

Robert D. Hume and Judith Milhous. 2015.  
*The Publication of Plays in London 1660-1800:  
Playwrights, Publishers and the Market.*  
London: The British Library

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It would be advisable to consult Hume and Milhous' massive study before making any assumptions about the material aspects of play publication in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Not only do they provide the empirical foundation from which further research might be conducted, but in doing so they carry out a thorough review of criticism that is immensely useful. It provides the reader with a very accurate view of the evolving ideas on playwriting in earlier works, rescuing important studies such as Albright's *Dramatic Publication in England 1580-1640* (1927) that have not enjoyed the success they deserved even if they have undoubtedly contributed to our current perceptions of early modern literature. Their statistical analyses constitute a basis for questions on issues such as readership, publication processes, anonymity, performance, economics of patronage, the sociology of playwriting and the advertisement of plays, allowing us to understand them in their own contexts of production and publication. Their work provides a solid structure that contrasts starkly with the interpretative trend in cultural and literary studies today, bridging the gap between speculation and a much needed scientific approach to literature. *The Publication of Plays in London* expands on their Panizzi Lectures delivered at the British Library (2011) and must be regarded as the culmination of a life-long career dealing with periods of dramatic activity that are often overlooked.

Hume and Milhous' partnership has been a major reference in Restoration drama criticism for a few decades. As for the material aspect of playwriting (namely distribution and the printing process), Hume's previous studies have laid the groundwork on which serious research might be based. The first part of the book deals with publication issues, including an introductory chapter on the emergence of the printed play-text in the early Elizabethan period.

Part I proper begins in 1660 and covers the movement from quarto publication (1660–1715) to octavo and duodecimo (1715–1800). Part II is entirely devoted to financial contexts such as the price of plays and playwright's remuneration across the two periods. Finally, Part III analyzes the phenomenon of catalogues, reprints, collections and illustrations, which hitherto has not received much scholarly attention. This volume thus stands in an advantageous position, as it enables the authors to situate the Restoration period in a continuous timespan from the establishment of the theater business in Elizabethan times onwards.

In the first section, Hume and Milhous devote themselves to debunking misleading assumptions on questions of authorship and publication prior to 1660. This allows us to observe the development of performance and publication rights and the changes leading to the establishment of the "third night profit" convention and the right of playwrights to peddle scripts to publishers and booksellers, which would have a tremendous impact in the professionalization of the theater. They provide an interesting insight into the Actor's Rebellion of 1694 as signaling the moment when performance rights became less fixed. They discuss Roger L'Estrange's status as a controversialist and the effects on licensing rights for professional playwrights, while also observing how King William's lax attitude towards playhouses managed to overthrow the claims of the United Company to the stock of pre-1645 works without raising complaints. Also, they manage to illustrate how booksellers secured a de facto perpetual ownership of the intellectual property of playwrights by allowing them to make only a single payment and how the turbulent political situation settled this state of affairs regardless of the passing of the Copyright Act (1710).

Even when Milhous and Hume base their conclusions on assumptions rather than statistical data, we are inclined to trust their well-established expertise as their management of evidence is clear enough to garner support for their intuition. Their guess that D'Avenant and Killigrew thought up the business scheme whereby patent companies put the risk entirely on the playwright while creating a market for aspiring gentlemen not only accounts for the careers of the likes of Dryden and Shadwell, but proves difficult to deny given the historical evidence and the situation confronting them at the reopening of the theaters. They successfully prove that

the involvement of playwrights in the printing process rose steadily from the 1660s onwards, yet they manage to include minor exceptions in constructing the big picture. The figures provided also show ground for a narrowing time lapse between performance and publication and the development of advertisement strategies coinciding with the rise of the newspapers or the commodification of cast lists and separate prefatory material at the turn of the eighteenth century. The material context of publication is well accounted for, as they provide a really good mapping of major publishing houses as well as changes in print runs and bookselling techniques. To my mind, their most important contribution rests on providing a solid foundation for future studies in authorship and the professionalization of the literary trade. The movement from collaborative and anonymous authorship to solo publication provides an explanation for the changing status of the playwright best seen in the appearance of major folio collections prior to the 1660s, as well as the posthumous collected works of D'Avenant and Dryden, which indicate that plays had come to be seen as bearers of literary value.

As they move into the eighteenth century, their consideration of piracy and its effects on the change towards octavo and duodecimo formats by competing publishing operations is also developed. The collapse of licensing regulations and the failure to impose the Copyright Act paved the way for what they recognize as the "decline in the aesthetic and intellectual ambitions of playwrights" (120) which is marked by the enforcement of Walpole's Licensing Act (1737). The lowering of literary standards is explained through the re-establishment of a competing duopoly, crushing the competition posed by small venues like Little Haymarket and accommodating new performances to larger crowds, to whom a dialogue-based piece might have not seemed easy to follow. The new theater gave rise to new theatrical forms that were constantly adapting their public appeal to achieve maximum profitability. Hume and Milhous also discuss marketing differences between octavo singletons and popular opera libretti, which leads them to question "what qualifies as a play," excluding musicals and afterpieces that might skew the figures that mainly affect play publication for the purpose of their analysis.

Hume and Milhous' materialistic approach is comprehensive but not overly ambitious. They recognize the inaccuracy in settling matters such as the relationship between printed versions and performance texts. Moreover, when they move to the realm of pure economics, they must admit the difficulty of establishing a stable comparison between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sterling values and modern currency, which is also subject to all sorts of inflations and devaluations—for instance, some of the evidence we have for a playwright's earnings is given in broad-pieces, which had a face-value of 20 shillings, but rose to 23 by the end of the seventeenth century. They reject the argument of the affordability of playbooks. This leads to further assumptions about how much profit playwrights and booksellers could make selling luxury items, which in turn implies a much more reduced readership and hence subscription figures than those which have previously been assumed. It also has certain implications regarding a playwright's remuneration, which included the price obtained from the publisher, plus third and sixth night benefits and favors from prospective patrons.

The last part of the book deals with the purely material aspect of reprints and their status as empirical data, particularly in the case of eighteenth-century publishers like Tonson and Bell. This aims at vindicating the role of neglected reprints and collections as source material for investigation, a call to arms against the sole authority of first editions in research and a reminder that they often limit our views of the development of theatrical and literary practices. This volume includes a collection of appendixes, tables and figures for further research, namely a list of copyright payments for plays, a list of titles included in major multi-author collections, a series of copyright transfers (Lintott's and the Upcott collection), the publication order of Bell's *British Theatre* series (1791–1797) and a list of bibliographical resources that have helped shape this astonishing work. We are all of us indebted to Hume and Milhous for illuminating the darkness that often shrouds our perception of the publishing world in two crucial periods for the development of British drama.<sup>1</sup>

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