

Elizabeth Williamson

The Evergreen State College



The Performance of Piety: The Uses and Misuses of Sacred Books on the Early Modern Stage

The devotional lives of Renaissance women, both Catholic and Protestant, were anchored in prayers and prayerbooks. The stage reflected the centrality of these objects by dramatizing moments in which female characters--usually, but not always aristocratic--are seen reading, or pretending to read. But as in the famous encounter between Ophelia and Hamlet, these theatrical moments often reveal as much about societal expectations surrounding female virtue as they do about the sincerity of an individual character. This paper explores such moments in light of the complex relationship between women's private devotional practice and the cultural performance of piety.