

Review

DAVID MCINNIS and MATTHEW STEGGLE (eds), *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England*. Pp. xiv + 296 (Early Modern Literature in History). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Hardbound £60.00 (ISBN 978 1 137 40396 4).

THE *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a very specific definition of the adjective *lost*: 'Of which some one has been deprived; not retained in possession; no longer to be found' ('lost', adj. 2). *Prima facie*, such a definition would appear perfectly to fit the status of all those plays written in 1567–1642 in England that are now lost: sadly, we have been deprived of them; evidently, we do not retain possession of them; more likely than not, they are no longer to be found. Clearly, if we were to stop at this definition, we would be bound to regard any investigations into those lost plays as an idle exercise in learned curiosity or, even worse, as a complete waste of time, and definitely as something quite far from emerging as a profitable area of research. Put more simply, 'lost' would be synonymous with 'dead'.

Unfortunately, this used to be the norm— with very few exceptions—up until 2008, when Roslyn Lander Knutson and David McInnis founded the *Lost Plays Database*. This is an online wiki-style forum for scholars maintained by the University of Melbourne, aimed systematically to record all data about lost plays and to make the most out of the collaborative nature of its very format, on the grounds that 'the sum total of such ostensibly ephemeral inquiries exceeds the constituent parts' (11). The underlying assumption of the project is that, rather than a death sentence, 'lostness' is in fact a continuum, and indisputable as it is that many texts are physically lost and probably never to be retrieved, there is nonetheless much that can be gathered about and through lost plays. Indeed, the *LPD* is by no means just a place where to stack up information and data; on the contrary, examining lost plays turns out to be especially helpful in casting new light on companies' repertoires, in putting apparently well-known texts under fresh scrutiny, in reconsidering previous assumptions about the transmission of literary

characters and motifs, in getting a clearer picture of the early modern theatrical marketplace and in reassessing the dating of extant plays. What an invigorating surprise it is to realize how much life can be drawn from death!

As the first *LPD*-derived full volume ever to be published, *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England* could not stand as a better advertisement to the whole initiative. It eventually gives due attention to the rich hoard of historical evidence related to this 'invisible drama' (3) and effectively fosters a momentous perspective shift, whereby lost plays should come 'to be regarded positively as witnesses to otherwise unrecorded theatrical events rather than as mere failures to preserve a literary text' (7). Even more importantly, however, the book represents the foundational act of a new, fertile field of inquiry as well as a veritable *vade mecum* for anybody wishing to work on lost plays.

The thirteen chapters that make up the book are divided into three sections (I: 'What is a Lost Play?', II: 'Working with Lost Plays', III: 'Moving Forward'), preceded by the editors' introduction, which lucidly surveys the state of the art and outlines the volume's rationale and aims. David McInnis and Matthew Steggle inform us up front that around 3,000 different plays were probably written and performed in England in 1567–1642. Of these, 543 are extant and as many as 744 are identifiable as lost. If we add 'elite' and 'literary' plays, the count of identifiable lost plays rises to an impressive 1,100 items. This datum alone should make readers immediately aware of how likely lost plays are to 'offer a huge, and little-explored, network of reference points about early modern drama' (2).

It is obviously (and regrettably) impossible to do full justice to the many perceptive insights scattered through the thirteen chapters of the book in such a little space. Nonetheless, I will try my best effectively to summarize the contents of the volume and to convey at least half the enjoyment and enthusiasm with which I kept turning the pages in order to penetrate into the enthralling realm of lost plays. Part I—the most theoretical—opens with William Proctor Williams's useful survey of the most important resources to keep at hand when dealing with lost plays. Williams also proposes

a taxonomy of four different degrees of lostness ranging from 0 (or ‘Chimera Class’) to 3, depending on the level of certainty about their existence and the likelihood that a manuscript may still be found. In the second chapter, Roslyn Lander Knutson seeks to ‘discern more clearly the boundaries between judicious conjecture and fanciful narratives’ (33). To do this, she focuses on the issue of ‘Ur-plays’, which sadly used to plague scholarship in the past both by elevating conjectural reconstruction to the level of fact and by encouraging the practice of lumping plays together as subsequent (and often corrupt) versions of a mythical, unique original. Andrew Gurr reflects on the gap between a title of a play and its content, which is often so enormous as to hinder the possibility to gather any information at all about the latter. He then proposes to explain the rationale behind dual or alternative titles for plays as a necessity for publishers and booksellers ‘to give the play’s mode and subject in full to any potential buyer leafing through loose quartos in a bookshop’ (65).

Matthew Steggle’s subsequent essay interestingly subverts conventional wisdom by complicating the dichotomy ‘lost’/‘unlost’. On the one hand, Steggle contends that unlost plays are also largely lost, in that little survives of their performance material. On the other hand, he argues that ‘for most of those plays conventionally regarded as lost, what we are looking at is best thought of as a play which in fact partially survives, in a small and specialized but densely meaningful textual form’ (72), that is its title. John H. Astington, the author of the following chapter, is the inventor of the categories of ‘splitters’ and ‘lumpers’, which mirror two opposite approaches to lost plays. Splitters think of lost plays as discrete until compelling evidence testifies to the contrary, while lumpers tend to act upon similarities between titles in order to minimize the number of plays. Although unitary solutions are often useful and sometimes even legitimate, lumping is very risky business, as it tends to flatten complexity and, even worse, to produce theory: ‘once placed together arrangements of evidence produce justifications for their being so arranged’ (94).

