

Jonathan Walker. *Site Unscene: The Offstage in English Renaissance Drama*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017. Pp xvi, 220. Paperback USD \$34.95. ISBN: 9780810135017.

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In *Site Unscene*, Jonathan Walker considers the possibilities of different types of ‘offstage’ spaces in the early modern theatrical experience. The book itself divides into two distinct sections that cover both the theoretical and the practical: the first half examines the theoretical underpinnings of the persuasiveness of offstage events, considering in particular what Walker calls the ‘spatiotemporal limits’ of the early modern stage (4); the second examines the practical and material experience of early modern drama, both the physical space of the theatres and the layout of the printed page. Through all of this, Walker challenges the bifurcated notion that theatre must be primarily a heard medium *or* a seen medium. Instead, Walker argues, it is both seen and heard always and at the same time. In the end, the theatre is a contested space that uses the interplay of rhetorical and material strategies to persuade the audience and create space for interpretation.

Most modern critics have accepted that the belief that early modern theatre was intended to ‘be heard’ rather than to ‘be seen’ is not fully borne out in the historical evidence, but the visual experience of the theatre remains undertheorized in contemporary scholarship. By working within a model of Brechtian alienation, Walker rejects the tendency to hierarchize the senses, insisting instead that we consider the two primary senses of the dramatic experience as working together in ways that are differentiated from the modern theatregoing — or drama reading — experience.

Walker considers his subject first in terms of theory, beginning with the dramatic theory of the ancients. Most important in this discussion is the way that the premodern theoreticians conceptualized those scenes that happened quite literally offstage, often due to staging conventions and practical needs. This is where Walker’s work really excels and contributes significantly to the critical literature, as he argues ‘that offstage events constitute an unexamined substructure to premodern theories of the dramatic mode’ (27). In his survey of aesthetic theories, including Aristotle, Horace, Evanthius, Aelius Donatus, and Philip Sidney (considered in this context as a neo-Aristotelian), Walker explores the differences between the dramatic mode and the narrative mode. These authors tend to insist on separating the *diegesis*, the mode of narrative belonging to the epic, from the

mimesis, the mode of enactment belonging to the stage (44). This theoretical separation derives from the Aristotelian demand for aesthetic decorum and a resistance to the irrational (the offstage space being invisible and therefore potentially irrational and uncontrollable). Part of the failure of Aristotelian poetics, in Walker's analysis, stems from a failure to recognize the need for both the mimetic and the diegetic onstage in order to persuade the audience and allow for interpretation.

To further explore that notion, Walker moves to early modern dramatic texts in chapter 2, examining in particular moments when characters speak of events offstage. While this failure to adhere to Aristotelian decorum that would divide the narrative from the enactment, the effect of the synthesis of the two is the very thing that makes the early modern drama effective. The kinds of onstage narrative that Walker focuses on — prehistories and entr'actes (the term he applies to offstage action that occurs between scenes) — are not merely descriptions of something that's happening offstage that cannot be recreated. Rather, these moments of narration create a social capital for the speaker who must convince the audience of his authenticity; further, these sorts of narration create the potential for an epistemological crisis for an audience who must determine what is authentic in the offstage space. The prehistories — as opposed to formal techniques of exposition, like choruses and inductions — 'inject unverifiable, contingent, and/or contested knowledge into the unfolding dramatic action, which burdens audiences with problems of evidential uncertainty' (59). By way of example, Walker examines the multiple recitations of the battle between Spain and Portugal in *The Spanish Tragedy*: the audience does not know which explanation is correct and that instability of meaning creates epistemological tension for both characters and audience members. Similarly, the entr'acte of *Much Ado About Nothing* — the story that claims Hero's infidelity — creates an instability for the audience between the visible and the non-visible. Ultimately, Walker argues, this work of instability allows the playwright to 'devise an intricate dramaturgy that capitalizes on the necessary interdependence of seeing and not-seeing as well as of knowing and not-knowing, which generates the space for interpretation' (95).

Given the complex interplay of these factors — and given that the emphasis of this book is on the space created for interpretation — Walker moves from the theoretical to the practical in the second part of the book, focusing on the material space of playhouses and of printed texts. These spaces create the literal and metaphorical room for interpretation for the audience and Walker's attention to the physical, historical contexts in which offstage spaces were evoked offers an important corrective to modern understandings of the early modern theatregoing

experience influenced by post-nineteenth century conventions of theatre design and audience decorum

In the third chapter, Walker turns his attention to early modern amphitheatres. Overviewing the archaeological work of recent decades and the scant primary sources available about early modern stages, Walker considers the problem of the vantage point for the early modern audience member. As with other areas of this book, Walker insists that we let go of our contemporary assumptions about theatre space (this is not Ibsen's stage, after all), and reconsider the offstage space that was visible to early audience members — the environment of the auditorium itself. The audience on the ground at the Globe or the Rose would not simply be there to watch a play: he or she would, in fact, be able to move around, to watch other people, and to engage in commercial exchange. Perhaps most invisible to the twenty-first century reader of the plays is the engagement with the onstage actors by the offstage audience. In these spaces, Walker writes, 'the auditorium prepares theatregoers to concentrate their aural attention by first accommodating their physical and visual needs ... [which gives] each one a perspective incrementally different from her or his neighbor' (129). The 'art of persuasion enters in not just at the ears' (125), and so contemporary understandings of early modern drama must look beyond simply thinking about 'hearing' a play, but instead consider the full sensory experience. Again, the interpretive experience is distinct for each audience member and relies on the interplay of innumerable factors.

The interpretive experience of the play does not only take place in the playhouses, but also when encountering the printed text, which is the subject of Walker's final chapter. He discusses the *didascalia* of the playtext (stage directions and the speech headings), the features which distinguish printed playtext from other types of printed narrative. In this chapter, Walker argues that 'Printed drama ... conducts the reader on a disruptive itinerary around the surface of the pages of the dramatic text, an itinerary that is itself an active drama of shifting textual, cognitive, and eye movement' (146). The printed playtext thus dislodges the reader's experience, much like the periphery of the early modern stage dislodges the audience member's experience. Walker argues, therefore, that no matter how the individual reader reads the playtext, they cannot deny that the *didascalia* and the words of the characters cannot exist without the other. That requirement for existence — beyond the mere notion of the interplay of the binaries — is what brings Walker's entire book together. Plays cannot be merely seen or heard; the playwright cannot rely merely on narration or enactment; the audience cannot simply focus on the actors on the stage or on the action around them; the reader cannot simply read the stage directions and speech headings or the speeches. All

of these things are necessary for the interpretation of the drama, whether we are in the early modern audience or in the contemporary moment.

In some ways, this book seems like two books: Walker works to bring together two contemporary critical strands to talk about a totality of the early modern interpretive experience. The book, it might seem, is potentially out of joint. But that is, actually, partly the point. Both the theoretical and the practical are operating at once and the interplay of the two is what we need to better understand the early modern dramatic scene. Walker's achievement is to open up that gap between the two and remind the reader that this is the space for interpretation. Only in those alienating lacunae can the audience find meaning in the drama. As a piece of literary criticism, this book both theorizes and enacts that gap.