EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

**Michael M. Wagoner, *Interruptions in Early Modern English Drama* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2022). x+284pp. ISBN 9 781 3502 3831 2.**

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Theatrical texts are by their very nature replete with interruptions: characters interrupting each other, characters interrupting themselves, action interrupting conversation and so on. Early modern plays are no exception to this pattern, but to my knowledge there exists no study attempting a sustained investigation of the significance of interruptions as a form within late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century English drama. Michael M. Wagoner's solid, well-researched and lucidly written monograph *Interruptions in Early Modern English Drama* fills that void, and brilliantly so.
The book opens with a theoretically sound Introduction that effectively clarifies the scope, methodology and objectives of the study. First, Wagoner describes the form of interruptions. An interruption, we learn, is made up of three moments: premise, rupture and continuation. After the rupture occurs, the premise cannot proceed as originally expected, and there are three options for the continuation: 1) to 'meld the premise with the rupture and create a synthetic new expectation' (p. 4); 2) to 'allow the rupture's language or event to dominate' (p. 4); or 3) to 'ignore the rupture and follow the premise's initial path' (p. 4) — all three options existing not as discrete possibilities but on a spectrum of potential outcomes. Drawing upon the work of such diverse ancient and modern theorists as Aristotle, George Puttenham, Philip Sidney and Louis Althusser, among others, Wagoner resolves to focus on how interruption as a form 'encodes a complicated struggle for power' (p. 4): the premise establishes authority, the rupture potentially challenges that same authority, and the continuation provides the outcome of that struggle.

There are three major types of literary interruptions, that is, creational, external and internal, but it is with the latter, namely those interruptions that are found *inside* the

texts, that *Interruptions in Early Modern English Drama* is specifically concerned. Wagoner further divides them into two categories: microinterruptions and macrointerruptions. Microinterruptions are 'specific and localized moments articulated within dialogue' (p. 9) and can be further distinguished based on what causes the rupture, namely dialogue, self, or action. By contrast, macrointerruptions 'are large scale and less localized', interrupting as they do 'plot or convention', and are meant to 'affect an audience's expectation of a situation, plot, or character' (p. 12). They can be further broken down into two categories according to what the premise is, either dramaturgy or convention. The undergirding force of the argument is that Wagoner primarily views interruption as a key tool for establishing and subverting power relations, and he shows how interruptions work in a number of solo-authored plays written by those he believes to have been the three main playwrights of the early modern period, namely William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and John Fletcher, who have seldom (if ever) been considered all three side by side.

The rest of the volume is divided into two sections according to the categories set down in the Introduction: 'Microinterruptions' and 'Macrointerruptions'. Section I is broken down into three chapters ('Dialogue', 'Action', 'Self'), Section II into two ('Dramaturgy', 'Convention'). All chapters offer painstaking analyses of passages from plays by each of the three dramatists that incrementally contribute to strengthening Wagoner's main argument, which is impossible to reproduce in the detail it deserves in the space of a short review. Hence, I will limit myself to presenting readers with a few pointers and highlights of the volume that I hope will manage to make the importance of this study emerge as forcefully as possible.

In Chapter 1, Wagoner shows how an examination of interruptions can shed light on the hierarchical relationships between characters and on the power dynamics that inform the plays he chooses as examples: Jonson's *Volpone*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Fletcher's *The Humorous Lieutenant*. Wagoner's scrutiny leads him to argue that Shakespeare dramatizes power struggles that are 'hierarchical and competitive' (p. 48), while Jonson delights in staging inversions of expected power dynamics and Fletcher employs interruptions in order to 'build community' (p. 48) by creating trust among the characters.

Chapter 2 deals with self-interruptions, the main function of which is that of creating a character's interiority. They can be broken down into three types: emotional, manipulative and comedic. As for emotional self-interruptions, Wagoner considers Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, Jonson's *Catiline His Conspiracy* and *Volpone*, and Fletcher's *The Mad Lover*; when discussing manipulative interruptions, he focuses

on Shakespeare's Iago in *Othello*; in the case of comedic interruptions, he examines Mistress Quickly in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. These detailed microanalyses lead Wagoner to contend that self-interruptions encapsulate 'the struggle for control of meaning that plays out between the playwright and the audience with the text and the actor as intermediary' (p. 88) and that they invariably demonstrate the power wielded by the playwright.

The following chapter takes up the issue of action interruptions, which 'provide theatrical opportunities for staging that are myriad in possibility but are also limited through the guiding form of the text itself' (p. 90). First, Wagoner takes into account Jonson's preference for using French scenes over the cleared-stage logic, which seems to be related to the playwright's aim to exert his own authorial control on the reception of the text by disrupting the audience's expectations with 'divisions that are more strongly unified by thematic affect than around clear-cut theatrical actions' (p. 97). The next example is the appearance of Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, 3.4. Wagoner inspiringly discusses the placement of the ghost's entrance in the editorial tradition from the First Folio to *The New Oxford Shakespeare*. He defends the Folio's early placement of this entrance, arguing that it 'creates a prolonged rupture in which the expectations of the audience lie suspended, as we await the moment in which the continuation might hit' (p. 101), a dramatic effect that is instead significantly lessened if the entrance is moved to a later moment. As a matter of fact, this latter solution, while probably less confusing for readers, detracts from the power of the silent presence of the ghost on stage *before* Macbeth acknowledges its presence, as the ghost's early entrance should be seen as 'an action interruption for Macbeth, not for the audience' (p. 107). Finally, Wagoner considers how Fletcher uses offstage music to interrupt onstage male action in *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed*, in which a song sung by women offstage interrupts a conversation between male characters, with 'the men los[ing] their power of conversation in light of the song coming from the women's chambers' (p. 113). Wagoner reflects on how editors have repeatedly misplaced the song, thus reducing its rupturing effect as it is found in the two earliest texts of the play (the Lambarde MS and the First Folio).

