

Early Theatre

A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama

Early
Theatre

A Journal Associated with the
Records of Early English Drama

Hannah August. Playbooks and Their Readers in Early Modern England. New York and London: Routledge, 2022

Laura Estill 

Volume 27, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112497ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.27.1.5794>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

McMaster University Library Press / Becker Associates

ISSN

1206-9078 (print)

2293-7609 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Estill, L. (2024). Review of [Hannah August. Playbooks and Their Readers in Early Modern England. New York and London: Routledge, 2022]. *Early Theatre*, 27(1), 139–142. <https://doi.org/10.12745/et.27.1.5794>

All Rights Reserved © Laura Estill, 2024

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

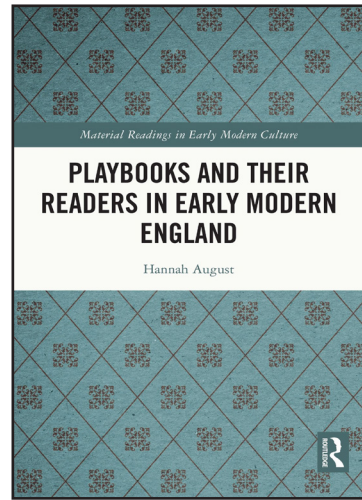
Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Hannah August. *Playbooks and Their Readers in Early Modern England*. New York and London: Routledge, 2022. Pp. xvi + 270. Hardback \$247.00 CAD. ISBN: 9781032059013. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003199748>.

Laura Estill
St Francis Xavier University

I regularly tell students to imagine performances of the early modern plays we read together for class. After reviewing Hannah August's *Playbooks and Their Readers in Early Modern England*, however, I will be sure to emphasize that reading plays with an eye to performance is only one mode of interpretation. August suggests that early English readers did not turn to printed plays as 'theatrical documents' (235), but, instead, as literary and poetic texts. Additionally, by analyzing different kinds of primary materials — notably, printed paratexts, dramatic extracts copied into commonplace books, and marginalia — August provides evidence of the wide readership for play quartos of commercially performed plays in pre-Restoration England. By investigating this range of sources, August succeeds in her goal of 'redressing the imbalance created by the scholarly fixation on Shakespeare' (17).



The book's introduction serves as a valuable assessment of the state-of-the-field when it comes to book history and early modern English plays; this introduction, like any of the chapters in the volume, would be a strong addition to the reading list for any graduate course on early modern drama. Throughout the book, August encourages us to think about the scholarly assumptions we make. For instance, August suggests that we can 'perhaps unfashionably' (84) revisit Foucault's author function and Genette's model of paratext; she asks us to question why we apply particular theories of authorship and (para-)text to early modern readers. August's introduction clearly outlines the scope and rationale of the volume.

August structures *Playbooks and Their Readers* around three main questions, which serve as her chapter titles: 'Who read plays?' (chapter one); 'Why read plays?' (chapter two); and 'How were plays read?' (chapters three and four). By

raising these questions, of course, August also answers additional questions: when and where did people read plays? And what evidence do we rely on for our scholarship about early play-readers? The abstract for *Playbooks and Their Readers* notes that the 'more detailed and nuanced conclusions' in the volume come from the analysis of both manuscript and printed paratextual evidence taken together. Yet the chapter divisions in this book separate this evidence: chapters one and two focus on paratexts in printed playbooks; chapter three on manuscript commonplace books with extensive dramatic extracts; and chapter four on marginalia in printed playbooks. The chapter titles suggest that these sources answer different scholarly questions. Each chapter, however, explores how this evidence answers multiple questions. To take the final two chapters as examples: August clearly shows how manuscript commonplace books with dramatic extracts and marginalia jotted into printed playbooks show not just 'how' people read, but also what, who, when, and why.

