as parallel for excessive spending in order to reap syphilitic profit.

There are some structural components of the book that seem questionable. The prose is extremely dense and some of the author’s syntax can stymy clarity (e.g., ‘the chapter seeks to put a finger on the ethical drift’ and ‘seeks to identify neuralgic points’, 26-7). Chapters are lengthy, yet tend to advance relatively discrete theses for different plays without much justification for their combination into single long chapters. For a book ostensibly on early modern drama, there is no substantial discussion of the plays until one third of the way through, at page 79 of a 237 page book (excluding postfatory material). The choice of play pairings is certainly striking and intriguing – *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* with *Macbeth*, *Othello* with *The Alchemist*; *Volpone* and *Timon of Athens* – but it is rarely made clear why such works have been placed in tandem, as there is extremely little comparison. This is primarily a concern in its discussion of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Macbeth*, which focuses on oeconomy and ‘the exploits of practical rationality beyond the limits of virtue ethics,’ and how ‘they contribute to the revaluation of private interest in commercial society’ (82). There is surprisingly little attention given to the extremely diverse settings of seventeenth-century London streets and the castle and heath of medieval Scotland, given this chapter’s discussion of ‘the intersection of the domestic and the political’ (81).

The book is replete with extremely rigorous, contextually informed, and textually supported readings of its plays, and it will doubtless prove an excellent resource for any reader interested in oeconomy as it relates to the individual plays. While the book is overall thoroughly researched, particularly in early modern and classical contexts, there are some notable gaps in its engagement with early modern scholarship. The author’s analysis of gift theory à la Maus and Derrida would have benefited greatly from engagement with Sean Lawrence’s *Forgiving the Gift: The Philosophy of Generosity in Shakespeare and Marlowe* (Penn, 2012). A couple of pages of Joshua Scodel’s *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton, 2002) are cited, but this foundational text ought to have more thoroughly informed its discussions of Aristotelian excess and moderation. However, its first chapter, with its extensive analysis of husbandry manuals, conduct books, and other writings on household management, is an excellent overview of the subject. Its sum is weaker than its parts, and this is perhaps a book best encountered in pieces rather than totality.

Daniel Blank’s *Shakespeare and University Drama in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023) brings new attention to early modern university plays, arguing for their influence on Shakespeare and early modern drama in general, as well as considering the role of drama in transforming Oxford and Cambridge into ‘more outward-facing universities’ (43). This work explores many lesser-known plays, recovering the details of plays whose ephemerality and limited audience has necessarily precluded them from more extended study, but grants them new significance in this reevaluation of the landscape of early modern university drama and popular theatre.

Chapter One focuses on Thomas Legge and William Gager, presenting a rich portrait of university drama at its most lavish, considering ‘the university stage’s large-scale, festive activities in the years when the commercial stage—along with its most prominent generation of playwrights—was still finding its footing’ (15). These are men, Blank argues, that were considered comparable to professional playwrights and that there was a greater affinity between the academic and commercial stages than is conventionally assumed. The chapter offers a reevaluation of Legge’s *Richardus Tertius*, contrasting its language and dramaturgy with Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, and the appeal of Gager’s own plays beyond the university. The importance of the university press is brought into relief: this allowed for a reach beyond immediate audiences, and facilitated the broader influence of university drama. Blank acknowledges that the comparisons between these playwrights and Shakespeare are purposed to ‘illuminate’ the latter rather than establish influence, and its conclusion is more that academic performances ‘may have alerted him to the impressive productions of the university stage’, rather than demonstrating any concrete impact (37).

Chapter Two is rooted in compelling close readings of academic and commercial plays, considering the university’s reaction to concerns about academic insularity and the impact of the threatening intrusion of the town on students’ moral and academic standing. It treats particularly the concern of love as a threat to scholarship, an idea ‘being expressed with particular vehemence at the end of the sixteenth century in England’ (41). This provides a strong framework for a stimulating reading of *Love Labour’s Lost*, wherein, Blank argues, ‘Shakespeare explores the impracticality and unsustainability of this exclusionary model’ (42). As above, Blank eschews any argument for the direct influence of academic plays on Shakespeare, and considers instead the potential of parallel readings. This includes a persuasive reading of *Doctor Faustus*, arguing ‘that Faustus’ global inclinations signify not only a rejection of Reformation theology and the philosophical learning it entailed; they also signify a rejection of academic isolation, of the inward-facing space of scholarship itself’ (52-3). The conception of the university in drama, Blank argues, is marked by ‘porousness’: ‘It is an institution from which scholars can come and go, and upon which outside forces can freely intrude’ (61). This provides a stimulating context through which to consider commercial drama, and makes a convincing case that ‘In addition to depicting the collision between the universities and the outside world, theatrical performance—both academic and commercial—was doing a great deal to facilitate it’ (62).

