

Mark Bayer. *Theatre, Community, and Civic Engagement in Jacobean London*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011. Pp xii, 258.

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Discussions of early modern drama sometimes connect the social and geographical marginality of London's playhouses with the subversive potential of the dramas they staged. The theatres' frequent situation in the suburbs, their perennial association with plague and disorder, and their alleged tendency to distract Londoners from more economically or spiritually fruitful activities seem appropriate to the entertainments they offered, which showed commoners dressed up to look like their betters, articulated challenging ideological perspectives, and held up the orthodoxies of the time to be demystified.¹ In *Theatre, Community, and Civic Engagement in Jacobean London*, however, Mark Bayer provides a very different account. Focusing in particular on the Fortune playhouse in Finsbury and the Red Bull in Clerkenwell, Bayer argues that close ties could exist between some theatres and the communities in which they were located, and that the plays they staged reinforced those ties rather than threatening social cohesion.

Bayer grounds his analysis in a detailed discussion of early modern London. He emphasizes the importance of local allegiances — to ward, parish, and guild — in Londoners' identities and also discusses the way spectacles such as mayoral pageants could foster a sense of belonging. He is keen to question the suburbs' reputation for 'lawlessness and immorality' (61) and writes well on the distinctive character of neighbourhoods such as Clerkenwell (105–8). Bayer also argues that rather than simply being sources of nuisance and disorder, within these neighbourhoods playhouses stimulated economic activity, contributed to poor relief and highway maintenance, and served as centres of community. One suggestive argument he offers is that the Fortune and the Red Bull enjoyed a different relationship with their respective locales to that of the Globe: while the last of the three 'became a destination for Londoners from across the Thames because Southwark did not yet have a large or stable enough local population to sustain a repertory theatre without cross-river traffic' (12), the first two 'were situated in viable communities where playgoers and players actually resided and formed meaningful social bonds' (94). I lack the expertise in urban history to verify this

argument, but if it is the case it points to an important difference between these three major playhouses.

Bayer's reading of plays from the Fortune and Red Bull repertories is informed by his view of the theatre as a force for social cohesion and by his assumption that audiences at those playhouses were distinct both in their geographical and in their social origin from those at the Globe. Plays like Thomas Heywood's *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody* (Bayer focuses particularly on Part 1) and Thomas Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon* offered readings of recent history that demonstrated both 'the structural importance of individual faith and the localized actions of community members in preserving a healthy state' (146). In addition, unlike, for example, Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*, these were plays adapted to the capacities of 'the artisans and apprentices who made up the majority of the Red Bull's audience' (in the case of *If You Know Not Me*) (130), playgoers who were suspicious of complicated dialogue, ignorant of Latin, and perhaps 'not ... intimately familiar with particular passages of the Bible' (133). In Heywood's *Agas* plays at the Red Bull, which dramatize episodes from Greek and Roman mythology, 'the dense classical allusions that might otherwise prove a significant barrier to comprehension were rendered intelligible through ... special effects' (165).

This question of audience composition, and the way in which it shaped company repertories, is a controversial one. On the one hand, as the seventeenth century progressed both the Fortune and the Red Bull acquired a reputation for spectacular, old-fashioned plays and lower-class audiences. On the other, the evidence is not altogether clear on either when the theatres started moving in this direction or how far they deserved their reputation: as Bayer acknowledges, the relevant documents tend to come from unsympathetic quarters. This ambiguity leads Bayer into positions that can appear contradictory: he complains that critics 'tend to condescend toward the Red Bull and its audience' (149), yet such condescension is implicit when he himself writes of the playgoers' limited 'intellectual capacity' (117) or suggests that they found the council scenes in Webster's *The White Devil* 'difficult and unengaging' (132). Arguing for locally and socially specific audiences at the Red Bull and Fortune, he sometimes ignores evidence that might point in the other direction: the fact that *The Silver Age* was performed at court by Queen Anne's Servants along with the King's Men, or the fact that the plays he discusses (perforce) went into print at all — hardly evidence for an audience that was 'unlettered' (161), or totally unlettered at any rate.

