

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Tim Fitzpatrick, *Playwright, Space and Place in Early Modern Performance: Shakespeare and Company* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011). xiv+314pp. ISBN 9 781 4094 2827 5.

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Tim Fitzpatrick ‘argues that there was a set of shared conventions about how the doors and other resources on the early modern stage were used to signify spatial relations in performance, and that these conventions are recoverable from the playtexts’ (pp. 1-2). He presents a persuasive case for his thesis that early-modern English playwrights primarily wrote for a two-door, rather than a three-door, stage, based on a thorough analysis of surviving playtexts rather than any attempt to reconstruct actual historical performances from the Elizabethan and Stuart eras. Somewhat oddly, though, Fitzpatrick’s most cogent objections against the three-door model proposed by Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa are articulated and buried in an appendix; they are not incorporated into the book’s main argument. This argument is set out in three main sections: the first examines the onstage and offstage resources available to early-modern playwrights; the second analyses the different ways in which they created and established a fictional sense of place on stage; and the third postulates that playwrights deployed the two-door stage with its tripartite spatial orientation as a method of stage-management and meaning-making – ‘technical work done...to facilitate performance by utilizing the operative spatial conventions to reduce the cognitive overheads of the actors’ (p. 6).

Fitzpatrick’s account is lucid, concise and pragmatic. He consistently holds together the varying capacities of dramatists to envisage the requirements of the stages upon which their work would be performed; the demands placed upon actors to learn new parts rapidly due to the constantly changing repertoire of early-modern companies; the physical logistics of the performance spaces available to these companies in London; and the ways in which the fictional worlds projected by the playtexts are spatially

mapped onto the theatre and draw upon traditions of playing shared by both the actors and their audiences. The broad scope of Fitzpatrick's selected sample of playtexts, combined with his careful attention to cues in dialogue and stage directions, ensures that this book offers a more significant contribution to the subject area than simply establishing the case for a two-door stage.

This thesis becomes a platform for rethinking how Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote for the theatre and the manner in which acting companies translated those texts in performance. Fitzpatrick's reading of 'spatial indications in the dialogue' and 'a similar articulation of space in the stage directions', for example, suggests 'a widely accepted system' of stage-management based on the inward/outward orientation of the two doors 'that worked at the functional as well as the fictional level to ensure the smooth running of performance and to facilitate performance preparation, enabling the playwrights to encode spatial information into their texts – to write with performance "foresight"' (p. 214). It is significant that Fitzpatrick's reading of the playtexts for performance cues is also cognisant of the debate around 'the status and provenance of stage directions' and whether they 'are attributable to the playwright or some other participant in the production process' (p. 199). Recent bibliographical research clearly indicates that stage directions often cannot be ascribed unproblematically to the dramatist. It is a strength of Fitzpatrick's work that his synoptic approach to the plays of the period does not lead him to ignore such textual matters, but indicates how they can be used to support his argument: 'if the stage directions reflect the dialogue-based scheme, and if it is possible that some of those stage directions are not the playwright's but have been inserted or modified by other participants in the production process, this is in fact corroborating evidence for a set of spatial conventions shared not only by playwrights but also by those responsible for organizing specific performances of the playscripts' (p. 199).

Fitzpatrick acknowledges that further work needs to be done in order to determine whether the texts evidence company-specific or playhouse-specific staging practices, though he assumes that these will be 'secondary and complementary to the general conventions evident' in his own research (p. 289). It is possible, however, that the detailed research envisaged – should it ever prove achievable – might undercut or modify the 'general conventions' that he sets out in this study. Nevertheless, the evidence that Fitzpatrick has accumulated and arranged in *Playwright, Space and Place in Early Modern Performance* supports an elegant theoretical model that explains early-modern theatre practice better than any alternatives currently on offer. He concludes: 'The entrance-exit and other movement patterns evident in the playtexts suggest that Shakespeare and other playwrights of this period were exquisitely aware of the meaning-movement binary as a shared, bi-directional competence; their structuring of

the texts evidences a sensibility to the dialogic and interactive nature of meaning-making between performer and audience, and a realization that theatre performance is a laboratory for human interaction and meaning-making more generally, precisely because it is one of the places where we learn how movement patterns can be made meaningful' (p. 245). Perhaps most significantly, Fitzpatrick's analysis demonstrates how the fictional creativity and emotive power of dramatic works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries was energised and conditioned by, as well as realised through, the physical constraints of the theatres for which they wrote and the limited capacity of actors facing 'the logistical demands of a tight production schedule' and an industry 'that required of them a repertory system that turned over plays in rapid succession' (p. 214).