Review of Maria Jones
Shakespeare’s Culture in
Modern Performance
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Maria Jones
Shakespeare's Culture in Modern Performance
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Maria Jones presents "the idea that the cultural object of performance may be authentic in itself and yet still pull back to an original history" (p. 177) and the study is indeed alert to the historical context of the plays considered (The Taming of the Shrew, The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, and Richard 2) and how early modern views on gender, foreignness, and monarchy speak to a modern audience. The book will appeal to anyone interested in the interface between text and performance, and a particular strength is Jones's sensitive readings of the plays themselves alongside important twentieth-century stage and film productions, although arguably a narrower range of productions might have been considered more closely, avoiding the somewhat list-like survey we get here. The wide-ranging analysis evident in chapters 2 and 3 narrows in chapters 4 and 5 to provide genuinely attentive readings of the plays' use of crucial properties, Ophelia's flowers and Richard's throne and crown. In general the book provides detailed and informative accounts of modern productions but Jones seems uncomfortable with authentic staging practice. Her objection that the replica Shakespeare's Globe players' production of Richard 2 (2003) was dictated by the players and ignored "a history of women's performance" (p. 171) seems unreasonable since history itself, not the players, tells us that women were not present on the early modern stage. Unfortunately the clarity of the main chapters is lacking in the introduction, which overuses jargon, and the author's occasional use of the first-person throughout, although presumably aiming at the personal, jars with the otherwise formal tone of expression. Moreover, it is not entirely clear why Jones chose to consider these plays in particular, omitting those which might have proved especially relevant to her thesis, for example Henry 5 and The Tempest. Nonetheless, this book will be of value to anyone--studies, scholars, and practitioners--wanting informed and sensitive reflection upon the recent productions chosen.

Joan Fitzpatrick