Chapter Three considers the ultimate exemplar of the Shakespearean scholar, Hamlet. While Hamlet’s background as a university player has long been considered, Blank is specifically interested in the culture of university drama that informs Hamlet’s own dramaturgy: ‘that university concerns [...] constitute an unnoticed dimension of the play—a dimension that is quite separate from power politics or familial turmoil, and one that relates specifically to the misogynistic and antitheatrical elements of the tragedy’ (72). This is an extremely intriguing reappraisal of the metatheatre of *Hamlet*, bringing new attention not only to how the criticisms of John Rainolds et al impacted university drama but their role, too, in commercial drama. Hamlet’s speech to the players, Blank suggests, ‘simultaneously recreates a university performance while imposing upon it the “modesty” that Rainolds had so fervently demanded’ (86). Blank also pays consistent attention to the misogynistic theme in the criticisms of love, female sexuality, and the outside world, and offers a convincing argument for Hamlet’s worldview as a product of the university drama concerns about insularity and antitheatricalism.

Chapter Four turns to disputed prophecies in *Macbeth*, centring Shakespeare’s encounter with *Tres Sibyllae* and his departures from Matthew Gwinne’s play, considering Shakespeare’s play as a ‘subtle commentary upon the relationship between kingship and intellectual culture’ (98). As with Blank’s reading of Hamlet and university culture, this offers a nuanced and productive reevaluation of the themes of Shakespeare’s works, and perhaps results in a more successful argument than earlier chapters’ more speculative theses. This discussion includes a particularly impressive reading of the witches as ‘imperfect speakers’, emphasising the overlooked grammatical sense of the imperfect tense and Macbeth’s desire for ‘the temporal position heralded by *Tres Sibyllae*. While *Macbeth* (and Macbeth) looks anxiously toward an uncertain future, *Tres Sibyllae* looks triumphantly back at the past, with the uncertainty of a vague prophesy now safely lodged in history, rendered “perfect”’ (108). The chapter is also notable for connecting *Macbeth* to Edmund Leigh’s university notebook, which transcribes a disputation whose debates, Blank suggests, reflect the concerns of Shakespeare’s play and may suggest Shakespeare’s own encounter with this notebook.

Finally, Blank considers Ben Jonson as a commercial playwright whose desire to be part of university culture is embedded with the complexly changing world of academic insularity. Blank finds Jonson’s pull to the universities ‘based upon an outmoded conception of the university stage’ (133). By the time at which Jonson took up his residency at Christ Church, the inward nature of the university had so much transformed and university drama had shifted so much to the concerns of the public stage, that Jonson’s conception of the old university stage no longer existed. Blank offers another excellent close reading, this time of *Volpone*, and considers its questioning of university drama as the very means by which Jonson was able to access the university stage. Ultimately, Blank convincingly demonstrates, ‘the academic theater scene that Jonson was expecting—teeming with Latinate, erudite, neoclassical stage-poetry—may well have been quite different from the one that he found’ (151).

Blank’s study is a thorough and consistently convincing analysis of the relationship between university and commercial drama, which presents a useful and carefully painted portrait of an overlooked dynamic in early modern theatrical culture. Readers might find chapters rooted in specifically evidenced arguments for influences more compelling than those that more modestly consider potential illumination, but this is overall a strong contribution to our understanding of the early modern theatre.

