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978-1-107-01356-8 - The Cambridge Introduction to Early Modern Drama, 1576–1642

Julie Sanders

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*The Cambridge Introduction to  
Early Modern Drama, 1576–1642*

Engaging and stimulating, this *Introduction* provides a fresh vista of the early modern theatrical landscape. Chapters are arranged according to key genres (tragedy, revenge, history play, pastoral and romantic comedy, city comedy, satire and tragicomedy), punctuated by a series of focused case studies on topics ranging from repertoire to performance style, political events to the physical body of the actor, and from plays in print to the space of the playhouse. Julie Sanders encourages readers to engage with particular dramatic moments, such as opening scenes, skulls onstage or the conventions of disguise, and to apply the materials and methods contained in the book in inventive ways. A timeline and frequent cross-references provide continuity. Always alert to the possibilities of performance, Sanders reveals the remarkable story of early modern drama not through individual writers, but through repertoires and company practices, helping to relocate and re-imagine canonical plays and playwrights.

Julie Sanders is Chair of English Literature and Drama at the University of Nottingham, and currently Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at its Ningbo, China campus.

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*For John, again, still, always.*

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‘They came in wherries, on horseback and on foot, from Cheapside and White Chapel, Westminster and Newington, Clerkenwell and Shoreditch, deserting for an interval their workbenches, their accounts, their studies, their sports, their suits at law, and their suits at court. They preferred the pleasures of the Globe to the pleasures of Brentford and Ware, and if they did not pass coldly by the ale-house door, at least they preserved enough pennies to pay the gatherers.’

Alfred Harbage, *As They Liked It* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 3

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## *Preface: an outline of approaches taken*

This is a study of the early modern drama that was written and staged in England between 1576 and 1642. It is determinedly a study all about making connections. Focusing on the commercial theatre context which arose from the opening of a series of purpose-built playhouses in London from 1567 onwards, and the particular acting practices, companies and residences that they brought into being with them, it nevertheless connects that particular theatrical world with the wider performance cultures of the court, of noble households and estates, and of civic communities, including that of the burgeoning capital city of London itself. Presented in part through chapters organised by genre, the book is punctuated by a series of focused case studies on topics ranging from repertoire to performance style, from political event to the physical body of the actor, and from plays in print to the space of the playhouse. These case studies enable the reader to zoom in on particular moments, attitudes and aesthetic practices that contribute to the overall story of the remarkable body of drama that was produced at this time. The study as a whole, however, asks readers to think about drama not through individual playwrights or plays but through repertoires and company practices, placing those playwrights and their plays into a highly collaborative and competitive environment of cultural production.

Individual chapters are deliberately not organised chronologically, or by strict periodisation, although the relevance of terms like ‘Elizabethan’, ‘Jacobean’ and ‘Caroline’ when thinking about early modern drama will be explored in the Introduction. The swerve away from a neat linear history is performed in order to allow the rich lines of connection and synergy between those plays staged in the 1590s and those performed in the 1630s and 1640s to emerge in fresh and unrestricted ways. Historical context remains important, nevertheless, to the meanings being argued for and the activities being described. This context is accounted for both in terms of defining the broader aspects of the labels we might place on plays dating in composition and first performance from certain decades and identifying key aspects of certain reigns and moments – work done in the Introduction – and in explorations of

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specific cultural and political contexts in individual case studies. A supporting Chronology is provided at the back of this volume in order to assist readers in understanding and applying that historical context when looking at individual plays.

It is always worth knowing when a play is likely to have been composed and first performed since, as one specific case study will argue (K), there is often much to say about the cultural and political field from which a play emerges and to which it is inevitably seen to respond. For this reason, I have endeavoured to provide a likely date of composition (even though this is sometimes accompanied by a telltale question mark indicating a certain fluidity of view on this matter) on an initial mention of any specific play and this material is repeated in the Chronology. Equally though, thinking in terms of repertoire, as the connective approach of this study invariably does, challenges us to think about plays in an ongoing relationship with a company and indeed with audiences and we would do well to avoid the fetishisation of first performances in any account of a play. Where does the story of the performance history of a single play begin and end? When plays were revived at a much later date in a repertoire, sometimes years, even decades later, parts would be played and indeed reinterpreted by different actors. Sometimes the different print and manuscript versions of these plays are evidence in themselves of this accretive biography, of how a play changes over time. Plays are also likely to have moved even within a single week or month between venues and therefore to different contexts, with court commissions of performances of popular commercial theatre plays being standard practice, and a regular need for provincial touring on the part of companies like the Chamberlain's/King's Men when the public playhouses were closed during times of plague outbreaks and alternative sources of revenue had to be sought; the 'text' such as it was would in these cases undergo further shifts and changes in the process. And it was not always or necessarily only successful plays that got revised or adapted for future performances: some plays find their moment much later in their life cycle. A prime example, referred to in more detail in Chapters 4 and 7, is John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess*, which flopped in 1608 when first performed (probably by the Children of the Blackfriars) but was revived with huge success by the King's Men in the 1630s when Queen Henrietta Maria's neoplatonic-influenced court proved more receptive to pastoral tragicomedy as a form and influenced the repertoire of public theatre venues in a similar vein.

