

## Review Article

# Situating performance in early modern England

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Matthew J. Smith, *Performance and Religion in Early Modern England: Stage, Cathedral, Wagon, Street*. ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019, pp. xi-xiii + 388, ISBN 9780268104658.

‘*Totus mundus agit histrionem*’ - although scholars continue to debate if this was in fact the official motto of the Globe Theatre, its proverbial use in early modern England is well attested.<sup>1</sup> In *As You Like It*, Jacques offers an English gloss on the tag, noting that ‘All the world’s a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players.’ (3.7.139-140)<sup>2</sup> The *theatrum mundus* topos has its roots in classical and medieval thought.<sup>3</sup> In early modern culture – with its emphasis on the *studia humanitatis* and the performative nature of the rhetorical arts – it is tempting to see theatricality at every turn: grammar schools turning out budding Demosthenes or Ciceros for the law, parliament, and court; perhaps even a new Roscius for the theatre.<sup>4</sup> During the high point of New Historicism some thirty or so years ago, nearly all social action could, it seemed, be analysed as performative. Although generally understood as qualitatively distinct spheres of social action, much could be gleaned by comparing, for example, historical execution

<sup>1</sup> See Tiffany Stern, ‘Was TOTUS MUNDUS AGIT HISTRIONEM Ever the Motto of the Globe Theatre?’, *Theatre Notebook*, 51 (1997): 122–127; but also Richard Abrams, ‘Oldys, Motteux, and ‘The Play’s Old Motto’: The ‘Totus Mundus’ Conundrum Revisited’, *Theatre Notebook*, 61:3 (2007): 122–131.

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Agnes Latham, Arden Shakespeare (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent summary, see Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 27.

<sup>4</sup> On rhetoric, pedagogy, and performance see Lynn Enterline, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), esp. 33-61.

accounts with dramatic depictions of hangings or beheadings.<sup>5</sup> The limitations of this approach, methodologically and historically, have been well rehearsed.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, various critical ‘turns’ in the intervening years – to book history, material culture, religion, and historical phenomenology most notably – have complicated our understanding of the performative in early modern England. Above all, each of these turns stress the historical contingency and specificity of performance culture during this period, however it is transmitted and experienced. If a comparative approach between different kinds of performance is to be undertaken then a high degree of methodological self-consciousness and care is required. A related – perhaps even contrary – development from the heyday of New Historicism is a willingness to question the period boundaries that conventionally mark off the medieval from the early modern.<sup>7</sup> Attending to continuities *and* discontinuities between these historical periods, this historiographical approach encourages a much broader, indeed *longue durée* understanding of performance culture.

Matthew J. Smith’s new book attempts to cross the late medieval/early modern boundary while also attending to the historical contingency of early modern performance in a range of locations.<sup>8</sup> It is certainly not a book lacking in ambition and, at its best, offers some provocative insights and persuasive close readings. Chapters cover the late-medieval Chester Cycle, Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, Donne’s sermons, the performance of ballads, and Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, via boy bishop’s festivities, Elizabeth I’s coronation procession, and a scene in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, a range that helps to explain the book’s subtitle, *Stage, Cathedral, Wagon, Street*. Smith wants to move beyond the confines of the theatre in order to show the diversity and range of performative space in early modern England. He is careful not to deny that the Reformation ‘inaugurate[d] significant aesthetic shifts’ in dramatic approach and performance practice but he also argues that ‘older aesthetic practices persisted in

<sup>5</sup> See for example Molly Smith, ‘The Theater and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*’, *Studies in English Literature*, 32:2 (1992): 217–232.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Ann Baynes Coiro and Thomas Fulton eds. *Rethinking Historicism from Shakespeare to Milton*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare’s History Plays: Rethinking Historicism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), esp. 10–32.

