

Playing it by the Book: Dramatic Literature before the Commercial Playhouses

Modern readers and theatre-goers take the presence of playbooks for granted. But before the late fifteenth century, play texts were hard to find. However, in the sixteenth century, as theatrical activity increased along with leisure-time reading, play texts became easier to find. But what function did these playbooks serve? Were they instructions for future performances; records of earlier performances; books to be read for pleasure or edification; or some combination of all of these things? Examining the material evidence offered by a series of extant playbooks, including early editions of *Everyman*, *Hickscorner*, and *Three Laws*, this paper considers the functions of dramatic texts in the century before the opening of the commercial theatres.

How is drama represented as literature? Printing contributed to fixing the visual semiotics of drama, but its effect was not immediately transformative. Examining the layout and lettering of playbooks, I suggest that the view that typography standardized dramatic mise en page ignores the dynamic cross-fertilization of manuscript and print cultures throughout the sixteenth century. What factors contributed to the development of conventions for the presentation of drama as literature? Most late-medieval playbooks look in like non-dramatic texts, but by the middle of the sixteenth century a relatively fixed set of conventions for dramatic mise en page had been established. I consider the possibility that the typographic arrangement of early continental editions of Terence, Plautus, and Seneca may have affected the way that English drama was presented on the page. What use did early English playbooks serve? Little is known about the transmission and consumption of dramatic texts, who read them and how they were used. The format of texts reveals not only the meanings of texts, but also habits of thought, and I propose that closer scrutiny of paratextual features and marginalia may yield clues about the way that playbooks were read and used between 1470 and 1576.

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