One of the strongest works this year, and one engaging uncertainty most explicitly, is Lauren Robertson’s *Entertaining Uncertainty in the Early Modern Theater: Stage Spectacle and Audience Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). This is an outstanding and incisive examination of the ways in which the early modern theatre explores and experiments with uncertainty, particularly the sense of presenting a specifically *entertaining* uncertainty, where uncertainty is defined by theatrical effect rather than emotional affect. This is against an epistemological background of discomfiting uncertainty: in addition to commonly recognised factors driving uncertainty including the Reformation, emergence of Baconian scepticism, crisis of succession, and massive changes in London, Robertson advances a ‘cultural circulation of uncertainty’ (13). The book opens with the familiar sight of Old Hamlet’s ghost, yet emphasises that an early modern viewer would not be able to immediately identify him as such. In subjecting spectators to such uncertainty, audiences could thus participate in performance through their own imaginative engagement with that staged uncertainty. The book treats an incremental increase of the effect of uncertainty, as playgoers develop an ever-increasing context for staged uncertainties and theatre appropriately responds and adapts. With a lucid and productive focus on bodies, time, props, space, and audience, Robertson expertly recontextualises many familiar and unfamiliar moments in early modern drama through the highly rewarding lens of entertaining uncertainty. We see how tragicomedy emerges from staging bodies that reveal themselves to not necessarily be dead, how history plays offer the invitation to *‘unknow*’ (17) the past and create pleasure from a crisis of succession, how the ’ephemerality of theatrical spectacle’ exists as ‘alternative to the permanence of partial knowledge’ (17), how communities share a ‘mutual recognition of their opacity’ (18), and, finally, that changes in Caroline drama meant that the most certain playgoers were the most open to uncertainty.

Chapter One addresses bodies, contextualising the semiotic ambiguity of actors pretending to be dead alongside the spiritual ambiguity of the line between life and death, and the importance of the resurrection. The connection between sleep and death renders the process of reading breath highly uncertain, a fact exploited by the *Henry IV*s with both Hal mistaking his father for dead and Falstaff’s comic resurrection, as well as Falstaff’s stabbing of Hotspur’s body. Such moments ‘looked forward to a theatrical reality in which onstage corpses universally reverberated with the possibility of their own animation’ (47). In Chapter Two, on time, the book investigates the achievement of uncertainty in the history play. Such works encourage spectators to unknow history, ‘cultivat[ing] conditional thinking by giving spectators a truthful baseline from which their minds were encouraged to wander; they were training grounds in speculation’ (75). Through manifesting foreclosed possibilities, plays exploring succession crises such as *Edward II*, *Richard II*, and *Macbeth* explore the possibility of speculative thinking.

The third chapter addresses props, particularly minuscule objects and the theatre’s struggle to represent not only the very large (battles, countries, storms) but also the very small, and thus must invite its spectators to look on things that they cannot see. It is striking that such obscure props ‘are deployed as evidence intended to resolve the epistemological and erotic crises produced by the perceived inscrutability of women’s bodies’ (115), as is explored through Thomas Massinger’s *The Picture*. This includes a rich reading of *Cymbeline* and Iachimo’s dynamics of squinting, as well as treating Antony and Cleopatra’s final ‘paradoxical display of what is lost when only probably knowledge remains’ (135). In considering space, the subject of Chapter Four, Robertson considers how ‘playgoers’ emerged as a new category of identity, one that persisted beyond the conclusion of the play to which such spectators were going. This raises the question of how spectators identified one another at a time ‘when the theater was still actively deciding what its plays looked like’ (150). This follows into a rich analysis of how playwrights utilise the physicality of the playhouse to contextulise plots of mistaken identity, where ‘the bifurcated structure of the enclosed playhouse’ becomes crucial to the entertainment of uncertainty (151) The unseen worlds beyond the theatre doors are crucial to these entertainments. The chapter also explores Impersonation as a spatial trope, where Portia must navigate space as well as costume, and *The Roaring Girl* signals the impossibility of pinpointing imposters among spectators. Such uses of space all serve to ‘remind[...] spectators of their interpretive limitations and partial knowledge’ (160).

