

Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England. Allison P. Hobgood.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. x + 236 pp. \$95.

Passionate Playgoing is dedicated to two propositions about the emotional workings of English Renaissance theater. The first is that affectivity was a two-way street: it was not only that the performance had an emotional effect on the spectators, but also that the spectators' emotions had an effect on the meaning of the performance. And the second is that sixteenth-century emotions were radically different from our own because they were understood, and therefore experienced, within a framework that had not yet been split by a Cartesian distinction between psychology and physiology. According to this view, the passions aroused by the first performances of Shakespeare's plays were bodily events as those of later audiences could not be. These theses are set out in an introduction and then pursued through separate readings of *Macbeth*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Volpone*. The last of these brings its discussion of the play to an early close in order to return to the book's general

themes; readers impatient for the main ideas should read the Jonson chapter as well as the introduction.

The leading propositions are recognizable and productive. Highlighting the meaning-making work of the audience follows the general tendency of recent literary history to treat the receivers of texts not as blank sheets on which literature imprints itself, but as autonomous agents whose practices can be described. And the insistence on the corporeality of early modern emotion responds to another current intellectual demand: that feelings have their history too. Critically, both moves have the effect of disintegrating the universal reader who once anchored the unity and significance of the work of art. We weep for Desdemona and laugh at Malvolio, we were told — but do we? And who are “we” in the first and in the second place? These are good questions, with a good deal potentially at stake. Here, though, there are problems with both.

With the first theme — audience emotion as “the most determinative factor” (8) in the life of the drama — the problem is not whether the proposition is true (it may well be), but what to do with it if it is. The agency of the spectators is asserted against that of the text, but the text is what we have to go on; it is difficult to argue against its signifying power on the basis of its own meanings. At crucial points Hobgood turns instead to scraps of audience response — Forman at *Macbeth*, Manningham at *Twelfth Night*, Gosson on the power of theater to arouse the passions. But these never say what she wants them to, while that they are invoked at all constitutes an admission that she needs the evidence they fail to supply. The emotions themselves remain obstinately speculative: early modern playgoers are tirelessly championed, but we don’t find out what they felt, only what the critic feels they may have felt.

The book’s other project is to “rematerialize — in order to blur — the post-Cartesian, post-Enlightenment line so often drawn between mind and body” (6). This sketches a very large gesture in the history of Western thought, and its fragility is traceable even in the syntax of this declaration (“line” is surely not intended to be the object of “rematerialize,” only that of “blur”?). Lacking serious conceptual exploration, the notion of a Cartesian moment is worn down by repetition of a simplistic opposition between early modern selves as embodied and post-Enlightenment selves as dualistic. This is unusable, not only because it is empirically unsustainable, but also because it dictates such incurious readings of the chosen plays. It involves passing in silence, for example, over the opening lines of *The Spanish Tragedy*, which many of Hobgood’s early modern playgoers knew by heart, and which, naïve as they are, articulate a subtler relationship of body and soul than her narrative admits. The subtlety stems, I think, from the fact that Kyd’s terminology is not only psychological or physiological, but also at once theological. The most surprising single thing about *Passionate Playgoing* is that its early modern landscape is almost totally devoid of religious ideas; that absence, on this topic, is disabling.

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