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Matthew Dimmock (ed). William Percy's Mahomet and His Heaven: A Critical Edition

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Matthew Dimmock (ed). *William Percy's Mahomet and His Heaven: A Critical Edition.* Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2006. Pp 259.

Matthew Dimmock opens his pioneering edition of William Percy's previously unpublished *Mahomet and His Heaven* by acknowledging that the play is an enigma: 'Its origins are uncertain, its textual history confused, its status as legitimate playtext doubted, its literary merit consistently denied' (1). While Dimmock's expertly edited text and learned introduction go some way toward clarifying these issues, *Mahomet and His Heaven* is never likely to garner attention for its artistry or stage history. Percy's poetry is strained and atonal, his characters are flat, and his play has probably never been staged. For that matter, it could not be mounted without causing great offense, given its disregard for the Islamic prohibition against personifying the Prophet Muhammad. Yet precisely because Percy ignored that interdiction (or more likely, had no idea about it) and produced the sole extant early modern play to stage Muhammad and 'flaunt' (1) its Qur'anic source, the play deserves scholarly attention.

Scholars will find intriguing many of the elements of the play discussed in Dimmock's erudite introduction. The work does far more than make good on its title's promise to portray the prophet and a supposed Muslim heaven. In a plot that actually spends far more time in Arabia than in heaven, Percy includes key components of the anti-Islamic polemic that early modern England had inherited from medieval commentators. Thus the action is chock full of greed, hypocrisy, and the occult. It features references to the alleged patching together of the Qur'ān from various traditions, Muhammad's supposed teaching of a dove to peck wheat from his ear and claim that the bird embodied the Holy Ghost, and above all associations of Islam with intemperate lust. We see incantations recited, a contest in knavery, and a beautiful Muslim temptress deceiving half a dozen men and striking the Prophet himself across the face before inviting him to 'kiss my cul'. This is not great literature, but it certainly entertains the reader who can pick his way through the play's thick web of obsolete idioms and archaic spellings.

In his introduction, Dimmock provides a detailed account of the author's life, indicating how Percy's Catholicism and his brother Henry, Earl of Northumberland's interest in the occult, alchemy, and astrology inform themes explored in the play. He carefully traces the play's sources, considering not only European translations of the Qur'ān but entire traditions of both

Christian and Muslim exegesis on the relevant passages. Although this focus may be meticulous to a fault, it attends to the ways in which Percy departs from his sources in stripping away the religious message of the original myth, emphasizing the sexual magnetism of the play's central female figure, and degrading Muhammad by playing upon widespread Christian notions of his lasciviousness. Thus, Dimmock argues that Percy's retelling of a Muslim story 'belongs to a genre of medieval anti-Muslim refutations that depends upon exposing the absurdity and comedy at the heart of Islamic theology' (22).

For all his assertions that the play seeks to lampoon Islam, Dimmock also avers that a number of its characters are 'demonstrably English' and that the falsity, lasciviousness, and greed of Muslims 'become the exaggerated attributes of his English targets' (22). This argument follows from Dimmock's monograph, *New Turkes: Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, 2005), which demonstrates that the 'Turke' was often a 'marker of infidelity against which the English schismatics ... were measured' (53). By this logic, London is refigured in the play as Medina, 'a transformation which mirrors the Catholic accusation that the English were the 'new turkes' of Europe' (*Mahomet* 11). Still, Dimmock is careful to point out that the 'conditional identification' of Islam and Christianity ultimately functions to establish a clear division between the two where 'Christianity represents the true faith, and Islam its corrupted duplicate' (29). For Dimmock, this also explains Percy's decision largely to ignore the tradition of seeing the Prophet as a charlatan trickster and instead to acknowledge his supernatural status while presenting him 'ensconced in an Islamic heaven surrounded by his angels' (32). To emphasize the contrast between 'Mahomet' and Christ, 'the Anti-christ had to be recognizably the mirror-image of the Saviour' and not merely the arch-conjuror of centuries-old libel. This leads to Dimmock's compelling suggestion that 'it is probably most productive to consider *Mahomet and His Heaven* as an experimental emulation (or perhaps reinvention) of the Corpus Christi dramatic cycle, a means of celebrating Christ and Christianity on stage at a point when such spectacles had been vigorously suppressed and were explicitly associated with "papisty"' (46).

While Dimmock argues for the ingenuity of the play's three interwoven plots and claims to have set out to produce a modern edition 'that is easy to read and which might be used by academics and students alike', much about this text renders it inaccessible to all but the most bookish undergraduates. Like Jonson's plays, Percy's is full of topical references and early modern cant. Yet where a teaching edition might gloss difficult terms in the margins,

Mahomet and His Heaven reserves its explanations for a 58-page appendix. Advanced graduate students and academics will be rewarded each time they turn to Dimmock's meticulous explanatory notes but even the most patient reader will long for on-page glosses when repeatedly confronted with lines such as, 'Must thou be equiperating? / what? thy grossum caput, unto my Actum? Ha'. Similarly, the decision to follow an admittedly problematic copy-text and 'keep editorial interference to a minimum' results in a text where two major characters are left out of the list of characters (without being inserted in square brackets), and confusing line breaks ('al: / so') are retained even for prose sections. Of course, Dimmock's commitment to producing a faithful modern text means that this edition will be valuable both for scholars interested in early Orientalism and for bibliographers who will appreciate the lengthy list of substantive variants and the alternate version of act 4, scene 1 appended to the text.

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Alison Findlay. *Playing Spaces in Early Women's Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp x, 260.

Alison Findlay's *Playing Spaces in Early Women's Drama* is a valuable contribution to the study of the relationship between early modern theatrical productions and the space in which they were written, performed, and set: an important relationship that gets relatively little attention. Findlay very carefully considers how specific historic, geographic, and architectural elements inform and are revised in plays written, performed, and sponsored by women from the late fourteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. Many of Findlay's critical readings of the plays and the space in which they were or may have been produced are instructive. This book is less helpful, however, when it comes to its assessment of the varying contribution of women to the dramatic arts, as it treats all contributions — composition, performance, and patronage — similarly without sufficient critical exploration of the input of others: male playwrights and set designers, for example. In its enthusiasm to identify how early modern women manipulated, reconfigured, and played with space