

Review

Matteo A. Pangallo, *Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare's Theater*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4941-5. 248 pp, £50 (hardback).

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In *Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare's Theater*, Matteo A. Pangallo proposes that the work of non-professional dramatists offers invaluable insight into the consumption of theatre by audiences during the early modern period. Using detailed analysis of plays by individuals such as the highwayman John Clavell and the roguish clerk for the East India Company, Walter Mountfort, the author demonstrates the capability of theatre consumers to draft and revise manuscripts; to understand performance convention and respond to institutional critique and to incorporate verse.

Pangallo explores a time when the audience's relationship with the stage was 'fluid, open and dialogic'. When 'collaboration' could take place on a scale anywhere from 'benign, inward imaginary response[s]' to 'externalized physical and verbal responses' which could change other audience members' (27) experience of the play, to independent exertions of creative authority. The latter category is particularly significant, however, because quite unlike their professional counterparts, amateur plays do not require one to 'deduce' audience expectations. Pangallo argues that they instead permit scholars to 'reveal directly what certain audience members wanted to see, how they thought a script should communicate, and how they thought actors might stage it' (3).

Pangallo's focus is certainly conducive to some of the wider aims of audience and reception studies. After all, the same gatekeeping of theatre and theatrical taste by playwrights that Pangallo establishes is evident today, even if the baton has transferred largely on to theatre critics. One need only witness the bemused bafflement and patronisation extended by the media towards the fans of star Shakespearean performers like Benedict Cumberbatch or Tom Hiddleston to witness the same denigration that playgoers are 'incapable of exercising appropriate, effective dramatic judgement' (61). The state of contemporary theatre is also a particularly resonant corollary for Pangallo's work

given the contentious status of theatre bloggers at a time when traditional arts journalism faces increasing pressure.

Pangallo fails to make these kinds of disciplinary connections explicit in his use of criticism beyond the brief concession that fan fiction ‘offers a loose modern analogy’ to those texts made by playwriting playgoers and one reference to Henry Jenkins. They are present on an implicit level, however; affirmed through his defence of non-professional work. He thus takes aim at the derogatory associations of ‘amateur’ as a descriptor for these playwriting playgoers, noting that such a term elides the potential sophistication of their work; their ability to recognise divergences between their own writing and that of professionals; as well as perhaps most interestingly, punctuating the assumption that the playwriting playgoers are wannabe or failed professionals. As Pangallo writes, ‘Simply because their ends differed [...] we should not think that amateurs necessarily invested a lower level of attention to their work than professionals’ (11).

Evidence of intersections between the professionalised early modern theatre and non-professionals are certainly plentiful and varied, stretching from the works that Pangallo charts through history to the present moment and the increasingly sophisticated texts created by fans online. They are sparsely attended to in criticism, however, and even then tend to reflect users who engage in ‘fan’ behaviour. A later but no less stimulating documentation of this area can be found in Katherine West Scheil’s *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America* (2012), for instance. And although applying an adaptation studies perspective, Valerie Fazel and Louise Geddes’ ‘“Give me your hands if we be friends”: Collaborative authority in Shakespeare fan fiction’ (2016) utilises fan-authored works to similarly reflect the understanding of performance by audiences. *Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare’s Theater* should thus be regarded as a welcome contribution to both of the two disciplines it straddles: early modern studies and audience and reception studies.

If I have one further reservation about the book, though, it is the reference to Shakespeare’s name in the title. It is understandable why this was done. Shakespeare continues to dominate not only scholarship of this period but the teaching of early modern theatre in schools, colleges and universities. The use of Shakespeare’s name thus assures a greater readership for the monograph, propelling it quite deservedly into the hands of those students and academics alike who may not have been so readily ensnared by a more vague title. But the titular emphasis does a disservice to the breadth of texts covered by *Playwriting Playgoers* and it also implies, I would suggest, a possessiveness to Shakespeare’s influence over the early modern theatre.

This is not to say that *Playwriting Playgoers* is without Shakespeare. He is present and used judiciously to colour the professional theatrical world Pangallo’s amateurs write within and to. But when *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appears, for instance, it is used to critique the limits of Shakespeare’s representations of amateurism rather than to affirm the bard as a standard against which playwriting playgoers either erred or toed the line. As

Pangallo writes of the rude mechanicals' preparations for 'The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe':

The professional's attempt to realize comic value from lampooning [... the mechanicals'] incongruity does not provide reliable evidence about actual amateur playwrights. Plays by actual amateurs, in fact, reveal a far more nuanced attempt to appropriate the materials and practices that they, as playgoers, saw the profession using (140).

Moments such as these indeed complement Pangallo's efforts at correcting or challenging assumptions about early modern audiences. It is puzzling then that the authority implied by *Playwriting Playgoers'* title is so thoroughly debunked by the book itself with its diverse and detailed examples of playwriting playgoers mapped onto an equal broad set of professional playwrights of whom Shakespeare is but one of many.

Biographical note:

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References:

- Scheil, Katherine West (2012), *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Fazel, Valerie and Louise Geddes (2016), "'Give me your hands if we be friends": Collaborative authority in Shakespeare fan fiction', *Shakespeare*, Vol 12, No. 3, 274-86.