<sup>7</sup> A seminal essay in this regard is David Aers, ‘A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the ‘History of the Subject’, in David Aers ed. *Culture and History 1350–1600* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 177–202. See also James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History. Volume 2, 1350–1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Gordon McMullan and David Matthews eds. *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The book is part of Notre Dame’s ‘ReFormations’ series edited by David Aers, Sarah Beckwith, and James Simpson, where the imperative to cross historiographical boundaries is part of the series’ brief.

the performing arts after the Reformation, sometimes unqualified and sometimes in sustained tension (I argue, productive tension) with emerging practices' (p. 41). It is to Smith's credit that he does not pursue this line of argument in relation to the alleged hidden Catholic sympathies of writers - particularly Shakespeare and Donne who have been well, if sometimes dubiously, served in this regard. Instead he concerns himself with habits of feeling, rhetoric, and aesthetics that may have evoked Catholic practices in a Reformed context. I was struck by his argument in chapter two on the Chester Cycle that the absence of God for most of *The Fall of Lucifer* has a broader theological and structural purpose: 'the obscurity of God is a fundamental component of Christian faith, and [...] this obscurity creates the conditions of dramatic conflict.' (p. 103). This is pithily put, and the emphasis on the Christian, indeed Johannine, origins of this structure shows usefully how Catholics and Protestants alike fashioned their aesthetics in response to this Scriptural imperative.<sup>9</sup> This is a fine chapter that really does cross period boundaries to fruitful ends, drawing on a stimulating array of visual illustrations. Smith does not see the Reformation as marking an indelible shift towards secularisation and a rejection of immanent materiality *pace* Charles Taylor and Brad Gregory (p. 65). Rather, he finds in late-medieval drama a way of framing the transcendent that is then re-imagined after the Reformation. Focused on 'the audience's self-referential act of beholding', this is 'an encounter in which the sacred may at any point be both inherent and deferred' (p. 66). In the post-Reformation period, this framework is recast as 'an opposition between human limitation and divine excess' (p. 67). This is not a new argument, but it does offer a different perspective on the late-medieval inheritance of early modern dramatic aesthetics.<sup>10</sup>

Smith draws on recent work in drama and religion, and in historical phenomenology, to build his methodological case. Unfortunately the pithiness in evidence above is not always sustained elsewhere. The methodological explanations in chapter one are a case in point. Here is Smith outlining the connection between audience and performance: 'The audience's role as the immanent and circumstantial representative of the ordinary – the unfastened gateway that both closes and opens the *theatrum mundi* – helps to make visible the ways a performance can immediately shape a group of people, since the audience never fully inhabits a position inside or outside the fiction or illocution'

<sup>9</sup> Smith does not consider important recent work that makes similar arguments about the structure of Christian soteriology and literary form by Paul Cefalu, *The Johannine Renaissance in Early Modern English Literature and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Claire McEachern, *Believing in Shakespeare: Studies in Longing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Adrian Streete, *Protestantism and Drama in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 80-109.

(p. 39). This quotation illustrates a somewhat cramped prose style where too much is packed into one sentence. The methodological sections make heavy weather of explaining the central claims. Qualifications and restatements abound here and throughout the book ('that is to say'/'in other words' most notably), the word 'nuanced' is over-used as a descriptor of literary features that demand more specific analysis, and the frequent restatements of the argument do not bind the composite parts of the book together as they should. Chapters can take a long time to get to the point. This is, as a result, a long book, one that would have benefitted from a more direct, less repetitive style, allowing its many virtues to shine more clearly.

