

Elizabeth Williamson. *The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama*.

Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009. ix + 232 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$99.99. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6827-5.

The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama proceeds from the claim that religious objects had religious meanings. These meanings, Elizabeth Williamson convincingly shows, were retained, exploited, and modified in a variety of post-Reformation cultural contexts, including the early modern drama. Straightforward as this premise may seem, it runs against many recent studies of both the post-Reformation public theater and material culture; specifically, Williamson distinguishes her approach from Stephen Greenblatt's argument that the early modern stage functioned as a way of "emptying out" (13) the religious significance of Catholic rituals and devotional objects. Instead, she argues, playing companies actually exploited a "complex range of emotions" (16) that surrounded pre-Reformation forms of worship. This insight underwrites her subtle and engaging readings of many early modern play scripts. Williamson's research establishes a fruitful conversation among scholarly fields that are not always perceived as overlapping one another: Reformation studies, material culture, and theatrical history. As a result, one of the book's most attractive features is the impressive range of sources — including both early modern documents and modern critical works — on which it draws.

The book is divided into four chapters, each centering on a different stage property as it appears in several different dramatic works: tombs, altars, crosses, and books. Chapter 1 treats a range of plays, focusing most extensively on scenes in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* and Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. Williamson positions these plays lineally in the tradition of guild-sponsored biblical dramas, demonstrating

that both forms of drama attack similar problems of staging resurrection through the absence of a body.

Chapter 2 turns to the representation of altars on the early modern stage, exploring a variety of ways in which the presentation and perception of altar tables in the theater might well have been informed by “reformers’ attempts to distinguish between the ‘popish’ altar and the ‘godly’ table,” constituting a “dialectical interchange between theatrical and religious practices” (81). Particularly well developed are discussions of Middleton’s *Game at Chess* and Jonson’s *Sejanus*. Williamson shows how Middleton’s play uses its altar scene to revel in the seductive power of theatrical performance, while Jonson’s asks the audience to reflect on the losses brought about by Protestant iconoclasm.

In chapter 3, Williamson tracks the migration of more portable religious objects — crosses and crucifixes — between sacred spaces and domestic settings as they were rescued and preserved by private households and recusant families, arguing that this movement produced a flexible interplay of meaning in which objects retained religious associations, even as they came to signify within secular formulations of inheritance and family identity. For instance, Williamson’s reading of Webster’s *White Devil* evinces parallels between the play’s presentation of the crucifix and the recusant tradition of the “family crucifix” (136), which might be cherished and passed on as a symbol of a family’s continuity and faith.

Chapter 4 focuses on the use of devotional books and bibles as stage properties. Far from suggesting that these properties are used simply to confirm Protestantism’s “preference for books over idols” (149), Williamson argues that the theater’s necessary reliance on religious books as physical properties “made it uniquely suited to draw out and comment upon” the “inescapable materiality” (151) of Protestant worship. Of special interest is Williamson’s consideration of gender in this chapter, as she discusses the role of devotional reading in early modern conceptions of the godly Englishwoman.

The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama will prove valuable to scholars of Reformation history, theatrical history, and material culture alike. At times the structure of the chapters, which cluster multiple texts around their shared stage properties, makes discussions of the individual plays feel a bit sparse or truncated, as though the explication of their own language — presumably the best evidence for some of Williamson’s hypotheses — is somewhat compressed or outweighed by the elaborate historical frameworks that precede it. Nevertheless, this structure allows Williamson to perceive trends that would not become apparent in another organizational scheme, and she marshals her information into the service of claims both surprising and sound.

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