

making familiar one of the leading actors of the London stage, especially for unearthing the historical documents with which we might re-envision the Jacobean/Caroline theatrical spectrum.

Jessica Dyson. *Staging Authority in Caroline England: Prerogative, Law and Order in Drama, 1625-1642*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013. 210 pp. \$109.95. Review by ELISA OH, HOWARD UNIVERSITY.

Encompassing literature, legal history, and politics, Jessica Dyson's *Staging Authority in Caroline England: Prerogative, Law and Order in Drama, 1625-1642* analyzes plays by Phillip Massinger, Richard Brome, Ben Jonson, James Shirley, and John Ford in the context of English legal debates about sovereign prerogative and legitimate legal authority in the two decades leading up to the Civil War. Building on Martin Butler's political readings of Caroline drama, Dyson contends that plays in the commercial theater during Charles I's reign debated the king's use of arbitrary sovereign prerogative over taxation, imprisonment, billeting troops, and monopolies. Dyson's welcome political approach to reading these plays argues that they increasingly criticized Charles's insistence on the divinely supported royal prerogative to act outside the law and that they presented alternative legitimate legal authorities. Furthermore, Dyson asserts that "[i]n over-asserting kingly and central authority, the plays suggest, Charles's policies raise the possibilities of destabilisation, fragmentation and disintegration of legitimate legal authority" (13).

In each chapter, Dyson frames her close readings of the plays with a specific seventeenth-century legal discourse of sovereign authority and the king's proper relationship to the law. Chapter 1, "Rights, Prerogatives and Law: The Petition of Right," situates Jonson's *The New Inn* and Brome's *The Love-sick Court* or *The Ambitious Politique* in the context of the dissatisfaction expressed in 1628 by Parliament's Petition of Right, which urged the king to limit his legal prerogative. Dyson argues that *The New Inn* "advocates the balance of subjects' rights against a moderated, if not curtailed, royal prerogative" (20). The play's mock court set up by women and ruled over by the servant Pru shows a struggle for individual rights when characters present

demands as petitions and debate the undeserved promotion of court favorites. Thus, on one hand, the play presents the complaints in the Petition of Right as legitimate, but, on the other hand, it also sets limits on the use of petitions and models a sovereign taking advice from counselors. Similarly, Dyson claims that *The Love-sick Court* references the Petition of Right “as an example of good government to advocate co-operation between the people, parliament and monarch, and emphasise the common good over individual concerns for power and privilege” (31). This play represents two unhealthy extremes—a court full of useless courtiers obsessed with debating neo-Platonism and a dangerously ambitious royal favorite—but ultimately proposes a “middle way” (44) of governing like the country swains, who embody active, loyal parliamentary figures.

Chapter 2, “Shaking the Foundations of Royal Authority: From Divine Right to the King’s Will,” begins by outlining relevant early modern political theories of royal authority. Divine right posited that the king’s power came from God and that, regardless of tyrannical behavior, he was subject to no person or earthly law. The related idea of patriarchy justified the king’s sovereignty with the biblical primacy accorded to fathers, including “fathers” of their countries. However, contract theorists argued that the king derived his authority from the collective sovereignty of his people, who had the right to impose conditions upon his legal authority and revoke his power if he became a tyrant. Dyson traces the representations of kingly authority in three Massinger plays and points to the increasing emphasis on the king’s fallibility and arbitrary individual will: while *The Roman Actor* (1626) presents legitimate though improperly wielded divine right royal power, *The Emperour of the East* (1631) questions the king’s authority over monopolies, taxation, and private property, and *The Guardian* (1633) criticizes unlimited royal prerogative.

Chapter 3, “Debating Legal Authorities: Common Law and Prerogative” turns to the early modern discourse of common law, its claims to legitimate legal authority, and its representation in Brome’s *The Queenes Exchange*, *The Antipodes*, and *The Queen and Concubine*. Dyson introduces legal arguments for the formation of unwritten English common law, and she explains how its authority comes from common law’s origins in immemorial custom. Legal theorists claimed

that it was derived from natural law and tested through so many years of experience that it promoted the good of all in society. Therefore, the traditional authority of common law discouraged the introduction of new laws or changes through royal prerogative unless a custom was proven contrary to reason. In each Brome play, “the state of the monarch-figure’s marriage is an index of the stability of the country. However...these plays go beyond advocating merely a marriage of law and prerogative, instead evoking images of monarchy governed by law” (89). Furthermore, these three plays represent unlimited royal prerogative, particularly when it attempts to overrule established law, as a descent into madness.

