



PROJECT MUSE®

Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage
(review)

Margo Hendricks

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 27, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 527-530 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0096>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/316791>

BOOK REVIEWS

Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage. By Lara Bovilsky. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Pp. 208. \$67.50 (cloth), \$22.50 (paper).

MARGO HENDRICKS, *University of California, Santa Cruz*

In *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage*, Lara Bovilsky undertakes an exploration of the intersection of race and the English Renaissance stage and the problems associated with locating such explorations solely within the modern conceptualization of race. Bovilsky's guiding principle is "that narratives of fluidity and boundary crossing mark the characteristic sites for both the production and analysis of racial content" (3). Bovilsky's book is impressive in its clarity and focus. Each chapter is succinctly and cogently argued as well as engaging. While I do not consider the book a groundbreaking study of race in Renaissance and early modern English literature, I do find the study to be insightful, nuanced and a persuasive contribution to ongoing debates about race. As Bovilsky suggests in the introduction, the debate about what constitutes race in Renaissance and early modern England has not been resolved; consequently, a strength in Bovilsky's analysis is that it does not aim to be all-encompassing nor definitive in its exploration of race.

The introduction offers a forceful critique of the idea of race as solely skin color. Bovilsky argues that race is multifaceted in early modern English usage: it references bloodlines, gender, class and nationality. Bovilsky outlines the intellectual and theoretical tradition of the study of race within Renaissance literary studies (citing the work of Kim Hall, Jean Howard, Richard Helgerson and others) as she establishes the distinction between her argument and these earlier engagements with racial identity in early modern England. What marks Bovilsky's analysis is that it seeks to reorient the discussion of race to allow for broader definitions that reflect the historical contingencies and specificities of social experiences within early modern English culture. In the end, as Bovilsky contends, the system of racialism and its "distinctions, distinctions whose effects have been no less real than their grounds, like the literature that represents them, are metaphorical, contradictory, and imagined" (35).

Chapter One, "Desdemona's Blackness," most fruitfully represents this assertion. Bovilsky persuasively traces the ideological and metaphoric history that informs Shakespeare's racializing of Desdemona. For Bovilsky, the ideological linking of morality and immorality with whiteness and blackness respectively

and the idea of chastity makes Desdemona a double “racial foil to Othello” (50). Bovilsky argues that Desdemona’s decisions and active agency (choosing her husband, dissociating herself from her father’s rule) figures “forth the racial darkening that was her fate as soon as she agreed to marry” (57). While “marriage is the primary site of discord between generations[,] in other issues...the child’s and the parent’s interests are generally presumed to be consonant” (52). Desdemona’s elopement and subsequent marriage to Othello marks her emergence as a fully sexualized woman and thus a “woman gone wrong.” The text’s vocabulary displays the “racialism rooted in images of the female body” (58).

This concept, that race is rooted in gender, is the framework that informs Bovilsky’s approach to race and early modern English cultural institutions such as the theatre. Thus, the remaining chapters of the book stems as much from this idea as from the actual texts Bovilsky examines. In Chapter Two, “Exemplary Jews and the Logic of Gentility,” Jessica (not Shylock) becomes the figurative and interpretative basis for Bovilsky’s reassessment of foreignness as racial identity. Race in this context denotes both lineage and social status (or “gentility”) and serves to articulate the importance of class in Renaissance drama depicting Jews. Importantly, Bovilsky points out, on the surface color is not a stable predictor of racial identity when dealing with Jewishness. European Jews were largely indistinguishable from their non-Jewish counterparts. What becomes clear in Bovilsky’s argument is that religious differences need to be “embodied” in order to be recognizable—especially when physical appearance conceals those differences. Using Jessica as the point/counterpoint for her analysis, Bovilsky analyzes *The Merchant of Venice*’s use of “color” to figure difference between Christians and Jews and Venetians and “aliens.” Color, in this text, becomes used to reformulate Jessica’s identity so that she serves as an “assimilable Jew” (her “blood” or lineage)—convertible and controllable.

Bovilsky’s comparison of Jessica and Portia is the most interesting aspect of her argument. Where both women have value to patriarchy is in the wealth and chastity they bring to their respective grooms. Yet, as Bovilsky rightly notes, once Jessica loses her virginity and the fortune she brings to Lorenzo, her status as a “gent(i)le”—initiated by the perception of her as “fair”—fades and she becomes racially ‘darkened’ like Desdemona. Unlike Portia, Jessica cannot escape the Petrarchan eroticism that shapes the fair/dark metaphor used in relation to women. As Bovilsky demonstrates, once Jessica is wed to Lorenzo she is described as “amorous” and “infidel,” unable to sustain her pre-marital ‘gentility’ in the face of what becomes clearly a manifestation of her ‘blood’ or her Jewishness. Portia’s potential loss of gentility is mitigated, as Bovilsky shows, by the metaphorical replacement of Portia’s physical body with the three caskets. The caskets, as Bassanio’s speech illustrates, is where the “Renaissance opposition between grossness and fairness is racialized in gendered images of darkness, density, immorality, and ugliness” (95).

