

of re-presenting acts of violence against women also marks its useful contribution to these debates in theatre and performance studies more broadly and to feminist performance criticism in particular.

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**Paul Whitfield White.** *Drama and Religion in English Provincial Society, 1485–1660.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp 247.

White's monograph provides a much-needed survey of not just religious, but also a significant amount of so-called 'secular' theatrical activity — the distinction is revealed to be illusory — in early modern provincial England. He revises outdated received wisdom in the light of original research and influential recent scholarship in a well-documented volume that is likely to be useful to specialists and generalist instructors alike.

The organization and methodology of the study are perhaps its greatest achievements. First, working only loosely chronologically, White instead takes the importance of 'local conditions of sponsorship, production, and reception' (5) as his rationale for grouping theatrical events 'mainly along institutional lines' (5). The institutions in question are parishes, civic bodies (including religious and trade guilds), universities, private households (including those of ecclesiastical leaders), and traveling troupes. Second — a point not articulated explicitly in his introduction, but just as important to the impact of the book as the first — he builds his argument through a cumulative series of case studies centered on clusters of clearly related, if not always demonstrably linked, pieces of documentary evidence about individual performance events. Readers hoping for a coherent new narrative account of the progress of early English theatre will be disappointed, as will those seeking hypotheses about the probability of wide-spread patterns of theatrical activity based on statistical analyses of surviving (identified) documents. Without ever short-changing his debts to other scholars or to the work of Records of Early English Drama editors in particular, White consistently acknowledges the impossibility of both narrative and statistical generalizations. Instead, he emphasizes the range of often contradictory impacts of a single event as

well as the need to make the most thorough possible analysis of the limited surviving evidence. The result is a rich account of complex, varied, and mutable theatrical activity in the period that defies conventional oppositions of sacred and secular, Protestant and Catholic, high and low brow, literary and performative, or even aesthetic and cultural.

White's strategy on a chapter-by-chapter basis is to provide important counter-examples to older arguments as a means of reinforcing recent scholarship. In his first chapter on parish drama, he demonstrates that even small parishes, alone or in combination with others nearby, were capable of mounting large-scale theatrical productions on the order of *The Castle of Perseverance*. His second chapter, on the impersonation of Robin Hood at parish festivities, demonstrates that the notorious outlaw was in fact an effective fund-raiser for the parish. Between them, the first two chapters make a compelling argument for the essential role that all kinds of theatrical and pseudo-theatrical activity played in the financial health of parishes. White's third chapter takes on the notion that Biblical Cycle plays were 'irreducibly Catholic and therefore defiantly resistant to Protestant adaptation' (68), demonstrating that at Coventry, Norwich, and Chester, at least, the plays as performed were variable and responses to them mixed if not contentious.

Chapter four on Cambridge theatre offers the most vivid and convincing account in the monograph of a community whose political and religious conflicts were inextricably linked to one another and to its drama. This success is admittedly aided by the rich evidence available: three Cambridge play texts (*Pammachius*, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, and *Club Law*) can plausibly be linked to specific performance events and each of these events registers extensively in non-dramatic records as well. That said, the chapter illustrates the strength of White's argumentative strategy throughout the volume: by linking play texts to external evidence of various kinds (financial, legal, and other social documents as well as modern interpretations of them), he is able to hypothesize the meaning of an individual theatrical event and thereby to engage his readers in the question of why the event — and the theatre in general — might have mattered in its own time. Significantly, each Cambridge performance event had a radically different cultural impact than the others, and no simple progression from Catholic to Protestant nor from co-operation to dissention between town and gown emerges.

White's fifth chapter on theatre in noble households demonstrates that Protestant bishops were subject to, and fulfilled, the same obligation as the nobility to provide theatrical entertainment — an element of hospitality — to

neighbors of all social strata. At the same time, however, recusant households in the North were engaging Catholic touring companies (notably the Simpsons) and perhaps even helping to shield them from prosecution. Chapter six, on traveling troupes, considers the relationship between a national witchcraft scandal and the King's Men's possibly propagandistic tour of *The Late Lancashire Witches*.

White begins and ends his book with a consideration of the 1652 production in Whitney of the professional London play *Mucedorus* by the members of the parish of Stanton-Harcourt. Although it falls outside of the main chronological focus of the book (despite its title, the bulk of its discussion concerns events up to the 1630s) the Whitney *Mucedorus* is an ideal instance of the kind of counter-example on which White's argument rests. Was it Catholic? Protestant? Sacred? Secular? Political? Aesthetic? Professional? Amateur? Impossible to say. What we *can* say is that it was a defining event in the life of a community, most likely because all these factors, heightened by the disastrous collapse of the performance venue, were important.

Martin Butler's words (quoted by White) characterize the premise of this study as a whole: 'it was the occasion that shaped the play, not vice versa, and the show was not as much a performance as an event. Its fulfillment depended on a fully social, and not merely theatrical enactment' (141). But White implicitly expands upon Butler's assertion, issuing an invitation to re-examine early modern English provincial theatre as a religio-socio-political *and* aesthetic phenomenon. This book argues that we should in future turn our attention away from categorization and trend analysis and toward detailed, document-based event analysis, and it provides rich examples of the benefits of such a strategy.

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