

Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich. *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment: Print, Performance, and Gender.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp 256.

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When Queen Elizabeth brought the court on progress to country estates, she would find herself accosted ‘spontaneously’ by satyrs, nymphs, shepherds, pining lovers, dairymaids, or wild men, characters who conscripted her to ‘perform’ in a sprawling theatrical landscape. Country-house entertainments were ephemeral, site-specific, interactive, collaboratively produced, and miscellaneous events with the feel of flash-mob ‘happenings’: they involved pageants, petitions, speeches, poems, props, and skits. In *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment: Print, Performance, and Gender*, Kolkovich argues that these seemingly marginal entertainments were, in actuality, a coherent literary genre and an important site for political and ethical negotiation in the Elizabethan era, not least because they provided an opportunity for elite women to participate in political debate and policy-making. In presenting the first scholarly monograph to think comprehensively about the genre and to consider its evolving meanings in performance and in print, Kolkovich offers rich historical, literary, and social contexts for understanding a fascinating and under-read genre.

Scholars have long recognized estate entertainments as occasions for news, gossip, and political self-promotion: hosts could air propaganda and make covert bids for advancement through the guise of extravagant praise for the sovereign. Kolkovich demonstrates, however, that these assemblages can be understood as more politically and culturally complex when considered *in situ*, whether in the setting of particular estates or as printed forms circulating in various book markets. She situates this genre as part of an emerging national literature that negotiated the boundaries of overlapping communities (region and nation) and the relative power afforded to monarch and competing authorities (including the host and the pageant ‘devisers’). By insisting on the crucial ‘locatedness’ of these negotiations as they materialized in performances and as circulating artifacts, *Elizabethan Country House Entertainment* succeeds in making a case for the significance and scope of a genre that almost defies categorization. After reading this book, the reader can immediately grasp the productive instability of these entertainments: as ephemeral performances that have to be reconstructed from partial and scattered evidence; as mutable book objects subject to multiple

marketing strategies; and as multimedia *assemblages*. In telling these stories, Kolkovich offers a valuable new understanding of elite women's roles in early modern cultural production.

The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment offers intertwined arguments rather than an overarching thesis. One interest for literary scholars lies in its articulation of the generic cross currents for these under-recognized 'texts'. Kolkovich argues that entertainments richly intersected with pastoral, the Petrarchan sonnet, and the country house poem while providing a crucial pre-history for the Stuart masque.

The book divides into sections addressing how the entertainments signified differently in live performance and in print. The first three chapters analyse the vocabularies, spectacles, and languages through which estate owners staged political debates and promoted particular alliances. In chapter 1, Kolkovich compares entertainments sponsored by William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester. How, she asks, did these families employ literary devices (such as prosopopoeia or pastoral motifs) to establish the symbiosis of court and country and to consolidate their standing? The chapter foregrounds the delicate negotiation of property and land rights carried out in hyperbolic and fantastical scenarios: at Theobalds, the personified physical house spoke a Latin address; at Kenilworth, the speaker offered the entire estate to Elizabeth. The queen's pointed rejoinder — 'doo you call it yourz now?' — brought to the fore the tense negotiations aired through pageantry.

Having analysed the topoi of praise and complaint, Kolkovich identifies two specific ideals probed by country house entertainments: courtly love and hospitality. Comparing entertainments by Leicester and Henry Lee, chapter 2 specifies ways that the Petrarchan rhetoric of service-in-love was, perhaps expectedly, a multipronged tool for expressing personal ambitions. The chapter's most inventive contribution lies in its examination of 1592 performances at Bisham Abbey, at Sudeley Castle, and at Rycote Park, where elite women attempted to develop a gendered alternative to a politicized Petrarchan language. In chapter 3, Kolkovich reads entertainments at Elvetham, Mitcham, and Harefield so as to track a shift from older ideals of hospitality to newer visions of civility modeled by particular families and networks. These performances staged ideological and ethical debates about how inclusive social events should be, how much they should value moderation, and how much they should affirm social and gender hierarchies. In engaging with recent work on hospitality (by Felicity Heale and Darryl Palmer, among others), this chapter implicates estate entertainments in a capacious early modern discourse about hospitality as practice and theory.¹

