

MEDIEVAL  
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RENAISSANCE  
DRAMA  
IN ENGLAND

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Edited by

S. P. Cerasano

Book Review Editor

Heather Anne Hirschfeld

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considering cognitive conceptions of space in new, increasingly complex ways alongside the cultural desire to define environments that scholars such as Henry S. Turner have already identified. *Thinking Through Place on the Early Modern English Stage* will be most useful to those working on place and space, cognition, and eco-criticism in the early modern era, though there are valuable insights here for other areas such as affect theory, and audience and disability studies. The number and variety of plays Bozio uses to make his argument speak to the interpretive potential of applying his concept of ecological thinking to the early modern dramatic canon.

**Shakespeare's Accents: Voicing Identity in Performance**, by Sonia Massai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 236. Hardcover, \$99.99.

*Reviewer:* ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN

Voices carry weight in the embodiment of characters on stage, because accents are a strong marker of a character's and actor's identity. Orlando praises Rosalind's courtly accent in *As You Like It* by saying "your accent is something finer than you could purchase in so removed a dwelling" (3.2.334–35). Sonia Massai's new book explores the cultural connotation of regional accents in four centuries of performances of Shakespeare on the English stage. Shakespeare is selected for case study because, as Massai asserts, since the mid-eighteenth century the "National Poet" has played a key role "in the establishment of a Standard English pronunciation" and Received Pronunciation (1–2) and thus the canon provides fertile ground for understanding English attitudes toward accents.

One of the arguments advanced by the book is that accent is a "curated aspect of the complex process of non-verbal communication" in live performance (69). Even as reviewers and critics remain fixated on expected accents in Shakespearean performance, the so-called non-standard accents are now taking center stage in casting and directorial decisions related to diversity concerns "in order to activate a different interpretation of the fictive world of the plays and to challenge a traditional alignment of Shakespeare with cultural elitism" (2). In other words, in telling a lesser-known story of the uses of accents on stage, this book treats accents as a marker of social identity similar to race and gender. As such, the book makes valuable contributions to both Shakespeare studies and the study of identities.

Organized in reverse chronological order, the four chapters outline each period's shifting attitudes toward non-normative accents and how new performance methods have challenged the uniformity that dominated the English stage. Based on an observable "acoustic uniformity" in each period (14, 102), the chapters identify key features of theatrical uses of regional accents in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-centuries (chapter 1),

twentieth-century Original Pronunciation experiments (chapter 2), the association of Shakespeare, “aristocratic patronage” and David Garrick as a “catalyst for acoustic change” between 1737–1843 (chapter 3), and national and regional accents in pre-1642 performances that were used to achieve nuanced dramatic effects (chapter 4). One of the book’s insights, as its Conclusion shows, lies in its denaturalization of voices on stage. Bringing political agents, historical phoneticians, and actors into a complex and constantly evolving picture of acoustic diversity, Massai decouples Shakespeare from “the speech of social and cultural elitism” and deconstructs audiences’ expectation “to hear voice as non-ethnic, class-unspecific and de-racialized” markers of identity (190–91). Moving from our contemporary time to the early modern period, the chapters take us back in time to reveal a long history of uses of regional accents in English theatre.

Chapter 1 theorizes that diverse accents became more desirable, if not normalized, thanks to the increasing number of foreign language productions since the late twentieth century, such as Welcome Msomi’s Zulu *Umabatha* (based on *Macbeth*) that toured to London and British-Asian adaptations by Tara Arts (69). As British audiences were challenged to make sense of Shakespeare in foreign languages and accents, they learned to appreciate a Shakespeare “liberated from the straightjacket of acoustic normativity” (15). Accents help to configure racial and class identities: in Nicholas Hytner’s 2013 *Othello* at the National Theatre, Rory Kinnear’s Iago used Estuary English to mark his outsider status, replacing racial difference with the class divide; in British-Pakistani director Iqbal Khan’s 2015 *Othello* at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Lucian Msamati’s Iago spoke in Tanzanian accent, Ayesha Dharker’s Emilia used a British-Indian accent, and Hugh Quarshie’s Othello spoke in “impeccable Standard Pronunciation” (63). The arrangement in Khan’s production heightened intra-racial tensions. There is one caveat, however, in this chapter. Massai suggests that paying attention to accents addresses a blind spot in the field of global Shakespeare, for scholars “tend to ignore the . . . radical quality of its complex acoustic otherness” (23). Firstly, current scholarship has engaged with sound studies and biases caused by accents (Marcus Tan, Mark Thornton Burnett, et al.). Secondly, the discussion does not include adaptations staged beyond the UK in World Englishes or other language, but rather, and specifically, only the small cluster of works that happen to have toured to the UK, particularly London, with an occasional Canadian example by Robert Lepage (22–23; 36).

Moving the timeline back by a century, chapter 2 observes that the linguists David and Ben Crystal both reclaim and resist “the authorizing function associated with early experiments with Original Pronunciation” (97). The author identifies as a catalyst in acoustic variation—beyond foreign Shakespeare—Mary Hope Allen’s experiments on the BBC with Original Pronunciation (70). Typically construed as “conservative exercise[s] in acoustic archaeology,” these experiments are read here as innovations that,

intended or not, ushered in acoustic diversity between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries when acoustic uniformity was taken for granted. This was also a time when actors such as John Gielgud shifted their method of speech delivery “from a more rhetorical melodramatic diction to a more relaxed and naturalistic style of speech” (15).

The legacy of David Garrick is the focus of chapter 3, which argues that Garrick’s popularity, regional accent, and signature “natural” style of delivery was an important factor in redefining acoustic standards at a time when the Southern English accent dominated the mid-eighteenth-century stage. While “standards of correct pronunciation were still being passionately debated,” what Massai calls a “sonic revolution” by Garrick triggered new performance styles in “regionally marked voices” to large audiences beyond Central London (103).

Chapter 4 takes stock of the sound of early modern drama in general before the 1642 closure of theatres. Thanks to fluid and diverse systems of patronage, theatre companies did not conform to singular standard of pronunciation. Players performed at commercial venues in London, at Court, and at country mansions. While the Restoration aligned the highly regulated public performance culture with court culture, allowing the ruling elite to define the “standards of acoustic decorum,” the period before 1642 fostered “the players’ ability to fake accents.” As this chapter demonstrates, there was much less anxiety over acoustic standards. This level of diversity led historical phoneticians to paint contrasting pictures of how Shakespeare’s contemporary actors would have sounded: both an “everyman sound” and speech typically found “in polite circles” (17).

The conclusion draws on, among other examples, Simon Godwin’s 2016 *Hamlet* at the RSC with a predominantly black cast, to show how accents should be part of theatres’ inclusive strategies beyond diverse casting practices concerning race and gender. The otherwise innovative production failed to “register a crucial type of diversity” because it succumbed to the pressure of audiences’ expectation to hear Standard Pronunciation and became “mono-tonal in acoustic terms” (194). This historically informed account of accents concludes with an impassioned call to action, urging producers in the UK to think more broadly about acoustic diversity as they strive to become more inclusive in their practice.

**Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World**, Patricia Akhimié. New York: Routledge, 2018. Ebook, \$52.16.

*Reviewer:* CAROL MEJIA LAPERLE

Study of the racializing mechanisms and discourses in early modern culture often relegate the important interventions of Shakespeare scholars to the

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