By considering how their paratexts marketed printed plays, chapter one argues that 'playbooks *in general* had a much wider potential appeal than they have, as a genre, often been credited with' (65, emphasis in the original). Building on existing feminist book history and feminist reception history, August makes a clear space for women play-readers as part of this general reading public. In chapter two, August offers a close reading of 'as' in 'plays as performed', 'readers-as-readers', and 'as it was acted' (78) to show that readers were open to thinking of plays as poetic texts to be read for, in Horace's (translated) formulation, 'profit and delight' (77). It would have been nice to see a return to this close reading of 'as' when August considers the 'play as book', 'play as text', and 'play as play' in chapter four. A highlight of chapter two is the discussion of Latin mottoes on playbooks, which is supported by an appendix that lists 'professional play quartos with Horatian title page mottoes, 1598–1659' (237–8). Adding the mottoes themselves in Latin with their English translations would make this appendix even more useful, but perhaps this will be the task for a future digital project with additional materials like title page facsimiles and hypertext. Chapter two includes a discussion of the author-function of Shakespeare's name on early modern title pages and the generic expectation it raised for book-buyers.

In chapter three, August discusses three commonplacing readers, or, to use August's term, 'extractive' readers (126): Abraham Wright, Edward Pudsey, and William Drummond of Hawthornden, all of whom copied selections from plays into their manuscripts. August demonstrates the value of having multiple scholars turn to these sources: her analysis of Drummond's interest in bawdy wit from printed playbooks is particularly compelling. In the book's fourth and final

chapter, August turns to the evidence of readership as registered in manuscript marginalia in playbooks. One of the most poignant examples in this chapter is the note 'My cosen Betty died | 14 December | 1638' (189–90) and additional details written along with an extract from Henry King's *The Anniverse* in a 1618 quarto of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. August suggests that these elegiac lines were copied into this playbook not simply because it had a handy blank margin, but rather, because this scene in *The Spanish Tragedy* resonated as an 'entirely appropriate intertext', 'thematically', 'generically and materially' (192); the accompanying image (191; fig. 4.3) supports August's interpretation and captures the imagination. The thoughtfully chosen and well explicated cases from chapter four move beyond simply taxonomizing readers' marks and instead offer lively examples of playbook readership.

Chapters one and two traverse a wide range of primary texts, both dramatic and non-dramatic, fruitfully combining some well-known examples (such as Ben Jonson's opening epigram in his 1616 *Works*) with lesser-studied examples (such as the epistle to Gervase Markham and William Sampson's *Herod and Antipater*). Chapter three presents a close reading of only three relatively well-known manuscripts, giving a detailed and interesting understanding of three early readers but eliding the many one-off dramatic extracts. As a result, the chapter does not describe the broader scope of readers captured in the earlier chapters; however, its attention to actual readers instead of simply the playbook's positioning toward its readers is important when considering reception and reading history. The breadth of coverage resumes in chapter four's turn to 'using, marking, annotating' (177), which looks at handwritten additions including marginalia, manicules, and asterisks in playbooks.

August's paragraphs are densely packed with evidence from primary sources, but eminently readable because of her engaging writing style. See, for instance, the book's catchy opening line: 'Ask a seventeenth-century God-botherer what he thought of reading plays, and you could expect a strong answer' (1). The volume's index allows readers to easily find discussions of particular materials, with headings such as 'title pages, examples from' and 'epistles to the reader' that subsequently list the titles of plays discussed. The list of 'Playbooks with manuscript marks or marginalia' (260–1) in the bibliography will also be of use to scholars. For ease of use, I would have preferred footnotes to endnotes to allow more ready access to the citations underpinning this important work without breaking the reading flow that August elegantly constructed. (Yes, I know that the decision to use end-of-chapter endnotes rests with the publisher; but I can live in hope that someone from Routledge or other presses will see this review. Routledge, if you're

reading this, we also want more images from primary sources, colour images in ebook editions, and pdfs that don't use the VitalSource platform.)

In the subsection of chapter one on 'the materiality of playbooks revisited' (30), August notes that the experience of reading a digital facsimile of an early printed play quarto is not the same as consulting it in person; moreover, she adds that reading a play quarto in person today is not the same experience as early readers would have had. With her conclusion, August points to how increasing digitization and access will 'enabl[e] the crowd-sourcing of interpretation' (234). I, too, hope to see further interpretations of these materials if they are, like August's, thoroughly researched and well contextualized. With *Playbooks and their Readers in Early Modern England*, August models how to read the texts designed for early readers and the traces left by those early readers.