

## Book Reviews

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**John H. Astington.** *Actors and Acting in Shakespeare's Time: The Art of Stage Playing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp vii, 252.

ELEANOR LOWE  
Oxford Brookes University

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John H. Astington's book opens with Edward Alleyn's establishment of the College of God's Gift in Dulwich, funded by Alleyn's success in the theatre business. For modern theatre historians, Dulwich College (as it is now named) has preserved the gift of Alleyn's papers and Philip Henslowe's invaluable accounts. The school is an appropriate and representative symbol of the book's main themes: pedagogy, theatre history, success in stage playing, and relationships amongst the acting community. Another theme that pervades the book is benefaction and inheritance, an attempt to legitimize the player's art beyond permanent theatre architecture and company patronage. Astington likens early modern actor training to an informal (i.e. unbound by law) apprenticeship. As much as he notes Alleyn's beneficence he also points out that this success was based on the multiple efforts of those who came before; as a result of the increased opportunities open to those talented at acting, the writing of drama and organization of theatre all changed radically as the profession developed and gained momentum.

In chapter one, Astington evocatively explores attitudes towards players and sensitively tries to pinpoint this transient craft: "The art of acting is to provide a physical something, visible, audible, and memorable, to give force and body to what on paper is merely "a speech" (18). He discusses early modern names for and descriptions of performing as a way in to examining how it was conceived; he considers 'natural' acting (and how its definition changed through time), acting as a mirror, counterfeiting and its etymological variations, and the notion of actors as shadows and their art as 'limning' or painting. Drawing on multiple sources, Astington works hard to capture this transient process. The writing moves quickly from sources such as

*Hamlet* to Stanislavski and back again; the reader is expected to pay attention and keep up. Astington does not simply present well-rehearsed, well-known quotations and sources, but examines them through a subtler, more exacting lens. What emerges from his discussion (particularly of Hamlet's experience of *The Murder of Gonzago, or The Mousetrap*) is that as much as acting is a skill in itself, the evaluation of that skill is in the eye of the beholder and audience reception is key to performance success (whether determined by appreciation of actors' skills or of the playwright's dramatization of the characters' endeavours).

Chapter two, 'Playing and Education', examines the interconnectivity between performative arts and the formal education system of grammar school, university, and inns of court (plus two choral institutions) through the importance placed on oratory. Exercises in performance offered students opportunities to develop their skills in 'pronunciation, clarity of enunciation, vocal emphasis and control, respect for rhythm and pitch, and the accompanying "action" of facial expression and bodily stance and gesture' (40); much as today, drama developed valuable transferrable skills. Astington provides several examples of performances by school pupils in London and throughout England. He gives a very detailed explanation of the different choral training schools, their locations, masters, and purposes, plus useful information on university drama from the performance perspective (key for those wanting to find out more about acting in the universities or non-playhouse based dramatic activity) and on the inns of court, exploring especially the withdrawal of inn members from public performance.

The third chapter offers fascinating information on the interrelationship between London companies, apprentices, the theatre, and finance. Using the examples of Richard Perkins and James Bristow, Astington suggests that apprentices — that is, younger players — were not only learning on the job, but were also a valuable asset to their theatre companies. They were not necessarily taught by masters but by their colleagues in the larger company. He concludes that as well as offering them a traditional training opportunity, the theatrical companies developed close bonds with their apprentices, who were financial assets to the company in their ability to play female roles (even if only for a couple of years, although some continued for much longer). The chapter demonstrates that 'actors themselves were intimately involved, socially and economically, in the institutions and practices of the city of London' (106), including apprenticeship. Throughout the book actors' relationships with the city appear as symbiotic ones, since a number of the actors

were also freemen of London trades; for example, John Heminges was a grocer and Andrew Cane was a practicing goldsmith.

Chapter four discusses the skill and practice involved in the actors' art, beginning by focusing on Edward Alleyn's performance as Cleanthes and four other characters in George Chapman's *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*. As Astington points out, Alleyn's differing characterizations of these multiple parts used minimal costuming and little make-up, so that his main tool remained his physical and vocal skill. Astington uses two case studies to explore issues of casting and doubling (where information is known) in *The Battle of Alcazar* and *The Second Part of the Seven Deadly Sins*. In this and several other ways he makes sense of detailed information, either by focusing on an individual actor (for example, Burbage) or on specific plays. He is particularly good at developing our understanding of playing comic roles, first by referencing modern comedians such as John Cleese. 'It needs only a certain movement of the face or intonation of the voice', he writes, 'for us to begin to laugh' in anticipation of further laughter (121). But Astington also points out the importance of ensemble work in comic performance: a clowning specialist, such as the one who played Bottom, also needs his supporting team.

Astington's exploration throughout the book of key company actors builds to an understanding of the ensemble as crucial to the business of playing in chapter five, 'Players at Work'. For example, Cane in *Holland's Leaguer* was the star actor, yet the success of his performance relied on the teamwork of four supporting actors. Astington demonstrates through this example how an apprentice might perform onstage alongside his master; for example, Cane played Trimalchio to his apprentice John Wright's Millicent. The cast list for *Holland's Leaguer* appears as a multi-layered theatrical resource; beneath the *dramatis personae*, superficially segregated by gender and status, careful excavation reveals the complex relationships between masters and apprentices, lead older males, lead younger males, clowns, and females. By exploring individual biographies, Astington manages to build a composite impression of the companies' emphasis on ensemble work and the power of the troupe. Using *Holland's Leaguer*, Astington exhibits the 'balance between senior and apprentice roles in comedy, where female parts are so important' (156). Apprentices in a theatre company were 'training' in women's roles while also fulfilling an essential function for the efficacy of the troupe. Astington points out, moreover, that not all those who bound apprentices were practising actors themselves; figures such as Heminges and John Shank may

be argued to have had an important influence on the King's Men without directly being involved with productions onstage.

Astington presents an artistic community active within London's trade guilds and using their systems of apprenticeship. The book offers a complex, lively, absorbing sense of the acting profession, its 'art' and social networks. At the end, perhaps in case we get too caught up in the romance of the early modern acting troupe, Astington reminds us 'that what they did was work, and exacting, difficult, and not entirely predictable work' (186). To emphasize the actor's work and its product, Astington quotes from Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*: 'Think ye see / The very persons of our noble story / As they were living' (187). In this vein, Astington provides a helpful 'Appendix of Principal Actors 1558–1660' that offers an excellent resource for those seeking deeper, detailed information. His work is suitable for advanced undergraduates and graduate students upwards, since the writing assumes core knowledge of early modern drama and theatre practice.

**Janette Dillon. *Shakespeare and the Staging of English History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp 160.**

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*Shakespeare and the Staging of English History* is the latest volume from the innovative 'Oxford Shakespeare Topics' published by the Oxford University Press, a series which brings together some of the most perspicacious voices in contemporary Shakespearean scholarship. In this slim though detailed analysis, Janette Dillon 'encourage[s] sustained attention to stage directions and stage pictures' (1), approaching the very practical topic of how Shakespeare staged his history plays. In doing so, she reiterates an easily forgotten though vital point regarding Shakespeare's theatrical canon: that it is first and foremost dramaturgical and written for the popular stage. While many readers are understandably drawn to the early modern playwright's superlative skill in poetry and rhetoric, Dillon shows that Shakespeare also cultivated a supreme sensitivity to the dynamics of performativity and staging from very early on in his career as a playwright (all