Finally, the book turns to the subject of audience in relation to the Caroline theatre, by which point it was not just knowledge of the theatre but also the limits of that knowledge that constructed this idea of audience of community. Focusing on *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Roman Actor*, Robertson explores how ‘The dramatic arc of *The Roman Actor* thus encourages spectators to make sense of the world of the play with the interpretive tools so crucially withheld from them in *The Spanish Tragedy*, only to thwart, ultimately, precisely that attempt’ (206). Such forms of intertheatricality situate uncertainty in the allusions between texts, and links interestingly with similar points about subversive allusions in sound made in Wright’s work. Knowing plays meant one also had to be ‘open to its next unpredictable, transformed appearance on the stage,’ and so such uncertainty became central to changes in early modern epistemology (207). In gesturing to the Restoration theatre’s inability to manage the uncertainty that had defined its forebears, Robertson concludes that ‘Uncertainty was the definitive mode of early modern theatrical phenomenology’ (208). These theses are all brilliantly argued, creating an overall excellent, stimulating work, fluently written, that offers new insights into early modern theatre and epistemology.

This is not a year that saw a great deal of theological or religious studies treatment, but Roberta Kwan’s *Shakespeare, the Reformation and the Interpreting Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023) is worth noting. It is unfortunate that this book must suffer from the medium of its publication. Edinburgh University Press now exclusively supplies review copies through their Edinburgh University Press ebook application. This ereader app provides no functionality for highlighting or note-taking, while attempting to copy text will crash the app. This is an extremely poor way to read and review books and I urge Edinburgh University Press to consider alternatives.

Kwan’s book presents an exploration into Reformation hermeneutics which ‘juxtaposes early modern theological hermeneutics with modern-day philosophical hermeneutics’, thus ‘bring[ing] together two overlapping (rather than remote) ways of apprehending human being’ (170). Kwan explores Shakespeare’s ‘interpreting selves’ (2) through the plays, those conventionally categorised as problem plays. Knowing God and knowing the self is central to early modern Reformation understanding, Kwan argues, and this can be traced through Shakespeare’s works. Readings are, at their best, deep and subtle, tightly interweaving early modern and modern philosophical approaches, though this means it won’t have much broader appeal. After an initial chapter mapping out Reformation hermeneutics, which is somewhat unoriginal and syntopic, we move onto *Hamlet* and the titular prince as an interpreting self; Chapter Three considers *Troilus and Cressida* alongside the unreliability of our own self-interpretation, ‘and the potential that this flawed knowledge has to corrode the self as a moral agent’ (24-5). Chapter Four turns to *Measure for Measure* and interrogates the effect of justice and individual agency on modern selfhood. Chapter Five concludes with *All’s Well that Ends Well* and its ‘eschatological hermeneutic which directed early modern English people’s attention to the next life’ (25).

Some of the strongest moments in this volume are those with the narrowest of focus: the Friar’s response to the slander against Hero, where he is positioned as an interpreter and not receiver of truth; or the shared inability of the Duke and Angelo to see themselves and fail to enact genuine mercy. Its modern philosophical method may make this more appeal to those of a similar school rather than Reformation or Shakespeare scholars more generally, but the book thoroughly treats the question of self-interpretation through a mixed early modern and modern philosophical framework.

Turning to more identitarian themes, Victoria L. McMahon’s *Shakespeare, Tragedy and Menopause: The Anxious Womb* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2023) provides a historically sweeping and textually vigorous account of menopause in early modern England, and how Shakespearean tragedy engages with its major ideas. McMahon takes a carefully anti-presentist approach, arguing that ‘“Menopause” did not exist medically or culturally until the early nineteenth century when it was recognized as a holistic condition’ (1). McMahon instead presents a history of a ‘proto-menopause’, assembled from an array of different medical, cultural, and philosophical ideas circulating at this time (5). The five main themes address include petrification (in both the womb and through the eyes), botanical conceptions of female reproduction, animalistic comparisons and the vagina as mouth, humoral envy, and the cyborg womb.

It is a great credit to McMahon’s work that the central characters of this study – *Hamlet*’s Gertrude, *Titus Androncius*’ Tamora, *Coriolanus*’ Volumnia, *Macbeth*’s Lady Macbeth, *Antony and Cleopatra*’s Cleopatra – emerge, despite their familiar and canonical nature, as such new and exciting figures through these readings. McMahon has assembled a stunning selection of ideas and methods through which these plays are read, and the interpretations that emerge are exciting and stimulating. A definition of the early modern menopause is both badly needed and timely, and makes an excellent companion to Sara Read’s 2013 *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*, also published by Palgrave Macmillan, with which McMahon engages. Its wide thematic explorations are also laudable: this is a book that mediates between concerns of witchcraft, motherhood, midwifery, humoral theory, and ranges through animal studies, cyborg studies, and plant studies. It is also a deeply generous book in terms of its engagement with other scholarship. McMahon consistently acknowledges the strengths of previous scholarship and defines her own departures from them without ever demeaning earlier work. It thoroughly footnotes its influences and references, and will thus provide a very useful work for undergraduates – to which its subject matter will no doubt apply – who are keen to learn more about these subjects. While I cannot say I am always convinced by the readings, they certainly offer some dazzling new perspectives on the texts.

