

Issues in Review

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New Approaches to Earlier Tudor Drama

Introduction: Why Attend to Earlier Tudor Drama?

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While the past two decades have seen the publication of excellent new scholarship about and resources for the study of earlier Tudor drama, much of this work continues to stress the historical and performance contexts for plays from the first half of the sixteenth century. The four essays in this Issues in Review demonstrate and call for new approaches to such material by featuring repertory studies, ecocritical readings, manuscript studies, and digital humanities approaches.

We have arguably reached the point where it is no longer possible to say that Tudor drama receives little critical attention. Recent publication of significant essay collections and reference works suggest growing scholarly interest in plays performed and printed while Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary I ruled as well as during the first decade of the reign of Elizabeth I. Essays in Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker's 2012 *Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, chapters on drama in Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank's 2009 *Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature*, and Kent Cartwright's 2010 *Companion to Tudor Literature*, as well as nearly half of the contents of Lloyd Edward Kermode, Jason Scott-Warren, and Martine Van Elk's *Tudor Drama before Shakespeare, 1485–1590*, encourage readers to revisit a wide range of these earlier plays, including so-called medieval cycles, morality plays, court

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entertainments, humanist drama, and traveling company scripts.¹ Darryll Grantley's comprehensive reference guide to English dramatic interludes reminds us that there are many more plays still to consider.²

Such projects necessarily build on the foundation of earlier research as they argue why we should attend to earlier Tudor drama. The documents transcribed and studied as part of the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project and more recent databases and web projects based on that data, continue to support, encourage, and enrich our investigations.³ Any scholar concerned with religious drama must turn to John King's *English Reformation Literature* and Paul Whitfield White's *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England*, and considerations of court performances necessarily engage with work like Greg Walker's *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* and *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama*.⁴ David Bevington's *Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (1962) and Joel Altman's *Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (1978) remain foundational studies for anyone beginning a study of English drama from the first two-thirds of the sixteenth century.⁵

Yet these invaluable projects heavily emphasize the historical and performance contexts of plays. More recent scholarship tends to rely on similar evidence and thus to make related kinds of arguments. Additional approaches are necessary, though, if we are to correct the 'evolutionary' literary historical narrative that has so often framed earlier Tudor drama as notable mostly because of its influence on, or the ways in which it was surpassed by, works for early modern London commercial theatres. We particularly need to develop arguments that stress the diversity of plays across the first half of the sixteenth century, a period whose enormously varied and complex theatrical traditions have not yet been fully described, much less theorized.⁶ That is not to say we should simply generate more theoretical readings of, say, *Ralph Roister Doister* because none currently exist. Rather, it seems sensible to recognize that valuable insights can develop if we view earlier Tudor drama through the same critical lenses that have been focused on plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Such approaches will allow us to put studies of overlooked plays into conversation with works by later playwrights but, more importantly, to recognize the particular strangeness and richness of earlier drama.

A few more recent studies are notable in themselves and for demonstrating what is possible.⁷ Kent Cartwright's chapter 'Humanism and the dramatizing of women' is one of the few arguments about early drama that stresses gender as a category worth analyzing. It thus raises important questions about how continuities and changes in how early humanist and later commercial plays represented women onstage.⁸ The reading of *Gammer Gurton's Needle* in Bruce Bohrer's *Animal Characters: Nonhuman Beings in Early Modern Literature* discusses the onstage cat in the context of both a range of feline-focused early modern texts and contemporary animal studies arguments to suggest how this coarsely funny play might have explored debates about religious truth and social order.⁹ Ineke Murakami's stunning materialist consideration of morality plays, *Moral Play and Counterpublic*, draws in arguments by Marx, Habermas, and others about the creation of publics and the rise of capitalism to consider *Mankind*, *Cambises*, *Horestes*, *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art*, and *Enough is as Good as a Feast* in relation to well-known works by Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson.¹⁰ The essays in this Issues in Review section make similarly innovative critical interventions even as they attempt to model and encourage further work.

The most common categories for grouping plays for analysis remain authorship and performance venue.¹¹ But most earlier Tudor plays survive as unique or rare cases — with *Fulgens and Lucrece* by Henry Medwall the only play we know was performed in the household of Cardinal Morton, *Magnificence* the only surviving play by John Skelton, and various court entertainments assumed to have been one-off performances. As a result, many arguments about early drama focus on one play or performance occasion at a time. By using the repertory-based approach first developed in studies of Queen's Men plays and performances by later companies in London, Maura Giles-Watson's 'John Rastell's London Stage: Reconstructing Repertory and Collaborative Practice' demands that we think of John Rastell not just as the author of a single play, *The Four Elements*, but as the centre of a group of playwrights whose work appeared at court, on a proto-public stage, and in print. In the process, she reminds us of the extent to which collaborative work is still not fully understood as crucial to dramatic enterprises in any period. Her grouping of a number of early humanist plays as a repertory not only calls for further analysis but also hints that key conventions of commercial theatre production might well have originated during the reign of Henry VIII at Rastell's Finsbury stage.

In contrast to Giles-Watson's original but nevertheless performance-history focused approach, Jennifer Ailles's 'Ecocritical Heywood and *The Play of the Weather*' offers the most theoretically sophisticated of the essays in this section. Her insights about the category of weather as it relates to social divisions, royal power, and human nature show the origins of what we still articulate as the most sensible responses to both ecological and economic crises. Given the number of Tudor plays that include characters who have a close relationship with the land — the title character of *Mankind*, the Plowman in *Gentleness and Nobility*, Hob and Lob in *Cambises* — many further studies that consider early sixteenth-century understandings of the environment seem possible. Such arguments can only enrich and refine the growing body of ecocritical work on Shakespeare's plays and theatres.

