

Leslie Thomson. *Discoveries on the Early Modern Stage: Contexts and Conventions.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 265. Hardback \$99.99. ISBN: 9781108494472. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108590488>

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Leslie Thomson's new book on moments of discovery in early modern drama begins by laying out the definitions and limits of discovery, explaining her methodology, and outlining the different kinds and uses of discoveries on early modern stages. In so doing, Thomson sets out to reinvigorate our thinking on what constitutes an onstage discovery and how dramatists used them, and to lay the foundation for her readers to recognize that understanding discoveries 'is fundamental to an appreciation of the degree to which the plays are artefacts of another era' (5). She drives home what she sees as the two major kinds of discovery, 'disguise-discoveries and discovery scenes' as being driven by 'the basic ideas that truth will be revealed in time and justice will prevail' (9) but aims to recast this conversation outside the purview of whether or not the so-called 'discovery space' was a common feature of early modern playhouses. For evidence of moments of discovery, she pulls from an exhaustive list of more than 150 different early modern plays, situating her assertions in an unquestionable position of authority. Thomson's thorough survey feeds productively into the discussion of what constitutes a moment of discovery and what characteristics these moments and scenes share across different years and different playwrights. Here, particularly, she focuses her thinking on the formal and generic uses of discoveries, noting that nearly half of all discoveries 'occur in the final act' of their plays (29). In sum, Thomson's formative contextual work on stage discoveries is the base on which she rests her assertion that discoveries 'are essential to the way a play dramatizes and explores such interrelated matters as deception, privacy, secrecy and truth; knowledge, justice and renewal' (1).

After identifying what constitutes a discovery on the early modern stage, their different kinds and uses, and some fascinating statistics, Thomson turns her attention to discoveries' driving forces of time and truth and then lays out secular and religious imagery that would have shaped how early modern audiences understood and responded to onstage discoveries. Highlighting Christianity's saturation of early modern England, Thomson suggests 'that the imagery and performance of discoveries in the drama of the period often echo the language and rituals associated with the revelations at the heart of Christianity' (81). In

this section, Thomson points to artistic representations of religious figures and moments, as well as the church service itself, noting particularly the similar use of curtains in drama and religion: 'The overt artifice of the curtains makes viewers conscious of the act of revelation, of themselves as observers, and of what is being revealed. In this it functions much like the staging of discoveries in plays' (90). From here, Thomson moves through the dramatic language of seeing and believing that echoes Christian teachings; considers the onstage places of discovery, including beds, chairs, tombs, caves, and shops; explores particularly inventive or complex discoveries; and ends with an appendix that asks, 'Was There a Central Opening in the Tiring House Wall?' (213).

A particular strength of the book is Thomson's incredible number and quality of examples of discoveries. In her discussion of discoveries that rely on chairs, she lists no fewer than thirteen plays, from *Henry IV, Part One* (1597) to Davenant's *The Distresses* (1639), noting, in turn, how chairs in discoveries signal seclusion, privacy, and occasionally location, but that 'these discoveries are of figures who are somehow immobile — most are seated, sometimes asleep, sometimes dead' (166). While this section lists rapid-fire the instances of chairs in discoveries, her treatment of beds in discoveries uses nearly as many examples but provides more analysis of each instance. After laying out some representative bed discoveries in *The First Part of the Contention* (1591) and Folio *Henry VI, Part Two* (1623), Peele's *Edward I* (1591), and *Tamburlaine, Part Two* (1588), Thomson provides a particularly fulsome account of the bed discovery in *Othello* (1620) before concluding with examples from Marston's *Sophonisba* (1605), Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, Suckling's *Brennoralt* (1646), and the anonymous *Tom a Lincoln* (1599). Her discussion of *Othello* notes that, typical of Shakespearean discoveries, 'what is revealed and how it is revealed are directly relevant to the concerns of the particular play', and *Othello* is the best example 'in which the idea that truth will be revealed in time and the dramatic action of discovery are given tragic specificity' (170). This attention to detail and abundance of evidence is part and parcel of Thomson's work throughout and leaves the reader with no question about the particular requirements, staging, efficacy, or frequency of each kind of discovery. Thomson's ideas about 'how these original circumstances might have influenced or determined a playwright's use of the device; how the action itself could have been emphasized in performance ... and how these elements would thus have affected the playgoers' understanding of what they saw and heard' are particularly effective when supported by her rich body of evidence (8).

If one must take issue with any part of this book, it is that she closes with her discussion of whether or not early modern playhouses commonly had discovery

spaces instead of situating this analysis early on. While Thomson does briefly explain her reasoning for ending with this topic rather than opening with it ('it is largely unrelated to my ideas about the uses of discovery scenes'), a non-specialist reader might benefit from a slightly more thorough account of discovery spaces earlier, perhaps in the opening chapter (8). Without it, questions about staging might consistently arise throughout. Of course, nothing would prevent a curious reader from beginning their exploration of the text in the appendix.

As a fresh perspective on staged discoveries, Thomson's text is valuable, but where it really shines is in its immense body of primary sources — not only plays, but works of art and non-dramatic texts as well, providing the reader with as close to an immersion in the early modern world as possible. This book undeniably sits within the realm of theatre and theatre history, but also contributes to art history and cultural history. As a resource for scholars thinking about staging, stage directions, art, culture, discovery spaces, props, or the business of early modern theatre, this book will surely shine new light on the topic of discoveries and lead its readers to generative new ideas and conclusions.

