Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England. By Gina Bloom

Ariane Balizet

Theatre Survey, Volume 50, Number 2, November 2009, pp. 343-345 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tsu.2009.a986299*

Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England. By Gina Bloom. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007; pp. 288. $59.95 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S0040557409990287

Reviewed by Ariane Balizet, Texas Christian University

"The term 'person,'" Gina Bloom reminds us, "is derived from the Latin *persona*, meaning literally 'through sound'. . ." (58). Although the overlap between the vocabulary of identity with that of the theatre has received much critical attention from scholars of the Renaissance, Bloom's book *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* reveals the scientific, religious, and cultural forces that perform essential functions shaping this connection. Bloom enriches our understanding of dramatic engagement with the voice as well as the embodied spiritual and gendered components of vocal performance. Bloom aims to construct a "material history of [the] detached voice" (4), and indeed this elegant study expands the field of material history as it illuminates vocal and auditory practices key to early modern subject formation.

As articulated in her Introduction, the chief fields in which a history of the voice holds significant consequence are materialism, performance, and gender. While embracing its aims and methods, Bloom challenges materialist scholarship to acknowledge the material properties of voice, which has "a history of production, ownership and exchange" (5) similar to the stage props of Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda's influential *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, and which shares with theatrical objects the epistemological instability that generates transgressive space on the Renaissance stage. The unpredictability of voice is emphasized by early modern representations of voice as "unruly matter" (6) that holds the potential to resist hierarchies of gender; to that end, Bloom yokes Judith Butler's "politics of expression with Derrida's emphasis on the materiality of the linguistic medium" (14), a theoretical approach that reinforces her central claim of subject formation *per sona*.

The chapters of *Voice in Motion* follow a vocal trajectory in their focus, beginning with the production of sound in an unstable body, traveling through the air, and entering (or being blocked by) the listener's equally unstable body. For Chapter 1, "Squeaky Voices: Marston, Mulcaster, and the Boy Actor," the bodies in question are those of the pubescent boys on London's stages. In light of social authority rooted in a rich, deep voice (as opposed to the high, trembling voice of women), the pubescent boy actor represents a body in flux, capable of moving between levels of gender hierarchy. Richard Mulcaster's 1581 *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children* reflects early modern priorities of "disciplining children's unruly vocal systems" (32), a pedagogy aimed at maintaining clear boundaries between vocal agency in boys and girls as well as men and women. Nor did boys only perform in women's roles; in her discussion of *Cynthia's Revels*, Bloom highlights the anxieties of boy actors playing women, children, *and* men. Early modern references to boys (even a young Falstaff) as "cracks" indicate that the vocal performance of pubescent

boys represented a liminal state of masculinity that challenged the absoluteness of male authority.

If the body is not a uniformly secure site for vocal production, the materiality of breath is subject to even further alteration upon leaving the mouth. In Chapter 2, "Words Made of Breath: Shakespeare, Bacon, and Particulate Matter," Bloom explores nonnormative vocal acts by female characters vis-à-vis early modern acoustic theory. While seventeenth-century science attempted to shape and control the movement of sound, characters such as Desdemona, Lavinia, and *King John*'s Eleanor utilize the aleatory nature of voice such that whispering and heavy breathing become a "subtle but robust form of vocal agency" (68). For example, Desdemona's "balmy breath" pleads for her innocence, as the breath's movement of a stream of blood reveals Lavinia's rape; Bloom's readings of *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus* make significant contributions to feminist studies of Shakespeare's female characters.