The book is structured across six chapters and a conclusion, lacking an introduction and providing instead a contextual overview of ‘Uterine Pathologies and Menopausal Ambiguities’ (1). These are long, rich chapters, helpfully divided into subsections that are each separately listed in the contents. Although it is a dense work, McMahon’s prose is extremely readable and she writes engagingly and feelingly of both the plays themselves and the real individuals on whom various medical studies were conducted that inform her readings. The first chapters define McMahon’s methods for approaching menopause, with a study that ‘doesn’t intend to exclusively medicalize early modern “menopause”’ but rather ‘embraces the recognition that conceptions of the female body were informed by differing belief systems—not only of how that body was physiologically constituted, but also how that body was expected to perform in social space’ (2). At 66 pages, this is a complex exploration, but well-worth the time even for readers who might be less interested in the literary applications themselves.

*Hamlet* and Gertrude is the first literary subject, in which McMahon ‘explore[s] the specific implications of a drying womb and its corollary influence upon the female sex drive, the pathology of which caused the desiccating body to emanate deadly, petrifying toxins, both within and without the body proper’ (71). Two of the main themes here are the idea of the petrifying womb which could literally transform foetuses into stone, as in the case of *lithopedia*, and the eye as the site of emanating ossifying toxins. McMahon’s combination of such stimulating material and innovative readings are both the strength and the weakness of this book. This chapter offers new perspectives on Gertrude and her son, and the parallels between the medical contexts and the plays can be striking, though the relationship between the context and text could be more convincing. McMahon does not seem to argue that Shakespeare would have encountered accounts of some of these medical phenomena (other than the *lithopedia*’s fame being sufficient that Charles I hoped to purchase a specimen), and so there may be some limited utility to considering them as necessarily informing the texts. Nonetheless, McMahon’s lack of concern for establishing empirical influences in favour of generating parallel readings allows for some of the most intriguing interpretations in this book, so this methodological quibble may not be of a concern to all.

Tamora and her ‘invasive vegetable womb’ provides the next subject matter (109). This chapter provides a botanical understanding of her reproductive capabilities, considered alongside plants and those animals that were believed to generate spontaneously in earthy environments, such as flies and tadpoles. McMahon argues, ‘as a subject of the ageing process, Tamora’s “invisible” pregnancy speaks to how changes within the womb’s microclimate transpiring under certain environmental conditions were perceived as pathological and likely to result in unnatural conception’ (115). These are strong readings and positions Tamora’s pregnancy and the ‘blackamoor’ child in a new and productive framework.

We then turn to Volumnia, connecting proto-menopause with ‘uterine afflictions’ and ‘their metaphorical connection to the bestial’ (156). This considers both the role of blood in the play, covering Coriolanus and connecting him with Volumnia’s own body, as well as the double ‘mouths’ of the female body. Both the reproductive power of the uterus and the rhetorical power of the mouth are silenced in this play, as a means to ‘tame’ ‘the proto-menopausal woman’s many “mouths”’ (156). Valeria is absence in this analysis, and Virgilia appears only fleetingly. McMahon’s focus on the most overtly proto-menopausal characters is obviously sensible, but I wonder – especially given McMahon’s troubling of the category of ‘old’ for women – if there is opportunity, too, to consider those characters less overtly considered menopausal. Virgilia’s single son has been variably attributed to her husband’s lengthy warring or to his aversion to marital sex, but could these readings lead us to challenge the conventional ‘age coding’ of other female characters?

