

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Blank, Daniel. Shakespeare and University Drama in Early Modern England

Goran Stanivukovic

Volume 46, numéro 2, printemps 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109456ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i2.42308>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Stanivukovic, G. (2023). Compte rendu de [Blank, Daniel. Shakespeare and University Drama in Early Modern England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 46(2), 202–204. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i2.42308>

© Goran Stanivukovic, 2024



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

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

Blank, Daniel.

Shakespeare and University Drama in Early Modern England.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. 192. ISBN 9780192886095 (hard-cover) £65.

A fresh critical analysis of drama written and performed at Oxford and Cambridge universities in the early modern period, and the creative link of that drama with Shakespeare and his contemporaries, has been long overdue. In his scrupulously researched book brimming with extensive and new archival evidence, Daniel Blank provides textual, philological, and critical analysis of the plays with their extra-textual context, the printing of university drama, and the interaction between academic and commercial plays. The result of this comprehensive critical perspective is a book that makes a significant contribution to the history of early modern English drama as printed text and stage performance. Blank covers drama in both manuscript and print and in both English and Latin. While Shakespeare is the main focus of the book, Blank's detailed engagement with the plays in Latin makes it a crucial resource for Neo-Latin scholars as well. Blank's attentive interpretation of a selection of Shakespeare's plays, which establishes a conceptual and textual connection with university drama, enables a new understanding of how Shakespeare's dramaturgy and his development of dramatic works came into being. Blank goes a step further and writes compellingly about the double flow of influence, both from university drama to Shakespeare plays and from Shakespeare's drama (like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) to the composition of new academic plays.

Blank's critical perspicuity as an interpreter of the text of university drama and his brilliant analysis show that the "skillful technique" (22) of *stichomythia*, or a conversation of two dramatic speakers in alternate lines, is not just an artifice but also a dramaturgical form that creates tension in drama through the composition of dialogue. With equal acuity he examines contextual, or cultural, university backgrounds that engendered new playwriting; for example, his brilliant and original analysis of the circumstances of the visit by King James VI and I to Oxford and to St. John's College in 1605 that led to Shakespeare's conceptualization of *Macbeth*.

The book is tightly focused and organized in five equally developed chapters; it has a comprehensive introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter contains useful signposts that highlight key points and strands in the argument.

This helps the reader map out the development of the argument and follow it with ease.

The introduction argues strongly that Shakespeare's "conception of the university" (5) was founded on student productions of the plays originating at Oxford and Cambridge. Blank takes it as his goal not to "idealize the early modern universities" (7) but to recover the transmission of texts and performance styles between university and the dramatic world outside it. The exploration of the points of contact between these two worlds in relation to the internal world of drama is what gives critical force to Blank's argument, and which reveals the richness of early modern drama.

The subject of the first chapter is a discussion of the manuscripts and print circulations of William Gager's 1582 *Meleager* (Christ Church, Oxford) and Thomas Legge's 1582 *Richardus Tertius* (staged at St. John's College, Cambridge). Both these plays were popular "theatrical productions" (15) on a large scale during university festivities. In his careful and close reading of the plays, Blank uncovers their verbal, rhetorical, and stylistic development and illuminates how their performative "capabilities" (21) influenced drama beyond the universities. This elegant and lucid feature of Blank's critical approach can be appreciated in his fresh interpretation of *Hamlet*, the subject of chapter 4. In the final thrust of his argument in this first chapter, Blank gives strong evidence of the connection between Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* and Legge's play, and demonstrates that the printing of two of Gager's plays made university drama no longer "ephemeral" (35). In fact, after Blank's book, it is impossible to consider university drama as an "ephemeral" genre.

The second chapter argues that the insularity of university is a topic charged with humour, something that Shakespeare develops in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Blank explores the topic of academic isolation in this comedy comparatively, taking up Christopher Marlowe's tragedy *Doctor Faustus* and Robert Greene's comedy *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. Marlowe and Greene, with whose works Shakespeare interacted at the level of rhetorical style shortly before composing *Love's Labour's Lost*, provide an inspiration for a theatrical remodelling of university experience—academic, amorous, and erotic. Furthermore, their works are fictional correlatives to another powerful influence: a university setting "modelled upon Oxford and Cambridge" (66).

Chapter 3 provides a remarkable interpretation of the dramatic context that helps answer the question "why Shakespeare so emphatically made

Hamlet [...] a university student" (68). The development of the argument that comes out of this question depends on the persistent juxtaposition of literary and cultural contexts. Blank analyses William Gager's satirical reworking of Seneca's *Hippolytus* and of John Rainolds's *Th'overthrow of stage-playes*, his infamous anti-theatrical tract, alongside pointed elements of university life and culture. He then reads these texts alongside Hamlet's world of theatre-within-theatre, his "aversion to the monstrous aspects of theatrical performance" (91), and the misogynistic undercurrent of his relationship with the women in the play that reads entirely fresh after Blank's approach and interpretation.

As noted above, in chapter 4, Blank places *Macbeth* in the context of King James VI and I's visit to Oxford and St. John's College, offering "a new approach to Shakespeare's source material" (98) and to Matthew Gwinne's "verse entertainment" (97), *Tres Sibyllae*. In this playlet, three students are dressed as "forest-dwelling" (97) prophetesses who meet the king outside the gate of St. John's College. Blank shows that the rhetorical-thematic texture of the story of this playlet "would form the basis of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*" (97), and he proceeds to demonstrate this with a well-documented examination of the "nexus between performance and political ceremony" (99).

The subject of the last chapter is Ben Jonson's dramatic "aspiration" (133) to be recognized academically; an aspiration that was nourished by his rivalry with some of his contemporaries. Blank shows how Jonson channels this desire in *Volpone*. He demonstrates how the literary culture of Christ Church College, Oxford, where Jonson was in residence, turns his academic aspiration into the subject of his drama.

The conclusion takes the reader back to Gager, his play *Meleager* (now lost), and to act 3, scene 5 of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare's last inspiration from university drama. It ends with a lucid evaluation of Shakespeare's place in the literature curriculum of the contemporary university: much like Ovid, renewed in academic drama inspired by his work, so Shakespeare will be renewed in "new avenues for understanding" (159). Blank's book has opened up such new avenues. He demonstrates that there is fascinating and original work still to be done on Shakespeare, and he does so in elegant, clear, and engaging writing that is sure to fully engage his readers.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i2.42308>