

Book Reviews

John H. Astington. *English Court Theatre 1558–1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp xiv, 293.

This book is the culmination of nearly twenty years of research and enquiry by Professor John Astington of the University of Toronto into the way plays and other dramatic representations were staged and financed at the Tudor and Stuart courts. The book contains chapters on the various court offices responsible for arranging such performances; on royal ‘places’ and the performing spaces they contained; on the artists and artisans who mounted the productions; on the audiences who attended them; and on the royal occasions which might call for theatrical performances.

Theatrical occasions ‘at court’ – which could mean at any of a number of royal places, depending on where the monarch was in residence – could also mean performances of a number of kinds, though the two predominant kinds were almost antithetical. At one end, selected companies of professional players from the London playhouses would be brought to court to perform commercial plays for the amusement of royalty and their guests; at the other, royalty and guests might themselves disport in amateur theatricals written and staged to their own differing but equally exacting standards. For brief periods during the years studied by Professor Astington, companies of boy players would also perform. Such theatrical occasions tended to cluster at certain times of the year, usually with the Christmas festivities as their epicentre. The author has provided a forty-six page appendix to this book containing a listing of all court performances known to him. As an index of theatrical activity at court from year to year this appendix is most useful; but as a reference for scholars it falls short, lacking as it does that most essential tool of serious researchers, a set of notes indicating the documentary sources for each piece of information reported.

Professor Astington is not the first person to examine the question of theatrical performances at court, or to survey the available evidence, but his work goes beyond that of his predecessors in providing a more careful and more extensive examination of the surviving records (including some previously unknown ones) and a more engaging set of conclusions drawn from them. ‘My aim in this study’, he says early on (7), ‘is to concentrate attention on the physical and aesthetic conditions under which actors worked when they

performed at the Tudor and Stuart courts.’ Accordingly, there is a focus on where the performing spaces were, who was responsible for maintaining and outfitting them, and when and why performances might be given in them. And Professor Astington has illuminating things to say in all these areas.

The opening chapter, on ‘The Royal Administration’, is a considerable improvement on the treatment of the same material in volume 1 of E.K. Chambers’s *Elizabethan Stage* that most of us are habituated to using. The next two chapters, on ‘Royal Places’ and ‘Royal Theatres’, are unavoidably the book’s longest, as they cover ground already heavily ploughed by Professor Astington’s predecessors. These too are useful chapters; much old information is re-presented here (and often re-interpreted to its advantage), and much new information added.

My personal favourite among the chapters is ‘Artists and Artisans’, a survey of the more notable personnel of the Office of Works and the Office of Revels, that is, the draughtsmen, the wire drawers, the property makers, the painters, the costume makers, the builders of hoisting machinery and other engines, and the host of other artisans whose activity was central to the effectiveness of any performance. Rescuing these people and these activities from their relative oblivion is an important goal for any theatre historian, as their introduction into the ongoing narrative helps to fill out and solidify what is often a thin account. This is not to slight the performers themselves, whose role was vital, but rather to redress the balance, the contribution of performers being in somewhat less danger of going unnoticed. (Needless to say, the writers who furnished the texts for such performances have their own claque, and need no support from us.)

Much if not most of the theatrical activity at court served an additional function, that of advocacy; it ‘provided the kind of splendid advertisement of cultural sophistication that monarchs wished to foster’ (5–6). Thus the very parameters of production at court differed from those of the public playhouses – a further reason for learning more about the property makers and costume makers and their colleagues. All too often, in our common consciousness, ‘Elizabethan theatre’ is synonymous with the public playhouses, and Henslowe’s ‘Ogle the wig maker’ or ‘Radford the little tailor’ stand in for a whole class of unknown artisans. A book like Professor Astington’s usefully invites us to consider a whole other area of performance and of performance aesthetic, and to think beyond Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson.

The amateur entertainments that originated in the court – sometimes called masks or masques – resemble only superficially the plays of the commercial theatre. In both cases, performers arrayed themselves before spectators and

spoke lines; but there the similarity ends. Masks were more concerned with art, music, fashion, and spectacle than with character and plot. Though the texts of some masks, like the texts of some stage plays, have survived from the period, the mask-texts are often quite short and tell us far less about what a full-scale production would have been like. As a result, masks suffer far greater neglect in our own day than do the plays of the Elizabethan commercial theatre. They are seldom taught, even less seldom staged; inevitably, the circumstances of their original presentation come to seem less significant. We'll probably never see a film called 'Inigo Jones in Love'.

