Early Modern Drama on the Page and Stage

Many books and university courses, trying to compensate for a history of the neglect or mistrust of plays as performance, use the phrase 'from page to stage' to think about the dramatic possibilities of their texts. In fact, for the early modern theatre, the phrase needs to be the other way around - from stage to page. Plays were performances first, and only later, and then only sometimes, books. This section of Great Writers gathers resources - podcasts, ebooks, websites - to explore the two interconnected lives of the early modern play - as an event in time and space on the stage of the Globe or Blackfriars theatre, and as a material printed object, on sale to Elizabethan and Jacobean readers in the booksellers' quarter around St Paul's Churchyard.

Whereas many dramatists worked on a 'freelance' basis for different theatres, Shakespeare wrote solely for an acting company whose personnel and talents he understood well. Unusually, he was also an actor himself, listed at the head of the roll-call of actors in the First Folio of his own plays, and as one of the performers in Ben Jonson's Roman tragedy Sejanus. Professor Tiffany Stern's lecture [1] shows how elements of staging and theatre practice can be gleaned from clues in his printed texts. Since we do not have any of Shakespeare's plays in his own handwriting, nor any manuscript evidence from the acting copies used in the theatre, her lecture makes use of early editions of Shakespeare's plays, which can be accessed from the British Library Shakespeare in Quarto or the Furness Collection First Folio sites. The main publication form is the quarto (a small, relatively cheap book, typically a single play, in which the paper has been folded four times). Ben Jonson and Shakespeare are exceptional in printing their plays in the expensive and high-status folio format. [see http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/sceti/furness/eric/teach/index.cfm [2]]

These early texts are challenging for modern readers in many different ways. They derive from a period when spelling is not standardized, and use the typographical conventions of combining u/v and i/j. Sometimes they are in blackletter, a gothic typeface that is difficult for us to read but was probably a marker of popular texts with a relatively wide circulation as it was easy for contemporaries to follow. The printing of plays does not yet have established protocols - the list of all the characters at the beginning that would now be expected from a dramatic text - or sufficient stage directions to enable readers to follow the action depicted. These aspects can be frustrating but they are also liberating, and revealing. One small example: often early modern dramatic texts call characters by generic rather than specific names: the 1608 Quarto of King Lear, for instance, uses 'Bastard' as its name for the person modern editors would call Edmund, perhaps suggesting that for early readers he was more of a type than an individual. It can also be interesting to look at the original titlepages of plays to see how they were being presented to their first readers: the title of Arden of Faversham is 'the Lamentable and true tragedie of M. Arden of Feversham in Kent. Who was most wickedlye murdered, by the meanes of his disloyall and wanton wyfe, who for the love she bare to one Mosbie, hyred two desperat ruffins Blackwill and Shakebag, to kill him. Wherin is shewed the great malice and dissimulation of a wicked woman, the insatiable desire of filthie lust and the shamefull end of all murderers'.

Links

[1] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/william-shakespeare

[2] http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/sceti/furness/eric/teach/index.cfm