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Shakespeare in Performance: The "Henry VI" Plays (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter have done a superb job of concisely describing and assessing so many productions of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays in so slim a volume. They begin by summarizing the staging of these plays, which were rarely performed before World War II in productions which the authors describe as imaging a chauvinistic "adventure of Empire" (37). The authors then move on to the more plentiful productions of recent decades, when "British history declined from Empire" (34). They start with a landmark production by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1951–53, directed by Douglas Seale, which **[End Page 111]** while intended as part of the country's celebration of its postwar self, the Festival of Britain, turned out to be more a condemnation than a celebration: "The Rep histories did not commemorate national identity. . . . Rather, they traded on the irresolution and fracture of a country traumatised by war" (52–53).

The Birmingham Rep's production set the stage for performances to follow. Rutter (who wrote chapters 3 and 4) finds that the first Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) 1965 production, *The Wars of the Roses*, adapted by John Barton and directed by Peter Hall, John Barton, and Clifford Williams, took the revolt against earlier, patriotic interpretations a step further. While the Rep left the plays "largely uncut and free of interpolations" (41), Barton not only cut the plays extensively but, Rutter points out, made many interpolations, some even using his own language, arguing that since the plays undoubtedly were originally collaborative efforts, he was only serving as one more collaborator. Rutter emphasizes that such changes were made largely to make the plays more contemporary. She also calls attention to the emergence in this production of two actors important in later-twentieth-century British theater: David Warner as King Henry and Ian Holm as Richard of Gloucester. The former gave the plays a pacifist emphasis, Rutter observes, to a degree that at first surprised even the director.

While the Barton *Wars of the Roses*, Rutter says, "was directed as political tutorial" (81), Terry Hands's RSC production of 1977–79 "was directed, like Shakespearean tragedy to follow, as England's family tragedy" (81). She sees Hands's version, like the other versions of this period, "culminating . . . in defeat, uncertainty, indirection, anarchy" (81). It was more complete than its Barton predecessor, Rutter points out, with few cuts, rearrangements, or interpolations. Hands seemed intent, she suggests, on presenting the plays straightforwardly, letting them speak for themselves. Working extensively with lighting, his "signature," she says, "is austerity, and his most stunning visual effects are achieved formally . . . by locating bodies in space and in writing physical compositions in what Barbara Hodgdon [in an interview] terms a 'spatial poetry'" (86). Hands was, Rutter says, "finding a way of playing in the theatre what he read in Shakespeare's playtext, 'poetry in juxtaposition'" (86).

Rutter also calls attention to Hands's notable casting, in particular, Alan Howard's portrayal of the timid king. Howard, who had just acted a successful Henry V, was equally successful as "the wise fool" Henry VI, upon whom this England, now a "ship of fools," was "anchored" (85). Also noteworthy is the attention devoted to Helen Mirren's erotically seductive, then sadistic, Queen Margaret—especially in light of Mirren's portrayals of a couple of future queens.

The probability of one's having seen the next productions discussed are greatly enhanced by the fact that they appeared on television. After briefly reviewing BBC-televized versions of *An Age of Kings* (1960) and the Barton *Wars of the Roses*, Hampton-Reeves begins his excellent account of Jane Howell's productions, which appeared solely on television in the BBC/Time-Life Shakespeare series of the early 1980s. What Howell recognized, according to Hampton-Reeves, was that *Henry VI* [End Page 112]

belonged more to the world of popular traditions than it did to high culture and, in a sense, televising [the plays] created...

Less tangential to the book's main thrust is Howard's detailed account of Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska in Andrzej Wajda's 1989 *Hamlet (IV)*. Howard calls her "one of the finest Hamlets of modern times" (185)—and we notice the absence of the modifying "female." The audience, sitting on stage, shared the space of the actress's supposed dressing room, seeing her sometimes in her mirror and sometimes on a TV monitor, while downstage, beyond the mirror, the play's action took place with the performers' backs to them, and beyond that the empty seats of the Stary Theater. The emphasis was on the performer's own relation to her role.

There isn't space here to discuss the Irish *Hamlet's Nightmare* (1993), starring Olwen Fouere as an abused child in a more than usually dysfunctional family. (The emotional strain was too much for Sinead O'Connor, who dropped out of her scheduled roles as Ophelia and Death.) Or about the Turkish, German, or Spanish female Hamlets. Howard's pages are, if anything, almost too crowded with fascinating stuff. He covers the first female Hamlet in talkies: a sequence in *Morning Glory* (1933) when Katherine Hepburn, as an aspiring actress, tipsily delivers "To be or not to be" at a Hollywood party. He finds material in Harold Pinter, John Fowles, Iris Murdoch, and Ian McEwan. We hear about Courtney Love saying she'd like to play Hamlet, and Spice Girl Geri Halliwell comparing herself to Hamlet because "I have Hamlet's disease of introspection" (252). He praises Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991), a theatrical novel distinctly not for all tastes. I enjoyed his treatment of the excellent Diane Venora, who played Hamlet at New York's Public Theater in 1982, valiantly resisting Joseph Papp's attempt to be Pygmalion to her Gallathea. She played Ophelia, also at the Public Theater, in 1990; she then played Gertrude twice in 1999, once for Andrei Serban at the Public and in Michael Almereyda's film.

From what might have seemed a slight, and more than slightly eccentric, subject, Tony Howard has fashioned an informative, lively, and appropriately large work of cultural history.

Shakespeare in Performance: The "Henry VI" Plays. By STUART HAMPTON-REEVES and CAROL CHILLINGTON RUTTER. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006. Illus. Pp. viii + 224. \$74.95 cloth.

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