

Book Reviews

Philip Butterworth. *Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp 272.

TAMARA HADDAD
University of Kent

Early Theatre 19.1 (2016), 147–50
<http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.19.1.2905>

In this long-awaited book, Philip Butterworth seeks to explore ‘the nature of implicit and explicit staging conventions in the performance of medieval and early sixteenth-century English theatre’ (1). The book’s principal source material is based partly on the surviving texts of performances from the period, although Butterworth draws an overwhelming portion of the primary material discussed from civic records, ecclesiastical accounts, and other such material as that found in the *Records of Early English Drama* volumes. Butterworth’s investigation relies on showing how the extant dramatic records can inform the scholar’s understanding of performers, audiences, and practical elements of the performance including casting, rehearsing, and costumes. While some scholars have addressed most of these concepts in more specific contexts with relation to a particular group of texts, Butterworth’s broad investigation of these elements provides the reader with an overview of these elements across geographical and generic boundaries.

The book begins by problematizing several modern theatrical terms that are often used anachronistically by scholars to describe elements of medieval drama. As Butterworth rightly points out, terms such as ‘character’, ‘stage directions’, and ‘special effects’ are post-medieval and as such should be applied cautiously to medieval theatre, and to highlight this issue these terms are italicized throughout the book. The concern is not, however, with replacing these terms with other, more appropriate ones; rather, Butterworth endeavours to make the reader aware of the problems of using modern theatrical terms anachronistically. This, however, leaves the reader with the unresolved problem of how to discuss these

theatrical concepts without a language that is contemporary to the performances themselves.

The strength of the book lies in the sheer volume of primary material that Butterworth presents in each chapter and he offers a careful consideration of how the extant records can provide an indication of the practical elements of medieval performances. The book itself is not predominantly concerned with how to apply the primary sources to modern performances of medieval theatre — there are, indeed, many books that address this issue more specifically, including Margaret Rogerson's edited collection *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City* (Boydell & Brewer, 2011). Nonetheless, the chapter breakdown implies that the reader can employ the book as a kind of compendium of staging conventions in medieval English theatre. The chapter titles focus on specific elements of theatre from types of performance space ('Outdoors and Indoors'), actors ('Casting and Doubling' and 'Rehearsing, Memorising and Cueing'), movement ('Coming and Going' and 'Timing and Waiting'), as well as audience ('Hearing, Seeing, and Responding'). The chapter that presents material related to staging effects ('Effecting Effects') is especially helpful as an overview for those who are interested in modern reconstruction or reenactment of medieval drama. Butterworth challenges the modern naturalistic convention that staging effects — using lifting mechanisms, fire, sounds, or other effects to enhance a performance — are employed on stage to 'create the illusion of reality' (141). Instead, he approaches the extant records of staging effects with the understanding that these effects 'promote and affect agreed pretense' (140), and as such he reminds the reader that the cause (or execution) of these effects did not take place 'backstage' or even necessarily out of sight of the audience. This chapter on effects highlights Butterworth's desire to move beyond traditional approaches that apply the conventions of modern theatre to medieval performance.

The discussion about the varied use of performance space in the chapter titled 'Outdoors and Indoors' is also helpful for those interested in practice-as-research through medieval theatre since it addresses some varied forms of indoor and outdoor performance. The chapter lays out a sampling of the different types of performance spaces used in the context of medieval English theatre and some major elements that are characteristic of those performance spaces (such as, for instance, the use of pageant vehicles in Corpus Christi drama and civic processions). While it is crucial that a discussion about staging conventions concern itself with how performance space is employed in practice, the extant evidence in this area is complicated since some practices — such as the use of pageant vehicles or platform stages — are specifically linked to particular performances or texts, and

as such Butterworth's discussion can only cover a limited number of examples. Additionally, the section on performance space veers very close to issues of site-specific or site-particular performance and it seems a missed opportunity to not address how the choice to use certain performance spaces reflects on theatre's relationship to the wider social context.

The wide historical range of the material — theatre from as early as the twelfth century until the early seventeenth century — and the breadth of genres stretching across liturgical, university drama, civic performances, and processions is astonishing. One problem with such an ambitious sampling of the extant material is that Butterworth is only able to provide a series of extracts from the records without necessarily allowing enough space to analyze each record in relation to its associated performance text. While Butterworth provides references to allow the reader to explore a text or record in further detail, the lack of connections perhaps makes the book unsuitable for those who are less familiar with the performances to begin with, and thus the book appears to be geared to an audience that already has a good working knowledge of medieval English theatre. Butterworth is very careful to provide as much detail as possible about the historical period and geographical placement of each primary text that he addresses, but the broad geographical focus of the book — encompassing London, Kent, Oxford, Cambridge, York, Norwich, and other locations — combined with the wide historical context can sometimes imply that what may have been true for one particular text or performance in one location may also have been true for other performances at other times. This is perhaps a problem with producing a book that attempts to survey the varied practices of such a broad historical period through the very general lens of 'theatre'.

The overall structure of the book is perhaps its weakest attribute. The chapter format of the book could benefit from some minor restructuring so that broader terms such as 'audience' or 'players' might replace the current chapter headings while the current chapter titles could appear as subheadings within each section as a way of unifying some of the material under terminology that is conventionally used by scholars to discuss certain elements of a performance. The sections that broadly cover actors, for instance — 'Casting and Doubling' and 'Rehearsing, Memorising and Cueing' — could fall under the larger heading of 'Players' with the current chapter titles as subheadings within the longer chapter. The same could be said for the chapters titled 'Outdoors and Indoors' and 'Coming and Going' which could come under the heading of 'Using Performance Space' and, again, be broken into subheadings that discuss specific elements of how performance space is used in medieval English theatre. An epilogue or conclusion to the

book, summarizing how elements of theatre addressed within each chapter could be viewed in light of the primary records that are sampled throughout the book, would also have served to unify the chapters under the broad topic of medieval staging conventions.

While the problems with the structure can make it difficult to employ the book as a kind of reference source for staging conventions in medieval English theatre, the major contribution of this book is Butterworth's meticulous presentation of the extant dramatic records that inform the assumptions that scholars make about how theatre from this period works in a practical sense. Butterworth's rejection of the anachronistic imposition of modern theatrical conventions onto medieval English theatre is evident in his discussion of the practicalities of staging, and he purposefully does not rely on research from modern productions of medieval drama to supplement what can be gleaned from the extant records. While this may perhaps overlook the extent to which performance-based research can enrich the study and understanding of the extant records, the varied source material referenced in the book provides a broad overview of theatre from the period and will surely serve as a good starting point for those who are interested in the practicalities of performing theatre in the medieval period.