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The Cambridge Introduction to
Early English Theatre

This introduction offers an overview of early English theatre from the earliest recorded vernacular texts in the late medieval period to the closing of the theatres in 1642. Where most existing studies focus on one side or the other of an imaginary boundary between 'medieval' and 'early modern' or 'Renaissance' drama, this book examines the theatre of nearly three centuries in a way that highlights continuities as well as divisions. The study is organised into five subject-based chapters: Places of performance; Actors and audiences; Writers, controllers and the place of theatre; Genre and tradition; Instruction and spectacle. It includes full chronologies, helpful text boxes and over twenty illustrations.

JANETTE DILLON is Professor of Drama at the School of English, University of Nottingham.

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Preface

My aim in writing this book has been to offer an overview of early English drama from the earliest recorded vernacular texts in the late medieval period to the closing of the theatres in 1642. The year 1642 is an unusually precise date for the termination of a volume which is marked elsewhere, and especially in its earliest material, by vagueness and uncertainty over dating. The reader can see this vagueness clearly illustrated in Appendix 1, where select plays of the period are listed by date. Dating parameters range from 1376–1580 (for the York cycle: a stretch encompassing the known period of performance for a group of plays which were probably substantially altered and revised over that time) to a single year in which a play may be known to have been both written and performed (as in the case of the highly topical *A Game at Chess* in 1624). In other instances, such as the N-town cycle, the group of plays from which it was assembled is known to be a compilation including some quite disparate material dating from different years, so that the overall date assigned to the cycle in the chronology is based on what is known of the extant manuscript and its language rather than on any evidence of performance auspices, which is notably lacking. Hence some dates are 'harder' and more meaningful than others; and, though the book generally adopts the procedure of putting dates in brackets after plays named or discussed, it does not adopt that practice where to do so might be misleading, as is especially the case with the often revised and adapted medieval cycles.

Though I have described the book above as an 'overview', it is not a chronological survey, nor does it aim for quasi-neutrality or the smoothing over of controversy or disagreement. On the contrary, it aims to argue a case arising out of the unusual breadth of the period surveyed. Where most existing studies focus on one side or the other of an imaginary boundary between 'medieval' and 'early modern' (or 'Renaissance') drama, my aim is to look at the theatre of the nearly three centuries between about 1350–1400 and 1642 (with occasional comparison outside these limits) in an attempt to highlight its continuities as well as its divisions. All the descriptive terms for historical period division above are unsatisfactory in various ways: 'medieval' implies a period that comes in the

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'middle', thus suggesting two more marked and definable periods on either side of it; 'early modern' implies a turn towards the modern and a perspective on the earlier period that views it teleologically as evolving towards the 'modern' that it is to become; 'Renaissance', on the other hand, implies sudden rebirth after relative dullness (C. S. Lewis' 'drab' age), thus looking backwards in a way that is as reductive as the forward perspective of 'early modern'. There is no escape from these terms, however, and this book uses them as part of the common currency of critical writing about the period. But I hope it does so with this difference: that instead of using them to seal a boundary between the medieval and the early modern, it allows them to describe different parts of the same picture, so that changes in the picture make sense within those parts of it that remain the same.

A further aim of the book is to let contemporary materials speak for themselves as much of the time, and often in as raw a state, as possible. This is the objective underpinning the shaded boxing of many quotations. By typographically isolating the quotation, boxes immediately allow the reader to see what someone else has said, and when, and to see that apart from, as well as within, the surrounding argument. The content of the boxes is always closely linked to the argument, sometimes very directly and immediately to the preceding sentence, and sometimes more generally, but the box allows the reader to absorb it in a slightly different way from the content of quotations integrated into the argument. Thus, where the argument over a paragraph or more is relying on quotations to illustrate the analysis of a particular play, for example, it is likely that those quotations will be typographically integrated into the surrounding prose; but where the quotations are doing separate work as well, and the reader is being invited to make his or her own assessment of their content, they will be shaded.

Quotations from plays have been taken, where possible, from plays in currently available anthologies, for ease of access, but spelling has been modernised throughout. Modernising spelling does occasionally distort meaning, especially in the case of medieval texts; but modernising the spelling of Shakespeare only, or of early modern plays only, two common editorial practices, perpetuates and highlights the imaginary boundary between medieval and early modern that the book as a whole rejects. For this reason, then, as well as for accessibility to student readers, it seemed appropriate to modernise spelling. The meanings of difficult words remaining are glossed in square brackets. Punctuation of early texts quoted follows editors where quotation is from a modern edition, but modernises slightly from unedited texts. Dates are rationalised to the current system, with the year beginning on 1 January. Money is counted under the old system, in pounds, shillings and pence, with twelve pence

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(12d) making up one shilling (1s) and twenty shillings (20s) making up one pound (£1).

I have used a short citation system in order to keep endnotes to a minimum. All works from which quotations are taken are listed in the Bibliography. Authors and short titles only are supplied in the text or notes. Plays cited are listed in the bibliography by author, or by name in the case of anonymous plays, with an indication of the edition from which citation is taken. Notes clarify only ambiguous cases. Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare* unless otherwise indicated.

For simplicity and ease of reading, a decision was taken to provide author, title and date for shaded quotations, but not to note actual editions and sources of reference, which would have cluttered the boxes or extended the notes very considerably. Act, scene and line numbers are given for plays where possible, but some texts cited from early editions or from the Chadwyck-Healy database, compiled from such early editions, have no act divisions, sometimes no scene divisions and occasionally no line numbering. Where no author is cited, the text is anonymous.

I would like to acknowledge a particular debt to the collection of theatrical records assembled by Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram in *English Professional Theatre 1530–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). This is a wonderful resource, from which a significant number of my quotations from early documents are taken, and to which serious students of early drama should return if they wish to understand some of the documents quoted here within a fuller context. It may also be worth observing here that the reason for the bias towards fuller quotation from early modern than from medieval documents is due to the much greater fullness of extant records in the later period. My debt to the collected and ongoing volumes of the REED (Records of Early English Drama) project is as great as to Wickham, Berry and Ingram, but evidence of medieval theatrical practice is disparate and locally specific in such a way as to make its relevance often particular to the individual instance and less easily extractable from that context.

I wish to thank the University of Nottingham and the Arts and Humanities Research Board (now Council) for giving me the time to write this book. Above all, I am grateful to those friends and colleagues who have read drafts, offered advice, or discussed with me so many of the problems raised by a book of this kind, in particular Andy Gurr, Brean Hammond, Julie Sanders, Simon Shepherd, Sarah Stanton, Peter Thomson and Greg Walker. My apologies to them for any errors that remain.

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Abbreviations

CHD	Chadwyck-Healy database of English drama, http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/
DTRB	Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)
EEBO	Early English Books Online, http://eebo.chadwyck.com/
EETS	Early English Text Society
ELH	*English Literary History*
ELR	*English Literary Renaissance*
EPT	Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry and William Ingram, eds., *English Professional Theatre 1530–1660*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000
ES	E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923)
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition

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