

**Jessica Dyson. *Staging Authority in Caroline England: Prerogative, Law and Order in Drama, 1625–1642*. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. x + 224. \$109.95.**

With its focus on the often overlooked riches of the Caroline stage and its attention to the period's central political and legal debates, Jessica Dyson's *Staging Authority in Caroline England: Prerogative, Law and Order in Drama, 1625–1642* makes a worthy contribution to recent scholarship on the early modern theater. Dyson's work is especially useful for its clear, efficient discussions of the historical contexts as well as the theoretical lineaments of Caroline disputes about monarchical authority and for its close readings of the language and stakes of these debates in the period's drama.

Dyson's introductory chapter effectively establishes her interest in the Caroline theater as a "forum" for the period's competing articulations of royal prerogative and common law as they took shape against King Charles I's increasingly personal rule (2). She identifies her approach to the drama as more "oppositional" than those of influential critics such as Martin Butler, but she is careful to insist that playwrights such as Ben Jonson, Richard Brome, Philip Massinger, John Ford, or James Shirley offered challenges not to Charles's "position as monarch" but rather to "his ability to act above, beyond or outside the established laws of the country" (9). In these challenges, she adds eloquently, their drama diagnosed a dynamic by which Charles I, "in over-asserting kingly and central authority,... raise[d] the possibilities of destabilization, fragmentation and disintegration of legitimate legal authority" (13).

Chapter 1, "Rights, Prerogatives and Law: The Petition of Right," investigates the acute constitutional issues driving the 1628 Petition of Right and their enactment on the stage. She reads the petition, which crystallized the competing interests of Parliament and King in matters of taxation and martial law, as a symbol of widespread fear of royal absolutism and of a concomitant loss of traditional liberties. She then examines plays that juggle these concerns, arguing that Ben Jonson's *The New Inn* "advocates the balance of subjects' rights against a moderated, if not curtailed, royal prerogative" (20) and that Richard Brome's *The Love-Sick Court* offers not only the predictable critique of self-interested courtiers and their bad counsel—readings offered by Butler and Matthew Steggle—but also a more "pointed political statement" about "the usefulness of parliaments" and the necessity of calling them (44).

Chapter 2, "Shaking the Foundations of Royal Authority: From Divine Right to the King's Will," surveys contemporary accounts of royal authority—theories of divine right, of designation, and of contract—and then charts Philip Massinger's

representations, over the course of three plays, of this authority and its relation to the law. She traces an arc of declining divinity: from king as undeniably a god with extra-legal power in *The Roman Actor* to king as undeniably mortal, willful, and fallible in *The Emperor of the East* and *The Guardian*. Although the theoretical background here is cogent, some of the specific readings are overly literal in ways that undermine the idea of a declining divinity; it may be true that Domitian in *The Roman Actor* is presented as a divine ruler and that his extra-legal prerogative “is not denied” (66), but the play neither condones nor reinforces this position—it seems to put it into question in order to insist on Domitian’s very human status and passions. Dyson’s treatment of *The Guardian*, which sees the outlaw Severino as a critique of, rather than a substitute for, absolute power, is more assured and convincing.

The third chapter, “Debating Legal Authorities: Common Law and Prerogative,” sets the common law center stage, as a legitimate alternative to the will of the monarch as the foundation of authority in the realm. Dyson consults a selection of sources, from medieval to modern, to emphasize period views of the common law’s precedence and rationality. She then turns to a series of plays by Richard Brome to “examine the ways in which the understood history and vocabularies of the common law are employed, translated and debated on the Caroline commercial stage” (98). Her readings here are relatively conservative, interpreting in Brome’s work a partiality to the common law as a complement to the good sovereign. Thus she discusses *The Queen’s Exchange*, set in pre-Conquest Britain, as a testimony to the way a monarch can remain sovereign precisely by heeding custom, and *The Antipodes* as a demonstration of the link between madness and absolutism that can be remedied only by the “tempering influence” of the common law on the arbitrariness of the monarch (116). Her consideration of *The Queen and the Concubine* makes a similar argument for the connection between sovereign and law, arguing that the play favors “a monarch who will rule according to law and legal processes and in favour of the common good” (126). Such approaches are themselves reasonable and rational, but they drain much of the deliberate (and deliberately political) whimsy out of Brome’s dramatic worlds and underestimate his critique of the common law itself as potentially irrational and “maddening” to its practitioners.

