

Tim Fitzpatrick. *Playwright, Space, and Place in Early Modern Performance: Shakespeare and Company*.

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Arguing that in the early modern theater “the audience shares with the actors and playwrights a set of spatial conventions with which to make and extract meanings” (10), Tim Fitzpatrick’s book is an attempt to explore the modes of spatial signification available to the early modern stage as revealed through a sample

of dramatic texts from the period. His key point is that place was signified by means of a coherent relational system embracing onstage and implied offstage locations, a “tripolarity, between the place represented by the stage and the two opposed places behind the doors” (65). To illustrate this system at work, the book is organized into three parts, “Onstage and Offstage Resources in Early Modern Performance,” “Establishing a Sense of Place and Fictional World,” and finally “A Spatially-Based Stage-Management and Meaning-Making System.”

The first part comprises three chapters dealing with basic principles of spatial signification. Fitzpatrick describes the ways in which implied motion and direction within plot action (characters in pursuit, meeting or returning, etc.) might correlate with systematic use of access points to the stage, and this paves the way for an initial discussion of stage doors, their breadth, direction of opening, and number. Fitzpatrick’s contention that the early modern theater contained two rather than three stage doors, receives its first airing here in chapter 2 and is further expounded in chapters 7 (“Stage Doors as Opposed Signifiers”), 8 (“Stage Doors and Stage Management”), and 10 (“Stage Doors and Ramifications”), as well as an extensive Appendix (“Three doors,” “Three ways,” and “‘In the midst’: Inferring a Third Opening”). Across these chapters he develops the notion that the two offstage locations with which each stage place is triangulated can be differentiated between outwards and inwards locations, eventually positing that these became conventionally assigned so that stage door right was associated with an inward location while stage door left signified a less localized outdoor one. In part two, the stage door is one of a series of means studied for signifying locations, including direct verbal nomination (versus inference), the use of props (from the table and book that might denote a study to the altar or tomb), and of split staging. The final part examines how this system of conventionalized spatial relations might have assisted actors with limited rehearsal time, and speculates over its impact upon playwrights and audiences.

Although Fitzpatrick’s conclusion aligns him with “the theatre and performance historian” whose aim he sees as “recover . . . original meanings” (245), his methods contrast strikingly with the work of most scholars in the area. The pioneering work of Andrew Gurr over the past twenty-five years has been joined by many recent studies of the theaters, playing companies, and playhouse practices of early modern London, whose combination of textual analysis and historical scholarship has enriched our understanding of the ways in which the material conditions of playmaking impacted upon the development of drama. Yet in his search for generic spatial conventions Fitzpatrick rejects the specificity of historical scholarship, arguing instead that “the texts, encode in their stage directions and dialogue clear and practical directions for performances, and can therefore provide significant evidence [of dramatists’] concrete thinking about early modern performance” (25). His analysis of the texts amounts to a careful classificatory procedure, itemizing features of spatial signification on the basis of a small number of core examples, extrapolated to a broader corpus, a method he describes as “classical induction” (186). There is, however, a difficulty in pursuing

a theory of spatial conventions at the level of the practical and the concrete, without subjecting it to interrogation from the documented material history of early modern theater. Fitzpatrick implicitly acknowledges as much in appendix 1, when his critique of arguments for the three-door stage engages with the material evidence for the Blackfriars' stage (249–51), and his claim to have identified a “broad set of spatial conventions that spanned the different companies” (289), with its indebtedness to the two-doored stage, must remain subject to qualification by the material and documentary evidence. Thus, while this book presents some intriguing speculation surrounding spatial signification on the early modern stage, the reliance upon inference and the resistance to history limit its explanatory value.

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