The essay 'New Contexts for Early Tudor Plays: William Briton, an Early Reader of *Gorboduc*' by Laura Estill has similarly far-reaching implications. Her case study of an individual copying lines from *Gorboduc* into his commonplace book decades after the play was written and performed reminds us that we ought to attend more closely to the afterlives of earlier Tudor drama. The printing history of early Tudor drama remains to be written. Along the way, we might revisit claims that Ben Jonson and perhaps William Shakespeare were the first poets for the stage to think of themselves as 'literary dramatists' given evidence of how Tudor drama circulated in print among readers and performers.¹²

Finally, Brett D. Hirsch's "'To see the Playes of Theatre newe wrought": Electronic Editions and Early Tudor Drama' explains the considerable editorial work that remains to be done in order to make plays accessible both to scholars and students. Digital editions have the potential not only to foster future critical considerations but also to enable a hitherto impossible range of digital humanities projects, including quantitative and stylistic analysis as well as data visualization of early Tudor drama. Hirsch begins his essay by acknowledging neglect of plays from the early decades of the sixteenth century. His work and that of the other contributors to this section indicates, however, how and why this period of critical oversight will come to an end.

Three of these papers originated at a panel entitled 'Rethinking Earlier Tudor Drama', which I co-organized with Maura Giles-Watson for the 2012 Modern Language Association conference in Seattle, Washington. Our call for papers garnered dozens of submissions, and the session itself filled the small room in which it was held, despite its rather inconvenient meeting time and the fact that it was scheduled opposite other sessions on early modern

literature. We found it heartening that the discussion afterwards included quite a few individuals in the audience speaking about their ongoing and upcoming research projects — as well as a debate about the aesthetic merits of fourteeners. As interest in earlier Tudor drama continues to grow, original insights will surely emerge from studies that bring a variety of research and analytic questions to these texts. There is much work to be done, and it is our hope that everyone reading the essays in this section may be inspired to take some of it up.

Notes:

- 1 Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama* (Oxford, 2012), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566471.001.0001>; Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature* (Oxford, 2009), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199205882.001.0001>; Kent Cartwright (ed.), *A Companion to Tudor Literature* (Malden MA, 2010), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9781444317213>; and Lloyd Edward Kermode, Jason Scott-Warren, and Martine Van Elk (eds), *Tudor Drama Before Shakespeare, 1485–1590* (New York, 2004). Other sources that contain useful material relevant to this topic include chapters by Leah Marcus and Suzanne Gossett in Arthur Kinney (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600* (Cambridge, 2000), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521582946> and essays on reformation, academic, and household drama in Arthur Kinney (ed.), *A Companion to Renaissance Drama* (Malden MA, 2004), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/b.9781405121798.2004.x>.
- 2 Darryll Grantley, *English Dramatic Interludes, 1300–1580: A Reference Guide* (Cambridge, 2004), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511483592>.
- 3 Particularly notable are REED, *Early Modern London Theatres (EMLOT)*, version 1 (2011), <http://www.emlot.kcl.ac.uk/> and *Patrons and Performances* (2003–13), <http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/>.
- 4 John King, *English Reformation Literature* (Princeton, 1986); Paul Whitfield White, *Theatre and Reformation* (Cambridge, 1993); and Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 1991) and *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1998), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511583155>. Walker's *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation* (Oxford, 2005), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199283330.001.0001> is also worthy of note as is White's more recent *Drama and Religion in English Provincial*

- Society, 1485–1660* (Cambridge, 2008), which makes extensive use of REED research.
- 5 David Bevington, *Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge MA, 1962) and Joel Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama* (Berkeley, 1978). Bevington's *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge MA, 1968) is also a seminal study.
 - 6 For discussions of the limitations of the evolutionary narrative and the need for new literary histories, see especially James Simpson, 1350–1547: *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, vol. 2 of *The Oxford English Literary History*, ed. Jonathan Bate (Oxford, 2004), 502–57 and Richard Emmerson's response to it 'Dramatic History: On the Diachronic and Synchronic in the Study of Early English Drama', *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies* 35 (2005), 39–66, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/10829636-35-1-39> as well as Thomas Betteridge and Greg Walker, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, 1–17, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566471.013.0001>.
 - 7 While I discuss monographs explicitly here, excellent articles that exemplify a range of critical approaches can be found in periodicals such as *Cahiers Élisabéthains* and *Early Theatre*. Exciting scholarship regularly appears at the biennial Tudor Symposium conferences and at annual meetings of the Sixteenth Century Studies Society and other organizations.
 - 8 Kent Cartwright, *Theatre and Humanism: English Drama in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1999), 135–66, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511483479>. For another excellent example of gender studies brought to bear on earlier Tudor drama, see Eleanor Rycroft, 'Morality, Theatricality, and Masculinity in *The Interlude of Youth* and *Hick Scorner*', *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Drama*, 465–81, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566471.013.0028>.
 - 9 Bruce Bohrer, *Animal Characters* (Philadelphia, 2010), 107–32, esp. 119–27.
 - 10 Ineke Murakami, *Moral Play and Counterpublic* (Routledge, 2011).
 - 11 Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1997) points out that scholars of later plays can overlook even collaboratively written drama because of a longstanding tendency to see literary texts with a single known author as normative.
 - 12 For arguments that identify the concept of literary authorship as emerging only in the last decades of the sixteenth century in England, see Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley, 1983) and Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge, 2003), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139342445>.