

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Stern, Tiffany. Documents of Performance in Early Modern England

Farah Karim-Cooper

Volume 33, Number 4, Fall 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106447ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v33i4.15986>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CRRS, Victoria University

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Karim-Cooper, F. (2010). Review of [Stern, Tiffany. Documents of Performance in Early Modern England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 33(4), 147–149. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v33i4.15986>

**Stern, Tiffany. *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xiv, 362. ISBN 978-0-521-84237-2 (hardcover) \$99.95.**

In the last decade, textual scholars have been challenging previous assumptions about the methods of play-text transmission, enlivening our understanding of early modern print culture and forcing students and academics to note the important role theatres played in the history of the printed book. In *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England*, Tiffany Stern goes a step further by asserting that “plays were from the start written patchily” (2). Such an argument goes some way to destabilise dramatic canonicity. By arguing that the play text is constituted of separate parts, Stern’s work crosses the critical boundaries of textual scholarship and theatre history to participate in the discourses of material culture and, in so doing, makes the suggestion that the fragments of the play text were social objects with a complex network of meanings and interpretative possibilities. The methodology and subject matter of *Documents* is reminiscent of studies of bodily prosthesis; in recent years, much has been published about the prosthetics of gender, clothing and the fragmentation of the body. Stern’s work neatly bridges textual scholarship with such critical disciplines by insisting on textual fragmentation as a necessary component in the production of a play’s meaning: “Together, the fragments that the playhouse made, in conjunction with the fragments that play-writing had produced, and the additional fragments brought about for advertising and explaining the play, were the documents that amounted to ‘the play’ in its first performance” (3).

The structure of *Documents* helpfully mirrors the topic itself in that each chapter takes as its subject a separate playhouse document: Plot-scenarios; Playbills and title-pages; Arguments; Prologues, epilogues, interim entertainments; Songs and masques; Scrolls; Backstage-plots; and The Approved ‘book’ and actors’ parts. What immediately strikes the reader is the sheer volume of material that Stern has consulted; the comprehensiveness of this study gives the reader a great deal of confidence in the argument, which is very convincingly delivered. Theatre historians have been arguing for years that there is very little documentary evidence about the processes of playwriting, an assumption that Stern has comfortably put to rest with her exposition of a copious amount of dramatic material. Not everyone reading *Documents* will be comfortable with the way in which textual fragments from later centuries and from the continent

are brought to bear upon early modern English playwriting. However, in deploying this approach, Stern manages to demonstrate surprising continuities between these seemingly disparate categories. A theory of textual descendancy emerges as a useful model with which to analyse and re-construct the ways in which playwrights generated and actors worked with texts, but Stern is responsibly cautious with this approach; when assessing an eighteenth-century fragment, she asks, "Are plots a variety of call-sheet in an earlier form? For this to be the case, further correspondences would be needed between the early modern and the eighteenth-century theatre" (219). Stern is right to suggest the efficacy of this methodology; if later textual fragments are there to be examined, why not examine them and ask the questions we would ask if they were dated a century earlier?

The title of the book perhaps suggests a topic less exciting than what we actually find inside. Stern entertains her reader with her detective work on this very complex and sometimes obscure material, bringing to life the processes and cultural practices that otherwise would have lain hidden. Chapter two, 'Playbills and title-pages', in particular, opens up a world of curiosity with regard to theatrical and print advertising in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Stern provides us with examples of playbills that are extant and illuminates those embedded in play texts themselves, unveiling a complex network of inter-textual strategies available to early modern playwrights and theatre companies. The most surprising revelation is the suggestion that the production of playbills was not only standardised and heavily regulated but that "generally, *all* bills for *all* companies were printed by one printer. This means that all bills must have looked similar up to a point, no matter which company, play or theatre they were printed for" (41). The idea that there was a universal marketing brand for theatre companies is an important consideration for those theatre scholars and historians who repeatedly imagine a much more disorganised and hostile industry; the idea that there were conventions of advertising makes sense in light of Roslyn Knutson's theory that there was more agreement and standardisation amongst theatre companies in the early modern period (*Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Equally illuminating is the chapter on songs and masques, which successfully maps out ways to explain the phenomenon of 'lost' songs amongst early modern play texts and manuscripts; here Stern asks her reader to consider the possibility that songs and masques had their own systems of circulation

outside of the play book. If plays could, through revision and revival, accommodate “new songs over time” (150), then surely, Stern argues, the same could be said for masques. Although Stern’s argument in this chapter emphasises the separate trajectory songs and masques had from performance through to print, she makes the point that these particular textual fragments, absent or extant, are to be given the same literary and dramatic weight as the words of the plays themselves.

Tiffany Stern’s *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* is essential reading for academics and students of Shakespeare studies, theatre performance and early modern drama. By revealing the fragmented or ‘dislocated’ nature of plays, Stern invites her reader to reconsider the theoretical modes by which these texts are assessed, written about and taught. This book is not just an account of early modern textual transmission; it provides a riveting narrative about the very textual mysteries that have for ages seemed to be so distant as to be irrecoverable. Stern recovers them with genuine literary curiosity, passion and scholarly distinction.

FARAH KARIM-COOPER, *Shakespeare’s Globe London*

**Stone, James W. *Crossing Gender in Shakespeare: Feminist Psychoanalysis and the Difference Within*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Pp. xv, 185. ISBN 978-0-415-87360-4 (hardback) \$125.**

James W. Stone’s book is a true essay, a daring exploration of gender in *Twelfth Night*, *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Cymbeline*. Starting from the Ovidian Hermaphroditus myth and leaning on Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, Janet Adelman, and many others, he retraces the conflicting and sometime painful male and femaleness in some major characters of these plays. For Stone, comedy is the place for gender construction through transvestism, tragedy for the inescapable and fatal implosion that androgyny entails. Before Shakespeare and beyond the common or commonplace Renaissance notion that in a love relationship the male becomes in some way “effeminate,” Stone sees the core of male anxieties in postcoital flaccidity, which he finds in Ovid