The second half of the book consists of three chapters that analyse the written forms in which estate performances circulated. Rather than seeing country house entertainment texts as documentary records of historical events, Kolkovich makes clear that entertainments were implicated in the book trade and in manuscript circulation in striking ways. Early modern readers would have grasped new aspects of these performances by virtue of their relocation within specific types of printed books and markets. Chapter 4 details ways in which three publishers refocused the meaning of entertainments. Kolkovich argues that Richard Jones's *Princely Pleasures, at the Courte at Kenelwoorth* and Thomas Cadman's *Queenes Maiesties Entertainment at Woodstocke* emerged less as 'true' news accounts of royal spectacle and more as literary, poetic, and recreational reading. Joseph Barnes, by contrast, chose to market *Speeches Delivered to her Maiestie This Last Progress* to promote a regional identity newly reconfigured in relation to the nation. Chapter 5 presents printed accounts of performances at Cowdray and Elvetham as converting local negotiations at the estate into newsbooks and manifestations of a globalized and loosely-centralized England. In deciphering these meanings, Kolkovich patiently curates multiple versions of texts while attending to their textual apparatus, the career of individual publishers, and the marketing of printed books.

Scholars may find particularly noteworthy Kolkovich's revisionary argument about Mary Sidney's role as an entertainment writer and inheritor of her brother's literary legacy. In chapter 6, she explains how entertainments could be positioned to bolster an emergent authorial identity, using Mary and Philip Sidney as interwoven test cases. In her reading, Mary Sidney materializes as a canny curator of her brother's works, someone who repositions his 'Lady of May' pageant to probe the gendering of patronage, literature, and politics. In stewarding her brother's works and scripting her own pastoral entertainment, Mary Sidney offers a pointed, gendered critique of the country house entertainment's function as political commentary. Extending work by Mary Ellen Lamb, this chapter adds to our understanding of how women's writing contributed to the shaping of the literary canon.² The book concludes with an epilogue that tracks the entertainment genre's afterlives in Stuart England.

The Elizabethan Country-House Entertainment makes strong contributions on four fronts. First, Kolkovich does a valuable service for scholars by skillfully creating seventeen historical entertainment 'texts' as objects of study, pieced together from twelve printed books and eight manuscripts. She thus lays the groundwork for future literary and historical scholarship that will be able to include the evidence of estate entertainments in assessments of Elizabethan ethics, politics, and representation. Second, in offering a comprehensive investigation of these

entertainments that includes their multiple sites of production and reception, she provides both a synchronic and diachronic view of the genre, one that allows better understanding of their repeated patterns and innovations. Third, by unearthing evidence of elite women's roles behind the scenes on estates, Kolkovich contributes to the collective project of making visible early modern women's labour and intellectual production, putting the book in conversation with critics such as Natasha Korda and Michelle Dowd.³ Finally, *Elizabethan Country-House Entertainment* tests a methodology that maintains multiple and shifting 'frames' of reference: Kolkovich ambitiously seeks to overlay and widen her interpretative frames sequentially such that a gesture read as a bid for favour is discovered to constitute a religious polemic in one incarnation and a brief for a class ideal in another.

The book is most successful in tracking the historical conditions of these entertainments and the discourses in which they were engaged; sometimes it elaborates these more empirical arguments at the expense of developing a theoretically elastic reading of a single event. When Kolkovich, for instance, assesses whether estate holders asserted the queen's mastery *or* their own, her reading fails to push past unnecessarily binary options and to detail instead the polyvocal discourses (such as that of hospitality, service, or desire) that hover unstably between ideologies. Kolkovich draws out the complexities of these discourses less in individual readings and more in her accumulation of site-specific incarnations. For me, *The Elizabethan Country-House Entertainment's* strength lies in Kolkovich's superb and granulated framing of these events as significant sites for critique and debate as well as in her comprehensive account of the production and circulation of these forms. She demonstrates that these fantastical assemblages offer treasures for scholars interested in Elizabethan politics, gendered performance, and literary history.

Notes

- 1 Felicity Heale, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990); Daryl W. Palmer, *Hospitable Performances: Dramatic Genre and Cultural Practices in Early Modern England* (West Lafayette, 1992).
- 2 Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison, 1990).
- 3 Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia, 2011); Michelle M. Dowd, *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York, 2009).