Early Theatre
22.1 (2019), 167–170
https://doi.org/10.12745/et.22.1.3937

Philip Butterworth and Katie Normington, eds. *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and Their Audiences*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017. Pp 296. Hardback £60.00 ISBN: 9781843844761.

SARAH BRAZIL
University of Geneva

Recent archival discoveries, such as those from the Records of Early English Drama project, testify to the prevalence and variety of performance modes in the pre-modern era. But as much as documents can tell scholars, they often fall silent on the questions of what exactly performers did, and how they did it, when they brought their plays, dances, or automata in front of audiences. These are the types of gaps in knowledge Katie Normington and Philip Butterworth set out to address in *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and their Audiences.* As they explain in their introduction, the editors challenged contributors to consider the nature, qualities, conventions, and audiences of early performances in an attempt to generate new ways of thinking about the most slippery questions critics of performance face. Their ten fellow authors embraced this challenge with gusto across this collection. Offering methodological insights that will inform future scholarship and discussions of historical practices that may be unfamiliar to readers, this publication has much to offer experienced scholars and newcomers to the field.

The strengths of the collection are nowhere more apparent than in the late Claire Sponsler's fine opening chapter on John Lydgate's mumming the *Disguising at Hertford.* With an aim to flesh out how this fifteenth-century performance happened, Sponsler takes influence from theorist Diana Taylor in promoting the embodied practices that constitute performance to a position of critical parity with the documents that record it. Sponsler's methods of tracing these practices include engaging in 'post-positive' readings based 'on plausible conjectures that can be developed through historical inquiry' (17). A point of particular interest for readers will be her discussion of the various methods of performance-centred research (here divided into 'practice as research', 'reconstructions' and 'practice-based research'), of which Sponsler offers an excellent critical overview.

Sponsler's chapter proves to be a touchstone across the volume. Bart Ramakers's study on intervals in Dutch *zinnespel,* sixteenth-century moral plays that were often lavishly staged, is an 'attempt to merge "careful scholarship and detailed research … with imaginative speculation"' (37). Ramakers presents *zinnespel* by asking what audiences may have seen, heard, and experienced at a performance.

Taking influence from phenomenology and cognitive studies, this chapter offers not only insight into a national tradition little known outside of specialist scholarship, but also a methodology with direct applications for complementary fields of research. David Klausner poses the question of how to evaluate a historic performance that possesses neither text nor action. Klausner cautions that text-centred studies run the risk of eliminating practices that complicate standard definitions of drama. In line with Sponsler's post-positive approach, Klausner's speculative offering is that performances which were stationary or involved little to no dialogue may have accounted for a sizable amount of medieval practices. Jennifer Nevile echoes Sponsler's contention that embodied practice is in need of greater critical focus, and reflects on why existing records of dance are so few, and why they pose such interpretative difficulty. Nevile's discussion of how performer-audience relations worked at English, French, and Italian courts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries offers the important clarification that 'dance performances were overwhelmingly conducted by courtiers for courtiers' (125). The question of how audience knowledge affects this relationship is stimulating, and has significant implications for other areas of early performance studies.

The chapters of Katie Normington, Kathryn Emily Dickason, Tom Pettitt, and Nerida Newbingen foreground the importance of embodied skill and knowledge in their respective contributions. Normington investigates the relationship between body and costume in drama, informing us that costumes were often used in roles more times than individual players, giving clothing the 'stronger association with the part' (78). Her question of whether it is possible to determine how a part was played from records of costume is stimulating, but needs a wider-ranging study to work through the implications for drama. Dickason's work on choreomania, a dance mania that spread across Europe between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, uses performance to open up new perspectives on a practice that critics have predominantly framed through a history of medicine lens. Dickason contends that critics should view choreomania in relation to other dance practices, and as a means of diversifying 'the repertoire of bodily experience in medieval culture' (159). In his chapter, Tom Pettitt proposes a new critical term for dramatic performances. He contends that 'interaxionality' can aid critics in identifying embodied practices (such as mumming) that intrude into plays, akin to how intertextual connections work in literary texts. And Newbingen's discussion of Florentine confraternity stagings of the *Ascension* and *Pentecost* from the 1420s insists that performances were not shaped by text but by 'a collective process' and the transmission of embodied knowledge from member to member (93). This knowledge includes craftspeople's development and operation of

complex machinery. Newbingin's citing of Florentine officials' inability to restage the *Ascension* play in 1566 is a testimony to how important the transmission of embodied knowledge and skill is to the dramatic enterprise.

A final strand of research concerns the non-human participants in early performances, which each author frames in this way rather than as a prop. In Max Harris's discussion of Palmasels (wooden carvings of Jesus sat atop a donkey, drawn in Palm Sunday processions), the critic convincingly reframes the artifact as a 'partially animated dramatic participant' as opposed to an art object and draws attention to its capacity to 'play the Palm Sunday script in various ways' (179, 180). Harris compares two contemporary Palmasel processions in Austria in order to demonstrate the form's performative scope and experiential value. Leanne Groeneveld likewise discusses the performative potential of the Boxley Rood of Grace (which was removed from Boxley Abbey and destroyed during the dissolution of the monasteries), and draws on performance theorist Richard Schechner to position the cultural value of the artifact and the gestures its wooden body was capable of executing. Groeneveld focuses on the Rood's movements (particularly in relation to the arms, eyes, and lips) in order to suggest a connection between specific gestures and possible performance contexts and audiences. Femke Kramer's discussion of staged horsemanship in Rhetoricians' farce plays from the Low Countries reminds us that there is much scholarship can glean from the play-texts themselves. In spite of a deficit of stage directions or other documentary material, Kramer writes that the 'physical actions … of the characters are almost entirely expressed in the lines composed for their performers' speech', akin to what the critic identifies as a 'show and tell' mode of practice (168). And finally, Philip Butterworth's 'speculative reconstruction' of a semi-automaton of St George and the Dragon engages with 'fifteenth-century knowledge of relevant mechanical principles' as a way of overcoming the loss of historical techniques (219). Butterworth helpfully includes a series of sketches that will allow readers to comprehend the scale and complexity of this semi-automaton. This chapter ends the collection on a different methodological note, while also laying the groundwork for another perspective on how scholars might investigate the wider culture of pre-modern performances.

The diversity of topics, methods, and theoretical approaches in this collection offers a treasure trove of potential avenues of study to present and future scholars in the field. In identifying the need to move beyond text-centred investigations of performance, the editors and contributors do not shy away from the lack of existing performance records or the problems of interpreting what does exist. Their contributions suggest new ways of viewing the same documents and strategies to

move beyond the limitations of the archive when necessary. If there is a weakness, it is the introduction. There seems to be a missed opportunity here for the editors to signal the implications of the respective interventions for future studies on performance practices, rather than solely synthesizing those included in relation to the aims of the collection. This small issue notwithstanding, *Medieval Theatre Performance* is both timely and well-executed in both an editorial and theoretical sense. While there are stand-out pieces such as Sponsler's chapter, readers will benefit from reading the collection in full, rather than identifying chapters relevant to their interests and skipping the rest. In this sense, the collection is a testament to the value of dialogue with colleagues outside of one's field, and to the coherence of editorial vision.