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978-0-521-80914-6 - Theatres and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe

William N. West

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Theatres and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe

In early modern Europe, before a “theatre” was a playhouse, it was an encyclopedia. In this book William N. West explores what “theatre” meant to medieval and Renaissance writers and critics, and places Renaissance drama, for the first time, within the powerfully influential context of the encyclopedic writings which were being produced at the time. Recent criticism has recognized that the culture of early modern Europe was a theatre culture, fascinated by performance of all kinds, but it was also an encyclopedic culture, obsessed with collecting and sorting knowledge. Early encyclopedias presented themselves as textual theatres, in which everything knowable could be represented in concrete, visible form. Medieval and Renaissance plays, similarly, took encyclopedic themes as their topics: the mysteries of nature, universal history, the world of learning. But instead of transmitting authorized knowledge quickly and unambiguously, as it was supposed to, the theatre created a situation in which ordinary experience could become a communicable source of authority.

By the mid seventeenth century, the theatre had become the model for the reformation of the encyclopedia and the encyclopedia for the theatre, as knowledge itself came to be seen as a kind of performance. West covers a wide range of works, from the canonical encyclopedic texts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance to Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, and Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, and provides a fascinating picture of the cultural and intellectual life of the period.

WILLIAM N. WEST has taught at the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford University, the University of Nevada, Reno, and is currently Assistant Professor of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has published on encyclopedism, the arts of memory, symbolic economies, and the epistemology of early modern performance. He is currently working on a book about the significance of confusion and misunderstanding in early modern drama.

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Since the 1970s there has been a broad and vital reinterpretation of the nature of literary texts, a move away from formalism to a sense of literature as an aspect of social, economic, political, and cultural history. While the earliest New Historical work was criticized for a narrow and anecdotal view of history, it also served as an important stimulus for post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytical work, which in turn has increasingly informed and redirected it. Recent writing on the nature of representation, the historical construction of gender and of the concept of identity itself, on theatre as a political and economic phenomenon, and on the ideologies of art generally, reveals the breadth of the field. *Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture* is designed to offer historically oriented studies of Renaissance literature and theatre which make use of the insights afforded by theoretical perspectives. The view of history envisioned is above all a view of our own history, a reading of the Renaissance for and from our own time.

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“But one who tries every study indifferently, and who goes at his task of learning gladly and cannot get enough of it, him we shall justly call the lover of wisdom (*philosophon*), shall we not?”

Then Glaukon said, “You will then be giving the name to a numerous and strange band, for all the lovers of spectacles (*philotheamones*) seem to me to be the sort that delight in learning something, and those who love to listen to things are very strange to be reckoned among the lovers of wisdom. They would not go willingly to a serious debate or any such entertainment, but as if they had farmed out their ears to listen to every chorus in the land, they run about to all the Dionysiac festivals, never missing one, either in the towns or in the country. Are we to call all these, then, and those who like to learn something, and all the practitioners of minor arts, lovers of wisdom (*philosophous*)?”

“Not at all,” I said, “but they are like lovers of wisdom (*homoious men philosophois*).”

“The true lovers of wisdom, then,” he asked, “whom do you mean?”

(*Tous de alêthinous, ephê, tinas legeis?*)

“The lovers of the spectacle of truth,” I said.

(*Tous tês alêtheias, ên d’ egô, philotheamonas.*) Plato, *Republic* V, 475c–e

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No person alone can make an encyclopedia, a theatre, or, as I have been discovering, a book. I am happy to say that my understanding of how knowledge is created by the sharing of information socially has deepened empirically as well as theoretically over the course of this project. At times it seemed as if I must have buttonholed everyone I knew at least once with some of these ideas, but in particular I am grateful to the leads, stray thoughts, moral encouragement, and intellectual and personal generosity of Elizabeth Allen, Albert Ascoli, Shadi Bartsch, Erin Carlston, Jennifer Colbert, Jody Enders, Bettina Gockel, Anthony Grafton, Tim Hampton, Stephen Hartnett, Bill Ingram, Giuseppe Mazzotta, Kathy McCarthy, Stephen Mullaney, Alex Nagel, Catherine Paul, Jim Porter, David Quint, Catrien Santing, Mike Schoenfeldt, Betsy Sears, Jeremy Smith, Terri Tinkle, and J. B. Voorbij. Some of them may not even know how much their contributions helped me in putting a shape to my ideas or in inspiring me to set them down on paper, but all of them have become part of this venture.

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Note on texts

Where it is relevant to my discussion, I have included the approximate date of appearance of works and plays in parentheses after the title. For written works, this is the date of composition or widespread circulation, as far as can be ascertained; for plays, it is the approximate date of performance. In either case, this date can differ significantly from the date of publication or the dates of the texts I cite in the Bibliography.

I have standardized English spelling throughout the text, but somewhat idiosyncratically. I have not modernized Middle English, although this has meant making some risky judgment calls, because it seemed too close to rewriting. I have also felt free to leave non-standard spelling in texts when it seemed to me to pun or suggest layers of meaning, e.g., Jonson's "Laborinth" (presumably because one must "labor in't") for Labyrinth.

Where possible, I have quoted from published translations, although some of them I have silently modified. When I have used my own translation for a work that has a modern translation in the Bibliography, I have noted it in the appropriate footnote. Translations from works with no published translation are my own.