Review of Stuart Hampton Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter The Henry VI Plays (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2006)

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Stuart Hampton Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter
The Henry VI Plays
£37.36 hardback

The avowed purpose of the 'Shakespeare in Performance' series editors, one of whom (Rutter) is also co-author of this volume, is to use "contemporary discourses of performance criticism to explore how a multitude of factors work together to determine how a play achieves meaning for a particular audience" (p. vii). What one tends to get, perhaps inevitably, is how productions achieve meaning for a particular scholar or scholars. It is difficult to agree with the series editors that "the study of Shakespeare's plays as scripts for performance in the theatre has grown to rival the reading of Shakespeare as literature among university, college and secondary-school teachers and their students" (p. vii) because most Shakespeare is consumed by readers in the majority world but that is to the series editors' advantage since a volume describing world-class productions is invaluable for those not fortunate enough to be able to see them, as well as serving as a useful reference point for others. The book's nine chapters, seven of which were written by Hampton-Reeves, ostensibly cover "the early modern period" (chapter 1) and "1899-1953" (chapter 2) before moving on to discuss specific productions, mainly those by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Unfortunately the first chapter is disappointing in its failure to focus on the early-modern period. Although most of the observations made throughout the study are of interest a few deserved more thought: I doubt relatives of the driver Jack Mills, coshed by the 1960s Great Train Robbers, would share in Rutter's celebration of them as anti-establishment figures (p. 54). Most damagingly of all, a book about the Henry VI plays that is virtually silent on the contributions of co-authors Thomas Nashe and others will strike serious readers as shallow in its historical scholarship.

Joan Fitzpatrick