The final two chapters seem oddly situated in the book, though the fourth chapter “The English Italian” does have synchronicity with the general ideas

and arguments of the first two chapters. The final chapter, "Race, Science, and Aversion," reflects Bovilsky's use of humoral theory (here labeled "science") to trace the way *The Changeling* "naturalize[s] antagonisms between or inclinations toward differentiated individuals or groups, by connecting the perception of psychical and physical differences to systems of affect, especially attraction and repulsion" (139). Again, color and blood play a significant role in Bovilsky's reading of the script's engagement with physical manifestations of racial identity: both signal the contamination that comes with female sexuality and desire, revealing the link between the failure of kinship relations and women as agents of their own subjectivity. This focus marks a weakness of Bovilsky's study: so much has been written on gendered ideologies related to chastity, sexuality and female agency that each chapter seemed quite familiar — as if I had already read similar discussions elsewhere.

While a fine discussion, *Barbarous Play* does not make the significant contribution to Renaissance race studies that it seeks. What the book does offer, making it worthy of our critical and theoretical attention, is an astutely intelligent and informed discussion of the relationship between gender, color, and blood. Bovilsky's study does not, however, succeed in expanding our understanding of the history of 'race' as a conceptual and social category in Renaissance and early modern English cultural discourses. What becomes evident is that Bovilsky's substitution of one social category (gender) for another (race) does not advance as much as she wishes a sense that the "variability of racial ideology and experience may mean that no stable or simple account of race is available for casual theoretical application" (21). In fact, Bovilsky's theoretical insistence on linking race to gender in her reading of the drama seems to lock her into the prescriptive discourse that she seeks to destabilize. Her readings focus on adumbrating the playwright's use of black and white as gendered and moral metaphors. In the end, *Barbarous Play* implicitly opens itself up to a reading that links Bovilsky's study to the complicated and tense dichotomy between gender subjectivity and racial subjectivity; it is as if, whether she intended it or not, Bovilsky is asking her readers to privilege gender over race as a constitutive experience of racial identity."

This disquieting sense is not easily shaken despite the overall merits of Bovilsky's analysis of the drama of Renaissance England. One wonders what her analysis would look like if Bovilsky had chosen *Antony and Cleopatra* or *The English Moor* or *Titus Andronicus*. Would her framework (conceptual and metaphorical) hold up against these scripts? This question suggests a larger problem with the on-going critique of how race became defined and determined within Renaissance and early modern English culture. Our choices of texts are often pre-determined because of the specific direction of our critical inquiries. To this extent, Bovilsky's assertion that "the most valuable research into the history of race will emphasize the contingency and specificity of racial experience in all periods" is not entirely shown by *Barbarous Play*.

Though Lara Bovilsky's ambitious theoretical aims fall somewhat short, the book contributes one more layered reading in the pursuit of understanding how race signified in Renaissance and early modern England. Bovilsky's analysis serves to highlight how important skin color is to racial theorizing in Renaissance and early modern culture—infusing ideological discussions of social, political and religious matters. Such arguments may offer not only Renaissance literary studies but also performance studies (and theatrical productions) new ways of drawing attention to the significance of skin color in these scripts. The progression of Desdemona's or Jessica's transition from "fair" to "dark" morally and sexually would be a remarkable theatrical gesture, allowing for the character's de-racialization and re-racialization over the course of the production. To that end, I would highly recommend *Barbarous Play* as a theoretical resource for theatrical practitioners interesting in highlighting *Merchant of Venice's* (or *Othello's* or *The White Devil's*) display of racial subjectivity.



Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion. Compiled and edited by Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xvii + 300. \$105.95 (cloth), \$31.95 (paper).

SUJATA IYENGAR, *University of Georgia*

Dedicated to "all students, scholars and activists fighting against racism" (v), this important anthology collects classical, medieval and, predominantly, early modern "sermons, statutes, medical texts, dictionaries, recipes...atlases, emblem books, religious commentaries...philosophical treatises, and scientific tracts" that engage with race (3). Loomba and Burton's helpful introduction provides a roadmap for navigating not only the *Documentary Companion* itself but also the contested and rocky terrain of early modern race studies. Worth assigning to students for its concise summary of previous scholarship and for its nuanced, sophisticated discussion of the mobile, multiple tropes of race in the early modern period, the introduction suggests that, given the difficulty (and doubtful value) of defining "race" precisely or of locating a specific, historical moment at which it comes into existence, it is of limited use to continue arguing (as scholars continue to do) whether the term *race* is "anachronistic" (2). Instead, they suggest, it is more productive to look at how early modern culture constructs ongoing and mutating "tropes of difference" (3), that is to say, how early modern English culture fabricates race by activating "religion, nationality, color, conversion, women, sexuality, the human body, lineage, diet, and human nature" to answer queries raised by "[d]ifferent forms of both benign and violent contact" with other peoples (3).

The editors' stated goals are to emphasize the uniqueness of peculiarly early modern notions of embodied difference and to draw our attention to com-