In chapter 4, “Decentralizing Legal Authority,” Dyson explores the complex relationship between central and local authority, an issue that often eludes scholars focused on London and the court. Dyson works through the roles and responsibilities of Justices of Peace and of Constables, emphasizing the especially difficult position in which they found themselves during Charles I’s rule, when they were called upon not only to represent the king’s judicial authority but also to enforce prerogative demands such as ship money. She then reads Richard

Brome's *Weeding of Covent Garden* and *A Jovial Crew* and Ben Jonson's *Tale of a Tub* for their negotiation of competing juridical pressures from the center and the periphery (though in the case of *Weeding*, the periphery is the London suburbs). Her strongest reading here is of *A Jovial Crew*, in which she sees the company of beggars as offering a "position between the extremes of deliberately obstructive country gentry and the absolutist monarch" (159).

The final chapter, "Theatre of the Courtroom," is perhaps the book's most compelling, surveying the structure of Stuart common law and prerogative courts and highlighting the shared roots in persuasive oratory of both legal proceedings and the stage. As Dyson sagely reminds us, trial scenes "not only provide an opportunity for the staged presentation of the workings of law and legal authority...but also...provide a forum for the trial of issues of social, cultural and political importance, including the legitimacy of legal authority itself" (163). Her treatment here of plays she has already considered in other chapters (*The Roman Actor*, *The Antipodes*) is a bit awkward, but it does not ultimately detract from her striking observations about the way staged courtroom scenes work. For instance, she notes how, in a rigged trial in *The Roman Actor*, accusations meant to serve as proofs against an innocent defendant backfire on the prosecution, as "accusations *do* become proof, not of the guilt of the actors, but of the guilt of the accuser of the acts presented on stage" (168). In a discussion of John Ford's *The Ladies Trial*, she observes how a husband's tyrannical testing of his wife's fidelity becomes a trial of his faith as well as hers, revealing the way in which he has "degenerated" from the custom of his nation, suggesting his absolutist leanings" (179). In *The Antipodes* she considers the way lower ranking, local justices could behave in absolutist ways (180). And in a concluding discussion of James Shirley's *The Traitor*, which she links provocatively to the trial of the second earl of Castlehaven in 1631, Dyson notes the way a "rehearsed" trial of the treasonous Depazzi, which does not feature a judge or jury figure, may suggest the impossibility of honest judges: "the only wise, honourable and incorrupt seats of justice in a play so full of plotting, deception and corruption are the empty ones" (188).

Dyson is a sharp reader who brings historically informed attentiveness to the Caroline drama which, after the seminal work of Martin Butler in the mid-1980s, is receiving fresh interest from critics such as Alan B. Farmer, Julie Sanders, Matthew Steggle, and Adam Zucker. Her book should certainly be of interest and use to scholars working in the period and the intersections of law, politics, and culture that define it. They may be surprised to find that so little time is given to the religious conflicts of Charles's reign, inseparable as they are from political and legal dynamics; and they may find themselves frustrated by readings that position the early modern drama as exemplary of a theoretical side or as a

didactic lesson rather than as the dramatization of the internal inconsistencies of various politico-juridical ideologies and their social and psychological effects. But readers will certainly benefit from Dyson's wide reading in the history of the period, her ability to distill complicated political arguments to their essence, and her impressive familiarity with the plays and scholarship of the Caroline stage.

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**William W. Demastes. *The Cambridge Introduction to Tom Stoppard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 166. \$80.00.**

Over the course of his fifty-five-year career, Tom Stoppard has written a blistering array of creative pieces: twenty-two short and full-length plays, thirteen screenplays, nine television plays, nine stage adaptations, seven radio dramas, and a novel. For the scholar tasked with creating an introduction to Stoppard's writing, it is a daunting body of work in sheer volume alone, to say nothing of the dizzying topical diversity of the works and their grab-bag of historical, philosophical, scientific, and literary influences. William Demastes's accomplishment in the new *Cambridge Introduction to Tom Stoppard* is all the more impressive for the concision and cogency it achieves in the face of such quantity and complexity. Aimed at the beginning to intermediate undergraduate, Demastes's *Introduction* manages to be at once comprehensive and comprehensible, charting a clear interpretive course through Stoppard's oeuvre without ever losing site of the underlying difficulty of the terrain. That Demastes's study is winningly written and carefully paced further adds to the appeal. Though pitched primarily at the undergraduate reader, Demastes's insight into the interconnectedness of Stoppard's varied works is such that those faced with teaching Stoppard are as likely to find the book rewarding as those studying him for the first time.

Without minimizing the breadth of Stoppard's work, Demastes's study clearly enumerates a set of common themes and concerns around which the playwright's work has tended to revolve over the past half-century. The introductory chapter on "Stoppardianism" seeks to identify a single core perspective at the heart of Stoppard's lengthy and genre-jumping career, defined by Demastes as a positivist commitment to the inherent explicability of human experience. "What Stoppard suggests," Demastes writes, "is that our general bewilderment is not the result of a meaningless universe but the result of our current perceptual and intellectual shortcomings as human beings. For Stoppard, it is the great pleasure of life to work at getting a better view and arriving at a better understanding of those

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