Timothy J. McGee (ed).*Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance.* Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph series, 30. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications (Western Michigan University), 2003. Pp xii, 331.

Especially in the humanities, where genuinely collaborative research is still evolving sophisticated strategies and supportive infrastructures comparable to those of the sciences, academic specialization and the increasingly rigid classification of disciplines insulate numerous cross-disciplinary fields of enquiry only too effectively from serious interdisciplinary investigation. Many avenues of enquiry continue to be pursued in virtual isolation by different disciplines, without the benefits of shared data, insights or methodologies. This volume earns musicologist Timothy McGee the gratitude of theatre historians, by focusing the talents of a team of specialists on a cross-disciplinary area of central significance to drama: the role of improvisation in the arts.

The increasing multi-disciplinary academic attention being attracted by improvisation is documented by publications such as Paul Berliner's groundbreaking *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994); Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (1996); *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation* (1998, ed Bruno Nettl); the Spring 2000 'Improvisation and the Arts' issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*; Robert Henke's *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (2002); Britta Brandt's *Das Spiel mit Gattungen bei Isabella Canali Andreini* (2002); and Anne MacNeil's *Music and women of the commedia dell'arte in the late sixteenth century* (2003). McGee's volume developed from an interdisciplinary conference on improvisation in the arts of all periods, hosted in 1999 with University of Toronto colleague Italianist Domenico Pietropaolo. The volume's focus is restricted to the pre-1700 period, when 'the idea of improvisation – the extent to which the performing artist was not only allowed but expected to improvise – was basic to the concept of the performing arts ... to ignore improvisation is to distort the art in a major way' (McGee, xi). McGee, Pietropaolo, David N. Klausner, and Jane Freeman (University of Toronto) are joined by Toronto-based Leslie Korrick (York University) and Randall A. Rosenfeld, four American scholars (Keith Polk, University of New Hampshire; G. Yvonne Kendall, University Houston Downtown; Clifford Davidson, Western Michigan University; Linda Marie Zaerr, Boise State University), Rome-based Barbara Sparti, and Jennifer Nevile (University of Sydney).

Established in the fertile artistic soil of the mid-sixteenth century, when European performance culture encouraged and rewarded the pursuit of creativity as much through improvisation as composition, commedia dell'arte combines both. Pietropaolo's introductory overview of improvisation is grounded in his deep knowledge of the Italian comedy. Taking as his starting point 'two lessons from Gozzi, the one in historiography and the other in method' (3), he considers the commercial pressures that moulded improvisation on early stages, its relationship to rhetoric, literacy and composition, and its role in creation and supplementation. Another commedia dell'arte practitioner, Evaristo Gherardi, provides his concluding focus. Three essays addressing music, and three on dance, are by McGee ('*Cantare all'Improvviso*: Improvising to Poetry in Late Medieval Italy') and five further specialists in early music and dance (Rosenfeld: 'Performance Practice, Experimental Archaeology and the Problem of the Respectability of Results'; Polk: 'Instrumentalists and Performance Practices in Dance Music, c.1500'; Sparti: 'Improvisation and Embellishment in Popular and Art Dances in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy'; Nevile: 'Disorder in Order: Improvisation in Italian Choreographed Dances of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries'; Kendall: 'Ornamentation and Improvisation in Sixteenth-Century Dance'). Art historian Korrick, herself a practising instrumentalist, actor, and dancer, provides the single contribution on art ('Improvisation in the Visual Arts: the view from Sixteenth-Century Italy'). Four essays addressing drama are by specialists in English and medieval studies. Davidson studs his masterly 'Improvisation in Medieval Drama' with a wealth of thought-provoking insights. Defining drama with generous inclusiveness, he suggests that:

> the available evidence will allow us to ascertain much about the *possibilities* for improvisation even when we cannot achieve the kind of certainty that we would wish to have. We can determine the range of the performance options, from formulaic ceremony with dialogue to plays which make available very considerable space for improvisation. (194)

For him, the great civic mystery cycles are a relatively unfruitful source of dramatic improvisation. My own researches, which have awakened me to the astonishing extent to which improvisation could permeate the dramatic strategies of the late medieval stage, highlight a striking example of 'subversive' improvisation in civic religious drama. It is the routine addition to some German Easter mystery plays of optional unscripted quack episodes, relating to the selling of unguents to the three Marys at the tomb of Christ. The

breathtaking bawdiness, violence, and sheer length of the fully scripted quack episodes of some Easter Play scripts undermine Davidson's dismissal of the unintentional pitched battle between the actress and four actors playing Christ, the angel and the three Marys in the village Easter Play recorded in Dyl Ulenspiegel's fictional 'thirteenth history'. Far from being merely an 'undoubtedly apocryphal ... tall tale' (204), this description contains precious indications of actual performance circumstances. Its accompanying woodcut, reproduced by Davidson in the 1515 version, is a rare example of authentic late medieval theatre iconography.