The print life of a play is another whole new way of being in the world that changes the ways in which a work might be categorised or understood, and could even impact its future fate within the repertoire. Certainly, if a play was a resounding popular success on a first performance, with good box office

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receipts to boot, it was likely to be revived quite swiftly. That is one way of describing or charting success and popularity, yet we also know of plays that were booed from the stage on their first performances (Ben Jonson's *The New Inn* in 1629 is an all too famous example)<sup>1</sup> but went on to enjoy a recuperative afterlife in print, appearing in private libraries and collections and feasibly even being performed in amateur household performances (for a fuller discussion of this particular phenomenon, see the Conclusion).

By thinking about plays in relationship to each other in repertoire in this way, then, we can also start to make better sense of the collaborative writing contexts of early modern theatre. Professional playwrights wrote somewhat to order; a businessman like Philip Henslowe, entrepreneur-manager of the Rose Theatre in Southwark, could make a case for the kind of work he wanted in a particular season from a Shakespeare or a Jonson. Furthermore, certain writers with specialism and expertise in specific aspects of playwriting and dramaturgy – plotting or comic scenes or spectacle for example – might be combined to write a single play in unison. William Shakespeare appears in this study, then, as part of the broader landscape of early modern theatrical creativity; importantly, not as a standout figure but as one working playwright among others, as someone responding to changes in fashion and styles of writing, to the possibilities and even restrictions of new playing spaces, and to what Rosalyn Knutson has called 'the politics of company commerce'.<sup>2</sup>

In explicating the rationale for the way in which material is selected and ordered here, I need to return to the important if knotty issue of genre. While the Introduction to this volume, and many of the chapters that follow, make the case for the understanding and indeed categorisation of early modern drama through an understanding of issues of space, place and time, the chapters themselves have been organised by genre. Tragedies, histories, comedies and the significant subgenres of pastoral and romance, revenge drama, city comedy and satirical comedy, as well as the hybrid tragicomedy, are significant ways of thinking about the plays that were produced for the early modern commercial theatre. As Jean E. Howard has indicated, 'genre was a key concept for organising textual production in the early modern period'; she continues with the point that 'genre indicated the implicit system that made one kind of text distinguishable from another in the relational field'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the easiest way to explain this is to think about a playgoer heading to the Rose Theatre in the 1590s or to the Blackfriars Theatre in the 1620s. Aware that they are going to see a 'tragedy' or indeed a 'tragicomedy', this thought is already shaping their approach to and expectation of the performance before they have even reached the theatre. Many plays openly acknowledged this kind of expectation,

sometimes satisfying it: the opening Chorus to Shakespeare's *The Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* tells us after all that the 'star-crossed lovers take their life' (Prologue, 6). A play may equally opt to surprise those expectations; it may find its creative energy from twisting or subverting generic expectations and conventions or from bringing them into sometimes dissonant dialogue with conventions from a wholly different genre (revenge tragedy's fondness for macabre comedy is a case in point). The collaborative writing conditions already described and explored in more detail in Case study J fostered this opportunity for generic encounters as playwrights with skills in tragic and comic writing were brought into conversation with one another (for example, see the relationship between main plot and subplot in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling* in 1622).

