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Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World / Patricia Akhimie

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Patricia Akhimie. *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World*. Routledge, 2018. 220 pp.

Reviewed by DEBORAH UMAN

In *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, Patricia Akhimie sets an ambitious goal: in addition to exploring how race, class, conduct, and drama are intertwined in the early modern period, Akhimie seeks to show readers how to recognize the pain of racism, which she reads as “a persistent and particular kind of injustice, the signs of which are as fluid as they are injurious” (9). Despite the variability of signs of human differences and despite the promise of self-improvement offered by conduct literature, Akhimie argues that social immobility was the reality for many groups within early modern English society. This immobility stemmed from the identification of somatic markers “like indelible blackness,” (5) and “the workings of racist thinking that link a social process of differentiation . . . to the naturalization of such differences” (11). To accomplish what she calls an “emancipatory task” (10), Akhimie examines an impressive range of primary materials. She focuses on four Shakespeare plays, *Othello*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *The Tempest*, which she pairs with surprisingly diverse yet relevant forms of conduct books devoted to “specific cultivating strategies” in the realms of travel, housekeeping, husbandry, and hunting.

The extensive introduction to *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference* establishes Akhimie’s theoretical framework and explains how this book fits with the emerging field of critical race studies focused on the early modern period. Central to this project is the call to identify the origins of bodily marks that are understood as natural and given an undesirable meaning so that a dominant group (without such bodily marks) can maintain power. While skin color may be the most obvious bodily mark to consider, Akhimie also examines how working-class bodies are racialized through signs of manual labor such as hard hands and bruises, noting that such racialization is both a physical and structural result of the often violent practices of exclusion and discrimination. The introduction also unpacks the paradoxical promise of self-improvement inherent to conduct literature, which simultaneously demarcates who can and cannot pursue upward mobility. The plays of Shakespeare, Akhimie argues, critique the rigidity of society and reveal the ironies of the conduct system without endorsing reform. Looking for instances “where the language of the play intersects, converses with, or debates the language of conduct literature” (32), Akhimie posits an additional reason for bringing Shakespeare into this conversation, pointing out that the study of Shakespeare today is widely considered a “cultivating strategy,” and that understanding this

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“anatomy of naturalized social difference, of race, contained within a canonical and widely read oeuvre can most certainly be useful to the ongoing project of antiracist critique and activism” (35).

Although starting with an analysis of *Othello* is not surprising, Akhimie’s approach to the topic of race in this play is unusual and revelatory. Juxtaposing *Othello* with travel literature that promises individual improvement through knowledge of the world, Akhimie presents a stark example of conduct literature that offers “an ideology of cultivation” (78) only to limit that promise to members of elite groups. While this chapter reads Othello’s blackness as the symbol of the impossibility of upward mobility through travel, Akhimie links race to the play’s obsession with “marking,” which she interprets both as a form of permanent branding and the act of observing and enhanced scrutiny. Counterintuitively, Akhimie argues, the play suggests that bodily signs are unreliable, “while the other kind of marking...does real and permanent damage to reputations and to bodies” (53). Akhimie supports her claims with careful and insightful close reading. Her attention to the scene in which Iago encourages Lodovico to watch Othello illuminates a rarely considered moment, clearly demonstrating that it is the act of observation that inscribes Othello with a permanent, black mark. Othello himself comes to accept this view of his physical and metaphorical blackness in his final speech, which Akhimie suggests is his final act of service: “rather than condemning the Venetian state with its faulty gaze” (77), Othello accepts the blame associated with his black mark and renders punishment on himself.

Building on the view of race as an external mark imposed upon the body by an external gaze, the remainder of this book looks at less explicit examples of racial thinking in Shakespeare’s plays, focusing particularly on bodily markers of class that appear because of the condition of manual labor or because of the treatment received by those in subservient positions. The chapters on *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Tempest* fit together quite well. Both demonstrate a kind of racial thinking—the sets of twins are referred to as Antipholi and Dromios; Miranda blames Caliban’s actions on his race—which categorizes individuals as members of a group, and both consider how treatment of servants—prescribed in conduct literature and illustrated in the plays—is seen as evidence of their place in the social order. Akhimie’s contextualization of the punishments heaped on Dromio and Dromio by reading the play alongside domestic manuals that promote beatings of animals and servants is enlightening. She points out that the bruise, which we would logically understand as temporary, was instead “treated as if it were perpetual and innate” (89) and draws “attention to the intersection between hereditary servitude (a caste system) and somatic signs (a racialized system of identification)” (98). Unlike their masters, who are reunited with their families and “freed” from the prisons of misidentification, Dromio and Dromio remain interchangeable as slaves. Nevertheless, the play briefly questions the differentiation made between the sets of infants when Egeon describes his last sight of the infants after the shipwreck. Additionally, the theme of mistaken

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identity exposes “the fragility of a social system that depends upon that confirming gaze” (105), which finally has the power to confirm a hierarchical system of identity. Similarly, Akhimie examines Caliban as evidence of a contradictory system that sees education as a tool for improvement, but only for some. Following the advice of husbandry manuals, Prospero inflicts pinches and other punishments on Caliban, limiting Caliban’s “movement, thought, and action” (154) and underscoring the division between land owner and land laborer. Despite questions of Caliban’s heredity, Akhime argues that Prospero’s treatment is what actually changes him into a monster, and it is finally his shape that demonstrates his inability to improve or be cultivated.

In the transition from *Othello* to *The Comedy of Errors*, Akhimie redefines race as “just one name for what was in fact a highly adaptive and varied system of social differentiation, the forms and features of which remained in constant flux throughout the early modern period” (84). Because her analysis of the Dromios and Caliban allows for ideas of categories of identity as fixed and inherent, her use of racial theory and vocabulary to discuss issues of class differentiation is appropriate even as it reminds a modern audience of the more rigid beliefs and policies that have developed regarding skin color. Her discussion of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* uses a similar logic, reading the hard handedness of the mechanicals as somatic markers that “are imagined to be irremovable” (145) and thus “naturalizes, and thus racializes, the exclusion of a working-class group” (118). Perhaps because this chapter rarely uses the word “race” or perhaps because the mechanicals are not subject to the kind of abject cruelty faced by Othello, the Dromios, and Caliban, this otherwise compelling consideration of the play within the context of elite entertainment such as hunting and country house performances raises questions about the antiracist thrust of a book that spends much of its time looking at class. Akhimie examines the import of these questions in a provocative coda, in which she considers her brother’s habit of walking near his home and being stopped by the police both in the context of sixteenth-century conduct literature promoting exercise for elite audiences and in light of the recent incidents of “stand-your-ground” laws as well as police violence against black and brown bodies. In response to these incidents, the Black Lives Matter movement has insisted on understanding race as a unique and rigid marker that continues to lead to tangible policies of discrimination and exclusion. In her conclusion, Akhimie revisits and reframes the goals of her project, looking for ways of reading that help “to recognize the injurious process of judgment and relegation, to redefine the meanings of suspect marks and behaviors, and to shift the position...of the observer” (189). These reading practices, Akhimie admits, may not “end a racializing culture of conduct” (191), but her book offers valuable insights into the racial thinking of the past and present as well as a model of cultivation that invites rather than discriminates.

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