In Chapter 4, Wagoner proceeds to examine macrointerruptions of dramaturgy, that is, moments 'when a playwright engenders an expectation in the structure of a play only to rupture that expectation' (p. 122). In order more clearly to illustrate the point, Wagoner first examines the Grex or chorus in Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour*, showing that the way in which Jonson breaks the traditional pattern of having the Prologue appear at the third sound of trumpet by introducing it at the second aims to 'disrupt the audience's comprehension of the play world versus the real world' (p. 125). Jonson's

interruptive techniques and use of the Grex, argues Wagoner, 'illustrate his manipulation of and control over the audience's expectations' (p. 130), while at the same time outlining his awareness that it is in fact a 'Sisyphean task' (p. 134). The discussion then shifts to *The Winter's Tale*, in which Shakespeare first sets up the audience's expectations and then defies them, and he 'tries to control the audience response by giving us a sense of superiority' (p. 142) over Leontes in the statue scene. The chapter ends with a very perceptive analysis of Fletcher's *The Chances*. The structure of the first act disorients the audience and 'disrupts our expectations of how a drama should begin' (p. 144), Wagoner observes. The eleven short scenes that make up the first act, together with the deliberately vague title, bring to the fore how Fletcher seeks to confuse the audience as to the characters' identities and the whole plot 'by providing excessive amounts of not useful, peripheral, distracting information […] while depriving us of pertinent facts' (146).

Chapter 5 deals with interruptions of convention, which are especially significant in terms of the relationship they create between writers and audiences, as well as between writers and their predecessors. Specifically, Wagoner focuses on male-to-female (MTF) cross-dressing within the plot of a play — i.e., cross-dressing by a male character, rather than the conventional cross-dressing of male actors in female roles — a technique that 'blurs the lines between reality and the theatre for early modern audiences' (p. 159), also providing readers with a helpful table listing plays with MTF cross-dressing in 1584–1636. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* is the first example selected by Wagoner, in particular the cross-dressing of the page Bartholomew as the Lady in the Induction, a transformation that happens offstage, thus preventing us from ever seeing Bartholomew *as Bartholomew*. In exposing the theatrical artificiality of the early modern convention according to which female roles were performed by young male actors, Shakespeare creates an interruption in the convention. The second example is more obvious, namely Jonson's *Epicene*. Wagoner believes that Jonson used that title to wink at the learned section of the audience, who might gather from it some indication of what was about to happen on stage, and ultimately argues that '[i]n crafting an interruption that reaches into the heart of a convention, Jonson questions that convention both to control his audience and to allow us to see through the theatricality as well' (p. 177), while at the same time never destroying the artifice itself. The third example comes from Fletcher's *The Loyal Subject*, in which Young Archas is disguised as Alinda. As Wagoner informs us, Fletcher used MTF cross-dressing more than any other early modern playwright. This example is particularly interesting in that, unlike Shakespeare and Jonson, Fletcher 'not only gives the character two separate identities […] but also permits audiences to see both sides of the disguised gendered character' (p. 186). Moreover, the play dwells at length on the attraction between Olimpia and Alinda,

and, as Wagoner remarks, even though it is true that the concluding revelation that Alinda is in fact a young man does eventually reassert the normativity of patriarchal heterosexuality, what Fletcher shows us throughout the play is not entirely voided of its subversive implications, because the alleged homosexual relationship between two women that an early modern audience would have witnessed on stage would have had a strong impact on 'notions of static gender identity' (p. 200) all the same. Rather than with a Conclusion, the book ends with a 'Continuation' in which Wagoner insists that the work on interruptions is not finished, as there is much more to be done, especially outside the work of Shakespeare, Jonson and Fletcher, with the volume aptly concluding half sentence, with a long, interrupting dash.

Among the main strengths of this book are Wagoner's keen eye on editorial theory and practice, his ever-present alertness to how performance can significantly alter the results of interruptions as they are written on the page and his undeniable skills in furnishing readers with original, provocative analyses of passages and scenes that we mistakenly thought we knew like the back of our hands. This applies to most of the examples discussed in the monograph, but Wagoner is clearly at his most invested and insightful when it comes to the plays of Fletcher, as demonstrated by his enthusiastic, brilliant and passionate discussions of *The Humorous Lieutenant*, 2.5; *The Mad Lover*, 2.1; *The Woman's Prize*, 2.5; and *The Chances*, Act 1, which all also furnish invaluable insights for any future editors of Fletcher. As a huge admirer of Fletcher myself, I could not be happier to celebrate the significant contribution that this book will make to the current re-evaluation of such an important and unjustly neglected playwright of the Jacobean era.

With its wide-ranging scope, its insightful close readings and its persuasive argument, Michael M. Wagoner's *Interruptions in Early Modern English Drama* will be a useful addition to the libraries of all students of early modern drama, especially those invested in the workings of conventions and structural issues, and those interested in the editing of early modern plays, as well as experts of Shakespeare, Jonson and, especially, Fletcher.