

**Tamara Atkin. *Reading Drama in Tudor England*. London & New York: Routledge, 2018. Pp xxx, 239. Hardback USD \$140.00. ISBN: 9781472476265.**

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‘The play is the thing’. While Hamlet uses this riddling analogy to refer to the play-as-performance, plays in sixteenth-century England were *things* primarily in the sense that they were objects — specifically, books — that could be bought, held, used, circulated, and destroyed. This is the abiding argument of Tamara Atkin’s enticing new study of English plays printed between about 1512, when a vernacular play first came to press, and the establishment of ‘London’s first successful permanent playhouse’ in 1576 (8). *Reading Drama in Tudor England* challenges the default mode of interpreting the linguistic and typographic codes of many sixteenth-century playbooks (not least the presence of character lists and doubling charts on their pages) as signs that they were intended primarily to facilitate performance. To do so, Atkin considers the textual features that scholars often cite to support the design-for-performance argument and re-reads them as ‘techniques and strategies’ that printers used to make plays legible ‘as a distinct category of text’ in the marketplace for books (3).

Atkin takes great care to account for the ninety-two single-play playbooks that make up her corpus (any edition or issue with its own STC number makes the cut). The book opens with a useful table that enumerates these books plus twenty-nine books of ‘quasi-dramatic’ material for context, and the introduction attends in detail to how the principles of selection that Atkin uses to create this archive synthesize and modify the varied approaches to these materials by W.W. Greg in *A Bibliography of the Early Printed Drama to the Restoration* (1939–59); Zachary Lesser and Alan Farmer in the *Database of Early English Playbooks* (*DEEP*; [deep.sas.upenn.edu](http://deep.sas.upenn.edu)); and Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson in *British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, vols 1 and 2 (2012). In practice, Atkin argues that what counts for us as ‘drama’ from the period in question should accord with what counted as ‘drama’ for sixteenth-century stationers and readers.

In pursuing this argument, Atkin insists on studying the books in her corpus on the terms of their own time. As she points out more than once, Tudor interludes, morality plays, dialogues, and other entertainments have usually been treated as inferior ‘foils’ against which later commercial theatre plays have been deemed to achieve ‘literary greatness’ (5). As a corrective, *Reading Drama* strives to reclaim ‘literary’ status for some of the plays in the Tudor corpus. The model

of 'literariness' that, according to Atkin, was operative in this earlier period had little to do either with explicit efforts to distance a playbook from performance contexts, or with the presence of authorship attribution on title-pages. Instead, the capacity of readers to perceive a playbook as 'literary' depended on whether that book's textual attributes situated it in relation to non-dramatic books and learned cultural contexts (such as the Inns of Court). In many cases, printers did not mobilize book design to dissociate the text from performance but used it instead to signal that the book was — and could be encountered as — a play. Across the board, Atkin argues, 'the *look* of plays in print ... can ... offer new ways of delimiting what we mean when we talk about drama' (11).

The first three chapters focus on paratextual features of Tudor playbooks that initiate readers into uniquely dramatic modes of reading. Chapter one examines the 'receptive possibilities' of title-page design: the wording and arrangement of titles, as well as the use of factotum blocks and woodcut borders (14). Some play printers emulated the typography of title pages made for non-dramatic books, while others forged design protocols that distinguished printed plays from other genres of book. In a compelling example, Atkin argues that the versioning and iteration of the 'Everyman' factotum woodblock in playbooks printed almost fifty years after it had appeared on *Everyman* (1529) gave these later books 'the look and feel' of established drama (56). Chapter two calls attention to the ubiquity of character lists, a departure from classical and continental playbook design, in the corpus of early printed plays and makes the case that stationers included these paratexts, along with the doubling charts that sometimes accompanied them, not necessarily as 'acting aids', as many historians have assumed, but rather to 'encode theatricality' for readers (76). This explains why so many closet plays and translations of classical drama feature such lists. What makes the text legible as a play, Atkin argues, is 'the sense that the text could have been or one day might be performed' (83). Stationers generated this 'sense' in the first few pages of the book in order that it may have the effect of 'inform[ing] the reader how it ought to be read'. Chapter three rejects the over-emphasis on authorial attribution as the singular site of 'literary' authority in printed drama by identifying and interpreting the other 'expressions of authority', including imprints and colophons, that appeared in the period's playbooks. Most interesting here is Atkin's point that instances where the playwright's name appeared at the end of the playtext in the form of 'quod [quoth] R. Wever', for instance, reminded readers that the text was meant to be imagined as speech. This form of authorship attribution therefore mediated between the play as a printed book and the *idea* of the play as an oral, embodied event.

These chapters all understand the makers of early printed plays to be the ones doing the 'reading' mentioned in the book's title. Atkin's argument throughout is that printers and publishers (sometimes the same individual serving both functions) tailored the designs of these books to suit a certain implied readership. The final chapter of *Reading Drama* taxonomizes how actual readers interacted with these objects: from scribal booklists that situate printed plays in the context of early book collections; to a *sammelband* created by seventeenth-century reader Richard Smith (d. 1675) that bound together old plays with newer ones; to doodles and transcriptions of verse that also hint at the other kinds of texts that were being read alongside plays. The examples of actual reading that Atkin discusses generally accord with the designs for implied reading presented earlier in the book (although she could usefully tease out these connections more forcefully). They demonstrate readerly engagements, rather than evidence of readers using the playbooks for what Atkin calls 'self-performance' — as scripts. In one case, a reader of *Lusty Juventus* (1551?) does appear to be marking up a playbook for performance (or at least with performance in mind). This reader uses information offered by the title-page character list to do so. The character list instructs that the role of Juventus is to be played by one actor, and Atkin argues that the symbols (+ and †) which the reader has inscribed at the beginning and end of Juventus's speeches, respectively, demonstrate the reader heeding this instruction.

What constituted 'reading' during the sixteenth century varied widely. Many reading practices are practically untraceable in the objects that survive, if they survive at all. Telling a history of *play*-reading without very much interpretable evidence of early readerly engagement is even more difficult because of drama's status as a bi-modal form. It requires thinking across a cognitive space that ranges between the idea of plays as performances and the materiality of the books that preserve them. *Reading Drama* achieves this on the level of the case study, and indeed the book is replete with fascinating micro-histories of implied and actual reading. Atkin concludes by meditating on the fragmenting of early plays, both of playbooks as integral objects through the repurposing of pages for binding waste, and of plays as a conceptual wholes through the extraction of passages from them for other uses. At these moments of disintegration, the play was severed from the bookish design features that made it legible as drama and therefore ceased to be recognizable — and able to be enjoyed — as a play.

*Reading Drama* begins with robust methodological questions about genre and periodization and ends by drawing our attention back to one of its central concerns: the ontological status of 'the play'. Atkin makes us see that while the designs of early playbooks might suggest the subordination of print to performance, it

was, in fact, the affordances of book design that created the conditions by which books could be identified as plays in the first place. For theatre historians, one lingering question will surely be why Atkin chooses 1576, a key moment in early modern *theatre* history, as the book's *terminus ad quem* when she deliberately reorients the study of early playbooks toward *book trade* logics and logistics (why not 1594, for instance, when the market for printed plays seems to have really taken off?). Finally, *Reading Drama's* recuperation of sixteenth-century playbooks as worthy of study in their own right will certainly have implications for the either/or — literary/theatrical — binary that still informs scholars' classification of later, commercial theatre playbooks. *Reading Drama* is therefore a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarship that treats the genre of 'the play' in early modern England as a resilient, adaptable, and varied category of imaginative writing, a 'thing' defined by as much by its material textuality as by its theatrical lives.