Lady Macbeth is read alongside Invidia, the figuration of envy whose dried body and monstrous form provides a parallel for her own unsexing and greed. Here, McMahon argues, ‘Shakespeare presents us with an early modern body in the throes of a particular pathology that mimics many aspects of contemporary menopause: changes to the quantity and consistency of menstrual flow; irrational thought and behaviours; and manic depression’ (198). This is one of the most specific and conventionally convincing interpretations in the book, though also the least exciting, and it reflects many similar ideas about witchcraft and the female body particularly generated by Lyndal Roper’s work. Finally, in the most theoretically distinct chapter, McMahon tackles Cleopatra as a mechanical cyborg. Cleopatra ‘challenges the boundaries of what her ageing body can do within the play [...] playing with themes of power and control housed within a radically reconfigured body—a body informed by systems of emergent scientific thought’ (243). Alongside readings of Cleopatra’s self-fashioning and her use of prostheses, perhaps the strongest idea is the simple reconceptualisation of Enobarbus’ infamous description of Cleopatra’s barge. Here, the barge is imagined as a mechanical metonymy, extending Cleopatra’s flesh into a cyborg: here, ‘The fans, bellows, oars, flutes, and sails are aerial instruments that represent the hidden ventricles, arteries, ducts, and alveoli of the female body’ (256). Like almost all of the female characters discussed in this book, Cleopatra must ultimately meet in failure. Given McMahon’s own focus on statues and self-fashioning, perhaps there is opportunity for a more positive reading here, in Cleopatra’s self-sequestering within her monument, and the architectural extension of her body.

This is a consistently excellent piece of literary scholarship, with frequently sparkling readings. Beyond presenting a definition of the early modern proto-menopause, some of its strongest ideas include an emphasis on the irrelevance of the cessation of menses to early modern ideas about reproductivity, as well as the surprisingly late points at which women were believed able to reproduce. As a caveat, alongside the lack of attention to clear influential strains between these contextual writings and Shakespeare, it would have been helpful to gain a greater understanding of the extent to which some of these ideas about reproduction were rare exceptions versus commonplaces. I must register an objection to McMahon’s forward-looking conclusion, which unhelpfully compares mastectomies and hysterectomies as though these are two singular procedures rather than two categories of different procedures. The conclusion then emphasises hysterectomies as ‘dangerous, risky and debilitating’: this is not necessarily the case, and rather unhelpful given the incredible difficulty people with uteruses have with accessing the procedure (289).

This final blip aside, the book especially commendable for challenging the very category of ‘old age’ for women at this time: ‘Not only was biological “age” an inconsistent early modern marker of senescence, but one would be unable to find a homologous ontological understanding of what it means to be “old” today,’ McMahon emphasises (27). This opens some intriguing potential for challenging exactly how old we assume dramatic characters to be, and rethinking the categories of middle and later age.

Also on identitarian themes, *Intersectionalities of Class in Early Modern English Drama* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023) provides an edited collection by Ronda Arab and Laurie Ellinghausen containing fourteen essays plus an introduction that seek to ‘take intersectionalities of class as the primary lens of analysis in the study of early modern English literature’ (11). Class is examined through a range of lenses, including race, gender, and sexuality, and overall the works makes a very useful contribution to scholarship’s increasing interest in the role of class in early modern culture. This is the first essay collection on the subject of class, and it aims to unpack ‘inequality; stratification; privilege and marginalization; social, cultural, and economic change and stasis’ (11).

If it is not too counter to the essential intersectionality of the book, the work can be loosely divided into four chapters on race, two eco-critical essays, three on women, three more on gender, and two on war and servants. These are all relatively short essays and with such a wide ground covered there is certainly a sense that there is much more to be said on any of these topics, but altogether this is a sparkling and varied collection of essays.

Emily MacLeod’s reading of ‘Blackness, Race, and Class in George Chapman’s May Day’, which considers how the frequent comparison between racial blackness and chimney sweeps gave rise to a permanent association between race and class, even if sootiness is customarily associated with removability. Peter Lewis and Timothy Francisco’s chapters both consider contemporary adaptations, with Francisco particularly considering ‘the cultural politics of white working-class Iago’ who has become common in modern performances, arguing that ‘classing racism in ways that ultimately do little to dislodge the status quo’ (72).

