

**David McInnis. *Shakespeare and Lost Plays: Reimagining Drama in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp 223. Hardback £29.99. ISBN: 9781108843263. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108915250>.**

Eoin Price  
Swansea University

*Shakespeare and Lost Plays* is the latest in a line of important recent publications which take seriously the lost drama of early modern England. Whereas older studies tended to denigrate or ignore lost plays, the most recent scholarship has overturned outdated assumptions. Developing a range of techniques and methodologies for studying plays which often exist to us only by name, scholars such as David McInnis — the author of the volume under review — have transformed our understanding of the period's drama. In his new book, McInnis undertakes one of the most ambitious studies of lost drama yet attempted by examining in detail the relationship between Shakespeare — the single most studied and most insistently present of all playwrights — and the many lost plays which, while absent in textual form, constituted a major part of the early modern dramatic corpus. Indeed, as the book's introduction states, 'our field is actually characterized by extensive documentary loss' (26), a fact distorted by the canonical centrality of Shakespeare, whose plays (with their high survival rate) warp our understanding of wider dramatic practice.

Throughout the book McInnis uses the example of Rubin's vase — in which a viewer sees either the image of a vase or two faces looking at each other — to figure the relationship between Shakespeare and lost drama. Rubin's vase troubles the distinction between the central figure and the background. Similarly, McInnis queries the still-dominant critical assumption of Shakespeare's pre-eminence by showing, in a range of subtle and imaginative readings, that his plays were tightly bound up with a large body of lost dramatic material. The lost plays considered in this book are not simply background context but are instead afforded the kind of care ordinarily reserved for canonical plays surviving in print or manuscript form. McInnis must strike a balancing act, however, because to make Shakespeare the background and lost plays the foreground would merely invert a flawed critical process. McInnis attempts and overwhelmingly succeeds at something harder and better: *Shakespeare and Lost Plays* ensures that neither Shakespeare nor the lost plays are privileged above the other.

The book's structure is chronological and spans almost the entirety of Shakespeare's career. The first chapter offers a broader recuperation of 'the reputation and value of lost plays' (25) while four subsequent central chapters, split into five year blocks, cover different stages of Shakespeare's life and working conditions. So, chapter 2 focuses on Shakespeare's output before the Chamberlain's Men moved to the Globe, chapter 3 considers the early Globe years, chapter 4 addresses the establishment of the King's Men and the eventual acquisition of the Blackfriars, and chapter 5 examines Shakespeare's final years. The final chapter analyzes the decades following Shakespeare's death in which his name was posthumously attached to lost plays he did not write. The book's structure has a pleasing coherence and elegance although labelling the period 1594–98 as 'Early Shakespeare' (58) perhaps stretches the definition of 'early'.

Chapter 1 surveys evidence from Henslowe's diary to debunk once and for all the old assumption that lost plays were mere filler. In McInnis's account, lost plays make up a significant portion of the overall repertory — in the case of the Admiral's Men, he estimates 89.78% of plays were lost (55) — and achieved much better financial returns than scholars typically acknowledge. Carefully argued, deftly navigating the manifold challenges of interpreting Henslowe's accounting system, which includes grappling with the naming and ownership of plays, McInnis avoids the pitfalls of earlier scholars who too readily advanced confident interpretations of complex material.

The second chapter focuses more specifically on Shakespeare, examining the plays performed at Newington Butts and the Curtain before the Chamberlain's Men transferred to the Globe. McInnis reconsiders the theatrical context Shakespeare worked in at a formative point in his career by attending to a range of plays, now lost to us, but familiar to him. McInnis uses the extant German play *Esther und Haman* to imagine narrative and performance possibilities for the lost 'Hester and Ahasuerus' play and then, having established a much fuller range of possibilities than previous accounts, relates the play to extant Shakespeare plays including *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Titus Andronicus*. McInnis is also attentive to matters of staging and draws smartly on the latest archaeological findings related to the Curtain playhouse and its large stage space, as part of his analysis.

