

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). xvi+302pp. ISBN 978 0 5217 6566 4.

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‘Shakespeare was a man of the theatre who wrote plays for the stage, but he was also a dramatist and poet who wanted to be read and who witnessed his rise as a print-published author’ (p. 1). Lukas Erne gets right to the point in the first sentence of his new monograph, a follow-up to his groundbreaking study *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (2003). Those who were won over by that earlier work will find much to admire in this new one; those who refused to give up a popular paradigm after reading *Literary Dramatist* may find it more difficult to hold on to after completing *Shakespeare and the Book Trade*; and those who have remained on the fence since 2003 should be convinced by Erne’s expansion of his argument in 2013.

The paradigm Erne challenged at the start of the 21st century was an entrenched one: Shakespeare was a playwright indifferent to the publication of his plays. The plays could best be understood in and through performance because he was only ever interested in the stage. While some plays were indeed printed, Shakespeare himself had nothing to do with the process. Besides, printed plays were nothing more than ephemera, quickly read and then discarded; they certainly were not worth collecting like other literary genres such as poetry. The trouble with this view, as Erne clearly demonstrated in 2003, is that it ignores considerable evidence that the plays of Shakespeare were actively read and collected in his time, that there appears to have been a concerted effort on the part of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men to get many of the plays into print during the late 1590s and early 1600s, and that some of the longer quartos such as *Hamlet* and *Henry V* were issued with readers in mind. In Erne’s new paradigm Shakespeare is a man of both the playhouse and the printing house.

Literary Dramatist was focused primarily on textual matters. *Book Trade* is principally concerned with material ones. Erne investigates the ‘publication, constitution, and reception of [Shakespeare’s] quarto playbooks published from 1594 to 1622, along with his poetry books’ (p. 7) and over five chapters and three appendices substantially builds on the case he first made a decade ago. In a comparative analysis of play quarto publication in Chapter 1, for example, he establishes that Shakespeare was by far the most popular playwright in print in early modern London, even more popular than Ben Jonson. A straight line has been drawn tracing Shakespeare’s popularity with readers from the early 18th century to today. Erne corrects this view by demonstrating that he was also popular with readers in the first half of the 17th century; in other words, he became popular *again* in the early 18th century. This is one of the chapters in *Book Trade* that relies heavily on tables and statistics, which Erne admits will be off-putting to some readers, but the evidence is clearly laid out, the data commentary lucidly written, and the results hard to ignore.

The focus of Chapter 2 is pseudepigraphy, the practice of misattribution. Between 1595 and 1622 ten playbooks were published with a false ascription to Shakespeare on the title page: five with some form of the whole name and five with initials like ‘W.S.’ or ‘W.Sh.’. Erne argues that there was a method to this madness, as certain stationers were trying to cash in on Shakespeare’s name. Sometimes this investment paid off; sometimes it did not. But such a strategy of misrepresentation was not employed for any other playwright. Between 1584 and 1633 the only one whose name was misappropriated by the stationers to try and make a profit was Shakespeare’s. This is further confirmation that the name itself had literary cachet.

Chapter 3 is a counterargument to those who have claimed that the lack of paratextual devices proves that Shakespeare took no interest in the publication of plays; if he had, then he surely would have made such quartos conform to the conventions of the time, for example by including a dedication, as Ben Jonson did. As Erne vividly shows in a detailed overview of the publication of all play quartos, however, it was in fact the norm not to include paratextual devices in play quartos. In other words, Shakespeare’s playbooks followed the conventions of the time while Jonson’s did not. This reflects a major difference between the two authors: Jonson always tried to control his image in print whereas Shakespeare practiced what Erne calls ‘unpossessive authorship’ (p. 4).

Chapter 4 examines the forty-one stationers involved in issuing Shakespeare’s quartos from 1593 to 1622. In this well-researched chapter – one that should become a touchstone for future research in this area – Erne shows that collectively they made a sizable investment in the plays and poems during these years. Quartos were thus not the

cheap trifles many have made them out to be; stationers put them out because they wanted to make a profit. And they issued lots of quartos by Shakespeare because he was an author whose poems usually sold extremely well, and whose plays sometimes did. For stationers, then, there was value in both genres.

The reception of Shakespeare's quartos is the subject of chapter 5. Erne documents that in Early Modern England a variety of readers and collectors were actively recording their purchases of play quartos, binding them, cataloguing them, annotating them on the page, and excerpting them in commonplace books. For these men and women Shakespeare's play quartos clearly had literary value.

Shakespeare and the Book Trade should be read in tandem with *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*. Cambridge University Press is taking advantage of the publication of the former by issuing a second edition of the latter that also includes a new preface by the author. Erne has always been a wonderful writer – all his books and essays are insightful and well crafted – but he is especially good here as he deftly answers his critics, many of whom seem to have misunderstood the argument and/or evidence in 2003. This is required reading for all who read the first edition but especially for those who remain unconvinced. In the new preface Erne also succinctly summarises *Literary Dramatist* and *Book Trade*: 'The first study argues that Shakespeare wanted to become a successful literary dramatist; the second one demonstrates that he did' (*Literary Dramatist* 2013, p. 20).

Shakespeare's plays had lives in two places during his lifetime: on the stage at theatres like the Globe and on the page at bookshops like the ones in St. Paul's Churchyard. We should keep both places in mind as we read, teach, research and perform the plays today.

Works Cited

- Erne, Lukas, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Erne, Lukas, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).