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**Matthew Steggle. *Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatres*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. Pp xiii, 158.**

*Laughing and Weeping in Early Modern Theatres* is a fascinating and welcome study of the fragmentary evidence for the display of emotion by early modern performers and spectators. Matthew Steggle's central aim is to examine the circumstances under which audiences laughed and cried during theatrical events and how actors represented these emotional responses onstage. His approach is strictly historicist; suspicious of performance critics who use the reactions of modern audiences as evidence for the aims and intentions of early modern dramatists, he argues that such studies problematically treat emotions as a 'transhistorical constant[s]' (58) and focuses instead on 'the available primary evidence about early modern custom and practice' (59). He also deliberately limits his scope to the practicalities of when and how emotion was displayed; for example, he avoids bringing renaissance comic theory into his study of laughter, instead documenting 'laughter as a phenomenon in itself' (57). Unlike other studies which have used evidence of weeping in early modern audiences to examine early modern psychology and concepts of selfhood, Steggle's prefers simply to 'document references to the phenomenon' (82).

By avoiding grander aims and focusing solely on what is documented, Steggle is able to show in minute detail the varieties of laughter and tears that could have been seen and heard within early modern playhouses and to capture vividly the visual and aural experience of emotions. In an innovative approach, he uses Chadwyck-Healey's *Literature Online* database of playtexts to locate 'implied stage directions': passages of dialogue that seem to indicate when an actor is intended to laugh or cry and that, Steggle notes, outnumber explicit stage directions 'perhaps twenty to one' (25). This approach yields fascinating results, among them a better understanding of the meanings of the phrase 'ha ha ha' and its variants throughout the corpus of early modern

drama. Steggle demonstrates that ‘ha ha he’ is a ‘classical’ variant most likely to appear in Inns of Court plays (27), ‘he he he’ is an utterance associated with ‘natural fools’ (30), and ‘ho ho ho’ is used for supernatural figures or to indicate a sardonic tone (31–2). He also appeals to stage directions (both implied and direct) and external sources such as Bulwer’s *Pathomyotamia* (1649) to describe the gestural language of laughter, noting that actors were sometimes expected to hold their sides, clap or even collapse onto other actors while laughing (36–7).

Steggle takes a similar approach to the representation of weeping on stage, noting certain recurring gestures such as the dabbing of handkerchiefs and the more surprising ‘putting finger in the eye’ (48). He shows that some actors may have been able to cry on demand, but also suggests the intriguing possibility that onions or other lachrymatory substances may have been used, perhaps concealed in handkerchiefs. Enobarbus may be referring to an actual stage practice when he says, ‘the tears live in an onion that should water this sorrow’ (53–6).

Turning to audience response, Steggle studies contemporary descriptions of audiences laughing and crying. About laughter he draws four conclusions. The first — that early modern comedies typically aimed to move laughter (59–63) — might seem obvious but Steggle notes that the point needs to be made given the views of writers like Philip Sidney who disdained laughter. He also finds that laughter is frequently described as loud and uncontrollable (63–9) and that there is abundant evidence for laughter at clowns and physical comedy, while evidence for laughter at textual humour is rare (69–80). As for tears, Steggle finds that some writers expected audiences to cry noisily at tragedies (83–4); that some prologues (albeit not many) state their intention to make the audience cry (93–7); that numerous descriptions of weeping audiences exist (84–90); and, surprisingly, that we have more evidence of audiences crying in the middle of plays than at the end (92–3).

Having drawn these conclusions, Steggle then discusses two factors that complicate them. The first of these is the well-known hostility of John Lyly and Ben Jonson toward laughter in comedy. Steggle doubts that these statements should be taken as absolutes. He shows that despite the famous condemnations of laughter by Jonson and his tribe, Jonson’s work also includes numerous positive references to laughter as a moral and even medicinal force; his theory of comedy thus emerges as less coherent than is commonly supposed (110–11). Similarly, he argues that Lyly should not be taken too literally, noting contradictions such as the presence within *Sappho and Phao* of

some of the very laughter-inducing elements the playwright condemns in his prologue (including apish parasites and bawdy humour). Less convincingly, Steggle uses the audience's laughter at Lyly's stichomythia during a 1990s production as evidence of Lyly's intentions (100–1): a puzzling lapse into the transhistorical performance criticism he elsewhere eschews which only serves to highlight the value of his otherwise rigorously historicist approach.