Juan Pedro Lamata provides a useful comparative reading of two of the most notorious early modern trans figures, Antonio de Erauso and Mary/Jack Frith. Lamata treats the important question of ‘why, in the seventeenth century, did the English and Spanish-speaking worlds concurrently develop separate fascinations with two trans figures who also happened to be both “rogues” and royalists?’ (93). This is a strong and timely reading of figures who are becoming increasingly entrenched in early modern trans studies and teaching, and provides a very useful comparative colonial reading. Ronda Arab’s work, too, considers gender and class in the context of sexual violence, investgating the use of sexual violence as a ‘tool used by lower-class men against their social superiors’ (263); this is also a useful study.

Paul Budra’s chapter on servants, jesters, and fools is another highlight, which considers how the lower classes employed performance in interacting with upper classes: how did class structure require them ‘to adopt affective strategies that became crucial features of their lived experience’ (150)? Its focus on disassociating affect is part of growing work on this topic and it is interesting to see applied here. On a similar note, Christi Spain-Savage’s work on women’s shop labor considers how such figures ‘were active, invested, and vital participants in the commercial world of early modern London’, and contributes usefully to our understanding of women in city comedy (232). Relatedly, Kimberly Huth’s work on mixed-estate marriages is a strong, historicist piece and a useful complement to popular teaching plays like *Arden of Faversham* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, considering how such marriage might ‘expose the period’s conceptions of class and gentility as cultural constructions’ while rubbing up against conservative ideology (198).

Alongside other essays in this volume, *Intersectionalities of Class in Early Modern English Drama* is a welcome and rewarding – if somewhat diffuse – selection of essays that are perhaps more useful in isolation than the collection is in its entirety, but which contribute many useful perspectives.

Finally, in the field of critical race and whiteness studies, David Sterling Brown’s *Shakespeare’s White Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) takes a serious engagement with constructions of whiteness as alterity in Shakespeare. This book centrally advances the concept of the ‘intraracial color-line’, which ‘delineates distinctions among early modern English white people that rely on the devaluing of somatically similar white folks’ (2). The book interrogates the invisibility of whiteness and ‘reveal how anti-Black racism, anti-Black violence, and general, harmful anti-Black sentiments were and are integral to white identity formation and white ideology construction’, specifically in the absence of Black characters (7). This is another strong entry in the growing field Shakespearean critical whiteness studies, and extremely worthwhile.

It is a short but compelling work, primarily considering *Titus Andronicus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. In *Titus Andronicus*, Brown examines those scenes and moments in which Aaron – the usual centre of race studies in this play – is absent, positioning him instead as a distraction from white on white violence between the Romans and Goths. Brown’s chapter on *Hamlet*, which considered Hamlet’s blackened masculinity and the play’s striving for the restoration of white masculinity makes excellent companion reading with Ian Smith’s chapter on Hamlet’s appropriation of black identity in *Black Shakespeare*. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra emerges very intriguingly as a ‘racially hybrid scapegoat’, with her ‘tawny’ body bearing a ‘white hand’ (100). Brown focuses on the whitening of Cleopatra through Antony’s rhetoric, though there is an untreated question about Cleopatra’s similar blackening. If Antony’s rhetoric makes her white, do ‘Phoebus’ amorous pinches’ partake in a similarly transformative blackening role or is this blackness assumed as essential and primary (1.5.33)?

Turning finally to *Othello*, Brown offers an ambitious and whirlwind reading of ‘Iago’s mindfuck game’ and the unacknowledged sexual violence inflicted against black characters, which Brown affectingly contextualises alongside contemporary sexual assault (137). In stressing the importance of listening to black voices and paying attention to black pain, Brown productively contributes to the ongoing, transformative relevance of the text. Tamora’s sexual violence against Aaron is also usefully highlighted, an element of *Titus Andronicus* often overlooked (despite its influence on William Heminge’s more violent sexual assault scene in *The Fatal Contract*). Incisive, often fascinating, it is an excellent addition to Shakespeare and critical whiteness studies.

On the subject of Shakespeare’s plays itself, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* emerge as the frontrunners of critical studies. *Antony and Cleopatra* also recurs, but in this particular crop there is little to be said of the histories, and almost nothing of the comedies. Driving questions of the uncertainty of identity and engagement make the tragedies particularly suitable vehicles for such concerns (although *King Lear* features surprisingly little this year), but it will be interesting to see how these epistemological questions figure when posed of more comic works.

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