

Tison Pugh. *On the Queerness of Early English Drama: Sex in the Subjunctive*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. Pp 241. Hardback \$65. ISBN: 9781487508746. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487538866>.

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Tison Pugh's *On the Queerness of Early English Drama: Sex in the Subjunctive* is a welcome addition to queer studies scholarship in early English drama studies. For Pugh, the very beginnings of Western medieval drama — the *Quem quaeritis* trope — lay a queer foundation from which all subsequent drama builds. This queer foundation, Pugh cautions, is not meant to imply a queer lineage that comes to fruition in early modern drama; rather, 'the queerness of the medieval stage' inspired the queerness that followed it (6–7). Drama as a medium and a genre is queer even if queer identities and sexualities rarely show up on the early English stage. Pugh establishes how his readings that will follow investigate the 'queer potential' of the various dramatic genres under study in their 'subtexts and in the myriad possibilities of performance' (14).

The first section of Pugh's book, 'Queer Theories and Themes of Early English Drama' contains two chapters that discuss early English drama from queer theoretical perspectives, establishing the framework for the readings in the second section. In chapter 1, Pugh explains how he sees early English drama functioning in the subjunctive mood, claiming this mood 'captures the whirlwind of possibilities always swirling in the dramatic sphere, particularly light of the conditional, potential, and aspirational quality of all playscripts' (22). Queerness comes into play in four potential ways: queer scopophilia, queer dialogue, queer characters, and queer performance (23). Pugh writes, 'Early English playwrights, guilds, and theatrical companies created a space for queer characters and plots to become visible, if only momentarily and often unintentionally, but nonetheless with lasting repercussions to drama' (48). In the next chapter, Pugh traces 'two related yet contrasting themes ... the moral benefits of male homosocial friendship and the immoral perils of sodomy' (49). He addresses the historical context for male friendship in the medieval and early modern periods before shifting to his examination of drama, noting that the general dearth of female characters in early English drama necessitates plays in which the homosocial relationships between men are the focus. Pugh avers, 'men's friendships can be salvific or damning, yet in either case they bear queer potential in the tension between normative and non-normative relationships, in the possibility that some men might like other

men just a little too much' (57). Pugh then traces the definitions and history of sodomy during these periods and details the numerous references to anality and/or anilingus in early English drama, before concluding this section with a discussion of lesbianism in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.

The first plays Pugh gives closer attention to are the York Corpus Christi plays, arguing 'in staging biblical scenes for the edification and entertainment of their audiences, the York Corpus Christi plays thematize Christianity's supersession of Judaism yet concomitantly depict the impossibility of typology, owing to the disruptive queerness inherent in portraying biblical genders, sexualities, and erotic ideologies' (71). Pugh establishes the numerous possibilities for queer interpretation throughout the York plays that exist because of the disconnect between typology and performance. He focuses especially on the ways in which Jewish gender and sexuality are contrasted with Christian gender and sexuality: 'Jewish sexuality is thus staged as promiscuously reproducing more Jews, whereas Christian anti-sexuality is conceived as multiplying holiness' (87). Pugh continues his analysis with a closer look at the 'queer romance' of Jesus in the plays. The York plays, Pugh opines, emphasize 'the ultimately queer relationships that surface when one attempts to distinguish between Jewish fecundity and Christian anti-eroticism' (94).

Pugh then moves on to 'Excremental Desire, Queer Allegory, and the Disidentified Audience of *Mankind*' in which he argues that allegory as a genre invites 'queer readings', and 'the journey to salvation in *Mankind* is depicted as unabashedly filthy and exuberantly queer' (95). Pugh highlights especially male homosociality and excrement as the queer agents within this play. After detailing the role of the carnivalesque in medieval drama, Pugh turns to queer theory to bridge the gap between the carnivalesque of *Mankind* and how it still fits in the morality play genre, particularly José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification. Pugh then transitions into a brief survey of medieval theology and philosophy regarding the human body to clarify *Mankind*'s conflicting portrayal of the body in scatological and theological terms. 'Excrement' Pugh concludes, 'symbolizes two conflicting desires in *Mankind*: to escape the sinfulness of the human body by rebuffing its inherent excrementality, and to indulge in and embrace the humorous pleasures afforded by such excrement' (107). Pugh finishes this chapter contemplating the queerness of the morality play that inherently must focus on 'the fallen and still failing human body rather than on the soul safe in the succours of paradise' (119).