The author's phenomenological approach is in keeping with a recent scholarly strand of thought that has sought to rethink performance.<sup>11</sup> Yet his various efforts to summarise the distinctive significance of his own approach make this book somewhat recursive. Because these central claims are not clearly stated, they are not consistently developed throughout the book, nor are the limitations of these claims fully interrogated. One main argument is that 'performances demonstrate a marked acceptance of the social and physical structures of mutuality through which individuals understood and lived their own identities' (p. 34). The phenomenal act of audience perception – a necessarily multiple activity – is also an act of theatrical constitution. For Smith, this activity tests the boundaries between the real and theatrical worlds: 'the performativity of the theatrical event subsumes the real world of its audience, not revealing all to be *merely* theatrical but showing all to be fully *real*' (p. 39). The reader's acceptance of this claim will, I suspect, rest on her willingness to accept the rather circular logic on display here. Of course, early modern audiences might suspend their disbelief during a performance. And as recent work on drama and the passions has shown, the boundary between stage and audience could be permeated.<sup>12</sup> But were audiences really not able to distinguish perceptually between real and theatrical worlds? Is all reality inherently theatrical? Is all social activity a performance? Can we make qualitative distinctions between a play performed at the Red Bull, a civic procession, a sermon given at Pauls' Cross, and a ballad sung at Bartholomew Fair? Or is 'performance' a conceptual catch-all that glosses over significant differences in these various performative events?

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Bruce Smith, *Phenomenal Shakespeare* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), Kevin Curran ed. *Renaissance Personhood: Materiality, Taxonomy, Process* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), and Michael Witmore, *Shakespearean Metaphysics* (London: Continuum, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> See *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Allison P. Hobgood, *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Smith draws on the work of J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler to support his case. He uses the term ‘intertheatricality’ by which he means an audience’s awareness of their ‘implication in the event and also of a given performance’s involvement in a network of overlapping performances. In a sense, intertheatricality is a condition that executes the kind of repetition that constitutes performative behaviors’ (p. 39). Some may find illumination here: others may find the restatement of a truth acknowledged by Aeschylus and Shakespeare alike: theatre is inherently self-referential. Smith argues that there is ‘really no strict difference between theatricality and [...] the intertheatricality shared among performance types’ (p. 33). While I can accept the conceptual necessity of the claim for Smith’s methodology, in order for this distinction to hold historically a more thorough-going discussion of theatrical genres (comedy, history, tragedy, etc.) would be needed, as would a fuller engagement with the work of scholars like Eva Griffith and Lucy Munro who have examined how specific theatre companies shaped distinct repertoires and audience expectations.<sup>13</sup> A final point on methodology and religion. In his account of the ‘turn to religion’ in early modern drama studies, Smith offers his summary of the general critical consensus as follows: ‘early modern drama addresses religion not primarily institutionally, devotionally, or politically but theatrically’ (p. 42), producing a list of (predominantly North American) scholars to support this claim. Yet if Smith had cast his net a little more widely to consider for instance the work of Margot Heinemann and Donna B. Hamilton on politics, Jean-Christophe Mayer on institutions, or Alison Shell and Timothy Rosendale on devotion, he might have produced a more rounded picture of the field as it currently stands.<sup>14</sup> As it is, the first chapter suffers from methodological over-reach, a lack of conceptual clarity, and a somewhat partial view of current scholarship.

Turning to the other chapters on various performances, although they do not hang together particularly well *in toto*, there is much to be admired at an individual level. The chapter on *Henry V* begins with a fairly conventional reading of the play as meta-theatrical, drawing our attention to ‘the artifice of theater and to the potential hypocrisy

<sup>13</sup> See Eva Griffith, *A Jacobean Company and its Playhouse: The Queen’s Servants at the Red Bull (c. 1605-1619)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen’s Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Margot Heinemann, ‘Rebel Lords, Popular Playwrights, and Political Culture: Notes on the Jacobean Patronage of the Earl of Southampton’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 21 (1991): 63–86, Donna B. Hamilton, *Shakespeare and the Politics of Protestant England* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), Jean-Christophe Mayer, *Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith: History, Religion and the Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Alison Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), and Timothy Rosendale, *Theology and Agency in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

