

David McInnis and Matthew Steggle (eds). *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014. Pp 295.

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Mark Twain famously compared writing a biography of Shakespeare to reconstructing a brontosaurus from three bones and three tons of plaster of Paris. Anyone wishing to study the lost drama of early modern England is faced with an equally daunting task. No wonder those venturing into this cloud of unknowing must often pause to flash their hazard lights in the form of caveats and rhetorical questions.

Misha Teramura's chapter in this collection, for instance, concludes with the resounding query, 'Can there be criticism without a text?' (142). Judging by this assembly of essays, the answer is an emphatic yes, and in part because each of the contributors exhibits such a commendable self-awareness of the perils of the enterprise. The book's elegant architecture also adds to its persuasiveness: the seven chapters attempting to draw modest inferences about non-extant drama are book-ended by six which are more methodological, establishing the prevalence of lost plays and even scattering breadcrumbs to suggest where scholars might find them.

In their scrupulous introduction, David McInnis and Matthew Steggle make the case that wilful blindness about lost plays is no longer tenable. A chief reason is that the census numbers have grown exponentially over the past century: the 74 identified by E.K. Chambers jumped to 187 thanks to W.W. Greg; Alfred Harbage upped the tally to 500; which, in turn, Andrew Gurr escalated to 744. Martin Wiggins has recently hiked up the estimate to around 1100. And these figures only include plays *we know* existed at one time. If we count 'unknown unknowns' (to borrow the immortal phrase of a former U.S. Secretary of State) the number of non-extant plays may be as high as 2400. Lost plays are to early modern drama what dark matter is to astrophysics. Hence the first collection to dare to grapple with them should be warmly welcomed by theatre historians.

In the opening chapter, William Proctor Williams proposes a useful four-part taxonomy for classifying missing plays according to degrees of lost-ness: from 'Chimeras' — the product of scribal error or alternative titles for surviving plays — to Class 3, which — mentioned in manuscript catalogues or Stationer Register entries — just might turn up in the dusty nook of an archive someday. Roslyn Knutson (who along with McInnis is a co-editor of the monumental *Lost Plays Database*) casts a withering gaze on Ur-Play scholarship. By disentangling

its reckless conjectures from the painstaking labors of the *LPD* contributors, she aims to establish the 'discrete legitimacy' (44) of truly lost plays.

Steggle and Andrew Gurr both usefully expand the parameters of what theatre historians mean by 'lost'. Gurr reminds us that the 'same play' may have existed in widely variant versions at different times and on different stages. Amplifying this point, Steggle cavils with the 'misleading dichotomy' (74) of lost and found: just because a text was printed does not mean that it is entirely 'unlost'. Revision was commonplace and a published play preserves only a snapshot of it at a particular moment. So even though they appear in the 1623 Shakespeare folio, early versions of *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure* must be listed in the roll call of the fallen. Moreover, drawing on the seminal work of Tiffany Stern, Steggle insists that the play-script is only one 'performance document' among many. Much can be gleaned from artefacts like promptbooks, plots, cast lists, and property inventories. So rather than approaching lost plays 'solely in terms of unfound manuscripts, we should instead be concentrating on the content from them that we do have' (81).

This challenge is taken up by many of the contributors in Part II. John Astington notes the tendency in recent scholarship of 'splitting' plays with deceptively similar titles — such as 'Richard II', 'Samson', and 'Valentine and Orson' — into discrete texts. Scavenging for clues among plots and jigs, he shows how the former supports this trend while the latter might warrant lumping. In the ensuing chapter, McNinnis reveals how much gold can be mined from the seemingly scanty plot of '2 Fortune's Tennis'. Misha Teramura examines the cluster of lost Troy plays in the Admiral's repertoire while Paul Whitfield White gives an equally thorough treatment of the company's missing Arthurian drama. Lawrence Manley accumulates a magpie's hoard of ascertainable facts about the titular protagonists in some lost plays in the Strange's repertoire: 'Harry of Cornwall', 'Mandeville', 'Titus and Vespasian', and 'Tamer Cham'. Michael Hirrel's chapter argues that Thomas Watson may have introduced metrical innovations and Italianate elements to Elizabethan drama in the early 1580s. Although the evidence is necessarily circumstantial, Hirrel makes the powerful case that Watson's lost drama would have filled the sails of Marlowe and Kyd. Christopher Matusiak spotlights the procession of friars in early modern play titles and property inventories, while Christi Spain-Savage focuses more closely on the wise woman Gillian of Brentford, arguing that her appearance in a lost Admiral's play could have been an important intertext for Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

After following Gurr's and Steggle's advice to clutch the 'icicles' (57) from the iceberg of lost plays and suture together fragmentary records, the book concludes

on a more empiricist note, with Martin Wiggins's overview of recent discoveries in the archives. Almost all of these have been manuscripts rather than printed books, and Wiggins presents them as object lessons on how to unearth more. His approach, in other words, is the diametrical opposite of the prescription followed in Part II. Such tensions within the collection could perhaps have been addressed with greater candour. But as Astington's chapter posits, methodological diversity can be healthy. If it is good to have both 'lumpers' and 'splitters', the tent should be large enough to host both manuscript hunters and reconstructors. Some archaeologists must dig for pot-shards and others draw inferences from them based on historical and cultural knowledge. Thanks to digital archives like Early English Books Online (EEBO), of which many contributors to this collection avail themselves, tracking down obscure references to possible analogues for lost plays has become much easier than ever before. There is of course a danger in conjuring with these shadowy titles or fragments: like Harry Potter's Mirror of Erised, lost plays might show us what we most wish to see. But when anchored in facts and executed with the kind of caution and integrity on display in this collection, it is possible to forge responsible conjectures. Such plausible speculation would make for a welcome supplement to the understandably restrictive, fact-gathering entries in the *Lost Plays Database*. Given the scope of the challenge, the more scholars who begin to probe and limn the body of missing drama from early modern England the better.

Readers who pick up this book expecting ground-shaking revelations about, say, the final resting place of *Love's Labour's Won* may come away disappointed. But one of this collection's achievements is to demonstrate why grandiose expectations and overconfident assertions would be misguided. Instead it outlines and enacts a *modus operandi* for finding fragments and carefully placing those we already have into narratives of theatre history. If lost plays have hovered like a cloud of unknowing over Renaissance drama, then this collection makes a graceful and mist-dispersing leap into the thick of it.