The second complication that Steggle investigates is Nicholas Brooke's argument in *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (London: Open Books, 1979) that some horrific scenes in tragedies are intended to provoke laughter. Steggle regards Brooke's book with suspicion because it treats modern audience responses as evidence for early modern intentions (113–4). He begins by demonstrating that there is no historical evidence for the phenomenon Brooke describes; audiences are never described as laughing at tragedies except in a negative sense when laughter 'breaks the spell'. Since some tragedies nonetheless seem obviously funny at times, Steggle asks whether other evidence can be found to support Brooke's reading. He uses *Lust's Dominion* as a test case in a fascinating section that illustrates the difficulty of proving things funny without lapsing into anachronism. As in the previous chapter, Steggle is not perfectly historicist here; for example, he notes an example of bathos that spectators might find funny even while acknowledging that this likely reaction is not safe evidence (120). Another approach draws connections between the events of the play and actions at which early modern audiences demonstrably laughed. Hence, Steggle suggests that the machiavel Eleazer is using the popular routine in which a stage clown peeps through a curtain when he '*suddenly draws the curtains*' to enter (119). This argument is not fully convincing either: a surprise entrance is quite the opposite of peeping and Eleazer could just as easily be frightening as funny here. Steggle finds a sounder methodology when he argues that a scene's tone may be indicated by onstage emotion, which can shape and direct audience reactions (117). He demonstrates that some of the play's violent scenes are full of onstage laughter while others are dominated by weeping, convincingly showing that onstage emotions can be indicators of the audience's expected response. In this way, he illustrates the manner in which internal evidence for Brooke's theory of horrid laughter may be found in some plays even if direct evidence is lacking (120–3).

In the final chapter, Steggle brings his study to an elegant conclusion by turning to Shakespeare. Taking further the previous chapter's description of onstage emotions that cause a similar response in the audience, he argues that

‘a characteristic of Shakespeare is to confound tears and laughter’ (125) and illustrates Shakespeare’s interest in ‘the similarity between the physiological states of tears and laughter, and the ease with which one may be interchanged for the other’ (136). Among several examples, he notes that Bottom expects his onstage tears to move the audience to weep but receives only tears of laughter for his pains, and that *Titus Andronicus* features scenes in which the signs of one emotion are repeatedly used to indicate the other (127–8, 131). Steggle’s observations on Shakespeare typically start from well-worn premises — *Julius Caesar* is about politics as performance, *The Winter’s Tale* highlights the difficulty of reading emotions correctly — but he makes valuable connections between these interpretations and the findings of his book. For example, he shows how Mark Anthony’s success in moving an audience with his oratory is in part achieved through the use of onstage emotion: Anthony elicits tears from his audience by weeping as he performs, unlike Brutus who only *describes* his weeping (133). Hence, *Julius Caesar* is not just about the theatricality of politics but also about the ‘the reading, the moving of, and the ability to seem to be responding to, signs of external emotion in others’ (134).

Some readers may be disappointed by Steggle’s refusal to expound on the wider significance of his findings. Although he notes in his introduction the study’s intersection with two ‘grand narratives’ — of the gradual alienation of early modern drama from popular folk roots to elitism and of changing conceptions of the body (8–9) — he does not draw detailed conclusions about the relationship between these narratives and his work. However, this modesty of scope does not detract from the numerous insights that his study puts forward or from the usefulness of his work. Steggle’s book will be an immensely valuable resource for future scholarship in this area.

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**Virginia Mason Vaughan. *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp xii, 190.**

Virginia Mason Vaughan’s book fits most easily with comprehensive studies of black personas on the early modern stage: Eldred D. Jones’s *Othello’s*