of that artificiality' (p. 117). What makes the chapter distinctive, however, is the approach to religion. It is used in the play 'as a psychological and intersubjective vehicle for creating audience appreciation for the theatrical connections among Christian ritual, political ceremony, and the process of theatrical appearing – how each depends on the audience's complicity as a performative limit' (p. 117). Once Smith untangles these various strands there are some good insights to be found here. Attending to the ritual aspects of theatricality, Smith establishes that 'Henry's inner character is a function of the very theatrical accoutrements that fitfully plague him' (p. 125), paving the way for a strong discussion of soliloquy and ceremony where, as for example in Henry's soliloquy at 4.1, we see 'a Catholic model of ceremonial devotion' joined to 'a Protestant model of iconoclasm' (p. 133). There is a similarly provocative discussion of the idol/idle 'ceremony' that Henry critiques in the St. Crispin's Day speech. Smith argues that for Henry ceremony 'both *represents* and *does* things' and that it is 'invoked in the form of nostalgia for the old religion' (p. 139). There is, it is claimed, 'no contradiction between Henry's use of ceremonial affect and his iconoclastic rhetoric' (p. 146). Others may prefer a less black and white approach; I would also have liked more theologically-informed consideration of Henry's willingness to do evil in the service of a greater good. But this remains a bracing and provocative chapter.

Chapter three turns to preaching culture and in particular to the sermons of John Donne. The central claim here is that 'as sermons incorporate their environments and their auditors' situatedness into their rhetorical representation, they echo the performativity of the broader performance culture' (p. 157). This is fine as it goes, but the author might have made a stronger connection by attending to relevant work in this area by Bryan Crockett, Mary Morrison, and others.<sup>15</sup> Smith does some fine work on the acoustic environment of St. Paul's Cathedral where Donne preached. He notes that preachers would have to compete with 'the noise of visitors and children playing' (p. 159), and that because St. Paul's was often criticised by the godly for its adherence to ceremonies and symbols associated with the old religion, 'a congregation's devotion could not sensorily fill the building without encountering reform and decay along the way' (p. 160). Contemporary illustrations alongside material from the online *Virtual Paul's Cross Project* are used well to show how Donne crafts his sermons 'with [an] awareness of how it shapes sound and in

<sup>15</sup> See Bryan Crockett, *The Play of Paradox: Stage and Sermon in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), Mary Morrissey, *Politics and the Paul's Cross Sermon, 1558–1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), and Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington and Emma Rhatigan eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

anticipation of competition with distracting noises’ (p. 165). This claim is then explained more fully in a reading of Donne’s 1628 Christmas sermon, especially its rhetoric of the ear and, more broadly, ‘the practice of ignoring things’ (p. 179) like external noises and visual distractions so as to better focus on the word of God preached. I was not convinced by the argument that there is a conflation of performativity and sacramental ‘real presence’ in Donne’s sermons (p. 185). In order to make this case, some consideration of Donne’s engagement with Arminianism is surely needed, especially in an early Caroline context – here and elsewhere the book displays a somewhat vague understanding of ecclesiastical politics.<sup>16</sup> But scholars of the early modern sermon will find this chapter of interest, especially as a practical demonstration of what a phenomenological approach to this material can yield.

Smith turns his attention next to the godly ballad, an area well-covered in recent years by scholars including Ian Green, Christopher Marsh, and Natascha Würzbach.<sup>17</sup> It is good to see ballads taken seriously as a medium for promulgating godly ideas. However, this chapter suffers from the conceptual lack of clarity noted above. I take the point that doctrine does not come pre-packaged in ballads and that it is necessary to analyse the performative ‘labor and process of their coming to be’ (p. 196). Smith does this work well - there are solid close readings of a range of ballads from the mid-Tudor period to the later seventeenth century. He is also good on how ballads encourage their audiences to pause for spiritual reflection, asking them to consider ‘the immediacy of belief within the immanent experience of the improvised environment’ (p. 239). He is less convincing, though, in his effort to account for the multiple modes at which ballads work: ‘Ballads come to be through authorial, economic, material, theatrical, and cultural processes, each of which has the capacity of furthering a ballad’s theme and each of which intersects with religious practice at different points’ (p. 197). While the general claim here is not in dispute, it would take a book-length study to do proper justice to each of these modes. A more disciplined focus on how ‘the presence and self-consciousness of a ballad audience are a performative function of the conditions of ballad performance’ (p. 207) would have helped to bring this rather diffuse chapter into sharper focus.