Janette Dillon notes that what we are dealing with most often when attempting to describe genre in the early modern period is 'overlap and blurring of boundaries' but she adds that 'Genre and expectation are mutually shaping.'<sup>4</sup> If we accept that, as Jean Howard puts it, genre was always 'provisional and productive' in the context of early modern theatre, we can nevertheless uncover much about developments, innovations and revisiting of genre and tradition as they were carried out by early modern playwrights in response to new conditions of playing and performance.<sup>5</sup> In chapters organised notionally by genre, that provisionality will be all too evident in the way that this volume as a whole constantly seeks to find overlaps and to blur boundaries in ways that deliberately threaten to undo its own categorisations. While individual case studies can be read for themselves alone, the volume as a whole undoubtedly benefits from being read in a linear fashion since the chapters, like the plays discussed, constantly refer back to each other and make connections. Genres do not respect borders and the reader is advised to enjoy a journey through texts and times that will quite deliberately loop back on itself.

Genre is, of course, just one particular way of organising the material that is presented here. The interspersed case studies are designed to offer a plethora of other ways of working and other ways of approaching these texts. Presenting in brief some of the cutting-edge scholarship of recent years, the thirteen case studies offer a panoply of approaches to apply not only to the texts analysed here but also to those for which there was sadly no space for detailed discussion. I fully expect, having made that bold statement, that individual readers and users might opt for a different route-map to the one I have set out, and may indeed choose different points of entry rather than simply following the chapters in order. On their own perambulation through the material they may well end up in different places to those I imagined. Like early modern playgoing, it may

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in the end just depend on the weather on the day: the opening case study is intended as an exercise in phenomenological study which suggests and stresses the value of the subjective as well as the objective in scholarship. As long as you enjoy and learn from the process of travelling through this book, it will be a job well done.

## *Acknowledgements*

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## Abbreviations and editions

All quotations from Brome, Jonson, Ford, Marlowe, Marston, Middleton and Shakespeare are from the following editions and are referenced by individual play title in the text.

<i>Brome Online</i>	<i>The Complete Works of Richard Brome Online</i> gen. ed. Richard Cave, <a href="http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/brome">www.hrionline.ac.uk/brome</a>
CWBJ	<i>The Cambridge Works of Ben Jonson</i> , gen. eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 2012)
<i>Ford</i>	John Ford, <i>'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays</i> , ed. Marion Lomax (Oxford University Press, 1995)
<i>Marlowe</i>	Christopher Marlowe, <i>Doctor Faustus and Other Plays</i> , ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford University Press, 1995)
<i>Marston</i>	<i>The Selected Plays of John Marston</i> , ed. MacDonald P. Jackson and Michael Neill (Cambridge University Press, 1986)
<i>Oxford Middleton</i>	<i>Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works</i> , gen. eds. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford University Press, 2010)
<i>Oxford Shakespeare</i>	<i>The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works</i> , gen. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford University Press, 1988)

The following individual editions of plays are used extensively. All other references to individual editions of plays are provided in notes to the main text.

<i>The Cardinal</i>	James Shirley, <i>The Cardinal</i> , ed. E. M. Yearling (Manchester University Press, 1986)
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<i>The Duchess of Malfi</i>	John Webster, <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> , ed. Leah S. Marcus (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2009)
<i>Edward IV</i>	Thomas Heywood, <i>The First and Second Parts of King Edward IV</i> , ed. Richard Rowland (Manchester University Press, 2005)
<i>Galatea</i>	John Lyly, <i>Galatea and Midas</i> , ed. George K. Hunter and David Bevington (Manchester University Press, 2000)
<i>The Lady of Pleasure</i>	James Shirley, <i>The Lady of Pleasure</i> , ed. Ronald Huebert (Manchester University Press, 1987)
<i>A New Way to Pay Old Debts</i>	Philip Massinger, <i>A New Way to Pay Old Debts</i> , ed. T. W. Craik (London: A & C Black/Norton, 1999)
<i>Philaster</i>	Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, <i>Philaster</i> , ed. Suzanne Gossett (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2009)
<i>The Shoemaker's Holiday</i>	Thomas Dekker, <i>The Shoemaker's Holiday</i> , ed. R. L. Smallwood and Stanley Wells (Manchester University Press, 1979)
<i>The Spanish Tragedy</i>	Thomas Kyd, <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i> , ed. J. R. Mulryne (London: Arnold, 1989)
<i>The White Devil</i>	John Webster, <i>The White Devil</i> , ed. John Russell Brown (Manchester University Press, 1985)
<i>The Witch of Edmonton</i>	William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford &c, <i>The Witch of Edmonton</i> , in Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (eds.), <i>Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays</i> (Manchester University Press, 1986)