

Nicholas Grene *Shakespeare's Serial History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) ISBN 0 521 77341-5 £40 pp. xvii+278

Until recently the generic organization of the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare dominated reception of Shakespeare's history plays, for by placing them in the order of the kings' reigns rather than the order in which they were written, the Folio made it appear that Shakespeare presented in one grand sweep the essentials of English history. Thus, Grene points out, E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* treated the two tetralogies as a single narrative about "God's curse on England for Henry IV's usurpation" (p. 25). Overreacting to Tillyardism, scholars such as Graham Holderness have overstated the non-sequentiality of the Shakespeare's history plays, but Grene takes as his critical starting point "the fact of their seriality" to explore the possibilities this opens up, especially for the dramatic use of retrospection, prolepsis, prophecy and plain reinvention of the past.

Deftly rejecting Tillyard's conservatism while retaining aspects of his method, Grene shows that the plays were actually performed in sequences in the 1590s and explores what follows from this knowledge. We need not fall for Harold Bloom's Romantic notion of character, Grene argues, to see that in working the chroniclers' serial narration of events into dramatic form Shakespeare spotted new technical possibilities for the portrayal of human personality, such as showing individuals' responses to personal and political crises occurring in their youth, and recurring in their prime and old age. For this Grene takes as particular examples Humphrey of Gloucester, Richard of York, Henry 6, Queen Margaret, and Richard 3 (pp. 99-129), but he might also have noted that one feels a good deal less sympathetic for George of Clarence's demise in an evening performance of *Richard 3* if one has just spent the afternoon watching his murderous deeds in *3 Henry 6*. Grene returns several times to a recent opportunity to have this experience, the Royal Shakespeare Company's *This England* sequential presentation of both tetralogies (with through-casting) in 2000 and 2001, and indeed his central thesis about the effects of seriality rests on a tripod of prose sources, original performance, and recent productions of the history plays. For this reason the book will deservedly find a wide audience across the English/Drama subject area, offering cogent textual and performance criticism as well as a theorized rejection of recent disintegrationist responses to the history plays.

381 words