

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Eva Griffith, *A Jacobean Company and its Playhouse: The Queen's Servants at the Red Bull Theatre (c.1605–1619)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).  
xiv+292 pp. ISBN 978 1 1070 4188 2.**

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In recent years, a number of critics and theatre historians have challenged a once-widespread view of the Red Bull playhouse in Clerkenwell as a downmarket venue playing old-fashioned, rowdy fare to socially inferior and aesthetically unsophisticated audiences. Essays collected in a special section of *Early Theatre*, 9.2 offered revisionist views, as did Mark Bayer's *Theatre, Community and Cultural Engagement in Jacobean London* (2011). Eva Griffith's book, which complements her previously published research on the playhouse, is a significant contribution to this body of work; but more than that, it should be a vital starting point for anyone working on the Red Bull and on the Queen's Men, who performed there until 1619.

In her opening chapter, Griffith sketches out some of the history of Clerkenwell, and its long association with dramatic performance. She details the acquisition of property near St John's Priory by Thomas Seckford in 1573, and his later subletting to Eustace Bedingfeld of a parcel of land including the future Red Bull site (which subsequently passed to his widow Anne). Griffith is adept at reconstructing early modern social networks: that Anne's brother was associated with the theatre owner Philip Henslowe, for example; that Eustace was the nephew of the future Queen Elizabeth's gaoler Henry Bedingfeld, unflatteringly depicted in the Red Bull play *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody*, Part I; that Thomas Seckford's brother Henry was a servant of Bedingfeld in the 1550s, and would by the 1580s be working in the Revels Office. She also brings into circulation many documents not easily accessible, including a seventeenth-century sketch of the layout of the Seckford estate. Griffith then proceeds to consider the reasons behind the building of the Red Bull playhouse, citing the actor Martin Slatiar's 1605 petition to the Privy Council which referred to Queen Anna's brother the Duke of

Holstein and his desire to patronise a group of players. In the event, the Duke left England and the Red Bull became the home of the Queen's Men, but his early link with the theatre represents an international dimension to its story that Griffith returns to in later chapters.

As with the Red Bull site, Griffith offers a detailed account of the pre-Red Bull Queen's Men (or the Earl of Worcester's Men as they then were). This includes biographical data about company members, paying particular attention to the clown Thomas Greene. She draws together available evidence about the location, size and orientation of the playhouse, demonstrating that the passage that linked the Red Bull yard to St John's St is now visible as Hayward's Place. Fascinatingly, she speculates that an elevated building visible on a 1660s sketch of the site was the theatre's tiring house, and that this contained the machinery enabling the company to achieve the airborne effects demanded by Thomas Heywood's *Age* plays and others.

Another aspect of the plays that captures Griffith's attention is their extensive use of pyrotechnics, which she links to the pre-eminence in that art of Denmark, the native land of the company's patron. Indeed, Griffith argues that Anna's dramatic impact went beyond her well-known influence on masque, suggesting that it informed the sympathetic treatment of female characters in plays from *If You Know Not Me*, Part I to *Swetnam the Woman-Hater*. However, she does not help her argument here by enlisting *Edward IV* and *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, both of which (as she acknowledges) date from the Elizabethan period, and the first of which was originally staged by the Earl of Derby's Men. Notwithstanding the repertory-centred approach of this book, perhaps it would have made more sense to explain the apparent sympathies of those plays with reference to their dramatist, Thomas Heywood.

Heywood, indeed, is prominent in this book, which includes case-histories of *If You Know Not Me*, Part I, *The Four Prentices of London* and *The Rape of Lucrece* (as well as *Swetnam* and *Greene's Tu Quoque*). It's good to see plays like the bizarre *Lucrece* getting some critical attention, although Griffith seems unaware of much of the critical work that has been done on Heywood in recent decades (as when she flatly states that concerns about the compatibility of apprenticeship with gentle status 'have never been made central to critical perceptions of *The Four Prentises* in the past', p. 77; but see Cooper, Jankowski). I would also question some of her readings of literary texts, such as John Webster's comment in the epistle to *The White Devil*, 'most of the people that come to that playhouse, resemble those ignorant asses (who visiting stationers' shops, their use is not to enquire for good books, but new books)' (*The White Devil*, 'To the Reader', 7–9). Griffith subsequently comments, 'he describes the people going to *The White Devil's*

theatre as desiring — and therefore being able to afford — *new books*’ (p. 210), but surely Webster’s words are a comparison used to disparage playgoers’ desire for novelty, rather than a statement about their purchasing power. This would not matter were it not that she uses them as evidence that Red Bull audiences included a contingent of ‘ignorant rich people’ (p. 212).

Much more successful is Griffith’s assiduous tracking of the Queen’s Men through the records, whether as multiple groups under the same name touring England and continental Europe, or as a provider of entertainments at court. Accounts for the latter are elliptical, and Griffith speculates interestingly about the role of Robert Sidney, Lord Chamberlain of Queen Anna’s household, in arranging them; Thomas Drewe would later depose that Sidney had ‘a kynde of government over the *said* Company’ (p. 152). Drewe’s deposition came during the legal action by Ellis Worth and other company sharers against Greene’s widow Susan Baskerville; drawing on her earlier, important archival findings, Griffith argues that Baskerville’s behaviour needs to be understood in light of her status not only as inheritor of Greene’s shares in the Queen’s Men, but as a part-owner of the Red Bull playhouse itself. Baskerville is only one in a series of women — Susan Bedingfeld, Queen Anna herself, the female playgoers who presumably enjoyed *Swetnam the Woman-hater* — whose role in the company’s story Griffith emphasises. In doing so, Griffith displays a willingness to revise and complicate existing narratives about theatrical history, often through a return to (or discovery of) archival material, that is typical of this valuable book.

## Works Cited

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