

**Katherine Steele Brokaw. *Staging Harmony: Music and Religious Change in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Drama*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017. Pp 292. Hardback USD \$65.00. ISBN: 9781501703140.**

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Since the time of Augustine, theologians from multiple religious confessions have struggled to account for music's affective power. Does sacred polyphony focus attention on the mass, or idolatrously distract from God's word? Should the psalms be set to popular melodies, or does this practice taint religious texts with worldly concerns? Katherine Steele Brokaw's *Staging Harmony: Music and Religious Change in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Drama* insists that 'stage songs and dances reveal that music's defenders and detractors were often both right' (3). The book analyzes how playwrights responded through music to shifting religious cultures during England's reformations. While Brokaw demonstrates that dramatists often used music to reflect their religious outlooks, she rejects reductive approaches that oppose music-loving traditionalists to music-hating reformers and instead argues that music has an inherent tendency to produce social as well as sonic harmony. The book asserts that shared auditory experiences in the theatre unified audiences with mixed religious beliefs and furthered the 'affective fusion of musical and devotional practice characteristic of Anglicanism' (11).

Brokaw offers a carefully diachronic account of how makers of music and theatre innovated in the face of religious change from the late fifteenth to early seventeenth centuries. Chapter 1 situates two fifteenth-century sacred dramas, *Wisdom* and the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, in the context of late medieval East Anglia's 'devotional cosmopolitanism' (15).<sup>1</sup> The plays each use music to represent both the sacred and the profane, and so at once evoke the musical liturgy and Wycliffite critiques of song's sensual dimension. In *Wisdom*, the same actors perform processional antiphons from the Canticles to represent spiritual purity and bawdy songs to figure the fall into sin. Brokaw argues that the play draws attention to similarities between sacred and profane polyphony, and hence to music's ambiguous moral status as both spur to devotion and inducement to sin. Rather than come down definitively on one side or the other, *Wisdom* offers a hybrid resolution that is both sensory and intellectual and is capable of multiple doctrinal interpretations, depending on a viewer's sympathies. In her discussion of *Mary Magdalene*, Brokaw addresses a concept that is key to her larger argument: parody. The staging of a Saracen mock-Latin mass produces comedy by highlighting the

absurdity of Christian ritual even as it presents the sacrament as a positive alternative to paganism.

The second chapter — one of the strongest in the book — focuses on the seeming contradictions of John Bale's career. Brokaw makes a persuasive case that Bale's early musical training as a Carmelite monk remained crucially influential after his reinvention as a militantly Protestant dramatist. Although in his polemical writing Bale objects to 'evensonges, howres, processions, lightes, masses, ryngynges, synginges, sensynges and the devyll and all of such hethnyshe wares', his anti-musical stance is only inconsistently maintained in his drama.<sup>2</sup> When he parodies liturgical music to mock Catholic practice in *King Johan*, he still relies on his musical experiences in the monastery to conceive of the songs and, as lead actor of his troupe, perform them. In *Three Laws* and *God's Promises*, he uses sacred musical traditions pragmatically to represent religious harmony in apparent contravention of his polemical prohibitions. I have some reservations about the term 'hypocrisy' that Brokaw uses to characterize Bale's stance. The intimation of bad faith — along with the implication that one stance towards music represents the deceptive surface and the other the inner truth — threatens to flatten the argument that anti- and pro-music positions were implicated in one another during this period. Generally, however, this chapter demonstrates how music exposes complexities in the confessional identity of even one of the most polemical partisans of the Henrican Reformation. In chapter 3, Brokaw presents Nicholas Udall as a near inversion of Bale: a 'cagey and adaptable' advocate of 'musical-religious compromise' (89). She places *Ralph Roister Doister* and *Respublica* in the context of Mary's early rule, when a religious accommodation between Protestants and Catholics still seemed possible, and argues that the plays use music to create 'moments that *feel* harmonious even as that feeling may mask irreconcilable difference' (106). Whereas Bale's departures from categorical evangelical condemnation of music feel hypocritical to Brokaw, she argues that Udall recasts dissimulation as an acceptable, even necessary, practice (117).

