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Callan Davies's *Strangeness in Jacobean Drama* is an attempt to understand and think through some of the changes to performance, dramaturgy, and language that seem to have occurred in the late 1600s and early 1610s. As with most issues surrounding early modern drama, this change is commonly understood through the filter of Shakespeare. Readers and viewers of Shakespeare's late plays have often remarked on the density, and sometimes opacity, of his poetry, the hybridity of the genres, and the eccentricity of the plots. Thankfully, Davies does not view the period through the narrow lens of Shakespeare (though plenty of exegesis exists in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*). Instead, Davies locates these changes in several major Jacobean playwrights, focusing mostly on Webster, Dekker, Middleton, Jonson, and Heywood. By doing so, he makes a compelling case that something strange is indeed going on in early seventeenth-century London.

To understand where this strangeness comes from, Davies investigates a dizzyingly diverse set of discourses and issues that he argues influenced and reflected the cultural matrix of the era. From rhetorical handbooks to descriptions of automata, he finds a deep cultural fascination with strangeness. Indeed, Davies doesn't just find the concept or experience of strangeness in these discourses; the word 'strange' literally pervades the texts. Davies's study is somewhat unique (or dare I say strange) in that it is organized around a single word and animated by a desire to understand that word. That being said, he notes that in the early modern era the word itself was poorly defined and was often stretched beyond what could be clearly articulated. Thus, 'the slipperiness of linguistic expression … lies at the centre of [the] book' (6). In Davies's hands the focus on strangeness becomes both narrow and expansive.

The first chapter explores early seventeenth-century fascination with strange language. For Davies, 'the first decade of James's reign sees concentrated interest in strange speakers — individuals whose speech is characterised by foreign inflections or associations, by studied ambiguity, and by the potential danger or violence arising from their language' (42). This interest is visible through discussions of immigration, which reveals an anxiety about foreign languages infiltrating England; the fallout from the Gunpowder Plot, which worries that ambiguity

or the famed 'equivocation' could threaten the realm; and canting discourse, which could work to facilitate dangerous crime. These discourses are then traced within Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Webster's *The White Devil*, and Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*. Of course, some of these linkages are not new (for instance, *Macbeth* and equivocation or *The Roaring Girl* and canting) but by situating all of these plays at the intersection of all of these discourses, Davies draws out the complexity and strangeness of the period's relationship to language.

The next chapter continues the book's exploration of language but focuses more narrowly on rhetoric. Davies concentrates on the strange ability of rhetoric to seemingly effect the physical world through its own power of persuasion and outlines the moral anxiety that this power provoked. He argues that the highly artificial language of some Jacobean plays, using *Cymbeline* and *The White Devil* as examples, calls attention to the strange power of language. Davies writes that 'by extending and exaggerating the elements that form the Elizabethan concept of "rhetorical" composition … both playwrights infuse the very style of the plays with the tension between "sugared phrases" and certainty, between truth and persuasion, that plague early modern discussions of rhetoric' (90). This tension will be recognizable to anyone familiar with the long running debate between rhetoric and logic in western philosophy, but Davies pushes this further by investigating how early modern rhetoric on the stage 'crosses over into dramaturgy and becomes a part of the play's pervasive sense of strange style' (97).

The third chapter, in my opinion, is Davies's most interesting exploration of strangeness on stage, as it tackles a frustratingly oblique aspect of early modern drama — the technology used during performance. Rather than trying to show what kind of technology was actually used on the stage, he explores the adjacent discourses of inventions, devices, and automata. These discourses themselves have their own adjacent discourses in magic, 'natural philosophy, geometry, burgeoning aesthetic commentary, and other humanistic pursuits' (124) since none of these subjects were considered an individual discipline in the early modern period. In an attempt to capture all of these related topics, Davies uses the term 'engineering' and views *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist* through this lens. And so Face and (especially) Prospero become engineers rather than philosophers and magicians. Davies contrasts the two plays to show that while *The Tempest* draws attention to the mechanical in its own production, *The Alchemist* hides 'its technological "action" from spectators who are drawn to believe in its falsehood' (151). The plays then explore how technology can either hide or render visible its own techniques of persuasion and power, and the moral questions that practitioners

(the engineers) must confront when deploying such technology. Davies's novel argument produces some fascinating insights into the way that early moderns thought about technology and how these thoughts were staged for audiences to contemplate.

Davies's final chapter covers more well-trod ground by exploring the philosophical concept of scepticism and its influence on the theatre. He points to William Hamlin's observation that 1603 was a 'watershed year' for scepticism after the publication of Florio's Montaigne (168), and then views *The Tempest* and Heywood's *Age* plays as explorations of scepticism. His discussion of the *Age* plays is hugely useful, as these texts are rarely written about, but so is his insight that strangeness is a form of sceptical contemplation. For Davies, 'the plays present strange shapes and opinions as puzzles, ones that demand questions but have no definite answers' (173). This observation continues the study's interest in the moral dimensions of strangeness. In previous chapters we saw how the plays ask moral questions about the uses and abuses of rhetoric and technology, and in this chapter we see how strangeness can take on even deeper moral and philosophical import.

Davies's decision to view Jacobean drama through the lens of strangeness has benefits and drawbacks (as does any organizational decision). On the one hand, the term is, as he demonstrates, deployed in the early seventeenth century in a number of different ways, so he is not imposing some artificial scholarly construct on the era in order to make sense of the complexity and messiness of the subject. Davies grapples with the changes in Jacobean society using the same terms that the early moderns used. Indeed, he does this not only with the term strange, but other key words related to his individual chapters: 'devise' in his chapter on technology and 'matter' in his chapter on rhetoric. Watching him think through what is strange about this era then becomes a kind of reproduction of the ways that his subjects thought about their own period.

On the other hand, this strategy sometimes leaves the reader with more questions than answers. I found myself wanting to hear more about what Davies, who has the benefit of historical hindsight, thinks about some of the issues he raises. For instance, is there a single event or discourse that had a bigger influence on the strangeness of the era than others? Can we reduce the complexity of the cultural moment in a way that brings us clarity? Davies, more or less, refuses his readers that kind of reductive thinking, which again is a strength of the project, but can also be frustrating.

Relatedly, I wish the book was longer (which is both a criticism and a compliment, I think). He covers a lot of different discourses related to strangeness in

this relevantly short monograph; indeed, there are several important discourses — emblems and travel narratives, for instance — that are left out of the above summary. This whirlwind tour through the strange world of Jacobean England can leave the audience wanting more. For example, his chapter on technology includes a tantalizing reference to a 1607 performance at James's court, where one Cornelius Drebbel demonstrated a perpetual motion machine, and then came back five years later to explain how it worked. Davies uses this anecdote efficiently to frame a discussion about the mysteries of technology and its deployment in *The Alchemist* and *The Tempest*. But the bit on Drebbel occupies exactly one paragraph. I could have read a whole chapter on this strange and audacious scam and how it relates to plays that feature scamming techno-wizards.

That said, I think Davies is at his best when quickly and effectively synthesizing primary (and often obscure) prose texts. I would recommend his discussion of rhetoric (86–91) to anyone who wants a brief but full exploration of this rich and complex early modern discipline. And really, anyone looking for an interesting and novel exploration of early Jacobean literature would do well to pick up Davies's fascinating work.