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Alex MacConochie. *Staging Touch in Shakespeare's England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 272pp. ISBN 9780192857361. \$80.00 hardback.

by Laura Jayne Wright

“*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar’s I am,” reads the penultimate line of Thomas Wyatt’s famous sonnet: to touch is to own.¹ In Alex MacConochie’s new monograph, *Staging Touch in Shakespeare’s England*, to touch is also to submit, to tease, to offer, to take, to infect, and to dominate. The tactile world of early modern England unearthed by MacConochie is one of shifting mores and new kinds of conduct, in which touch is not always erotic, not always easily codified, and rarely straightforwardly hierarchical. If there are “canons of tactile decorum” (135) in early modern England, as he writes, it seems that those laws exist to be rewritten. Far from repeating and solidifying these laws, the stage is proposed as the place in which to challenge them. MacConochie’s argument is interwoven with interesting work on consent, on reciprocal pleasure in a culture which largely denies the desires of women, and on social norms which can be breached at a touch. There are also striking questions raised concerning which kinds of touch are public and which are private. The embrace, for example, which slips between “social, ceremonial, *and* intimate uses” (93) deploys its ambiguity as a show of both vulnerability (I put my body in your arms) and power (I take your body in mine).

In a refreshingly brisk but often conversational style, MacConochie slips deftly between the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Volosinov, drawing their theories of utterance and interlocution into his own examination of “interpersonal touch” (1, 6), and developing an idea of mutual connection which is crucial to the rest of his work.

¹ Thomas Wyatt, “Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind,” in *Sir Thomas Wyatt: Selected Poems*, ed. Hardiman Scott (Manchester: Fyfield, 1996).

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For MacConochie, this kind of two-way touch is crucial to understanding early modern physicality. Touch is framed as “dialogic,” as “both medium and subject of social negotiation” (7). Touch is an exchange rather than simply an action: it is, as MacConochie points out, impossible to touch someone without receiving returned “touch” on one’s own skin (4), or, more problematically in times of plague, to reach out without the fear of receiving a “polluting touch” in response (99).

Dividing its chapters by body part, in a blazon writ large, the book works upwards from feet to arms to lips, culminating in a coda, entitled “Reunions,” which brings those disparate parts together in a reading of Wilkins’s *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* (1607). The decision not to separate acts of touch by “kind”—the violent, the erotic, the affectionate—but by body part results in a striking and often usefully uncomfortable exploration of touch in relationships not held to be dependent on mutual consent. MacConochie not only begins with feet—reversing the blazon—but turns at once to scenes of kicking. In this discussion of low blows, MacConochie cuts sharply to one of the central questions of his work: the connection between touch and power.

As MacConochie’s first example in this chapter on feet, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), underscores, domestic spaces and marital bedrooms were often staged as sites of violent contact. It is in relation to such theatrical examples that this book’s title, *Staging Touch*, is best served. While Walter Calverley’s crimes had already been described in a ballad, two pamphlets, and a play by George Wilkins which curtailed and rewrote their brutal conclusion, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* confronts audiences with live, on-stage violence. The staging of violence is distinct from the violence encountered elsewhere in early modern culture if not least for the very obvious reason that the former does no physical damage, even if it conveys the illusion of doing so. MacConochie is attentive to the complexities of touch and violence and attends even to moments where no touch is made, as in his description of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*’s Husband “invading [his wife’s] space to the point of violent contact” (31). He is, as one would hope of a scholar studying touch, attuned to the microaggressions and hints of violence that less powerful characters endure onstage (and, which, of course, play out in manifold ways in the world offstage). The stage kicks MacConochie discusses are, for instance, further complicated by their relationship to a “behavioral genre common to the early modern theater—comical kicks delivered by superiors to their inferiors, always well-deserving of such punishment—to a newly tragic context” (26).

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Speculating interestingly on how stage directions such as “spurns” might be performed, MacConochie frames the early modern playhouse as a space that both replicates and subverts the expected standards of touch within everyday behavior. There are, as MacConochie demonstrates, at least imagined rules for appropriate touch both on and off the early modern stage. To touch correctly was a way to offer connection without confrontation: “civil manners help to ameliorate competitive frictions, as much as to determine hierarchical prerogatives” (137). Yet, *Staging Touch* is at its most intriguing when it considers the ways in which such rules are broken.

