

Tracing Early Modern Readers: New and Traditional Approaches to Historical Data

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August, Hannah. *Playbooks and their Readers in Early Modern England. Material Readings in Early Modern England*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 270 pages. ISBN 978-1-003-19974-8. Ebk. \$71.17.

The digital age ushered in new research methodologies and expanded the accessibility of historical material beyond imagination in many fields, including early modern studies and book history. However, as Hannah August's monograph and other works in early modern culture and book history point out, this should not mean that traditional research methods are no longer necessary. Not all data are available even in such large and continuously expanding databases as the *Early English Books Online* or other scholarly webpages. Even with thousands of early modern print products and other data becoming widely accessible digitally, interpretation must be complemented by hands-on research, flipping the pages of early modern books in libraries. Investigating the materiality of culture remains indispensable. Hannah August's *Playbooks and their Readers in Early Modern England* is a prime example of recent cutting-edge scholarship in book history, combining digital and archival research, print and manuscript sources. Her monograph maps out what we can say about early modern readers of playbooks with some certainty, while remaining honest about the degrees of probability when it comes to such elusive and ephemeral fields of investigation as the history of reading and early modern handwritten marginalia. The conclusions of the monograph are based on consulting more than five hundred playbooks in different holdings (among others, The British Library, The Folger Shakespeare Library, The National Library of Scotland, The Oxford Bodleian Library), looking for different readers' marks in them, which are rarely—if ever—recorded in library catalogues. This archival and in-person examination is contextualized by the author's reliance on previous findings in the field as well as other, digitally available sources, thus showcasing how present-day cultural historical research balances various sources of information. Therefore, the book has a solid grounding in leading present-day research and proves a rich storehouse of information in the field, even if it shows some points of weakness in presenting findings and sometimes tends to oversimplify interpretation to help easier categorization of data.

The “Introduction” clearly delineates the corpus, the time frame, and the aim of the book: to examine what it meant to “read a play,” that is, to read a (mostly) quarto-sized print edition of a professionally performed play for early modern readers in England and Scotland between 1584 and 1660. The designated period spans almost eight decades from the first print publication of commercial drama (Robert Wilson’s *The Three Ladies of London*, with the title-page designation “as it hath beene publicly played”) to Charles II’s restoration, which launched a new era in theatrical production and consumption after an 18-year-long hiatus, when all theaters had been closed in England. The focus on one print genre, one format (more than two-thirds of playbooks appeared in quarto, making them relatively cheap and portable in an unbound, stab-and-stitched form), and a clearly designated time frame appears reasonable and laudable. However, one of the major shortcomings of the book is that it only occasionally takes into consideration that this is too large a time span to investigate without making careful and due distinctions between very different decades in early modern English culture. The early boom of professional London theaters in the 1590s under Queen Elizabeth I, followed by a gradually changing cultural climate in the first two decades of Jacobean rule, can only be compared to the late Caroline period of James Shirley (after 1625) with careful distinctions. August’s claims of corresponding data become even more problematic when these earlier phases are lumped together with what happened in the theater-less decades of the 1640s and 1650s after the Puritans closed all professional theaters in 1642. Although there are references to how marketing and readerly considerations changed within these almost eighty years, findings are too often combined without due distinction to fit categories and conclusions, especially in Chapters 3 and 4 (“How were plays read? Part one: Extractive reading”; “How were plays read? Part two: Using, marking, annotating”), which discuss the author’s fresh readings of well-known dramatic extracts in manuscripts and her original findings of readers’ marks in playbooks.

