
The historical study of early modern audiences, epitomized by Andrew Gurr’s essential *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*, has focused on the responses of playgoers to plays seen in performance. In *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*, Charles Whitney suggests that a broader perspective is required for an understanding of how plays were perceived and how their reception contributed to the subsequent evolution of the early modern drama. His historical survey of reception from the late sixteenth century to the Restoration reflects the premise

that experience of drama, created by authors, players, and audiences together through dramatic transactions, is rarely confined to the moments and places of performance. Playgoers carry their theatrical experiences with them from the theatre and continue to absorb, assimilate, and apply them” (5).

In addition to the playgoing audience, Whitney argues that play readers constitute a secondary dramatic audience, and he suggests that a tertiary level of reception can be seen in the responses of people who allude specifically to plays that they know of, but have neither seen or read. Whitney’s study is not concerned with the blanket condemnations of drama found in antitheatrical tracts nor with the overall reputation of given playwrights. His survey focuses on specific responses to drama by people who were not professionally engaged in the theater (although he does refer to professional reception as a way of elucidating nonprofessional reception).

The book’s first two chapters focus respectively on Tamburlaine and, as Whitney labels him, Sir John Oldcastle-Falstaff, the two characters who figure most prominently in extant response. He argues that audiences did indeed accept the invitation of the play’s Prologue to applaud Tamburlaine’s fortunes “as you please” and that this diversity of response collaboratively moved drama away from didacticism: it “marked a decisive turning point in freeing the theatre to represent and to experience both deeper feeling and more complex meaning” and “helped validate processes of response that were not limited to the time and place of performance, but reverberated beyond theatre and innyard” (20). Whitney also sees the strong and conflicting responses engendered by Sir John as contributing to this “liberated” aesthetic, and he uses his discussion of Sir John as a way of more deeply exploring the characteristics of early modern response. This chapter begins with a discussion of Shakespeare’s changing of “Oldcastle” to “Falstaff,” and Whitney insightfully remarks that the pressure to change the name is in itself one aspect of the play’s reception. Interestingly, his survey reveals that many of the most important early responses to these plays continued knowingly to allude to “Oldcastle” or to allude to “Falstaff” in a way that pointed to “Oldcastle.” Overall, the survey highlights Falstaff’s growing association with festive traditions even as it demonstrates that early modern reception is characterized by an aesthetic that pragmatically emphasizes utility and benefit.

The remaining four chapters focus on particular segments of the early audience. Chapter three looks specifically at known playgoers up to 1617, with particular attention to John Davies of Hereford, the Inns of Court, Edmund Spenser, Robert Tofte, and Simon
Forman. Chapter four centers on the responses of commoners, and Whitney’s discussion confirms what we have come to understand: that while the early modern theatre may be less democratic than it was once thought to be, it did in fact serve a diverse audience. Moreover, as Whitney makes clear, the reactions of this multi-segmented audience were not homogenous. Chapter five discusses playgoing and/or play-reading gentlewomen. It includes Whitney’s argument that Amelia Lanyer’s depiction of Cleopatra in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is indebted to dramatic representation (either seen or read). He also looks at responses to drama by Joan Drake, Anne Murray Halkett, and Dorothy Osborne. The final chapter examines the responses to Jonson and Shakespeare from the Caroline period onward and ends with a discussion of the way in which Milton’s reception of Shakespeare assimilates him to a republican vision.

One of the goals set by Whitney in his introduction was to show that the study of early modern reception is both feasible and important for understanding Renaissance drama. He has succeeded admirably, and students of Renaissance drama will find that this insightful study opens new vistas onto the ways in which these plays spoke to contemporary audiences. A survey such as this is necessarily selective, but as Marlovians, readers of this review will appreciate that a good fifth of the book centers on Marlowe.

Bruce Brandt
South Dakota State University