In the light of performance issues arising from her modern productions of 'The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell', Zaerr ('Medieval and Modern Deletions of Repellent Passages') considers 14th to 16th century variants of a medieval romance, 'Sir Beues of Hantoun'. She finds that the heroine Josian's role is consistently and progressively reduced from pro-active, self-supporting skilled medical practitioner and professional street musician to decorous princess, and concludes that some of these 'modifications may have been motivated not by a scribe's careful consideration but by a performer's response to the urgent and concrete expectations of the audience' (236). In 'Shakespeare's rhetorical riffs', Freeman draws on modern musicology to make analogies between early modern dramatic exchanges and the 'fundamental sociability' and 'strong and flexible aurality' (254, 268, quoting Monson and Berliner) underpinning successful jazz jam sessions. For her, Shakespeare's scripted improvisation is 'both modeled on and a model of the extemporaneous dialogue of actual improvisation' (247). A thorough knowledge of the role of rhetoric in early modern schools and theatres informs her invigorating investigation of specific examples of Shakespearian dialogue, in which characters vie to dominate each other by flaunting their superior wit, in competitive sparring matches based on puns, figures of repetition, and a wide range of other interactive rhetorical devices. Klausner ('The Improvising Vice in Renaissance England') examines planned and unplanned improvisation on the English renaissance stage. Authorially sanctioned improvisation is indicated by descriptive stage directions such as Cooke's 'Here they two talk and rail what they list' of 1611, and the suggestive etcs punctuating so many early modern playtexts. Evidential sources for spontaneous improvisation include anecdotes in commonplace books and actors' jestbooks, but also play variants. Klausner quotes some of the former, and suggests that the far greater length of Hamlet's speech advising the players in the much shorter 1603 quarto 'may well represent a not very successful attempt at improvisation' (278).

Significant categories of dramatic improvisation necessarily elude the approaches of one section of a single volume. One such, that incidentally undermines Klausner's sweeping claim that 'planned improvisation was not influenced in any way by the Italian *commedia* tradition' (283), is extended virtuoso solos of the type of Launce's entry scene in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 2.3. Also missing are two welcome components of multi-author interdisciplinary books: a bibliography, and brief details on individual contributors. However, the admirably comprehensive index guides readers through a volume in which every section illuminates aspects of improvisation's mediation between artistic creation and live performance. Of interest to scholars of theatre as a whole, as well as for its introduction and drama contributions, it unites distinguished scholars at the forefront of several disciplines in emphasising that, in the period before 1700, improvisation and orality underpinned a multiplicity of performance spheres. Their timely insights earn it shelf-space in every serious library of early theatre.

M.A. Katritzky

Laurie E. Maguire. *Studying Shakespeare: A Guide to the Plays.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. Pp 256.

It is a good time to be teaching Shakespeare: films and books, pop culture and current events seem to be conspiring to help us connect the plays with our students and both with the world. From Branagh to Bart Simpson, the Western world is awash in Shakespeare references. And we also have a variety of good academic books aimed at an undergraduate Shakespearean readership: Toby Widdecombe's *Simply Shakespeare* (New York, 2002), for example, or *Studying Shakespeare: A Practical Guide* (Hertfordshire, 1997) by Katherine Armstrong and Graham Atkin. Both propose in varying ways to make Shakespeare accessible to students, to show them how to read, how to write, and in general how to stop worrying and love the Bard. Both are useful, but both start from the unstated premise that Shakespeare is some kind of obstacle that students need a boost to o'erleap. For years, I've used Russ McDonald's *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: an Introduction with Documents* (Boston, 1996), with its introductions and examples of genre, text, performance, as a supplementary text in my second- and third-year Shakespeare courses; however,