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Review of Rachael Ball, *Treating the Public: Charitable Theater and Civic Health in the Early Modern Atlantic World*

Margaret E. Boyle

Bowdoin College, mboyle2@bowdoin.edu

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Ball, Rachael. *Treating the Public: Charitable Theater and Civic Health in the Early Modern Atlantic World*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. xvi + 138 pp. + 1 ill.

The interdependent relationship between early modern theater and social-charitable institutions is taken up as a point of departure in Rachael Ball's ambitious 2016 study, *Treating the Public: Charitable Theater and Civic Health in the Early Modern Atlantic World*. In a concise and provocative read, Ball establishes a comparative framework to trace the development of early modern theater and a variety of social-charitable institutions. She pairs the following cities under the broad "Atlantic World" lens, each pair comprising the topic of the first four chapters of her book: Madrid and London, Seville and Bristol, Mexico City and Dublin, and Puebla de los Angeles and colonial Williamsburg. At its start, the book asks readers to explore this interdependent relationship as a model that is circulated across a variety of contexts: "to establish the uniqueness and importance of the system of public theater and charitable hospitals that developed in Castile and that Spaniards exported to their American colonies during the early modern period" (7). Ball skillfully brings together a diverse array of source material for her readers, including royal decrees, town council minutes, theater contracts, hospital records, sermons, letters, diaries, and play-texts. Throughout the volume, she emphasizes how "the charitable function of playhouses," meaning the taxation of revenue as a way to fund a variety of social-charitable institutions, including hospitals, serves as a way to "legitimize and popularize theater" (154).

There are a number of exciting aspects of Ball's project. The book synthesizes multiple theater histories, with deft attention to theater as text as well as process: featuring actors and actresses, a variety of performance spaces, descriptions of audience, discussion of reception, censorship, popularity and morality. It is also compelling for the way it connects theater to larger ideas around early modern civic or public health. Not only does the book stress "the fundamental connection between hospitals, ideas about care for the poor, and the financing of public theaters," but it establishes multiple avenues to view theater as an instrument of healing (9). Throughout the book, Ball outlines specific examples from early modern plays that reference local geography or current political events as a way to demonstrate the relationship between playwrights and their audiences (see for example pp. 44-45). For the context of the book's larger concerns with health, it would also be compelling to discuss at more length the representation of health issues within and across national theater traditions (the representation of medicine or treatment practices on stage, for example).

Treating the Public is a deeply interdisciplinary project, its potential impact conceptualized as an "analysis of ways that urban dwellers experienced and used

theater as a social, cultural and economic institution” (11). Perhaps due to this ambitious reach, some of the discussions around disciplinary work can feel murky, where for example Ball differentiates between literary and historical approaches to the topic at the close of the introduction. Similarly, the project’s innovative and necessarily revisionist commitment to Atlantic World over national perspective could benefit from a bit more nuanced engagement with existing historiography, if not specific to theater history. These minor concerns should not deter the reader from engaging with this important volume, rather they should emphasize the difficulty and importance of this kind of larger scope work.

It is worth highlighting the fifth chapter of the book and its discussion of early modern antitheatrical treatises. The lively discussion of gender politics, and its potential connections to health and illness, make the chapter an especially thought-provoking read. Ball writes for example, “opponents of the stage feared that men would take on womanly characteristics that would have corporeal effects for them individually and for the body politic as a whole. Womanliness equated with sickness” (141). Attention to these gendered dynamics at play in this discussion of theater and health sets the stage for ongoing scholarship in this field, and the book overall raises a number of compelling and interrelated questions for future work. The interdisciplinarity of *Treating the Public* ensures its appeal to a variety of audiences including theater scholars, historians of medicine and science, and early modernists from a variety of national traditions that are not always in conversation with one another: Spain, England, Latin and North America.

Margaret E. Boyle
Bowdoin College