Throughout *Staging Touch in Shakespeare’s England*, there are many such thoughtful close readings of rule-breaking touch: a moment of “footsy” in *The Winter’s Tale* (25); the “powerfully superficial queerness” (103) of Aufidius’s embrace in *Coriolanus*; the Dromio twins’ handholding at the end of *A Comedy of Errors*; and a perhaps-innocent kiss between Cassio and Emilia in *Othello*. This list is not to imply, however, that Shakespeare claims MacConochie’s sole focus, as well as his title: less-familiar characters are given extended attention, including, memorably, the swaggering Captain Tucca of Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster*. Often, readings begin with familiar sources (a section on hands begins with the essentials, namely John Bulwer’s 1644 *Chirologia* and Farah Karim-Cooper’s 2016 monograph *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch and the Spectacle of Dismemberment*), but from this sure footing MacConochie often turns in unexpected directions. If there is at times a sense of racing through a dizzying survey of tactile moments, this is the necessary result of such an expansive study. Some avenues are not fully explored; there is perhaps less attention to disability studies than a reader might expect in a work so concerned with the connections between bodies, something MacConochie acknowledges as a further avenue for exploration on his last page. There is also often little discussion of form when the argument moves away from its central questions, concerning dramatic performance, into longer analyses of touch in texts which do not require physical connection between actors. When this discussion does come—as in work on the direction “spurn,” mentioned above, or in relation to the delicious question “does performative force inhere, naturally, in certain acts of touch?” (153)—it tantalizes as much as it satisfies.

However, one could not accuse MacConochie of leaving his topic underexplored. Resisting the restrictions of the “single entendre” (62), a multiplicity of readings is offered throughout; indeed, the desire to play out a scene several times

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to several different ends is characteristic of his approach. The well-known innuendo in *Hamlet* (“Lady, shall I lie in your lap?”) is, for instance, framed as “a reference to oral sex [which] suggests Hamlet’s debasement and, on the other hand...consideration for Ophelia’s own desire” (87).² Even then, the options are not exhausted: the line also recalls the role of the young boy at his mother’s knee, or else a moment of intimacy which echoes Christian iconography as the believer rests their head in God’s lap. To nuance this fascinating moment further, *Hamlet* is then in turn set beside a moment of “broad comedy” (63) in *The Coblers Prophecie* (first printed 1594) in which Mars is found lying in the lap of Venus, a “gesture of surrender to female power” (64) and various interactions in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590) in which, amongst other examples, Guyon is found in the lap of Mirth. This moment—and Hamlet’s mention of Ophelia’s “nothing” (3.2.111)—thus emerges as far more meaningful than the crude joke which is so often offered in editorial notes. Pausing, elsewhere, on “one of the most erotically explicit scenes of early modern drama” (4-5), an exchange between Horatio and Bel-Imperia in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), MacConochie insists that no kind of touch is tied to a single association. Bel-Imperia’s line, which includes the instruction to “set forth thy foot” might be read as an imperative which demonstrates her sexuality, or as a resistance to the assumption of masculine dominance that the foot might also represent.³ Neither reading is privileged; indeed, both are required to understand the scene’s careful renegotiations of what touch might mean.

This approach—offering multiple, differing readings for each touch while situating it amongst complementary moments in other texts, extending outwards like capillaries—means that no moment of contact, however small, is left in isolation. It is a method of analysis that opens up possibility, rather than sectioning off meaning. MacConochie’s style is one of humanist *copia*, offering as many possible inflections of touch as might be plausible. It is an approach perhaps best summarized by his own sentence: “Even as certain accents to behaviors are most commonly adopted in a given sort of situation, the range of possible accents is always wide—and most importantly, susceptible to further widening” (24). Or by another, self-aware, moment of analysis: “Laying heads in laps, the scene suggests, need not be an emasculating or a

² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The First Folio, 1623*, ed. Neil Taylor and Ann Thompson (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 3.2.109.

³ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. J.R. Mulryne and Andrew Gurr (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), 2.4.38.

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domineering form of touch. It might rather be seen as an embodiment of affectionate spousal reciprocity. Emphasis on *might*" (74).

For me, the constant reaffirmation that touch holds several, even contradictory, associations at any one time, served to challenge and reinvigorate my interest in actions which might, at first, appear to be simple means of expressing erotic or amicable affection. Others may desire firmer answers and fewer unresolved questions, but touch is, as MacConochie so thoroughly shows, not a fixed point of contact so much as a moving target. Refusing to find answers is, ultimately, this book's strength. Even when plays (such as *Edward II* and *Arden of Faversham*, discussed in terms of queer and gender normative models of touch) fail to rewrite the heterosocial and patriarchal codes of behavior with which they attempt to engage, that failure is, as MacConochie notes, itself a kind of success: "The failure of a class of touch acts to signify a single, narrowly defined set of social relations enables so much else" (130). To codify touch is to confine it, something MacConochie argues is only ever limiting.

There is a passionate, even hungry, desire throughout this monograph to explore more, to tell more stories, to offer more examples. The touch of lovers was, as MacConochie demonstrates, thought to be uncontrollable, and MacConochie approaches his subject with similar vigor. As Will Greenwood, whose 1657 treatise cites Robert Burton here, writes, lovers cannot keep their hands off one another: there is a ceaseless need for touch, for "Culling, dallying, feeling their pappes, biting lippes, embracing, treading on their toes."⁴ In MacConochie's account, too, there is almost too much to—forgive the pun—touch upon, resulting in a book which pours out its insights without pause. It is an essential study which refuses to define and confine its generative subject.

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⁴ Will Greenwood, *Apographestorges, or, a Description of the Passion of Love* (London, 1657), 68; Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1621), 600.