As the particulate matter of voice and breath enter the body of the listener through the ear, early modern representations of audition take on an expressly spiritual dimension. In Chapter 3, "Fortress of the Ear: Shakespeare's Late Plays, Protestant Sermons, and Audience," Bloom draws on vivid seed metaphors used in Protestant sermons to communicate "fertilization" (145) of the Christian soul by the Word of God. Because the origin of God's Word was divine, the seed of salvation was subject only to obstacles of *reception*. Thus "sermons shift the conditions of subject formation away from speaking and toward listening" (114), investing the auditor with the responsibility of becoming aurally receptive to the Word. Consequently, many believed that the ear could be similarly an entry point for evil, and here Bloom explores the gendered implications of auditory agency. Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, for example, exercises "bad hearing" (124) in his refusal to listen to reason. Conversely, women in the late plays enact "aural defensiveness" (135)—deliberate refusal to hear—in order to preserve their chastity. Female aural defensiveness can be transgressive in the short term in its resistance to immediate authority, but Bloom acknowledges that the preservation of chastity in this way ultimately reifies patriarchal priorities, erasing momentary incidents of willful (and therefore disruptive) deafness.

The unique questions posed by an echoing female voice comprise Bloom's fourth and final chapter, "Echoic Sound: Sandys's Englished Ovid and Feminist Criticism." Echoing voices such as those in *The Duchess of Malfi* and Ovid's "Echo and Narcissus" represent a radical usurpation of gender hierarchies in terms of vocal agency. For Bloom, George Sandys's 1632 edition of his translation of Ovid counters the problem of a disembodied female voice; Sandys reaffirms Echo's vocal independence, but he simultaneously repudiates her agency by associating it with a heathen author.

Scholars of drama from the Middle Ages to the Restoration will benefit from Bloom's study in its interdisciplinary approach to sound in the theatrical domain, and those with interests in early modern concepts of gender will find the analysis of political and historical consequences of vocal performance by women (particularly in the Epilogue and Chapter 2) an important advancement in feminist studies of the Renaissance stage. *Voice in Motion* balances the many

dimensions of voice in early modern England—among them science, gender, and post-Reformation religious thought—to reveal a rich cross-section of vocal performance as cultural property and embodied experience.

• • •

Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance. By Michael Witmore. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007; pp. 248. $39.95 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S0040557409990299

Reviewed by Howard Marchitello, Rutgers University

The 1546 anamorphic painting by William Scrots of the nine-year-old Edward Tudor with which Michael Witmore introduces his intriguing study of children and fiction in Renaissance England stands admirably as an emblem of the historical and interpretive work of his book *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance*. When viewed from the traditional vantage point directly in front of the painting, the image one sees is doubled: a radically distorted image of the young prince is superimposed on a conventional landscape drafted in standard linear perspective. In this view, the landscape is recognizably "realistic," while the image of the prince, crafted according to a wholly different perspective, is nearly indecipherable. But once the viewer crosses the room and views the painting obliquely from the right side of the frame, the image of the prince comes instantly into clear and exclusive (or, one might say, royal) focus. Witmore reads the allegory: "With the addition of time and motion, a likeness of Henry's precious son has taken over the frame" (1). While this allegorical reading of the figure of the child sets the model for Witmore's readings across a wide range of cultural events and literary texts—royal pageants, children's theatre, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, and witchcraft trials and possessions—it reveals at the same time a deep engagement with critical and methodological concerns in a number of fields, including early modern cultural studies and the history of the child. The great virtue of Witmore's book is that this anamorphic child—this child viewed from different disciplinary perspectives—snaps into a new clarity with a new urgency.

Witmore's focus on early modern children as an "intermediary species within the kingdom of self-possession" allows them to emerge as figures for both the attractions and dangers of fiction that "were themselves derived from the suspension of adult faculties of reason and prudential self-control" (5). Witmore's discussion draws upon the seemingly natural abilities of the child for both spontaneous mimicry (mimesis) and imaginative absorption, traits that served to render children ideal embodiments of the powers of fiction and imaginative productions.

Witmore's first chapter offers a historical account of those qualities of child mimicry and absorption that link them to the operations of fiction. To this end, he offers a description of an "anthropology of fictional practice" (24) that emerged from a broad spectrum of ideas, from legal theory to theology, to poetics and