



Davies, Callan. Strangeness in Jacobean Drama

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Davies, Callan.

Strangeness in Jacobean Drama.

Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama. London: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 214 + 8 ill. ISBN 978-0-3675-031-3 (hardcover) US\$160.

Modern readers and theatre goers so often experience estrangement when they encounter Jacobean drama—with its baroque plots, bizarre and macabre spectacles, and grandiose “linguistic manoeuvres” (4)—that the epithet “strange” serves well to capture contemporary responses to the worlds of these abundantly imaginative plays. “To be strange,” writes Davies in his incisive book on a resourceful topic, “is to be novel, innovative, exciting, and frequently complex” (4). The strangeness of Jacobean drama is also the source of its brilliance. Strangeness captures the effect produced both by language and by its transformation into performance. It produces dramatic pleasure. But strangeness signifies how readers and viewers (and critics) translate these texts into their experience of drama.

Thoroughly researched, and elegantly and accessibly written, this book charts a new direction in the analysis of Jacobean drama. Davies turns a broad and elusive effect of drama into a critical concept arising from the connections that individual dramatic elements create when they interact either on a printed page or in theatre. The book is organized around four key concepts of strangeness: speech, rhetoric, technology, and philosophy. Each of these elements, alone or in combination with another, changes how we think of desire, emotion, the interplay of the verbal and the visual, co-writing, the sound of language, emblems, early modern versification, style, genre, stage effects, and story-telling, among other features of Jacobean drama. Following a comprehensive introduction explaining “the philology of strangeness” (3), each of the four main concepts is carefully, lucidly explored in its own chapter. Every new chapter expands and enriches the meaning of strangeness: it is not just “a description of or response to spectacular visual action” (2) but also “a major term in the Jacobean theatrical vocabulary” and “more broadly a fundamental concept within the early modern English cultural imagination” (191). Strangeness is shown to pervade Jacobean drama and to have consequence for criticism.

In the chapter on speech, Davies examines the crafting and stage delivery of speeches, especially speech patterns and verbal arrangements that produce

linguistic and narrative strangeness in Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*, and Webster's *The White Devil*. Davies's concern is with the form and content: verbal forms of the foreign use, wordplay, repetition, and coinage intersect with the sonic and vocal idiosyncrasies when such a linguistically dazzling repertoire is articulated on stage. But Davies is also interested in the cultural and Catholic background against which some of this linguistic strangeness was written and performed. This chapter demonstrates one of the most appealing features of Davies's criticism: he ingeniously reads Shakespeare alongside other playwrights, which locates the strangeness of Shakespeare's plays within the broader dramatic and linguistic strangeness of the period.

The next chapter, full of original and adroit interpretation, is concerned with formulating and illustrating strangeness based on the texts' rhetorical and stylistic curiosities. This chapter is central to the book because it explores "the crossover between the theatre's material and poetic registers" (81), between the verbal and the performative, an intersection that produces strange language in plays like *Cymbeline* and *The White Devil*. The links made between English and foreign verbal models are part of Davies's argument. It might be worth recalling that something close to the idea of strangeness related to wonder (another concept examined in this book) already existed in late sixteenth-century Italian poetics, where a form of strangeness was described as *la maraviglia*, or "the marvellous," denoting the pleasurable effect produced by an interaction of the linguistic, philosophical, and moral aspect of poetic drama. The Italian Platonist Giason Denores, in his 1586 treatise *Discorso intorno à que' principii, cause, et accrescimenti, che la comedia, la tragedia, et il poema heroico*, discusses devices that cause wonder and admiration, and thus produce pleasure, in the audience; these devices entail arranging verbal elements in an extraordinary way. Thus, *la maraviglia* forms the basis of wonder, another related concept which Davies brings up in his Introduction in relation to the pervasive "engagement with the visual world" (16) of a play. The Italianate world of many Jacobean plays might just make it possible to think of wonder produced by such lavish worlds rendered in grandiloquent terms as the English modelling of *la maraviglia* in the period's theatre of strangeness, thus revealing a connection between English and Continental poetics and practice related to the shared concept. This is especially pertinent because Davies makes a perceptive point about wonder and strangeness marking out "a significant moral response to an event,

vision, or report” (17), and his fine philological explanation of *deinos* (17) shows the similar way in which moral philosophy played a part in the creation of *la meraviglia* in Italian drama.

Technology, or “strange special effects” (118)—including automata, devices, magic, the mechanics of conjuring and juggling, engineering of spectacles, and the modification of technological developments to serve stage productions—is the subject of the excellent third chapter, which brings together the textual and material aspects of strangeness in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*. Both in this chapter and throughout the book, Davies interprets a wide range of archival documents, mining them for evidence of strangeness. He analyzes literature about monsters, rhetorical manuals, legal trials, sermons, printed emblems, manuals of technological inventions, and providential writing.

The last analytical chapter examines the period’s burgeoning philosophy of scepticism in relation to theatre and desire in Beaumont and Fletcher’s play *A King and No King* and Thomas Heywood’s plays, *The Brazen Age*, *The Golden Age*, and *The Silver Age*—plays brought together by the way they interrogate “attraction” and use of strangeness “to articulate a sceptical consideration of individual ethical choices” turned into “the human sensory experience” (161), experience arising from the interaction between theatre and the audience’s response to the craft of drama.

Noticing strangeness as a major force of Jacobean drama illuminates the genre’s intellectual, aesthetic, and performative richness. This book introduces a new way of writing drama criticism through the lens of a defining concept by demonstrating how the early readers and audiences made emotional and intellectual connections with the plays. Significantly, Davies’s arguments will also inspire critics and students to think of strangeness as an idea that unlocks new pleasures in reading and writing about what are very strange plays indeed.

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