In chapter five, 'Sodomy, Chastity, and Queer Historiography in John Bale's Interludes' Pugh argues, 'the queerness of Bale's plays emerges not as much in

their vitriolic condemnations of sodomy ... as in the impossibility of dramatically representing both England and King John as purged of sexual sin' (121). For Bale, scripture is the solution to England's ills, yet the medium he uses to stage scripture is inherently tainted. Pugh explains, '[t]he allegory of King John becomes entwined in an ultimately queer historiography, one that positions John as the righteous precursor of Henry VIII but also proves the fundamental instability of the dramatic medium for cleansing Reformation England from aspersions of sexual transgression' (126). Pugh suggests Bale condemns so many things and groups in his attempts to promote Protestantism — sodomy, heterosexual vice, women, etc. — that he breaks the allegory he tries to craft. This provides another moment in Pugh's analysis to look briefly at lesbianism as Bale's grouping of women with sodomites 'aligns them with similar sexual transgressions of men' (134). Pugh transitions to analyzing the queer historiography of Bale's *King Johan*, arguing that Bale cannot divorce King John from his erotic biography. In his attempts to portray him as 'perfectly chaste', Bale demonstrates 'the ways in which staging history, while raging against sodomy and chastity, can introduce unexpected erotic undercurrents into one's work' (145).

In the final chapter, 'Camp and the Hermaphroditic Gaze in Sir David Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*', Pugh suggests that Lyndsay's play 'can be understood as both a descendant of the medieval carnivalesque and as an early-modern precursor to camp' (146). Pugh argues that a camp reading 'illuminates the play's investment in infusing dramatic protocols with a parodically embodied sensibility, with its political message of reform curiously irrelevant to his deeper theatrical interests' (147–8). Pugh suggests Lyndsay's play exploits the humor of men playing women's roles, but in so doing the innovation of allegory and dramatic form overshadow the play's didactic and reformatory aims. This discussion of early modern camp necessarily leads Pugh to explain the 'hermaphroditic gaze' of theatre, which he is quick to point out is in no way real and relies on outdated assumptions. To explain the context for this gaze, Pugh traces the understanding of hermaphroditism from the classical through the medieval eras, concluding that for the early modern stage 'when gender is in doubt, the masculine serves as the default expectation' (162). Because of this context, Pugh suggests Lyndsay's play is able to reach the proto-camp levels that it does with actors who are clearly men playing up their female roles. In this revelation, Pugh argues, the carnivalesque becomes camp.

Pugh ends his book with a conclusion addressing the medievalism of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*. Pugh opines that twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer theatre is much like early English drama in that its critics dismiss

it 'because of their interest in building ... community through didactic narrative frameworks' (180), yet clearly audiences enjoyed them or else there would not have been plays at all. In closing, Pugh comments that the queerness of the dramatic past, continually relearned and rediscovered, has been there for viewers to see all along.

As imaginative and innovative as Pugh's study is, it seems rather male-centred in its analysis. Even though we have no evidence to suggest actresses were a part of these productions, one wonders why we cannot speculate on the potential moments for lesbianism if female actresses may have been the scopophilic pleasure of queer women in the audience. And then in his discussion of the 'hermaphroditic gaze' in *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, Pugh neglects to entertain trans perspectives — such perspectives are conspicuously absent from a book investigating queerness. The audience he imagines even if they are queer are also cisgendered. Again, this may be an unfair critique to levy at Pugh's book specifically when the inattention to trans perspectives and experiences is indeed a larger issue in (especially) medieval and early modern drama studies. Pugh deserves credit for providing the space for us to wonder about such perspectives given they are regularly ignored by other critics. In the end, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama* reminds us how very queer early English drama is and provides fresh avenues of exploration for those of us working in this field.