[Review of:] The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England (Amherst and Boston, 2006) / Marta Straznicky (ed.)

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tragedies make valuable contributions to criticism of these works. The study's participation in the growing area of the history of affect will make it an important book for many readers, and its engagement with issues of gender in the medieval and early modern periods should resonate with readers in various fields as well. In its ability to "preserve, interrogate, and transform" (28) our encounters with medieval and early modern drama, this book is a critical Purgatory, in Goodland's definition of that term, a "space that preserves, interrogates, and transforms communal memory."


Reviewed by Lukas Erne

In her excellent introduction to The Book of the Play, Marta Straznicky argues that we need a comprehensive history of early modern play reading. Maintaining that printed plays have too long been treated as pale reflections of their performed counterparts, Straznicky astutely notes why the readerly reception of plays was neglected: the New Bibliography paid attention to playbooks as "a species of print culture" but "took no interest in plays as reading material" (2). Much twentieth-century criticism took an "intensely literary approach" to the study of drama, "but its fundamental ahistoricism meant that the matter of what Shakespeare's contemporaries may have been doing with the words on the page was never raised" (3). The New Historicism overcame the earlier ahistoricism but focused on "the intersection at the level of content between writing and politics" and mostly ignored "the traces of cultural, commercial, and political contest that are embedded in texts as material objects, especially as books" (5). Thanks to important recent work on the text's historicity and materiality, it has become clear, Straznicky argues, that "the theatre's impact on the public sphere . . . was conducted through two congruent, but distinct media, the playhouse and the printing house" (7). While New Historicism did much to assess the impact of the first medium, we are only just starting a full exploration of the second.

Straznicky's introductory manifesto is compelling not only for its astute awareness of the work that remains to be done but also because of its survey of important earlier scholarship on "printing conventions for early modern drama," "elements of typographic design," "marketing of plays," "business practices of certain print shops," "the commercial context of play publication generally," "attitudes to playreading . . . assembled from prefatory matter and from public and private library catalogues," and "the impact of print on advancing the authority of playwrights and the cultural status of drama" (5–6). Straznicky shows herself attuned to recent developments that relate to her project, notably, the "reassessment of the economies of play publication" (6) and work that has "demonstrated that . . . professional playwrights (including theater shareholders like Shakespeare) not only were not averse to seeing their plays in print, but also wrote plays with the intention of meeting the specific interests and requirements of readers as well as theatricalgoers" (7). Her introduction presents a convincing case that "we can no longer assume that play-reading was simply an extension of playgoing" (16).

The essays that make up the rest of the collection do not amount to the "cohesive history of play-reading" the introduction evokes—"an enormous undertaking," which "may well never reach completion" (5). I hope Straznicky is wrong. What many of the essays do provide are incisive case studies. They are divided into two parts, of which the first focuses on "Real and Imagined Communities," either actual readers who left documentary traces or groups of readers as they are constructed in the prefatory material of playbooks. Straznicky's and Cyndia Susan Clegg's essays turn to the latter to analyze how dramatists and publishers conceived of their readers. While Straznicky focuses on female readers and reveals an insistence on "the corporeality of women play-readers" (60), Clegg's analysis suggests that readers of playbooks were aligned not with theatregoers in pursuit of entertainment but with readers of "'serious' literature . . . intelligent and discerning," who "as co-creators of the literary dramatic text . . . possessed the capacity to assure the fame of playwrights, and to ensure their perpetuity" (35). Lucy Munro's investigation of early seventeenth-century readers of Edward Sharpham's The Fleer similarly reveals the gap between the play as book and the play as performance: whereas Sir John Harrington bound up his copy of The Fleer with other play quartos in a stately volume, another copy of the same play shows theatrical alterations with "extensive cuts and revisions, excising around one-third of the play and several characters" (39). Elizabeth Sauer, finally, investigates a specific instance of the role of play reading in "the formation of political and communal identities" (81): the proparliamentary play Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized (1643), a translation of George Buchanan's Baptizes sive Calumnia (1577), ordered to be printed by the House of Commons Committee Concerning Printing in 1642–43 (83)—only months after the Puritan parliament had ordered the closing of the theaters.

The essays in the second part, grouped under the heading "Play-Reading and the Book Trade," examine the reception of playbooks from the angle of publication. Zachary Lesser provides a welcome reevaluation of black-letter typeface in playbooks, which has too simplistically been seen as "an index to popular culture" (101) but which in fact carried a variety of meanings, including a nostalgia for a unified "traditional English community" (107). Peter Berek convincingly demonstrates that "generic terms on title pages" of playbooks often had "relatively little to do with the shape of a plot or with literary meaning" but instead helped "printers and booksellers find a market for their wares" (160). Alan B. Farmer demonstrates that the rise of the news trade in the 1620s and 1630s had a significant impact on the reception of printed drama and that Ben Jonson was justified in fearing that "the news trade would turn many plays into dramatic newsbooks. Finally, Lauren Shohet studies the masque as "a bi-medial form" (177), in which print made its policy debates available to readerships beyond the privileged circle of those present at performances, while Douglas A. Brooks returns to the subject of publica-
Rebecca Lemon’s *Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare’s England* follows texts by John Barrell and Karen Cunningham concerning English treason laws, but her approach is noticeably different. Barrell and Cunningham focus on the imaginative aspects of treason (and the startling fact that simply thinking about treason was a capital offense in England after the 1534 Treason Act), while Lemon centers her discussions around treason’s linguistic features, effectively tracing how circulation patterns concerning the discourse of treason change during and after significant cultural events—especially times of crisis and war.

Lemon’s approach is twofold. First, she points out the important, yet overlooked, fact that despite the enormous number of treason cases—including arrests, detentions, convictions, and executions—during the late Tudor and early Stuart periods, treason never succeeded; it never manifested itself in the killing of a monarch. Instead, Lemon posits, the contemporary discourse of treason develops as “subjects and monarchs report on and narrate the crime not as it materialized but as it might have been” (2). Early modern texts replay, again and again, the horror that might have happened, so that treason becomes, in Lemon’s words, “doubly linguistic”—an event “created in the texts circulating after a plot” and a “form of speech that anticipates, or functions as, violence to the monarch” (3). The historical cornerstones of Lemon’s analysis are the Essex rebellion and the Gunpowder Plot, two events, she asserts, “that are never studied together” (13). Considering these two events side by side, Lemon argues, “opens up these otherwise obscured connections, and thus reveals the increasing growth of moderate Protestant and Catholic subjects loyal to the state but critical of its policies on treason” (15).

Lemon begins with a discussion of John Hayward’s prose history of Henry IV, dedicated to the earl of Essex, noting that it was not considered seditious or treasonous when it first appeared in 1599. In fact, she observes, because Hayward practiced civil law, a profession whose members were “overwhelmingly” royalist from taking the oath (115). Lemon notes that a number of Catholics and moderate Protestants resisted this either/or proposition and points out that the oath divided Catholics as well. Moreover, she finds, “Catholic recusants could not be so easily converted or condemned, to the apparent surprise of James and his supporters” (122). Written within this environment by John Donne, who had recently con-