

Allison P. Hobgood. *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp x, 236.

KATHARINE GOODLAND

The College of Staten Island, CUNY

In *Passionate Playgoing* Allison Hobgood invites us to imagine the porous, susceptible, ‘corporeally gener[ous]’ (61), humoural bodies of playgoers in the theatres of early modern England and consider not only what they might have felt, but also how their presence was essential to the production of affective meaning. If, in other words, as recent studies of the passions demonstrate, early modern playgoers understood their bodies as porous conveyors of emotions that were in constant flux, then it follows that playgoers were not merely passive receptacles of the passions imposed upon them by theatrical conventions and passionate acting, but also active participants in the communal market of emotional exchange that was the early modern playhouse. Hobgood’s hypothesis makes sense within the framework of humoural theory, and she succeeds in articulating the importance of this vantage point for gaining a more nuanced understanding of early modern drama. Her work contributes to the growing field of audience studies in which, as Nova Myhill and Jennifer A. Low explain, even though ‘audiences ... are imaginary creations, assemblages of ambiguous fragments of textual and external evidence, there is a great deal to be said for allowing these pieces of evidence to speak to each other ... to develop hypotheses that let us conceive of the early modern audience as a vital partner in the production of meaning in early modern England’.¹ In an introductory essay, five case studies, and a coda, Hobgood harnesses an impressive range of scholarship in pursuit of this objective. As her ‘initial foray’ into how early modern playgoers may have influenced the drama (24), she approaches the ‘The Mousetrap’ in *Hamlet* from a new angle, arguing that Claudius’s abrupt departure from the play demonstrates ‘the King’s conscious refusal to enable or collaborate further with a performance he knows to be dependent upon — even exploitative of — his capacity to receive emotion’ (25). Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 present *Macbeth*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, and *Twelfth Night* respectively as case studies in the reciprocal performance of early modern affectivity. Each chapter explores the fluid exchange of passion from a different perspective that conceives of the early modern playhouse as an emotionally risky, sometimes dangerous place where playgoers ‘might have attended performances to experience their passions fully and meet head-on their terrifying “fury”’ (187).

Her essay on *Macbeth* focuses on the ‘insidious’ nature of fear that pervades the play (42). Playgoers were likely to have been ‘irradiat[ed]’ by this fear (61), a phenomenon that would become augmented in the communal atmosphere of the playhouse as it coursed through the audience. In this way playgoers ‘collaborated in an emotional transaction that depended, at the very least, on their deeply embodied presence’ (61). If *Macbeth* posed a perilous adventure for playgoers who exposed themselves to the dangers of ‘fear-sickness’, *The Spanish Tragedy* offered an antidote to a different kind of fear.

In chapter 2 Hobgood argues that audiences of *The Spanish Tragedy* helped to produce the ‘Genre-effect’ of Revenge Tragedy, which she construes as assuaging ‘annihilationist fears’ by immortalizing the protagonist (77). In her view the audience ‘affectively resonates’ Hieronimo’s emotions as he ‘narcissistically shifts the focus from Horatio’s passing to his own intense affective responses to death’ (70). This shift transforms his ‘vengeful act of honoring his dead son’ into ‘a desperate act of self-commemoration made possible only via the emotional participation of early modern playgoers’ (70). Hieronimo’s longevity in English memory attests to the success of the genre-effect Hobgood intuitively.

Chapter 3 proposes an opposite method of theatrical humoral remedy, moving from Hieronimo’s self-immortalization to Anne Frankford’s self-immolation. While *The Spanish Tragedy* served as a salve against obliteration, Heywood’s *A Women Killed with Kindness* offered a Paracelsian form of theatrical homoeopathy in which poison is cured with poison. Drawing upon Tanya Pollard’s work in *Drugs and Theater*,² Hobgood argues that the audience ingested the wayward emotions portrayed by the characters in the play, and most especially those of Anne, whose self-sacrifice is as immoderate as her affair. In this manner the play ‘might have remedied theatergoers’ passionate distemper by encouraging an affective encounter driven, in the end, by their immoderate, unregulated consumption of dramatic emotion’ (127).

Whereas the first three chapters construct the audience as a participant in the performance of immoderate private emotions — guilt, fear, grief, lust, and remorse — chapter 4 takes us into the realm of emotions defined by public exposure. Here Hobgood examines Malvolio’s humiliation in *Twelfth Night* and his subsequent attempt in the play’s final scene ‘to perform his way out of shame’ (155). Hobgood posits that the steward would have failed to re-shape the audience’s image of his ‘faulty body’ because his rehearsal of the abuses he has suffered only reinforces their view of him as unable to manage his leaky and immoderate humours (156). Hobgood hypothesizes that it may have asked too much of

the early modern audience to acknowledge their own sense of shame through empathy with that of Mavolio.

Chapter 5 builds upon this idea of audience resistance, showing more directly how playgoers influenced the plays they attended. In Ben Jonson's prologues, inductions, and the scene at the window between Volpone and Celia in act 2 of *Volpone*, Hobgood finds the most overt evidence of the ways in which plays were beholden to playgoers. Building upon previous scholarship on Jonson's well-known exasperation with his audiences, Hobgood illuminates how 'Jonson incorporates' the 'risky cooperation' between plays and playgoers 'into nearly all of his plays by perpetually performing drama's potential affective powerlessness' to control spectators (178).

These five chapters develop a vivid and nuanced portrait of playgoers, examining a range of ways in which they might have participated in the creation and circulation of affect from willingly exposing themselves to dangerous and immoderate passions to staunchly resisting empathetic irradiation. At either end of the spectrum Hobgood shows that audience members were active participants in the passionate exchanges that comprised early modern theatre. This sense of active participation suggests why theatregoers may have attended plays in the first place: 'The pleasure of early modern playgoing grew from spectators' realization of theater's vexed dependency upon their passionate embodiment — specifically, their simultaneous humoral unpredictability and exacting corporeal control' (163–4).

She closes her book with a coda that considers the significance of her analysis for understanding the nature of selfhood in the early modern period, theorizing that the early modern self is best understood as a potentiality glimpsed in the 'highly contingent and undeniably emotional interfaces between' playgoers and plays (195). The dearth of evidence poses the most significant challenge to Hobgood's endeavour, a conundrum that at times renders her argument prone to overstatement and circularity. But these problems may well be the price of admission to the imaginative arena where the complex work of bringing to life the 'feeling bodies' of early modern playgoers necessarily takes place (8).

Notes

-
- 1 Nova Myhill and Jennifer A. Low, 'Introduction', Nova Myhill and Jennifer A. Low (eds), *Imagining the Audience in Early Modern Drama, 1558–1642* (Palgrave, 2011), 10, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230118393>.
 - 2 Tanya Pollard, *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005).

