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# Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare's Theater / Matteo A. Pangallo

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**Matteo A. Pangallo. *Playwrighting Playgoers in Shakespeare's Theater*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. 256 pp.**

Reviewed by EMMA KATHERINE ATWOOD

Matteo A. Pangallo's *Playwrighting Playgoers in Shakespeare's Theater* offers a fresh take on the study of early modern audiences and their role in theatrical production. Challenging common generalizations about collective audience experience otherwise perpetuated by performance studies and theater history scholars like Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, Pangallo instead turns his attention to what he terms "playwrighting playgoers," amateur playwrights whose scripts reveal important details about early modern audience experiences. Pangallo expands our understanding of who these amateur playwrights were—not only were they aristocratic poets, but also they were renegade highwaymen, desperate clerks, and sincere middle-class aspirants with a penchant for theatricality developed while attending plays. Adopting "new audience studies" as a theoretical framework, Pangallo moves beyond a reading of participatory spectatorship to demonstrate the dialogic and collaborative relationship between the audience and theatrical culture, or as he puts it, "my objective is to read the professional theater through the plays of the audience" (7). Taking his readers through manuscript revisions, stage directions, and verse analysis, Pangallo presents an unconventional and largely convincing bid to take amateur playwrights—and the things they can tell us about early modern audience experience—more seriously.

Pangallo's first chapter lays the groundwork for reading audience theatrical experience on its own terms. While professional playwrights like Ben Jonson expressed disdain for audience collaboration and considered it a threat to authorial control, Pangallo shows how amateur playwrights relished the idea of collaborative consumers. By employing an "acquisitive playgoer" model, this chapter contends that audiences not only intruded on and collaborated with performances, but that certain audience members also adopted a sense of authoritative ownership over the plays they saw. This is evident, Pangallo suggests, in the plays these audience members wrote in turn. A convincing reading of theatrical inductions written by amateurs, specially punctuated by the character of the "stranger" in John Jones's *Adrasta*, reinforces the chapter's primary thesis that playgoers were expected—and in many cases required—to participate in the theatrical process. In *Adrasta*, the "stranger's" metatheatrical intrusion on the stage and subsequent exit through the tiring house enacts what Pangallo calls a "fantasy of participation" that reflects the ambitions of playwrighting playgoers (70). As

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Pangallo argues, “the question for these different authors, then, was not whether the audience was to participate in making the play but how and to what ends” (71).

Pangallo begins to answer this question of “how and to what ends” in his following chapters. In chapter two, he examines two cases of manuscript revisions by amateur playwrights. Pangallo argues that Walter Mountfort’s *The Launching of the Mary* was revised with performance in mind and thus reveals details about early modern theatrical censorship practices. As a frequent playgoer, Mountfort likely heard censored phrases such as “fayth” and “troth” at performances but as an amateur playwright, he was unaware of what needed to be omitted from a printed script (80). His revision following negotiations with the Master of the Revels illustrates important information about the otherwise invisible gaps between a written script and a live performance. In his reading of Arthur Wilson’s *The Inconstant Lady*, revised for readers rather than for performance, Pangallo begins to analyze specific stage directions. For instance, he considers Wilson’s inverted sense of “within/without” stage directions, which provides a sense of his audience-oriented perspective. Collectively, these nit-picky close readings offer an impression of the way an audience might have experienced early modern theatricality.

Chapter three continues this interest in stage directions to argue that playwrighting playgoers had a “sophisticated, if at times peculiar” understanding of theatrical conventions and were not, as previous critics have suggested, naïve or undeveloped wannabes (104). In three case studies highlighting the “materials and practices” (140) embraced by amateur playgoers, Pangallo reveals the range of expectations that audience members had for theatrical performance. For instance, Pangallo finds that amateurs tend to write their stage directions with a more consistent awareness of the audience, using instructions such as “to the people” rather than “to himself” in moments of soliloquy (113). Challenging Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson’s contention that the language of amateur playwrights differs significantly from that of professionals, Pangallo analyzes William Percy’s verbose yet “permissive directions” (132). These creative stage directions suggest things like costumes “in a severall cullour whither you please” and even offer viable alternatives for staging with a professional adult company or with a children’s company “for Poules” (133). Rather than see these “permissive directions” as the naïveté of an inexperienced playwright, Pangallo argues that such directions, while unusual, demonstrate an experimental, hopeful, and flexible approach to staging and an acute sense of theatrical possibility.

While chapter three examines the visual cues an audience might expect to see, chapter four examines the aural cues they might expect to hear. In considering the role of verse in amateur plays, Pangallo veers back toward the more typical model of the aristocratic amateur. However, he still challenges the common assumption that only professionals were capable of poetic artistry. In offering an in-depth close reading of amateur dramatists’ verse techniques, Pangallo disputes the contradictory scholarly approaches that have called amateur dramatists’ verse either “too irregular” or “too consistent,” suggesting that scholars cannot have it both ways (165). A strong reading of Barnabe Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter* punctuates this chapter and disproves both theories, focusing on the play’s attuned

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poetical devices, from metrical variation and disruption, to enjambment and alliteration.

Sometimes Pangallo insists that previous scholars have been too “fixated on differences” between amateur and professional playwrights (142). At other times, he insists that these differences are significant enough to illuminate the audience’s role in producing early modern theatricality. Perhaps both can be true; if that is the case, this paradox might be more fully examined throughout the monograph. Appropriately, the analytical focus relies on amateur plays; however, it is sometimes unclear whether Pangallo’s argument concerning audience perceptions of theatricality might also serve a thesis that revisits the professional performances that inspired these playwrighting playgoers. For instance, a particularly illuminating reading of the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is buried deep in chapter three; such a paradigm-shifting example would be better served as a prominent touchstone rather than an afterthought. Admittedly, the fact that Pangallo’s findings offer a dual purpose is perhaps a strength rather than a weakness. Ultimately, *Playwrighting Playgoers in Shakespeare’s Theater* offers a significant contribution to a number of early modern fields, including the study of audiences, authorship, theatricality, and dramaturgy. Furthermore, it should remain a useful primer on a number of previously overlooked playwrights for years to come.

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