Chapter 3 recontextualizes two early Globe-era Shakespeare plays, *Henry V* and *Hamlet*, by placing them back into conversation with lost plays such as 'Owen Tudor' and 'felmelanco', which were performed around the same time. The aim here is to 'defamiliarise' canonical plays to 'trace new sets of associations between their subject matter (and form) and the plays of other companies' (91). This is a productive and helpful enterprise, which McInnis reaches through a

series of skillful, careful, and innovative readings. The result is an exciting interpretation of *Hamlet* that privileges the play's connectedness with 1590s drama (both lost and extant) rather than figuring the play as soaring above it, as in so many critical analyses.

Chapter 4 moves into the Jacobean era with a thorough examination of two lost plays which might inform our understanding of *Macbeth*. McInnis offers a detailed and persuasive account of 'The tragedie of Gowrie' (a play that has received some critical attention) before providing an imaginative, conjectural overview of the rarely considered tragedy, 'The Spanish Maze', one of the earliest plays the King's Men performed at court before their new patron. McInnis tentatively proposes that the latter play may have referred to the manor house of the Copleys, a Catholic family who had attempted to assassinate the then-James VI. It may be, he argues, that '*Macbeth* grew out of the company's sustained interest in their patron's close escapes' (136). Whether this argument is right or not is ultimately impossible to ascertain and seems slightly beside the point. McInnis is more concerned with querying entrenched assumptions about Shakespearean exceptionality than with setting up new orthodoxies. In the conclusion to the chapter, he again pushes back against notable critical trends by providing a gentle critique of recent scholarship that in his view too readily attributes the Blackfriars playhouse with transforming the repertorial constitution of the King's Men.

Chapter 5 tackles Shakespeare's late career output and in doing so smartly negotiates the issue of Shakespeare's most famous lost play, 'Cardenio'. Rather than making this play (which has received more attention than most extant plays) the centrepiece of the chapter, McInnis first considers Shakespeare's late career, extant, predominantly tragicomic output, in a new light. Whereas recent work on Shakespearean lateness risks prioritizing Shakespeare over his contemporaries 'by conceiving of his plays purely in relation to the playwright's own *oeuvre* rather than the plays' generic kin' (151), McInnis illuminates *Cymbeline* with reference to the lost 'Play of Oswald'. But it would be perverse if the book had nothing to say about 'Cardenio', so it seems right that the second half of the chapter situates the play persuasively alongside lost and extant drama by Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, and several other playwrights thereby placing Shakespeare's play within a longer and wider theatrical tradition.

The sixth and final chapter examines six lost plays dubiously attributed to Shakespeare in the seventeenth century. Aiming better to understand how Shakespeare was perceived after his death, McInnis characteristically mixes caution and rigour with imagination in his investigation of each play. The attributions 'amplify,

perhaps clumsily, the central tenets of the Shakespeare canon' (204) emphasizing his fondness for Ovid and his predilection for the serial history play.

McInnis's study is generous and hopefully generative, and it deserves the kind of careful engagement it offers to its subject. McInnis sheds light on understudied plays and he finds exciting connections, never before identified, some of which in turn allow for a different perspective on individual Shakespeare plays and on his career and early afterlife. But above all, McInnis models an approach to scholarship that promises to yield further insights. McInnis is scrupulously careful throughout and is attentive to whether a claim is probable, plausible, or more of a stab in the dark. In chapter 3 he admits when he is 'just guessing' (100), in chapter 4 he acknowledges when his reading is 'highly conjectural' (135), and in the conclusion he warns against the danger of received narratives ossifying into facts (207). At times, his caution disrupts his argumentative flow, and his unwillingness to make grander claims may disappoint some readers. But this reluctance, I think, says something about the kinds of entrenched scholarly practices McInnis consistently challenges. This refreshing book, which balances meticulous attention to detail with imagination and creativity, deserves to be widely read. That the book is relatively inexpensive for a new academic hardback should help it get the attention it deserves.