In Chapter 4, “Decentralising Legal Authority: From the Centre to the Provinces,” Dyson outlines the duties and descending hierarchies of legal authority from the king to the provinces to illuminate Brome’s *The Weeding of Covent Garden*, Jonson’s *A Tale of a Tub*, and Brome’s *A Joviall Crew*. These plays highlight how local officials such as constables and Justices of the Peace often faced conflicting loyalties and difficult negotiations between the demands of the central royal authority and the local communities where they lived. In contrast to other critics of the play, Dyson asserts that there is no divided authority in *The Weeding of Covent Garden* but rather the ultimate recognition of and submission to the legitimate authority of the Justice of the Peace. *A Tale of a Tub* presents “[t]he manipulation of law and legal authority for personal ends ... [and] critiques the Caroline court’s self-interested interventions in the provinces” (154). In *A Joviall Crew* Dyson contrasts fears of Charles’s prerogative rule in Justice Clack’s selfish, arbitrary absolutism with a respect for traditional liberties and rule by ancient customary laws akin to common law in the beggars’ “commonwealth.” For Dyson, Springlove and Amie’s meeting at the beggars’ commonwealth represents a much-needed compromise between harmful royal prerogative and a king who governs with parliament and within common law. However, this play still threatens a complete fracture in the “chain” of functioning legal authority from center to province and in society itself.

Chapter 5, “Theatre of the Courtroom,” outlines the jurisdictions of the different seventeenth-century courts yet resists drawing specific historical parallels in its close readings of trial scenes in Massinger’s

The Roman Actor, Ford's *The Ladies Triall*, Brome's *The Antipodes*, and Shirley's *The Traytor*. Unified by the premise of a trial, these scenes ask the audience to question the proper exercise of centralized legal authority, but all the other examples of legal functions and dysfunctions in the book could equally well make the audience question legitimate legal authority. While it is true that "[t]he empty seats of justice in *The Traytor's* trial scene is the most obvious representation of the destabilisation of legal authority" (188) in the book, it would be more useful to join the discussion of the trials in *The Roman Actor* and *The Antipodes* to the discussion of these plays in earlier chapters. The Epilogue addresses Shirley's masque *The Triumph of Peace*, which was presented to the king by gentlemen from all four Inns of Court. Dyson claims that the masque's unusually public lawyers' procession comprised "a real triumph of the law through the Inns' successful appropriation of royal iconography" (190). Though troubling aspects of Charles's personal rule can be read in the ambivalent characters of the antimasques, the masque itself staged the triumphant union of the king and the law, instructing Charles through praise of a self-moderated royal authority.

Dyson's contextualization of these Caroline plays continues an important discussion of the legal and political history that informs their composition, performance, and reception. The close readings are sound and thorough, though Dyson's arguments are often difficult to locate due to her tentative claims about what the plays do beyond "explore," "engage," "examine," and "address" issues of legal authority and her tendency to reserve comprehensive, assertive statements for the ends of chapters. Furthermore, there is an embedded chronological argument that needs to be brought to the surface: the book indirectly demonstrates that English drama from 1625 to 1642 featured increasingly negative representations of royal prerogative and fragmented or absent legal authority. Though this chronological argument is made explicitly in Chapter 2, it is not foregrounded in the introduction, is buried in other chapters, and is only fully articulated in the concluding sentence of the book: "Charles I's attempts to gain greater and tighter control over the laws of the kingdom, asserting himself as the authoritative legitimate legal power, led to an increased emphasis on the legitimacy of the common law and local custom as meaningful

alternatives to the King's will as law in maintaining order" (199). The analysis of each play could also benefit from a fuller critical apparatus, and, though Dyson omits depictions of republics and republicans "to avoid temptation or accusation of reading with hindsight" (7), future work on this topic will hopefully interpret representations of these more radical political theories. Nonetheless, this study will be of interest to scholars of seventeenth-century drama, legal history, and the intellectual history of England's evolution toward royalist and parliamentary polarization.

Adrian Wilson. *Ritual and Conflict: The Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. vii + 261 pp. \$124.95. Review by KAROL KOVALOVICH WEAVER, SUSQUEHANNA UNIVERSITY.

Adrian Wilson's *Ritual and Conflict: The Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England* considers the social networks that shaped childbirth in seventeenth-century England. Wilson looks at the "relationships, institutions, and customs" that dealt with childbirth. The author investigates illegitimacy, marriage, and the ceremony of childbirth, applying a method derived from Michel Foucault that looks at occasions when women worked with or against the prevailing gender order. Wilson's work is noteworthy because of its strong and clear analysis and its use of fascinating and intriguing case studies.

Wilson starts out his text by focusing on illegitimacy. He does so for three main reasons: to contrast it with marriage (the topic he addresses in the second section of the book); to show its connections to the church and state, institutions or social networks that had profound influences on childbearing; and to highlight how bastard-bearing was a circumstance that many women of the seventeenth century might find themselves dealing with. The author demonstrates that rituals affected illegitimacy. Due to social customs that sanctioned premarital sex, many couples found that they were expecting babies before their vows were exchanged. Regional practices like spousals, "contracts of marriage...lacking force in law (14)," for example, allowed for premarital sex and resulted in expectant mothers. Wilson also shows that conflict