

6-12-2017

The Duchess of Suffolk / Edited by Richard Dutton and Steven K. Galbraith

Kevin T. Gates

Follow this and additional works at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kevin T. Gates (2017) "The Duchess of Suffolk / Edited by Richard Dutton and Steven K. Galbraith," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 12 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Early Modern Culture by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact awesole@clemson.edu.

Thomas Drue. *The Duchess of Suffolk*. Ed. Richard Dutton and Steven K. Galbraith. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015. 224 pp.

Reviewed by KEVIN T. GATES

Whatever his reputation during his lifetime, Thomas Drue's name is now virtually forgotten. Copies of his texts are not easily obtainable, and works attributed to him are rarely, if ever, performed. In fact, those who have heard of Drue are likely to associate the name with another play, *The Bloody Banquet*, which many scholars now consider to be a collaborative work by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton. Drue's *The Duchess of Suffolk*, then, may seem at first blush to be an unlikely candidate for a new edition. The title's obscurity, of course, argues for its inclusion in OSUP's new series of Early Modern Drama Text Editions. The stated goal of the series is to "offer scholarly editions of less familiar drama texts of Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline England that contribute to modern critical conversations and thus deserve to be better known."¹ With respect to familiarity, the mission is certainly accomplished. As to the rest, the *The Duchess of Suffolk* arguably succeeds on its own merits, but it is through the work of the editors, Richard Dutton and Steven K. Galbraith, that the play's value in modern criticism may be more fully revealed.

The Duchess of Suffolk is, superficially, a history play, recounting a marginally accurate version of the persecution of Protestant Katherine Willoughby during the reign of Queen Mary (for example, in a brief scene, the Duchess encounters Erasmus, who had been dead for twenty years). A reader could easily see the Duchess herself as a quasi-allegorical embodiment of the Anglican faith. Drue takes care to paint her in a very positive light at the very beginning of the play, presenting her with two quick opportunities to show her quality. Her first action in the play is to give alms to the thankful poor. She is then quickly given the opportunity to demonstrate humility and deference to the king, asking his messenger to "Return my salutations on my knee / And say my whole possessions are all his" (I.i.22.23). As virtuous as she may be, however, even she cannot resist firing a few verbal shots at Stephen Gardiner and Edmund Bonner as they are led to prison. "Faggots," she says, "will then grow cheap" (I.i.36). No experienced theatre-goer will be surprised when Bonner's prediction that he "shall live / These scorns to quittance, your free heart to grieve" comes true (I.i.55-6). Queen Mary comes to the throne and releases Gardiner and Bonner. They and their minions then pursue the Duchess, her husband, and their children across Europe. The rest of the play is essentially an episodic tale featuring a series of increasingly narrow escapes. Just when the Duchess seems caught, word comes that Queen Mary is dead. The newly-crowned Elizabeth calls the Duchess safely home.

There is nothing apparently controversial about *The Duchess of Suffolk*. It rather seems to be a very conventional, even patriotic, piece. It is religiously orthodox, it contains no depositions or other material that seems to challenge the

Reviews

authority of the crown, and uses as its source a seventy-year old tale which was “deeply imbedded in” English national identity (9). And yet, Sir Henry Herbert, the Master of the Revels, wrote in early 1624 that the play was “full of dangerous matter,” necessitating a good deal of revision.

Recent scholarship has made the case that dramatists had, by the 1620s, become quite sophisticated in their attempts to make political statements that eluded the censors. Jerzy Limon has argued that *The Duchess of Suffolk* (along with Middleton’s *A Game at Chesse* and other, less well-known plays from 1623-4) was part of a propaganda war against attempts to marry Prince Charles to the Infanta of Spain.² Co-editors Richard Dutton (who has also written extensively on censorship of English drama) and Steven K. Galbraith follow Limon’s interpretation, suggesting that the comparisons between the Duchess and Elizabeth, daughter of James I, were too palpable to be missed. Elizabeth and her husband, Frederick V, Elector Palatine, had been defeated by Catholic forces shortly after he took the throne of Bohemia, resulting in their exile until they were given refuge at the Hague. Drue also appears to have combined three historical persons in order to strengthen the connection between the locations where the Duchess and Elizabeth found safety in exile. The play, under this line of reasoning, shows the similarities between the plights of the two women, and thereby calls for intervention on Elizabeth’s behalf. In other words, the play is a call for England to enter the Thirty Years War, one of the most destructive conflicts in European history.

It is worth noting that it is not clear which version of the text has come down to us. If the text was the version approved by the Master of the Revels, we may with reasonable safety assume that the “dangerous matter” Henry Herbert wrote of had been removed. Dutton and Galbraith’s assume that “the play as printed is largely the play Drue as wrote it” (9).³ This seems debatable, since it was Herbert himself who gave license for the printing of the play a mere six months after licensing the play for performance (17). The circumstances of Elizabeth’s exile had not been resolved by then, so the dangerous associations remained. Ultimately, however, this may matter little. The events surrounding the performance and censorship of *A Game at Chesse* show that drama could at times contain strong messages not readily apparent to a reader, even when that reader was the Master of the Revels himself. It remains quite possible that Drue’s unaltered text was the source.

Dutton and Galbraith do more than discuss the political implications and censorship of the text. They give a thorough treatment to the play’s provenance and reasonably speculate on certain casting choices among known actors with the Palsgrave’s Men. They also pay particular attention to the stagecraft of the piece, discussing several stage directions with an eye to how the desired effect might have been achieved and the perception of such events by the audience. In addition to the introductory materials, the volume features a digitized version of the text as printed in 1631, with a modern spelling version of the text on the facing page. The text is thoroughly annotated in footnote form, allowing modern readers with limited experience in texts from this era to follow along with relative ease. Appendices include possible source material in the form of John Foxe’s and

Reviews

Thomas Deloney's versions of the story of Katherine Willoughby. In short, the volume provides a brief but thorough view of historical, textual, and performance issues necessary to more fully appreciate the play.

The Duchess of Suffolk is a satisfying read with a compelling protagonist. It has interesting staging possibilities, including opportunities for obvious physical comedy. The work of Dutton and Galbraith provide the context necessary to gain a much deeper appreciation of the play and its significance on the English stage. Together, these qualities argue for this text's inclusion in the canon and this volume's usefulness in the classroom.

Notes

1. "Series: Early Modern Drama Text Editions." *The Ohio State University Press*. Web. 18 Aug. 2016.

2. Jerzy Limon, *Dangerous Matter: English Drama and Politics 1623-24*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

3. Dutton and Galbraith base this assumption on their determination that the play contains no obvious gaps or awkward scenes, hallmarks of careless revision. They note, however, that Janet Clare disagrees somewhat with this assessment in "*Art tongue-tied with authority*": *Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 189-190.

Kevin Gates holds an MA in Theatre from Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas, where he teaches Theatre History. He also holds a J.D. from The University of Houston Law Center.