

Lucy Munro. *Shakespeare in the Theatre: The King's Men*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Pp 239. Hardback £67.50. ISBN: 9781474262613. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474262606>.

Eoin Price
Swansea University

Lucy Munro's *Shakespeare in the Theatre: The King's Men* is an incisive, engaging, imaginative, and accessible book that deserves a place on the bookshelves and reading lists of all Shakespeare scholars. Beginning with the King's Men's formation in 1603 and ending with the company's reception in the civil war and interregnum period, the book examines the interaction between Shakespeare's plays, their enterprising performers, and the wider dramatic repertory. In a preface, Munro places the actors who made up the King's Men firmly at the centre of her study, arguing that their collaborative efforts helped to produce 'various versions' (xviii) of Shakespeare rather than a single, monolithic entity. Her elegant study, evoking the structure of a play, moves through a prologue, five chapters, four interludes, and an epilogue, traversing subjects including race, gender, and sexuality (areas often overlooked by standard accounts of theatre history), while drawing on documentary evidence including cast lists, court records, and royal proclamations.

Like the King's Men themselves, Munro weighs up the different challenges of court and commercial performance. Her solution is to dedicate the prologue and interludes to court performance, saving the much longer chapters for discussion of playhouse performance. Rather than marginalizing court performance, Munro's structural decision arguably demonstrates that court performance was integral to the King's Men. Each interlude builds on its preceding chapter, helping to cohere the overall study.

In a move characteristic of the book as a whole, Munro's first chapter focuses not directly on Shakespeare, or his plays, but on the actors who performed them. Identifying three main kinds of actor — leading men, like Richard Burbage; comic specialists, like Robert Armin; and apprentices, tasked with performing women and juvenile roles — the chapter shows how the different parts played by a given actor might inform one another. Keeping Shakespeare in the background is a smart move that helps clarify and centralize the role of performers. This step is especially useful given that the field of Shakespeare studies has historically tended to favour author-centred analysis.

The second chapter brings Shakespeare into the foreground, but his plays share the spotlight. Munro attends to *Othello* alongside Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, offering a sensitive reading of casting decisions and the stage technology of the Blackfriars theatre, at which the King's Men played both plays. In a decision that is illustrative of the wider project, Munro considers these plays in revival, pushing back against the scholarly tendency to privilege first performances. This in turn enables a much wider and fuller sense of how the King's Men used and reused, shaped and reshaped, Shakespeare's plays.

Chapter three continues the book's interest in the careers of King's Men actors, and the revival of Shakespeare. The chapter brilliantly traces an 'extended stage history' (91) of Shakespeare and George Wilkins's *Pericles* by focusing on new plays with similar themes or narrative conventions performed by the King's Men around the time of known *Pericles* revivals. These plays share an interest in narratives of trafficking and bondage which Munro reads in relation to the state of servitude in which actors, indebted both to the monarch and a paying audience, worked.

The fourth chapter places *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* — two of Shakespeare's plays most invested in the idea of magic — in close proximity to a string of plays about various forms of sorcery. Where the previous chapter focuses its energy on Shakespeare's generative potential, chapter four views *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* as an enduringly popular and influential play which inspired Shakespeare and other King's Men dramatists. Munro illuminates the complex dramaturgy of plays in the King's Men repertory, showing that some plays like *The Tempest* made a single actor the focus of attention whereas others like *The Winter's Tale* and John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *The Prophetess* split their focus across several smaller female roles played by apprentice boy actors.

The final chapter considers how the King's Men negotiated the dangers of royal patronage by focusing on their performance of several topical and politically incendiary plays. Shakespeare's plays feature centrally, as do Fletcher and Massinger's *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelte* and Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess*. Again, Munro is keen to stress how these plays 'depended not only on narrative itself but also on the embodied performances of actors' (175) whose physical qualities, gestures, and occupation of stage space helped shape meaning.

One of the book's great strengths is its willingness to challenge received ideas about the early modern dramatic canon, in its widest possible sense. Munro understands Shakespeare through his contemporary actors and playwrights, reading canonical plays next to less well-known plays without ever patronizing or backhandedly maligning the less canonical plays or playwrights. Thomas

Killigrew's *The Princess* gets serious and sustained consideration in chapter three alongside better-known plays by better-known authors while the lost play *The Tragedy of Gowrie* sits productively next to history plays like *Richard II* in chapter five. Munro's choice of Shakespeare case studies is also pleasingly varied: she is keen to emphasize the importance of *Pericles* to the King's Men repertory and offers a thorough discussion of *Henry VIII*. These collaborative, late career plays are among Shakespeare's more neglected works but here they occupy a more central position in the analysis.

Plays are not the only things freighted with canonical significance and Munro is equally keen to overturn critical assumptions about performers. Her book is as interested — perhaps, given its interest in post-Shakespearean drama, even more interested — in Joseph Taylor, Richard Sharpe, John Thompson, and other Caroline-era actors as it is in their more famous forebears such as Burbage and Armin (although these figures feature prominently too). Munro likewise resists prevailing attitudes about the relative status of the two King's Men playhouses. One of the book's great insights — forming a part of the argument in chapters four and five — is that the Globe did not become a downmarket venue after the King's Men acquired the Blackfriars, as scholars often imply. In this and many other matters, *Shakespeare in the Theatre: The King's Men* offers valuable new insights about Shakespeare and early modern theatrical culture more broadly.

There are, of course, trade-offs to any critical approach. Munro's performer-centred method leaves little space for an examination of playwrighting collaboration (a shame, perhaps, given that several co-authored plays are the subject of case studies). While the book is admirable in its commitment to challenging canonical assumptions, it unfortunately, but perhaps unavoidably, risks seeming to endorse one widely accepted but contestable assumption about early seventeenth-century theatre: that the King's Men were the premier company of the period. Queen Henrietta Maria's Men, about whom Munro has written illuminatingly elsewhere, is confined to a couple of minor references and the wider, richer field of Caroline era theatre necessarily takes a backseat.

In the grand scheme of things, though, these are minor trade-offs. Indeed, the inclusion of the King's Men in the *Shakespeare in the Theatre* series has several benefits, perhaps the most notable of which is that it works against any assumption that the company were passive vehicles for Shakespeare. The book makes a valuable contribution to Shakespeare studies by connecting the choices made by the King's Men to later developments in Shakespearean performance. The discussion of the Caroline era revival of *Othello* and its long-lasting legacy is one of the book's many highlights. There are, in fact, many such highlights in this lucid

study which manages the rare feat of offering a clear and detailed introduction to a historically significant topic while also breaking new ground in its analysis and approach.