So Professor Astington's book is salutary on several counts. Unfortunately, he has served his material better than his publisher has. The compositorial software used by Cambridge University Press is presumably the agent responsible for some odd formatting decisions in the text; is no human eye, other than the author's own, cast over page proofs once they are generated? Here are just a few examples. Throughout the book the difference between the hyphen and the m-dash is imperceptible, resulting in many word-conjunctions appearing to be hyphenations. The epigraphs are so formatted that any distinction between the quotation and the attribution is obliterated. On page 43, 'neoclassical' is hyphenated between the 'c' and the 'l'; on page 109, 'Buckingham' between the 'n' and the 'g'. In various places in the book (e.g., 155, 158, 159, 179) the pound-sterling sign £ is printed as 'ú', suggesting that the translation from word-processing output to typesetting output was incomplete. I could go on.

But my principal unhappiness is with the index, which is sadly deficient. Here is but one set of instances, taken from that part of the chapter, 'Royal Places', in which the author discusses Whitehall (48–55), a discussion that properly includes the Banqueting House and the Cockpit. The Hendrick Danckerts painting that shows these buildings is reproduced and discussed; Cardinal Wolsey is mentioned (as he is again in the section on Hampton Court); the Banqueting House is discussed in some detail, both before and after its rebuilding by Inigo Jones; Robert Smythson's *c.* 1609 plan of the pre-Jones Banqueting House is reproduced and discussed; John Webb's 1629–30 plan of the Cockpit playhouse is reproduced (as are other of his drawings elsewhere in the book), and the Cockpit itself discussed, not only here but in greater detail in the succeeding chapter on Royal Playhouses. All this is admirable, and consistent with Professor Astington's general thoroughness. Yet a search for any of these items in the index will be frustrating. There are no entries at all for Danckerts, Wolsey, Smythson, or Webb (or for Wenceslaus Hollar, another draughtsman whose drawings the author reproduces and discusses). And the Banqueting House and the Cockpit can be found only if one has the

counter-intuitive prescience to search for Cockpit under P (for Phoenix), or for both of them under W (for Whitehall).

These omissions and misplacings are typical of the indexing of the volume as a whole, and are unfortunate. A work intended for a scholarly audience, as this book clearly is, does that audience a disservice when the useful and important information it contains cannot be re-found except by searching for it page by page. Regrettably, publishers like to encourage terse indexing, on the assumption that only prospective purchasers use the index, to see if a book touches upon the topic they seek. But in truth, indexes are used far more often after purchase, by users trying to re-locate something they know they've read. Users of this book won't find that an easy task. I go on at unseemly length about these matters because they are the pebbles in the shoes that hobble what should be an enjoyable walk with a competent scholar. Professor Astington's book is without question a book worth having. But, like much else in this sublunary world, its final form has been tempted away from a greater perfection, perhaps by that serpent called 'the market'.

WILLIAM INGRAM

W. R. Elton. *Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida and the Inns of Court Revels*. Aldershot, VT: Ashgate, 2000. Pp xi, 201.

The history of the reception of *Troilus and Cressida* reflects its enigmatic and, to many, repellent nature, and until the latter half of the twentieth century the play languished amongst Shakespeare's least popular and least performed. In 1896 Frederick Boas designated it a 'problem play' because of what he perceived as its darkness or bitterness, and the label has stuck as if 'problem play' were a genre in itself. It is, however, an arbitrary category (it has been used, for different reasons, to include a number of plays that have little in common other than that some people have found them puzzling), and in *Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida and the Inns of Court Revels* W.R. Elton rightly dismisses the whole conception of the problem play as 'categorically ill-defined and vague' (3), and argues that if we understand that *Troilus and Cressida* was written as an entertainment for students in the Inns of Court the difficulties surrounding the play can be resolved. The idea that *Troilus and Cressida* might have been performed at the Inns of Court is not, of course, new; it was first suggested by Peter Alexander in 1929, and the majority of scholars appear to have accepted the reasonableness of the proposition. Elton sets out