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Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time by Roslyn Lander Knutson

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*Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time.* By ROSLYN LANDER KNUTSON. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Pp. x + 199. \$55.00 cloth.

Reviewed by M. L. STAPLETON

Knutson's thesis is usefully straightforward. She wishes to demonstrate that the players, playwrights, theatrical financiers, and booksellers of Shakespeare's time had to have been engaged in a fraternal enterprise, cooperation necessitated by simple economic survival. Therefore, a viciously competitive dramatic community—the paradigm constructed during the first half of the twentieth century by scholars such as Charles W. Wallace, R. B. Sharpe, and Alfred Harbage—simply could not have existed. Knutson's methodology is equally lucid. She revisits the problematic sites in her field in order to overturn the War of the Theaters hypothesis so dear to this earlier generation of scholars. Yet, she does not simply reinterpret these data and anecdotes. She also shows exactly how Wallace and his successors misread it by basing their conclusions on slim evidence to fit preconceived notions. Apparently, “inclusive and cohesive features of the playhouse world” (148) were not attractive to them.

The test cases that Knutson reexamines in the heart of her book (chapters 4, 5, and 6) are John Allevyn's feud with James Burbage on behalf of Burbage's sister-in-law, Margaret Brayne, for whom Allevyn was interceding; the War of the Theaters, which John Marston's *Histrion-Mastix*, Ben Jonson's *Poetaster*, and Thomas Dekker's *Satiromastix* allegedly document; the “little eyases” passage in *Hamlet* and its relationship to the controversy about boy-players; and, most dear to popular culture, the purported rivalry between Jonson and Shakespeare. She argues that Marston was probably not the author of *Histrion-Mastix*, and that the allusion to the children's companies in Shakespeare's play refers to events at the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century (1608–1609) rather than at the beginning (1600–1601), when the aforementioned three plays were written and performed. Therefore, the War of the Theaters could not have happened as scholarship has constructed it. As Knutson so effectively puts it: “company business was a larger enterprise than the temperament of its practitioners” (20).

Knutson addresses the general reader as well as colleagues in her field. She understands that most readers of Shakespeare and his fellows are unfamiliar with theater history and accounts for the lacunae in the knowledge of this audience, especially in her book's first chapter, “Theatre history as personality.” At the same time, *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time* contributes significantly to theater history itself. It builds on William Ingram's arguments concerning collaboration among players in sixteenth-century London. Legal-economic factors such as licensing regulations surely dictated various types of partnerships rather than rivalries. As Knutson says, “commerce among the playing companies was built on patterns of fraternity, the roots of which were feudal hierarchies such as kinship, service, and the guild” (10). The second chapter, “Players and company commerce,” demonstrates such patterns of fraternity by exposing the extremely dense “networks of friendship, kinship, and parish residence” in the theatrical world (24). The sheer number of connections and their

complexity shows how disastrously disruptive quarrels would have been to business. Her third chapter focuses on playwrights and booksellers, especially the fashion in which the latter popularized the work of the former. As Knutson documents, these personal relationships facilitated commerce.

At a future date, it would be interesting for Knutson to speculate as to why it was so important for many of her authoritative predecessors, "canonical Shakespearians" all, to invent and perpetuate the War of the Theaters thesis. Such an exploration would have been beyond the scope of *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time*, but an article outlining her theory of this paradigm would be valuable indeed. As I have intimated, the book's excellence lies in its lucid writing and coherent organization, as well as in its appeal to multiple audiences. Although the last three chapters of this work seem to be aimed at specialists in the field, anyone could benefit from a reading of the *Hamlet* section (103–26). The uninitiated could learn about theater history, and students (especially) could profit from observing Knutson's deft handling of data and translation of it into readable English prose. In many ways, the book's scholarly method imitates its own thesis. Knutson's frequent mention of other scholars in her field and her habit of situating her work in the context of theirs is, like the theatrical world she describes, collaborative rather than competitive, generous and collegial.

*The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England: A Collaborative Debate.*

By ANTHONY B. DAWSON and PAUL YACHNIN Cambridge:  
Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. x + 215. \$65.00 cloth.

Reviewed by DAVID HILLMAN

*The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England* is an unusual book. Its two authors, Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, set out to depict the relation between early modern theatergoing and the broad cultural and social contexts in which it flourished. But each approaches the question from a markedly different perspective. Dawson understands playgoing in the context of early modern theatrical and religious practices; Yachnin, a neo-Marxist critic, locates Elizabethan drama in the framework of an "entertainment marketplace" (209) and insists that these earlier practices can be understood only within the *longue durée* of Western cultural history. Both positions are of interest to anyone seeking to understand the cultural place of the stage in early modern England.

The authors are interested throughout in theatrical pleasure: why is it, they ask, that Elizabethan playgoers went to the theater at all? Since the demise of New Criticism, *pleasure* has been something of a dirty word in literary critical circles, and this book's restoration of the principle is a welcome one. For Dawson, theatrical pleasure is indelibly linked to a communal, affective response to the aesthetically staged event; for Yachnin, it is far more a matter of individualistic and competitive engagement within an entertainment marketplace. Dawson sees playgoing as akin to religious "participation" (11 and *passim*). Audiences respond to the bodies and objects onstage with an awareness of both the represented persons and stories and the act of repre-