

Benjamin Griffin. *Playing the Past: Approaches to English Historical Drama 1385–1600*. Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001. Pp xiii, 193

Renaissance English historical drama is a slightly evasive object of knowledge. Everyone agrees that the category includes the plays about the reigns of medieval English kings, which were fashionable on the London stage during the last fifteen years of the sixteenth century. But what about the remoter, semi-legendary past (*Gorboduc*, *King Lear*)? Or the parochial past of London (*The Shoemakers' Holiday*, *If You Know Not Me, You Know No Body*)? Or the plays, like *James IV*, that pretend to be about British history and aren't, and the others, like *The Whore of Babylon*, that pretend not to be and are? Given the sheer miscellaneity of the drama that can reasonably be called historical (to say nothing of the miscellaneity of what can be called 'England'), Benjamin Griffin is surely right in guessing that Elizabethan audiences had no 'clear and distinct idea' of the genre to which his book is devoted.

But then this admission, which comes a few pages from the end of his final chapter, renders Griffin's enterprise more paradoxical than he acknowledges. For it is precisely as instances of a dramatic genre that he chooses to read the plays. This is by no means the only possible procedure. For example, the texts may be regarded as a kind of historiography, and so related to the models – chronicle, providential, humanistic, biographical – which influenced the history-writing of the age. But Griffin is very explicitly not doing this: he excludes all non-dramatic sources from consideration and, by also excluding plays about classical Rome, draws a curtain across the principal subject matter of Renaissance historical thought. Or again, the reigns of the past can be seen as a language for intervening in the history of the present; a powerful critical tradition scans the history plays for political ideologies that make sense in the late Elizabethan context; this line of questioning is also largely absent from Griffin's argument, and from his bibliography. Finally, early modern historical drama has been seen as a sort of forcing house of national consciousness, constructing an English (or, a little later, British) identity through narrative and enactment. This idea, too, if not wholly ignored, is touched on so briefly as to make it clear that the book's real interest lies elsewhere.

Having passed on these various interdisciplinary possibilities, Griffin is left with the genre itself, whose indefiniteness therefore makes not just for minor problems of what to put in and what to leave out, but also for a larger uncertainty as to what the book is really about. Too much an empiricist to adopt any kind of ideal or generative concept of genre (the book contains

almost no theoretical ideas), Griffin seeks to derive his topic from observed particulars, a quest which traps him in a diminishing circle.

What the twentieth-century standard works mostly did with this problem, as Griffin points out, was to hand the agenda over to Shakespeare. Then everything was straightforward: 'histories' essentially meant the plays listed as such in the front of the First Folio, and other plays belonged to the genre to the extent that they resembled the ones on the list. Griffin is out to resist this bardolatrous logic: he places special emphasis on the handful of Elizabethan history plays that probably antedate Shakespeare's and finds in them an autonomous site of theatrical invention, not a mere prehistory of the Henriads. Even so, once the book reaches the 1590s, the gravitational pull reasserts itself: *Woodstock* is drawn into its inevitable dialogue with *Richard II*; the discussion of *Edward III* gets sidetracked into the authorship debate; the last two chapters both conclude with reflections on Shakespeare. The book protests against Shakespearean teleology rather than escaping from it.

So, *Playing the Past* is not about history, it would prefer not to be about Shakespeare, and its theoretical innocence prevents it from being about genre. What, positively, is it setting out to do? Two answers to this question loom quite large. Firstly, it is trying to show that the English history play is not an innovation of the late sixteenth century, but a renewal and development of a medieval dramatic tradition traceable through the native saint play (typified by the lost but demonstrably widespread drama of St Thomas Becket) and through a kind of festive combat-show, whose generic identity Griffin seeks to define by comparing *The Famous Victories of Henry V* (c1586) with the late-medieval Coventry play of 'The Conquest of the Danes'. Secondly, it is making a case about the dramatic form of English chronicle drama: namely, that whereas a tragedy or a comedy comes to an end, having (notionally) exhausted the premises of its world, a history play, rather than ending, points to the continuation of its world, beyond the last word of the text, on and up to the present time of the audience in the theatre. This idea is most obviously seen in the 'genealogical trope': the typical moment when a more or less choric speaker invokes the past and future descent of the play's monarch, thus unclosing the play's time and inserting it into a greater continuity.

The first of these ideas is tenuous, depending as it does on assumptions about the content and typicality of non-extant plays. The second seems to me interesting and productive. It cleverly grasps the historical subject-matter as an aspect of the form, in the sense that the history of a foreign country, however chronicle-like its presentation, could not have the temporal character the argument attributes to plays of English history. It therefore offers critically

lively ways of thinking about the relationship between historical drama and its audience, and even (were one to interrogate the categories of 'us' and 'not-us', which are rather taken for granted here) about the questions of national identity that Griffin eschews. Also, by suggesting an incompatibility between 'open' history and 'closed' tragedy, it asks interesting questions about plays that, like, say, *Edward II*, seem to be both. It is in these possibilities that this rather premature and amateurish book is at its most useful.

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Roslyn Lander Knutson. *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp x, 198.

Roslyn Lander Knutson argues in her latest book that playing companies have traditionally been studied in terms of personalities, as exemplified in the attention given to rivalries between the Admiral's Men and the Chamberlain's Men, and between the adult and children's companies. She claims persuasively that the groups of players had a common commercial interest that was far more important than contentions and rivalries. She acknowledges that there were hot-tempered theatre people, such as Christopher Marlowe, Richard Burbage, Ben Jonson, and John Day, who fought in personal quarrels, but she sees in the overall workings of the theatres a 'commercial predisposition toward cooperation grounded in the patterns of hierarchy and fraternity in the patronage and guild systems' (12). She points to a number of factors to support her thesis. Players from various companies tended to live fairly close together in a few parishes such as Shoreditch and Cripplegate. The Admiral's and Strange's Men acted together in 1594 according to Henslowe's *Diary*. Players 'formed friendships, kinships and professional connections across company boundaries' (47), and the paramount concern of the companies was to stay in business. So, she concludes, the personal relations of players were subsidiary to the commercial interests of the companies.

The companies also relied on 'a cooperative workforce of playwrights' (49) to supply marketable scripts, exploiting the topics and genres that were in vogue at the time. In relation to this claim, and to the matter of personalities, Roslyn Knutson focuses on the so-called 'war of the theatres'. She assembles evidence from imagery, prosody, style, and vocabulary to argue that *His-triomastix* was not written by Marston and demonstrates by a casting chart that the play could not have been acted by the children's companies because its