The final chapter returns us to the theatre and to Christopher Marlowe’s wildly popular *Doctor Faustus*. This play, and its various pre- and after-lives, are considered in order to argue that ‘audiences

<sup>16</sup> See for example Ashsah Guibbory’s articles ‘Donne’s Religion: Montagu, Arminianism and Donne’s Sermons, 1624-1630’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 31:3 (2001): 412-439, and ‘Reconsidering Donne: From Libertine Poetry to Arminian Sermons’, *Studies in Philology*, 114:3 (2017): 561-590.

<sup>17</sup> See Ian Green, *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Natascha Würzbach, *The Rise of the English Streete Balad, 1550-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

felt a special investment in the religious terms of Faustus's fall and responded to this investment by pitting themselves against the play's devils – those medieval and early modern performative embodiments of theatricality gone sour' (p. 255). Again, this chapter is marred by the attempt to cover multiple conceptual bases. But there are some good analyses here. Smith writes persuasively on the devils and vices in the play's pageant, provoking 'the audience to a form of laughter that functions as ridicule' (p. 261), perhaps as a form of collective protection against maleficent powers. He is also persuasive on the likely silent presence of devils on the stage 'watching from the background throughout the play' (p. 263) and he draws well on medieval religious art to explain the likely theatrical effect here. *Faustus* is, of course, a notoriously unstable text that exists in two very different printed editions, the latter with various additions, and that also has an after-life in sequels, adaptations, ballads, translations, and other printed materials. Smith covers these multiple versions of the story, noting how in the theatre and other performative contexts, iterations of the Faustus narrative increasingly foreground devils and devilry as a performative strategy. He argues that 'audiences may have felt as if they were competing with devils in the playhouse and in intertheatrical contexts' (p. 267), a large claim that is intermittently borne out in the analysis that follows. There is some solid work on the Faustus ballads that builds on the preceding chapter, showing how in these texts 'audiences performatively participate in expelling religious deviants from their community' (p. 279). Examining the extra devilry and knockabout anti-papal comedy found in the B-text, Smith's argument that this amounts to a 'performative creation of an in-house community of the Protestant faithful' (p. 302) needs, for this reader at least, to be more solidly grounded in mid-Jacobean religious politics in order to convince fully. Still, I am persuaded that the play compels 'the audience to reflect on their own presence at and contribution to the drama' (p. 306), even if the precise lineaments of that reflection must remain – in the absence of further primary evidence – admittedly speculative.

The Postlude to the book, which also acts as a conclusion, turns aptly to the Jig, that amalgam of song, dance, dialogue, and improvisation that commonly concluded early modern plays. These texts – simultaneously nostalgic for older theatrical forms and proleptic of newer performative modes – are another example of generic and historical 'intertheatricality' (p. 311). Returning to the theme of crossing historiographical boundaries, the author notes that Jigs function 'as intermediaries between the genre forms that playwrights adapted and the medieval religious world of festival endemic to England' (p. 318). This is no nostalgic lament for those imminent, enchanted Catholic modes of belief and practice that the Reformers rudely swept away. It is rather a salutary reminder that those modes continue to



jostle for prominence in the performative cultures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These ‘trans-Reformational energies’ (p. 321) are not always elucidated in this book with the clarity or consistency that one might want. Yet Smith is right to insist on the competing presence of these energies and to draw our attention to the multiple performative spaces in which they are articulated and negotiated in early modern England.