David McInnis’s piece on ‘the most neglected of backstage plots’ (105), ‘2 Fortune’s

Tennis’, opens Part II of the collection, which presents a few case studies. By focusing closely on the characters named in the plot, McInnis concludes that the play must have been a tragedy. He then examines the reasons why the Admiral’s Men may have wanted to include it in their repertory in 1600–02 and puts forward two plausible alternatives for the play’s subject matter: it may have been about either the Fourth Crusade or the Emperor Phocas narrative. Misha Teramura examines ‘The Conquest of Brute’, a lost play dealing with Aeneas’s legendary great-grandson, who was believed to have founded London. The play would have certainly added a ‘distinctly nationalist inflection to the *Tamburlaine* model’ and ‘capitalized on the demand for conquest plays fed by the Admiral’s repertory at the Rose’ by ‘staging Brute’s successive victories in Greece and continental Europe’ (131). Moreover, the portrayal of Brute’s divinely sanctioned foreign conquests might have been useful in supporting British imperialistic claims. The five lost Arthurian plays performed by the Admiral’s Men’s in the 1590s are the subject of Paul Whitfield White’s essay, an attempt to disclose a thread connecting those two heroic romances and three chronicle plays through a painstaking examination of inventories. The chapter especially discusses the position of the plays within the rest of the Admiral’s Men’s repertory, and speculates that a ‘fusion of Protestantism with the Arthurian lineage of the Tudor dynasty’ (156) may have been foregrounded in this cycle as a response to the spread of anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic sentiments.

In chapter 9, Lawrence Manley identifies Lord Strange’s Men’s ‘tittus & vespacia’ as ‘Titus Vespasianus’, a play that would have probably been about the fall of Jerusalem. Manley’s essay is arguably one of the highlights of the collection, insofar as he is able cleverly to reconstruct a web of interrelations between Thomas Legge’s *Solymitana Clades*, Thomas Nashe’s *Christs Teares ouer Ierusalem*, and William Heminges’s *The Jewes Tragedy*. Manley concludes that all these works are indebted for a common episode to Peter Morwen’s *The Historie of the latter times of the Iewes common weale*. This, in turn, plausibly indicates ‘that the lost “tittus &

vespacia” was itself inspired by Legge’s play, written so near in time to the Rose play’ (176). Michael J. Hirrel’s subsequent piece is possibly even more compelling than Manley’s by virtue of his tantalizing reconstruction of the portrait of the shadowy figure of Thomas Watson as a ‘lost’ playwright. Watson is arguably ‘the most important playwright in English none of whose plays survive’ (187) and he must have performed a crucial role in the development of the modern style and prosody of drama together with Thomas Kyd. The picture drawn by Hirrel displays Watson as a learned man and a rogue, a murderer and a fraudster, who dilapidated his inheritance and was obliged to approach the theatre marketplace in order to make ends meet. Thin as it is, the evidence suggests that Watson was highly influential on subsequent dramatists: it is not inconceivable that William Shakespeare may have gathered his knowledge of Italy from his plays.

The last two chapters of Part II both feature discussions of Gillian, ‘an infamous, possibly fictional but probably real, woman from the London suburb of Brentford’ (229) first appearing in literature in the 1560s. Christopher Matusiak especially focuses on the Admiral’s Men’s ‘Friar Fox and Gillian of Brentford’ and ‘Friar Rush and the Proud Woman of Antwerp’, inasmuch as they may have influenced Shakespeare’s depiction of the Duke disguised as a friar in *Measure for Measure*. The chapter ends with a reflection on how the repetition of the same motifs in art can keep eliciting a powerful emotional response on the audience’s part while at the same time increasing art’s self-referential level. Christi Spain-Savage speculates that ‘Friar Fox and Gillian of Brentford’ ‘staged Gillian as a cunning woman and is thus the missing link in her literary and theatrical transformation’ (229). This particular portrayal may have influenced Falstaff’s cross-dressing disguise in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The discussion of the textual discrepancy in the depiction of Gillian in the 1602 Quarto and the 1623 Folio versions of Shakespeare’s comedy leads

Spain-Savage forcefully to argue in favour of the hypothesis that the Quarto is an early version of the Folio revision, rather than a memorial reconstruction.

Part III consists of a single concluding chapter by Martin Wiggins, a fascinating and amusing foray into the meandering paths leading to the physical discovery of lost plays. Findings are to be expected primarily from manuscripts rather than from printed sources, possibly from the private collections of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century lovers of plays, although public archives can also turn out to be helpful. However, we are very unlikely to find one of those plays whose titles we already know, as past experience tells us that normally, ‘when a lost play comes to light, it is likely to be previously unrecorded’ (262).

Frankly, I am unable to find any significant faults in this splendidly organized and superbly structured collection: the essays invariably impinge on one another, thereby bestowing a deep sense of cohesion and coherence upon the volume. *Lost Plays in Shakespeare’s England* marks a significant paradigm shift in early modern scholarship by defining a new field of inquiry that should be approached in high spirits: lost plays are by no means entirely lost, nor are they less important than plays that survive. In fact, as the volume amply demonstrates, the study of lost plays is an invaluable enterprise, which can be conducive to useful conjectures and fresh insights into early modern drama and theatre at large and, more specifically, ‘into the artistic conversations that engaged playwrights and players within and across their respective repertories’ (208). It is therefore with keen interest and eager expectation that I anticipate Matthew Steggle’s forthcoming monograph *Digital Humanities and the Lost Drama of Early Modern England: Ten Case Studies*.

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