The “Introduction” and the first two chapters (“Who read plays?”, “Why read plays?”) mostly offer an informative summary of previous scholarship in the field, citing all the major scholars and publications by Roger Chartier, Peter Stallybrass, Zachary Lesser, Alan B. Farmer, Holger Syme, Emma Smith, Heidi Brayman Hackel, just to mention a few of them. Therefore, this part of the book becomes a little too dense with information and is hard to read with such copious footnote material. Nevertheless, August makes very important claims as well, as she calls attention to the significance of the early modern “continuum of literacies” (in Brayman Hackel’s phrasing,

11), besides emphasizing the role of printed paratextual material in playbooks to orientate and control readers. She also points out the potential dangers of traditional approaches in book history. Such pitfalls include the distortional effect of too much emphasis on Shakespeare-related material (according to August's numbers, out of almost six hundred playbooks of the period only 68 were by Shakespeare), or the preference of discussing elite male readers ("gentlemen readers") as opposed to ordinary readers of the period, among them women or less educated people, belonging to the "middling sorts" (such as, artisans, yeomen, servants, shopkeepers). Here August also clarifies what publication in quarto meant regarding affordability and circulation outside London, even though she enters into an unnecessary argument with other scholars regarding the traditional price (sixpence) and usual size of a playbook. These passages are neither too convincing nor supported by enough evidence, so they do not mean a valuable addition to the field.

These chapters also introduce the three main claims of the book. First, as she proposes, playbooks were popular reading material since they were read, bought, borrowed, and scribbled into continuously throughout the period, even though they never comprised more than ten percent of the print market. August seems to avoid the word "popular" intentionally, claiming that "the usefulness of the concept 'popularity' has been thrown out by numerous scholars" (3), which is neither a correct claim nor a wise choice. A more careful consideration of what "popular" meant in these decades and how the concept and content of popular culture evolved in the commercial print and theater worlds might have helped balance some of the claims of the later chapters.

August's second major contention is that readers turned to playbooks as to other reading materials, only rarely considering their theatrical origin. Although we have records of playbooks being read out by readers in smaller groups (August mentions Edward Derrington), the majority of evidence points to readers using playbooks as other quarto-sized books, showing the same modes of engagement with them from extracting wise or witty sayings and highlighting erotic or other amusing material to scribbling and inserting original material (owners' marks, lists, poems, records of family events). The so-called "commonplace book" culture of the time, originating in Humanist education, was readily applicable to playbook readers as well. They mined these texts for moral and linguistic profit, which is shown by August's fresh readings of the extracts made by three such well-known educated male readers of the time: gentleman reader Edward Pudsey (1573–ca.1612), Scottish poet William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649), and poet-

preacher Abraham Wright (1611–1690) in Chapter 3. She pays close attention to changes in their handwriting, how these readers imitated playbook typefaces in different hands, how they changed performative markers for recycling them in personal communication, or to use them for their own poetic purposes, that is, how they adhered to and transformed the Erasmian tenet of commonplacing for rhetorical and moral profit, complementing received wisdom with entertaining bawdy or misogynistic extracts.

The third important argument of the book is that playbooks were bought, borrowed, and used by a heterogeneous readership, even if in most cases we can only speculate about the historical identity of a reader, especially in the case of people belonging to the middling or lower sorts, who did not leave any other historical trace. In the last chapter different types of marginalia by these unknown readers are inspiringly discussed, even though putting them into clearly defined categories regarding how “theatrical” the readers’ response is appears somewhat more limiting than helpful and remains ambiguous by its own nature, since we may only guess at early modern readers’ intentions.

The book offers numerous valuable discussions which are supported by original and innovative research, for instance, the readerly expectations based on authors’ names, or the tension between publishers targeting wide audiences and authors trying to tailor their work to a specific readerly group, with a focus on Thomas Heywood and James Shirley. On the other hand, some claims of the book are easily confuted, like the awareness of Horace’s and Italian theorists’ writings instead of Puttenham’s and Sidney’s books among early modern readers, or the use of the word “wit” and “pleasant” as suggesting comedy and erotica in playbook title pages, or the emphasis on genre distinctions when genre indications like “history” were semantically flexible in the period. Some more detailed case studies might have served the argumentation better, like the one on the Bodleian copy of the 1618 edition of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, where the anonymous reader connected the motif of grief with a family death record and a poem by Henry King in handwritten marginalia (189–92). Nevertheless, the book informatively maps out the expectations and responses of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century readers of playbooks and offers a solid basis for further and even more nuanced research in the field; therefore, it is an important addition to book history and early modern cultural studies.

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