

Significant categories of dramatic improvisation necessarily elude the approaches of one section of a single volume. One such, that incidentally undermines Klausner's sweeping claim that 'planned improvisation was not influenced in any way by the Italian *commedia* tradition' (283), is extended virtuoso solos of the type of Launce's entry scene in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 2.3. Also missing are two welcome components of multi-author interdisciplinary books: a bibliography, and brief details on individual contributors. However, the admirably comprehensive index guides readers through a volume in which every section illuminates aspects of improvisation's mediation between artistic creation and live performance. Of interest to scholars of theatre as a whole, as well as for its introduction and drama contributions, it unites distinguished scholars at the forefront of several disciplines in emphasising that, in the period before 1700, improvisation and orality underpinned a multiplicity of performance spheres. Their timely insights earn it shelf-space in every serious library of early theatre.

M.A. Katritzky

Laurie E. Maguire. *Studying Shakespeare: A Guide to the Plays*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. Pp 256.

It is a good time to be teaching Shakespeare: films and books, pop culture and current events seem to be conspiring to help us connect the plays with our students and both with the world. From Branagh to Bart Simpson, the Western world is awash in Shakespeare references. And we also have a variety of good academic books aimed at an undergraduate Shakespearean readership: Toby Widdecombe's *Simply Shakespeare* (New York, 2002), for example, or *Studying Shakespeare: A Practical Guide* (Hertfordshire, 1997) by Katherine Armstrong and Graham Atkin. Both propose in varying ways to make Shakespeare accessible to students, to show them how to read, how to write, and in general how to stop worrying and love the Bard. Both are useful, but both start from the unstated premise that Shakespeare is some kind of obstacle that students need a boost to o'erleap. For years, I've used Russ McDonald's *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: an Introduction with Documents* (Boston, 1996), with its introductions and examples of genre, text, performance, as a supplementary text in my second- and third-year Shakespeare courses; however,

Laurie Maguire's *Studying Shakespeare: a Guide to the Plays* will go on next year's text list instead. In her attempt to resurrect character and motivation as entry points to reading or seeing Shakespeare, she puts together a survey of 'Private Life', 'Marital Life', 'Political Life', 'Public Life', and 'Suffering' in the plays that will be profoundly useful not only to undergraduates and to general readers, but also to university teachers eager for fresh ways to help students make genuine connections with Shakespeare in the classroom.

Students will find this a well-thought-out text to work from, with sensible subsections on topics such as 'Money', 'Women and Politics', and 'Language' in the section devoted to 'Public life'. Each of those sections is divided again by play, and each play may get dedicated space in as many as four different units and countless quick comparative references in others. The index points students not only at names and titles, but also at ideas and subjects like 'abuse', 'audiences', 'anger', and 'beauty'. The style too is ideal for the project: neither overly specialized in its vocabulary nor condescending, it hits the best of the plain style. The dilemma of Helena in *All's Well*, for example, is summed up, 'She wants Bertram; he doesn't want her; she wants him anyway. Probably more of us are empirically familiar with this type of situation than we are with love at first sight' (69).

Useful and accessible though it is, if the book has a flaw, that flaw is embedded in one of its many virtues: because it wants to make meaningful connections between the plays and the culture of North American and UK students, its many references to current events and pop culture will date it. Margaret Thatcher and John F. Kennedy probably have a longer allusional shelf life than *Dynasty* and the Artist formerly known as Prince or than the William Kennedy Smith and OJ trials (my first year students were 7 when OJ Simpson drove his white Bronco down the LA freeway). That flaw aside, Maguire's book is an ideal introduction, not to Shakespeare the obstacle but to the Shakespeare who still matters in 2006.

Shannon Murray