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Book Review

Johnson, Sarah E. *Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early*

Modern England. Women and Gender in the Early Modern World.

Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. 185 pp. \$104.95.

Following the recent "material turn" in early-modern studies, the appearance of Sarah E. Johnson's *Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern England* is a welcome development, advocating that greater attention needs to be paid to the place of the soul and spirituality in these discussions, especially in those concerned with representations of women on the stage. The relationship between body and soul was much debated in early modern England, and Johnson negotiates various perspectives from medical and theological treatises in her introduction as well as throughout the book, while also acknowledging the frustrations of such writers: early in her introduction, for instance, she quotes from Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Minde* (1604) where he complains that he "could propound above a hundreth questions about the Soule and the body, which partly are disputed of" (8). However, as Johnson notes, discussions of the soul and body

frequently placed the two entities in a hierarchy (soul over body), and this hierarchy was frequently gendered: “the designation of the body as feminine and of the soul as masculine, in relation to each other, predominates, along with the assignment of certain key characteristics to each” (7). It is this dichotomy that forms the framework for Johnson’s readings of representations of women in Renaissance tragedies, comedies, and courtly entertainments, and provides her with the means to show how certain “dramatic moments ... pushed against the dominant gendered construction of soul and body in ways that involved representations of women [troubling] patriarchal stereotypes and expectations by exposing their fragile roots” (163). Indeed, Johnson’s framework allows her to produce some innovative readings of plays and masques, some of which are notorious for their misogynistic representations of women, showing that the reversing or breaking down of the soul/body and immaterial/material hierarchy can provide “more positive representations of women and challenge oppressive gender ideology” (164).

The book is divided into four equal chapters, each focusing on a dichotomy that reflects the soul/body hierarchy and its relation to one or more plays, or, in the case of the last chapter, a small selection of masques. Chapter one, “Puppeteer and Puppet,” explores Vindice’s “dark puppetry of Gloriana’s skull” (27) in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606-1607), before moving to a discussion of puppetry and materiality in Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). Johnson explores the gendered nature of the term ‘puppet’ (as empty and subordinate, a body to the puppeteer’s soul) but explores how an onstage puppet had “disruptive signifying power” not intended by the puppeteer (27). For instance, Gloriana’s skull, carried around by Vindice, is shown to be “neither fully flesh nor fully spirit” (53), undermining the gendered soul-body dichotomy, while *Bartholomew Fair* is shown to argue for the “imperfection or impurity of soul or spirit

that everywhere accompanies displays of the physically gross or base," particularly in the figure of Ursula (56).

Chapter two, "Tamer and Tamed," explores John Fletcher's *The Tamer Tamed or; The Woman's Prize* (1609-1610?), particularly the connection between the soul and the will in the character of Maria. In comparison with Shakespeare's *Taming of Shrew* (1592-1594), Johnson shows us that Fletcher's play "inverts the associations of men with spirituality and rationality and of women with the body," and situates the play in a wider early modern debate over gender roles and the use of rhetoric using this soul-body framework (72).

Chapter three, "Ghost and Haunted," focuses predominantly on *The Lady's Tragedy* (1611), a play most often attributed to Middleton, and revisits the puppeteer/puppet analysis of *Revenger's*. Here Johnson examines the play's use of a female ghost appearing alongside her displayed corpse as engaging with the soul-body relationship, arguing that the appearance of a woman's spirit haunting her fiancé "participat[es] in and also push[es] against the gender assumptions at its root" (105). At the end of the chapter, Johnson contextualizes this analysis with a discussion of the presence of female ghosts in contemporary plays, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1609-1611) and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613-1614), all of which argue for a "more complex understanding of the female self" than its appearance as either a "disembodied spirit," or "stone monument" (129).

Chapter four, "Observer and Spectacle," develops ideas explored in the previous three chapters but extends the discussion to a small selection of masques, including Samuel Daniel's *Tethys Festival* (1610) and Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605), where women were able to perform, in contrast to the Renaissance stage. Here, Johnson

examines whether women's bodies performing in the masques could represent the soul, transgressing and collapsing hierarchical boundaries through costume and dance, also showing, through particular reference to *Blackness*, that women could act as men's consciences by "moving" them to take action (160).

There is much to celebrate in this book, including its close attention to writings about the soul-body relationship, its attention to the effect of performances on an audience (consisting of both women and men), including the effect of using real human remains on the stage, and the plays' questioning of received gender ideologies. Although Johnson is keen to state the parameters of her study as concerned with the representations of women in male-authored secular works, her discussions of the importance of women in the audience may have benefited from looking at female-authored writings to find evidence for the way women understood the soul-body relationship. Quite rightly, however, Johnson suggests that this study will provide a valuable framework for further study of both male- and female-authored works, alerting scholars to a "hitherto overlooked means of questioning the patriarchal subjection of women" (164), allowing us to see new meanings in some of the period's more macabre and seemingly misogynistic representations of women.

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(Manchester University Press, 2014).