[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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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.”


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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 theater’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 play-reading . . . 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 economics of play publication” (6) and work that has “demonstrated that . . . professional 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.”


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Reviewed by Terry Reilly

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 and the formation of dramatic authorship in the context of Richard Brone's *Antipodes* (1640). By providing insights into manifold aspects of the reception of printed drama without quite cohering into a whole, the essays in *The Book of the Play* make valuable contributions to a burgeoning field. They also underline the need for a comprehensive history of play reading, which Straznicky's introduction so cogently articulates.