
REVIEWS

Colin Butler. *The Practical Shakespeare: The Plays in Practice and on the Page*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. 205p.

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Butler's *Practical Shakespeare* is not a work intended for Shakespeare scholars. His treatment of stagecraft across a variety of Shakespeare's plays will often seem self-evident to a reader familiar with the critical discussion surrounding Renaissance dramaturgy, and there are no fresh ideas to recommend the work to those steeped in Shakespeare scholarship. Nonetheless, the work provides a useful general overview of Shakespeare's tactical stagecraft, and gives a clear account of the most common devices he uses to achieve dramatic success. Those who love to attend Shakespeare's plays will find the text a friendly guide to the dramatic conventions of his most popular works and a solid bridge between text and stagecraft. Perhaps the readers who can best make use of this work are those who find themselves occasionally teaching Shakespeare's plays to high school students or college freshmen in introductory literature courses. I believe the two most useful chapters for this purpose are "Scenes Not Shown" (chapter 5) and "Prologues and Choruses" (chapter 10). Probably the weakest chapter is the first, where the description of the playhouse lacks much needed illustrations. This familiar ground has been covered better in a number of other readily available sources.

One of the most difficult things to explain adequately to students new to Shakespeare is why (in our increasingly visual culture) they should *read* what is so obviously meant to be *watched*. Butler's jargon-free treatment of prologues, choruses, entrances, exits, etc. links text to performance in a clear framework that combines writing and stagecraft rather than privileging one over the other. He reminds us that while all performances begin with the text, the text is equally born in and shaped by the possibilities and limitations of the Renaissance playhouse. For example, "Scenes Not Shown" (chapter 5), explores the effects of compression, characterization, and pacing in scenes that are reported rather than shown. Butler distinguishes between events that cannot be portrayed on stage—such as Macbeth's battlefield exploits and Henry V's trips across the channel—and those that Shakespeare chooses not to show—such as the weddings in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello*. The reminder that much of what we "see" onstage is actually description is an important one, and Butler does a good job explaining how such scenes operate in the plays.

The turn to two films at the end of the chapter adds surprisingly little to the topic, and the discussion of Polanski's *Macbeth* and Olivier's *Henry V* does not provide an effective review of either movie.

The critical conversation about prologues and choruses has become quite abstruse, and Butler's practical and solid introduction to these unusual devices is particularly useful to the occasional teacher of Shakespeare. In my experience teaching Shakespeare at both the introductory and upper-division levels, I have found students are often confused by choruses and prologues. The "imaginary forces" which the prologue of *Henry V* asks us to work seem to be blunted in a generation that has grown up in an era of extraordinary visual special effects. Butler gives a strong overview of how Shakespeare works our imaginations to streamline the plays and compress years "into an hourglass."

As a general overview of stagecraft in Shakespeare's works *The Practical Shakespeare* is a solid introduction. I recommend it to the occasional teacher of Shakespeare's plays. ✱