In fairness to Bayer, the question of audience membership in early modern playhouses is never going to be resolved beyond doubt. While I incline to the view that audiences at the Red Bull and Fortune were somewhat more diverse than he assumes, at least in the early years of the century, his argument is both legitimate and thought-provoking. His final chapter, on the 1617 riots at the Cockpit playhouse, offers intelligent discussion of why Queen Anne's Men might have thought it a good idea to move there from the Red Bull and why Clerkenwell inhabitants might have been outraged at their decision. (The question of whether the disturbances were primarily occasioned by fury at the move is another controversial topic in the field.)² Where his book does disappoint, though, is in its use of early modern texts. Some of Bayer's readings are disputable, to say the least: for example, he takes the ballad *London's Ordinary*, which wittily assigns drinkers to different hostelries on the basis of their social origins ('The gentry went to the King's Head, / The nobles unto the Crown', etc.) as indicating that 'these drinking establishments came to cater to a particular demographic' (68) — surely an overly literal interpretation. More seriously, in some instances the documents simply do not say what he takes them to say. One is his reading of John Gee's *New Shreds of the Old Snare*, from which he quotes the sentence 'the Jesuits being or having actors of such dexterity, [I see] no reason [but] that they should set up a company [for] themselves, which [surely will] put down The Fortune, Red Bull, ... and Globe' (Bayer's ellipsis stands for 'Cock-pit', which he omits for reasons unknown; my square brackets indicate inaccuracies in his transcription).³ Bayer uses this sentence to make the argument that Gee 'implicated the failure of the theatres in the sluggish spread of the Reformation and the growing insurgency of the old religion' (127). The context, however, is Gee's description of Jesuits contriving factitious apparitions to persuade women to become nuns, which he compares to the use of boy actors at playhouses; no criticism is being made of the deficiencies of the popular stage. Later, Bayer cites Thomas Jordan's prologue to a 1655 revival of *The Poor Man's Comfort* by Robert Daborne as evidence for 'the positive changes produced by popular drama' (130); but the lines 'Players are turn'd *Phanaticks*; / And the *Red Bull* where sports were wont to be, / Is now a Meeting-house' are actually an imagined response to the play's title, which is seemingly 'fitter for a *Pray'r-book* than a *Play*'.⁴ Bayer suggests that Thomas Heywood wrote *The Four Prentices of London* 'to solidify the Red Bull's reputation as the playhouse most favored by apprentices' (96), and he dates the play to 1615, when it was published; but Heywood's preface makes

clear that it was ‘written many yeares since’, indeed, ‘some fifteene or sixteene yeares agoe’ — that is, well before the Red Bull opened in about 1605.⁵ *As You Like It* and *Tamburlaine* are both misquoted (52, 82) in ways that make their blank verse unmetrical, and a letter from Martin Slater offering ‘an astonishing £500 for highway maintenance’ in exchange for permission to finish building the Red Bull appears to have been misinterpreted (72).⁶

Everyone makes mistakes, including this reviewer, and devoting so much of a review to them seems a little harsh. But in a work that advances important arguments in a controversial area of theatre history, the accurate use of documentary evidence is crucial, and Bayer’s carelessness in this regard does not help his overall case. For readers looking for more information about the environments in which London’s northern playhouses were situated, and for criticism of some of their (relatively overlooked) plays, this book will be useful; but readers should approach with caution his readings of early modern documentary sources.

Notes

- 1 As Bayer notes, a classic example of this tendency is Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago, 1988).
- 2 See for example Eleanor C. Collins, ‘Repertory and Riot: The Relocation of Plays from the Red Bull to the Cockpit Stage’, *Early Theatre* 13.2 (2010), 132–49.
- 3 See John Gee, *New Shreds of the Old Snare* (London, 1624; STC: 11706), 17.
- 4 Thomas Jordan, *A Nursery of Novelties* (London, 1665; Wing: J1051), 23–4.
- 5 Thomas Heywood, *The Foure Prentises of London* (London, 1615; STC: 13321), A2r–A2v.
- 6 In Slater’s letter to the privy council of 31 May 1605, the sentence that mentions the sum of £500 is followed by a sentence that begins ‘Since which time there is a letter come from your honourable lordships to stay the finishing of the same’, which appears to indicate that the sum has been spent on building the playhouse, not on ‘the amending and maintaining of the pavements and highways thereabouts’. Glynn Wickham, Herbert Berry, and William Ingram (eds), *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660* (Cambridge, 2000), 568.