

6-15-2019

The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment: Print, Performance, and Gender / Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich

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Recommended Citation

Emily M. Fine (2019) "The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment: Print, Performance, and Gender / Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 14 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol14/iss1/16>

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Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich. *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment: Print, Performance, and Gender*. Cambridge University Press, 2016. 256 pp.

Reviewed by EMILY M. FINE

Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich's *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment: Print, Performance, and Gender* delves into the pastoral world of the satyrs and shepherds, nymphs and queens found in country house entertainments, which Kolkovich defines as "the episodic pageantry performed at country estates during royal 'progresses'" (2). The book makes two important scholarly interventions, one more localized to country house entertainments and one more broadly applicable for scholars of the period. First, Kolkovich contends that country house entertainments should be studied as a literary genre with specific features and forms, rather than solely as events. As the first scholarly monograph devoted comprehensively to country house entertainments, this is no small claim. By offering an extensive analysis of the country house entertainment as both a performance and print genre, Kolkovich compellingly argues for its literary, cultural, and political significance. Beyond this generic claim, she counters scholarly assertions that having a female monarch did not majorly reconfigure women's status in England. Instead, she shows how Elizabeth's rule enabled or empowered noblewomen to participate in political activities through their involvement in country house entertainments.

After outlining some of the main generic features of country house entertainments in the introduction, the book is divided into two parts: performance and print. Part I examines country house entertainments in their original performance context, interweaving close readings of the pageant texts with analysis of the historical context. It explores how entertainment hosts navigated both Elizabeth's gender and their own in order to "negotiate the roles of monarch and advisor, of region and nation, and of men and women" (8).

Chapter 1 lays out one of the central ideas of the book: the importance of locality. As occasion- and site-specific collaborative performances, country house entertainments raised questions of ownership and obedience. When does "country" refer to the local region, and when does it make claims about the nation? Who owned the estate, the host or the queen? How did hosts assert control over their guest (the queen), even as they acknowledged their subservience to her? These questions, carefully laid out in the first chapter, become running themes throughout the book.

The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment is at its strongest in Chapter 2, "Your Majesty on my knees will I follow': Performing Gender and the Courtier-Monarch Relationship." The chapter begins with the entertainments of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and Sir Henry Lee in the 1570s and 1590s. Borrowing Leonard Forster's idea of "political Petrarchism," Kolkovich demonstrates how Leicester and Lee used Petrarchan rhetoric to position themselves as courtiers in

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relation to the monarch. The chapter then looks at three performances in 1592—Bisham Abbey, Sudeley Castle, and Rycote Park—which all underscore women’s contributions to entertainments and roles in forming political alliances. These pageants promote female courtiers as more suitable political advisors than their male counterparts. The strength of this chapter lies in its nuance: Kolkovich reads closely for both presence and absence within the pageants, drawing attention to women’s participation in the entertainments that may not be immediately evident.

Chapter 3 explores shifting notions of hospitality as displayed in three country house pageants, Elvetham (1591), Mitcham (1598), and Harefield (1602). Each of the pageants invokes the idea of reciprocity in the use of hospitality: presenting the Queen with a lavish entertainment in hopes of gaining her favor. At the same time, the entertainments suggest a shift in perceptions of hospitality, from generosity to both rich and poor to civility among an elite group. This chapter gives an account of hospitality that puts women at the center, particularly in the discussion of the Harefield entertainment in 1602 by Alice, Countess of Derby, and her husband Thomas Egerton. Kolkovich also draws attention to women’s domestic labor that is often hidden, like the sugar work included in the feast at the 1591 Elvetham entertainment.

Part II of *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment* analyzes the new meanings that accrue on entertainments in their printed form. While many scholars have used these printed pageants as records of the original events, Kolkovich argues that printed entertainments had new audiences and contexts, and should be examined separately from the original performance. In each chapter in this section, Kolkovich close reads the text of the entertainment alongside the printers’ other works to show that country house entertainments could be adapted to suit the changing socio-political climate.

Chapter 4 opens the second half of the book by making the methodological case for “studying publishers and their aims in printing Elizabethan pageantry” in order to understand the entertainment’s new meaning in print (125). Eleven out of seventeen known entertainments were printed in part or in full, and several of them were reprinted. Printers anticipated that country house entertainments had literary value as informative and enjoyable reading and would, therefore, be profitable to print.

After establishing the profitability of printed pageantry in Chapter 4, the remaining two chapters contend that printed entertainments functioned as news and literature, respectively. Chapter 5, in particular, demonstrates the strength of Kolkovich’s reading strategy: by looking at the overall career arc of the printers William Wright and John Wolfe, Kolkovich successfully argues that the Cowdray and Elvetham pageants in 1591 served as national news that helped shape ideas of English nationalism. Chapter 6 considers the Sidney entertainments, Sir Philip Sidney’s “The Lady of May” (1578, printed alongside the *Arcadia* in 1598) and Mary Sidney Herbert’s “A Dialogue between Two Shepherds, Thenot and Piers” (1599, printed in *A Poetical Rhapsody* in 1602). Kolkovich contrasts these entertainments with the Cowdray and Elvetham pageants discussed in the previous chapter, asserting that “both [Sidney] texts promote the country house entertainment not as news, but as politically engaged

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literature akin to the sonnet or eclogue” (194). The chapter focuses on the literary value of the entertainments, particularly the role they played in shaping Sidney’s literary legacy and Herbert’s position as his literary heir. *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment* closes with a short but compelling epilogue that traces the afterlives of the country house entertainment in Stuart England.

Throughout *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment*, Kolkovich offers a nuanced understanding of gender and politics in Elizabethan England that takes locality into account. Methodologically, in the shift from performance history in Part I to print history in Part II, the detailed focus on gender occasionally gets lost. For example, it might have been interesting to consider whether the case for female courtiers made by the Bisham Abbey and Sudeley Castle entertainments, which Kolkovich discussed in Chapter 2, remained as strong in the printed collection containing these two entertainments that she analyzes in Chapter 4. Kolkovich mentions that the printer, Joseph Barnes, obscured the collaborative authorship and the contributions of female devisers of these entertainments, but I found myself wondering how this elision impacted the entertainments’ message regarding political roles for women. Though Part II focuses primarily on male printers as the “devisers” of the entertainments in their printed form, Kolkovich returns to her earlier focus on gender in the final chapter, which offers a feminist reading of Mary Sidney Herbert’s role in shaping her brother’s legacy.

Overall, this detailed and well-researched book clearly identifies the varied purposes that a country house entertainment could serve for the entertainment hosts or the printers. Kolkovich carefully amasses sources and texts, laying the groundwork for future scholars of early modern performance genres, print history, gender, and literary history to continue her work.

Dr. Emily Fine researches early modern women’s writing, post-Reformation death and memorial practices, and inheritance in seventeenth-century England. Since completing her dissertation on mothers’ legacy texts in 2016, she has begun exploring women’s life writing as a source for better understanding English legal history. She is currently a full-time instructor at the University of Alabama, where she teaches first-year writing, the early British literature survey course, sixteenth-century literature, and Shakespeare.