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Philip Butterworth, *Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 272 pp. ISBN 9781107015487.

Daisy Black

corresponding email: D.Black3@wlv.ac.uk

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-3742-6473

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Reviews

Philip Butterworth, *Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 272 pp. ISBN 9781107015487.

Questioning the use of post-medieval theatre concepts and terms (such as ‘character’, ‘characterization’ and ‘stage direction’), *Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre* calls for a review of the ways we approach medieval performance. Considering a range of fourteenth-to sixteenth-century plays, records and supporting texts from England and Cornwall, this exciting study examines the ‘agreed pretence’ established between performance instigators and witnesses. Ten chapters address staging conventions including indoor and outdoor performance; casting and doubling; rehearsing, memorising and cuing; coming and going; playing, feigning and counterfeiting; dressing and disguising; expounding and monitoring; effects; timing and hearing; and seeing and responding.

Butterworth begins by examining the performance criteria attending a variety of outdoor and indoor performance spaces (p. 23). He claims that some areas of a playing space may have held more audience focus than others (p. 37), and later develops this by suggesting that players may not have had to ‘hide’ or ‘disappear’ from the audience’s view when they were not part of the main action (p. 90). It would have been useful to see more discussion here of the ways such staging might have influenced meaning — for example, what the consequences would be for a play such as the York *The Fall of the Angels*, where Lucifer’s boasts would deliver very differently if God remained visible, if not being the main focus of the action, as opposed to being out of sight.

A chapter on casting and doubling draws attention to the construction of personae, while a useful discussion of rehearsing, memorising and cueing provided an insight into methods of performance preparation. Butterworth also examines evidence from explicit stage directions and Roman oratory traditions to dismantle post-Stanislavsky notions of characterisation as impersonation, truth and embodiment, instead arguing that medieval performers saw themselves as standing *in place of*, not *as* the personage they sought to represent (p. 95). This is supported in a chapter on dressing and disguising, which also includes an excellent discussion on the under-studied topic of the use of wigs and beards (pp. 113-4); and in a chapter on the use of effects to ‘demonstrate, illustrate or illuminate’ rather than provide the illusion of reality (p. 154).

Throughout, the book interrogates performer-audience relationships. While an examination of the meta-theatrical roles of expositors and monitors contributes to a well-established critical discussion, the consideration of timing in performance is an unusual and

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helpful inclusion. The extent to which audience responses validated (and challenged) 'agreed pretence' is examined in a discussion of physical and vocal responses, whilst again underlining the fact that medieval audience responses did not necessarily perform the same functions they do today. While more consideration of the implications of this for the formation and reception of meaning would have been useful, it is understandable given the book's scope and scale — ten short chapters did not always leave room for the implications of Butterworth's findings to be fully explored. Nevertheless, this book has provided valuable tools for further studies.

Interrogating and dismantling some of the modern assumptions brought to criticism of medieval performance, *Staging Conventions* is unusual in that it succeeds both in broadening academic studies and in providing practically useful tools and resources for those seeking to stage performances of medieval plays. Throughout, Butterworth's argument is engaging and compelling, and Butterworth's rich use of familiar and less well known sources make this book a highly valuable addition to medieval English theatre studies.

Daisy Black (University of Wolverhampton)