

**David AMELANG. 2023. *Playgrounds: Urban Theatrical Culture in Shakespeare's England and Golden Age Spain*.  
London and New York: Routledge**

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In *Playgrounds: Urban Theatrical Culture in Shakespeare's England and Golden Age Spain*, David Amelang offers a spirited, comparative overview of theatrical reality and practice in early modern England and Spain. For all sorts of reasons it is an enticing project: Shakespearean England and Golden Age Spain were the period's quantitative and qualitative leaders in dramatic output, an output that occupies a privileged place in any universal literary canon. Yet at the same time, England and Spain were at perpetual religious and political odds, which makes the simultaneous rise to prominence of the theater in both cultures, as well as the material and practical similarities, even more intriguing. It is the surprising lack of any sustained comparative analysis of those theatrical cultures which Amelang aims to redress in this study. Self-styled as an exercise in cultural poetics, the book's broader claim is that "the social fabric was seamlessly woven into the texts of two of Europe's most iconic dramatic traditions" (2). A corollary of that is that similarity or difference in urban theatrical cultures should bespeak corresponding similarity or difference in social fabrics: to that extent, the scope of *Playgrounds* extends beyond the literary to the historical and makes it an indispensable addition to the growing body of literature on early modern Anglo-Iberian relations.

Chapter 1, "Cities," compares the urban contexts of the two dramatic traditions. London was of far longer standing, much larger, more metropolitan and more commercial than Madrid, Spain's more recently established and essentially court-dependent capital. On the other hand, while England's purpose-built theaters were with few exceptions to be found only in London, *corrales de comedias* dotted the Iberian peninsula from Seville to Zaragoza, and from Lisbon to Valencia — and beyond: drama was produced and performed in the colonies too. As Amelang argues in chapter 4, this meant that there was a greater demand for new plays, which might account for the awe-inspiring fecundity of Spanish playwrights when compared with their English counterparts, as well as

for the more pronounced perception in Spain that plays and their texts were throw-away commodities. Chapter 1 then considers the districts within which purpose-built performance venues tended to appear. In London, civic disapproval meant the entrepreneurs had to find locations in the extramural “liberties,” which led to the concentration of large-scale open-air venues in very particular areas (first Shoreditch, then Southwark). For their part, the indoor theaters of St Paul’s and the Blackfriars owed their intramural existence to the fact that the land they occupied belonged to the Church and was thus beyond the City’s jurisdiction. Any such clustering is less easy to discern in Spain, where the authorities, both political and religious, were generally more tolerant. As the chapter makes clear, this was because Spain’s *corrales* tended to be run by those authorities, who used the profits to finance hospitals, hospices, and so on. Thus, any morally-fueled anti-theatrical prejudice in Spain was usually fast quenched once the cash started flowing in. Nowhere, as Amelang points out, is this basic distinction between the two theatrical cultures clearer than in their responses to plague: whereas the London theaters were closed down during outbreaks to reduce the risk of infection, in Madrid they remained open to guarantee badly-needed funds for overstretched hospitals.

Chapter 2, “Playhouses,” compares the built structures of the two countries’ respective theaters, which, on Amelang’s account, becomes a tale of large-scale similarities and microstructural differences. Here there is a slight conceptual fuzziness, which Amelang himself admits: to what extent can a converted *corral de vecinos* be considered a purpose-built venue? There is also, perhaps, an over-eagerness to find similarity where there is in fact difference: the size and shape of the London amphitheaters hardly makes them and the Spanish *corrales* look “so much alike” (44), while Amelang’s search for explanations turns up more red herrings (*commedia dell’arte*, classical heritage) than hard facts. Bringing converted inns the Boar’s Head and the Red Bull into the equation only confuses things further: unlike the purpose-built amphitheaters, these were considerably more similar to the *corrales*. Quite simply, the slightly conical circular or polyhedral animal-baiting arena offered a structurally sounder model for large roofless buildings than any corral or innyard. More convincing is Amelang’s explanation of how the respective theater-worlds catered differently to increasingly aristocratic spectators (roofing and seating in Spain, indoor spaces in London) or for female playgoers (more segregation in Spain). The chapter is followed by a first interlude, “Why did Madrid not have a

Blackfriars?," the answer to which seems to have been the need to cater to London's more numerous aristocratic audience.

Chapter 3 deals with the "Players." After noting how each theatrical culture was prey to similarly grounded anti-theatrical prejudices, it compares the hierarchical corporate structures of the English companies and the Spanish *compañías de autor*, with their shared origin in guilds; the respective practices of touring, now known, as Amelang notes, to have been far more common in England than was once supposed; and the place of women in the respective companies, which Amelang claims reasonably to be the signal difference between the English and Spanish playgrounds. In the latter, several decrees prohibiting female actresses in the 1580s and 90s were ignored since, on the one hand, Iberian blood seems to have run higher about cross-dressing boys than cavorting women and, on the other, women made better box-office sense. Spanish actresses were, however, obliged to be married, a moral stipulation which was no let to promiscuity. In some cases, marriage led to influence within the corporate structures, some actresses becoming *autoras de comedias* as the 17th century progressed. The figure of the professional actress also shaped the conception of Spanish plays, which gave greater protagonism in terms of the number of lines to female than to male characters, as Amelang's second interlude, "Professional Actresses," demonstrates statistically; the contrast here with England only aggrandizes the miracles of Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, or Volumnia.

Chapter 4 turns to "Dramatists" and asserts the common rhetorical-dramatic education most writers in both countries would have received. It then deals with the use of verse and the conceptions of genre in both "dramatic cultures," two issues which can barely be done justice in the limited space available to Amelang, who is a little doctrinaire regarding genre and suggests that play composition was genre- rather than story- or character-driven despite the alleged preference in both cultures for catch-all tragicomedy. Otherwise, the amazing fecundity of Spanish playwrights is put down to the need to write for large audiences across a more numerous variety of venues; one corollary was the cheapening of the dramatist's art in Spain at the very time that it was enjoying royal patronage in England. Finally, chapter 5, "Playbooks," explores the place of the play in the different book markets, the various formats — Amelang argues for equivalence between English quarto and Spanish *suelta*, and family resemblance between folio edition and *parte* — and mechanisms of censorship. It also has time to discuss playbills and synopses.

In general, Amelang is more concerned to find similarities than differences. This is understandable since it counters the expectations generated by the historical record of political and religious antagonism and is therefore a more attractive and ambitious thesis to defend. However, its daring requires more historical substantiation; in particular, *Playgrounds* might have enquired with more insistence into the intellectual, diplomatic, and cultural networks of exchanges which could have facilitated the transmission of theater-related information between the two nations, but then it would have been a different book. Rather than begging questions, *Playgrounds* should be viewed as raising them. It provides a convenient, timely, and stimulating roadmap of some of the avenues future scholars should research more exhaustively. As such, it is an impressive achievement which, in addition to providing a lively overview of its subject for general readers and graduate students as well as an exhaustive, up-to-date bibliography, will be the natural first port of call for future navigators of the comparative histories of Shakespearean and Golden Age theater.

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**How to cite this review:** Jonathan P. A. Sell. Review of David Amelang. *Playgrounds: Urban Theatrical Culture in Shakespeare's England and Golden Age Spain* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023). *SEDERI* 34 (2024): 101–104.

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