Chapter 4 tracks how morality plays from the first two decades of Elizabeth's reign promote the agenda of the established church, and in the process attempt to define the role of music in devotional life. Earlier plays like John Phillip's *Patient and Meek Grissell* set religious lyrics to ballad melodies and presume that secular musical traditions can enrich and popularize devotional verse. More strictly Calvinist plays like William Wager's *The Trial of Treasure* tend to associate music with reprobation. Brokaw notes the conceptual problem of the Calvinist morality play: if spiritual status is predetermined, the ethically malleable protagonist at the traditional heart of the genre makes no sense, and music can have no real power to

‘educate, convert, and save’ (154). She then reads the later *Misogonus* as an attempt to discover ‘a moderate compromise in synthesizing musical forms to suggest that no one is beyond hope’ (154).

The final two chapters of the book turn to major canonical Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, who treat the relationship between music and religion in more oblique terms. Chapter 5, on Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, considers the relation of religion, music, and magic. The chapter revisits the connection between Faustus’s incantations, natural and ceremonial magic, and religious ritual. Although Brokaw makes a persuasive case that allusions to music deepen Marlowe’s engagement with magical and religious discourses and help to expose them as theatrical, her reading of the play as an exercise in skepticism is a largely familiar one. She argues that the play contrasts the immediacy of musical performance with the obscurity of Faustus’s eschatological context. Hearing bells mark the passage of time during his final soliloquy, Faustus can know his death is imminent but not who is responsible for dooming him. He becomes a powerful image of ‘the folly of religious certainty’ in a world where there is no solid basis for adjudicating competing truth claims (186). The final chapter sees Shakespeare forging similar connections between theatre, religion, magic, and music in *The Tempest* and *The Winter’s Tale*, although to less skeptical ends. Prospero initially employs Ariel’s song coercively, but his ultimate turn to ‘heavenly music’ unites natural magic with Christianized theories of the music of the spheres to orchestrate social harmony. Leontes rejects music along with other forms of art in the first half of *The Winter’s Tale*, but Autolycus’s ballads and the strains that bring Hermione’s statue to life recuperate music as a reminder of how unity can be created from diversity, and harmony won out of discord. Like *Doctor Faustus*, Shakespeare’s plays make the human performances of staged music far more present than the supernatural powers those performances are supposed to evoke. Where Brokaw’s Marlowe tears down pretensions to religious knowledge, however, her Shakespeare finds ‘the human-made commonalities between theatrical and religious narrative, masques, and musical deceptions ... a cause for cautious celebration’ (189).

One major strength of *Staging Harmony* is its demonstration of the complexity of religious and social identity. Not only does Brokaw follow recent theatre history in acknowledging the confessional diversity of dramatic audiences, but she also shows how music’s affective dimension tends to unsettle individual doctrinal identifications. Memories of polyphonic liturgy or years of choral training can be reactivated by songs that trigger reluctant nostalgia in even the most doctrinaire reformist listener. The movement from discord to harmony is not merely a metaphor for social concord and inter-confessional negotiation, but a phenomenon that

singers and listeners literally feel in their 'resonant bodies' (231). The book also helpfully uses music to broaden what qualifies as religious experience. Although much of Brokaw's focus, especially in the earlier chapters, is on dramatic appropriations of explicitly religious musical heritage, *Staging Harmony* demonstrates that dances and ballads can also hold doctrinal significance. At times, I found Brokaw's efforts to discover theological resonances in music without obvious religious qualities a little tenuous. Is, say, Ferdinand's claim that music allayed the water's fury and his passion really sufficient justification to argue that Shakespeare is evoking 'religious defenses of music, which ascribed these correspondences to God's design' (196)? Brokaw also occasionally takes advantage of the lack of evidence for original musical settings to hypothesize performances that are convenient to her argument. She argues, for instance, that the first song in Philip's *Patient and Meek Grissell* evokes sung metrical psalms that use the same long metre. Long metre, however, is also found in secular ballads, and when Brokaw says 'Grissell's song could have been set to something that was already a psalm tune, or one of the many ballad tunes and dances that were recycled into psalm tunes,' she can only speculate (129). Overall, however, *Staging Harmony* offers a sophisticated account of theatrical engagement with music over a key period of dramatic production, a subtle description of early modern religious cultures, and a rich theorization of music's role in embodied belief.

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- 1 The term is from Stephen Kelly and Ryan Perry, 'Devotional Cosmopolitanism in Fifteenth-Century England', Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh (eds), *After Arundel: Religious Writings in Fifteenth-Century England* (Turnhout, Belgium, 2011), 365, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.MCS-EB.4.2019>.
- 2 John Bale, *The Actes of Englysh Votaryes* (Antwerp, 1546: STC 1270), *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*, A2v.